
Book Reviews

The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s by Robert J. Alexander, Greenwood, 1981, \$32.50.

Elsewhere in this issue Paul Costello discusses the history and politics of the International Communist Opposition (ICO). I only want to look at the way Robert J. Alexander handles that same history in his new book and the sources upon which he relied. Robert J. Alexander is an historian presently teaching at Rutgers University. He has written a number of works on the Communist movement. Some, such as his history, *Communism in Latin America* (1957), is presented in the classic cold-war, anti-communist jargon of those years. Others, later texts like his 'Schisms and Unifications in the American Old Left, 1953-1970,' which appeared in *Labor History* in 1973, are more straight forward chronologies, often containing useful information.

Make no mistake about it: Robert J. Alexander is no Eric Hobsbawm, who treats Communism from a sympathetic if critical perspective. Nor is he a Theodore Draper, whose two volumes on the history of the Communist Party, USA, although hostile, are solidly based on a wealth of primary source material available nowhere else. Robert J. Alexander is a traditional academic historian, and his book is a rather dry chronological history of the Communist Party-Opposition (the so-called Lovestoneites) and other sections of the ICO. But for all of that, he has still done us a valuable service by bringing out the first full length treatment of the "International Right Opposition" available in the English language.

This book should be read for the facts, names and dates it brings to the readers attention, not for the analysis which Alexander provides (or rather, fails to provide). The problem with chronological history is that the succession of events becomes a substitute for an in-depth examination of them—rarely does any theoretical-political discussion emerge, except where the debate was one over the events being described. Then its terms are merely repeated by Mr. Alexander quite matter-of-factly. This is not a fatal error, however, since, to the extent Mr. Alexander does discuss the events he is retelling, he does so from an entirely academic perspective.

A number of interesting points do nonetheless emerge from this work which are not generally known by those on the left. Clara Zetkin's support for the work of the German Opposition is one example. The trade union activities of the Lovestone group in the garment industry is another. The chapter on the relationship between the US CP-O and the CPUSA will interest those otherwise familiar with the Communist history of that period.

Another little known point which deserves comment is Alexander's discussion of the Spanish Party of Marxist

Unification (POUM), a discussion which appears to be drawn largely from the two volume history of that organization written by Victor Alba. Alexander suggests that the "left" errors made by the POUM during the May events of 1937 were due to the fact that Andres Nin, a former Trotskyist of a more "leftist" orientation was in charge of the Party during that critical period because of the absence of the real head of the organization and a more realistic strategist, Joaquin Maurin.

Turning to the sources upon which Mr. Alexander based his research, a different set of problems presents itself. Alexander relies almost entirely upon the newspapers and other periodicals of the ICO's US section. These are supplemented by a scattering of secondary sources and some personal interviews with leading figures in the ICO still living, but the additional information so gathered appears to be minimal. If uncritical reliance on these official sources is problematic, Alexander's use of other authors is more dubious. Benjamin Gitlow's *I Confess* (1939) is as garish a piece of anti-communist fiction as its name suggests. Fortunately Alexander refers to it only in passing, but its presence in the footnotes is a sign that this volume is not always as scholarly an enterprise as one might first imagine.

On the brighter side Alexander's use of an extensive collection of in-depth materials on the POUM and the Spanish Civil War make these sections some of the fullest and most interesting in the book. Still on the matter of sources, Alexander here appears not to have known or used a number of items which could have been utilized. K. H. Tjaden's book-length history of the Communist Party of Germany-Opposition, *Struktur und Funktion der KPD-Opposition* (Meisenheim, 1964), is not mentioned. Nor is M. N. Roy's own account of his break with the Comintern, *Our Differences* (Calcutta, 1938). Alexander appears not to have consulted the *Bulletin of the International Communist Opposition* (are there copies available in this country?) or to be aware of the existence of the Gruppe Arbeiterpolitik, a successor to the German Communist Opposition which presently exists in West Germany, and has republished some important works of the 1930s ICO section in that country.

All of these problems and lapses, however, should not conceal the critical fact mentioned earlier: this is the first full length treatment of the ICO in English. Whatever its weaknesses—and we have touched on many of them—until a genuinely Marxist treatment of this subject is produced this volume will provide us with a wealth of raw data which remained buried until now.

A final note: readers who may wish to do their own research on this history and politics of the ICO will find invaluable the Greenwood reprints of the various publications of the ICO and the Lovestone group: *Revolutionary Age*, *Workers Age*, *International Class Struggle*, and *The Road to Communism*.

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