The Appeals of Communism

In most Western countries the Communist Party was not the major party of the left at any point in the seventy years separating the formation of the Comintern in 1919 from the fall of Communism in Europe in 1989. More commonly, Communists were but a tiny minority of the population. With their organization and discipline, they could, however, sometimes wield influence well in excess of their numerical strength, especially in the trade union movement. What kind of people became Communists differed significantly in countries where the Communists were the main alternative to conservative or liberal parties from those, more common in Europe, in which Communist membership and electoral support trailed far behind socialist parties of a social democratic type.

In France, Italy and, to a lesser extent, Finland, the Communist Party was, however, for much of that seventy-year period a serious political force. In the first post-Second World War elections these were the three democratic countries in which the Communists did best, except for Czechoslovakia where they emerged as the largest single party in free elections in 1946. In the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia the Communist Party got 40 per cent of the vote (well ahead of the socialists), although in Slovakia its support was significantly lower at 30 per cent. The appeals of Communism in Czechoslovakia owed much to disillusionment with the Western powers for colluding with Hitler – in the Munich Agreement of 1938 – to hand over part of Czech territory to Germany; to the Czechs’ historically good relations with Russia; and to the role of Soviet troops as the principal liberators of their country from German occupation. The Czechs and Slovaks were not to know that this would be their last free election for more than four decades. For the majority of those who supported the Communist Party at the polls, that was not what they were voting for. The immediate post-war years were, however, a time of genuine enthusiasm for ‘building socialism’ in Czechoslovakia, although different people meant different things by that notion.
In the other countries where the Communist Party did relatively well in the first post-World War Two elections, and which, unlike Czechoslovakia, remained democracies, the Communists attracted, in broad terms, between a fifth and a quarter of the electorate (26 per cent in France, 23.5 per cent in Finland and 19 per cent in Italy). It was many years before the socialist parties overtook the Communists in France and Italy as the main party of the left, though in Finland this was achieved as early as 1948. The very fact that in Italy the Communists constituted over several decades the party which seemed to be the main spokesman for working-class interests meant that comparatively recent immigrants were not (as was the case in countries as diverse as the United States, Canada, Britain and South Africa) a major component of their membership. This was, on the contrary, made up almost entirely from the indigenous population. That was true up to a point also of France, especially in comparison with the English-speaking countries. However, in the 1920s and 1930s there was a large influx of immigrants, especially Poles, Italians and Spaniards, many of whom became industrial workers, with some being drawn into the Communist movement.

The Communist Party was, moreover, quite effective in appealing to regional groups who felt neglected by the political elite in both France and Italy. France, in particular, with its own Jacobin tradition, was a natural home for a revolutionary party. The PCF made the most of this, portraying the Bolshevik revolution as a continuation of the French Revolution of 1789 and noting Lenin’s affinity to Robespierre. Class, even more than regional, differences throughout the twentieth century were sharp, as was the predominance of elitist educational institutions which, in turn, were a gateway to political power and influence. Intellectuals who had gone to French universities – most notably the Sorbonne in Paris, rather than the exclusive grandes écoles – were also a social group from which the PCF recruited in large numbers. The attraction of Communist ideas thus, at least partly, cut across the class divide, with the goals of the Communist Party being seen in France and also in Italy as ‘coinciding with the socialist-humanitarian aspirations which were deeply rooted in those countries before the advent of Communism’.

More generally, we can say that the appeals of Communism worldwide included country-specific factors; international developments (whether the Great Depression of the early 1930s or the rise of fascism later in that decade); and the varying attraction of the Soviet Union at different times. The last point is of great importance. Depending on the period and on the eyes of the beholder, the Soviet Union could be perceived as a model to be admired and copied or, alternatively, as a dreadful warning. The policies of the Comintern, heavily influenced (to put it at its mildest) by Soviet
interests, also played a different role at various times. In both Europe and North America there was a deep economic depression at the end of the 1920s and mass unemployment at that time and in the early 1930s. That led some recruits directly to the Communist Party, but the worst years of the economic slump in the West coincided with the Comintern’s Third Period of narrow sectarianism which reduced the attractiveness of this apparent alternative to a crisis-riven capitalism. As a result, in most countries the Communist parties picked up more members in the later 1930s than earlier in the decade, even though by then the Western economies had begun to recover and although the years 1936–38 were ones of show trials and massive purges in the Soviet Union. The change in Comintern policy and in the international situation played crucial parts in the expansion of Communist ranks in the later 1930s. The period between 1935 and 1939 was, as noted already in Chapter 5, that of the Popular Front. The threat of fascism, combined with the Comintern’s call for solidarity in the face of it, was much more conducive to winning new supporters than its earlier policy of making no distinction between democratic socialists and fascists. The fast-growing Soviet economy, with its Five-Year Plans and full employment, was also a source of attraction. It seemed to many in the West, dissatisfied with what they saw as avoidable hardship occasioned by a capricious capitalism, that a system of central planning provided a more rational way of running an economy than the booms and busts of the inter-war market economy.

Since even in the inter-war years (not to speak of the Cold War era) party membership was treated with great suspicion in Western democracies, there was a much wider body of people who were highly sympathetic to the Soviet Union and to the Communist Party than those who actually took out a membership card. They became known as the ‘fellow travelers’. Although the leaderships of the democratic socialist parties generally distanced themselves from Communism and, as noted in an earlier chapter, the strongest of them, the British Labour Party, took pains to prevent Communists joining their ranks as individual members, some non-Communist socialist intellectuals turned out to be especially starry-eyed admirers of the Soviet Union.

Writers and Communism

The American novelist Howard Fast, the product of a poverty-stricken childhood, was working in a Harlem branch of the New York Public Library when in 1932 a female librarian gave him George Bernard Shaw’s The Intelligent
Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism’ to read. Fast recalled that he read through this ‘wonderful book’ in one night and ‘Shaw was my idol and teacher ever afterwards’. British Communists who joined the CPGB before or during the Second World War frequently mention this same book, first published in 1928 and in an updated paperback edition in 1937, as the work which converted them to a belief in socialism – and Communism. The Irish playwright, who spent his adult life in England and was one of the most prominent of the early Fabians, wrote much more accessible prose than that of the classical Marxist theorists. While strongly sympathetic to the Soviet Union, and taking a benign view of both Lenin and Stalin, Shaw was, nevertheless, sceptical about the turning of Marxism into a political religion. Although he noted that he himself had been convinced of the superiority of socialism over capitalism by reading Marx’s Capital, he wrote in 1927 (for publication in 1928):

There is, however, a danger against which you should be on your guard. Socialism may be preached, not as a far-reaching economic reform, but as a new Church founded on a new revelation of the will of God made by a new prophet . . . They preach an inevitable, final, supreme category in the order of the universe in which all the contradictions of the earlier and lower categories will be reconciled . . . Their prophet is named neither Jesus nor Mahomet nor Luther nor Augustine . . . but Karl Marx . . . Two of their tenets contradict one another . . . One is that the evolution of Capitalism into Socialism is predestined, implying that we have nothing to do but sit down and wait for it to occur. This is their version of Salvation by Faith. The other is that it must be effected by a revolution establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat. This is their version of Salvation by Works.9

Arguing that Marx was a teacher from whom much could be learned, not someone to be worshipped as an ‘infallible prophet’, Shaw urged his readers not to vote for anyone who spoke contemptuously of Marx, but added: ‘Do not, however, vote for a Marxist fanatic either, unless you can catch one young enough or acute enough to grow out of Marxism after a little experience, as Lenin did.’10 While Lenin certainly adapted Marxism to Russian conditions, whether the pre-revolutionary society or the exigencies of government, the idea that he ‘grew out of Marxism’ is but one of Shaw’s more dubious observations on the Soviet scene.

The poet Hugh McDiarmid who, in the course of a contentious life, managed to get himself expelled at different times from the Communist Party for being a Scottish nationalist and from the Scottish National Party as a Communist, had an even more exalted view of Lenin than did Shaw.
In his poem ‘First Hymn to Lenin’, he compares him to Christ and says that Lenin marked the greatest turning point in the history of humanity since the birth of Christianity. He makes clear his awareness of the killings perpetrated by the punitive arm of the Bolshevik revolution, the Cheka, but takes a cosmic view of their activities as both necessary and insignificant. What matters is ‘wha [whom] we kill’ in order:

To lessen that foulest murder that deprives
Maist [most] men o’ real lives.”

That poem by McDiarmid is dedicated to Prince D.S. Mirsky, who fought on the side of the Whites in the Russian civil war, emigrated to Britain in 1921, taught Russian literature at the University of London, and acquired a growing enthusiasm for what he saw as a ‘National Bolshevism’ developing in Russia. He joined the British Communist Party in 1931 and returned to his homeland in 1932. Five years later he was arrested by the secret police. He perished in a Soviet labour camp in 1939.

The most notorious example of Fabian socialists becoming infatuated with ‘the Soviet experiment’ is that of Sidney and Beatrice Webb. They wrote a vast book which purported to show in detail how the Soviet Union was governed. Called Soviet Communism: A New Civilization? when it was first published in 1935, it appeared in its second edition with the question mark removed. Writing in October 1937, the Webbs observe: ‘What we have learnt of the developments during 1936–1937 has persuaded us to withdraw the interrogation mark.’ The Webbs wrote much other work worthy of respect (including, not least, the first of Beatrice’s two autobiographical volumes, My Apprenticeship) – and they were the main founders in 1895 of a great educational institution, the London School of Economics and Political Science. In their October 1937 preface to the second edition of Soviet Communism, they self-deprecatingly ascribe their writing of an enormous book on the USSR ‘to the recklessness of old age’. They add that their reputation ‘will naturally stand or fall upon our entire output of the past half-century, to the load of which one more book makes no appreciable difference’. However,

* This poem was first published under a different title, ‘To Lenin’, in an anthology of New English Poems, edited by Lascelles Abercrombie, in 1930. By the following year it had become ‘First Hymn to Lenin’ and the title of a collection of McDiarmid’s own verse. In another poem in that same volume, ‘The Seamless Garment’, addressed to a mill worker in McDiarmid’s native Langholm, he describes Lenin as ‘The best weaver Earth ever saw’.
it would have been better for their posthumous reputations not to have published a book replete with statements such as ‘During the present year (1937) strenuous efforts have been made, both in the trade union organization and in the Communist Party, to cut out the dead wood.’\textsuperscript{14} The year 1937 was that in which the physical annihilation of Communists reached a grotesque height, as the Great Purge hit the ruling party itself with full force. The Webbs engaged in mild, and misleadingly qualified, criticism of ‘the deliberate discouragement and even repression, not of criticism of the administration, which is, we think, more persistent and more actively encouraged than in any other country, but of independent thinking on fundamental social issues . . .’ in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{15} However, they happily concluded that ‘the ancient axiom of “Love your neighbour as yourself” is embodied in Soviet society and that ‘in the USSR there is no distinction between the code professed on Sundays and that practised on week-days’.\textsuperscript{16} All that in the worst years of Stalinist repression.

Quite apart from socialist writers such as George Orwell, who were never attracted to Communism – with Orwell’s Animal Farm (1944) and Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) providing two of the most effective indictments of Stalinism and totalitarianism – there were also writers who did feel the pull of Communism but who before the end of the 1930s had seen through the fundamental falsity of Stalin’s Soviet Union. The most prominent among them was the French writer André Gide (like Shaw, a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature). Gide, without joining the party, was attracted by Communist ideals and the kind of society he thought was being developed in the Soviet Union. In 1932 he wrote: ‘My conversion is like a faith . . . In the deplorable state of distress of the modern world, the plan of the Soviet Union seems to me to point to salvation. Everything persuades me of this . . . And if my life were necessary to assure the success of the Soviet Union, I would gladly give it immediately.’\textsuperscript{17}

On the invitation of the official writers’ organization in the Soviet Union, Gide visited Russia in 1936. While many other foreign authors were flattered by the attention they received, with numerous banquets being given in their honour, Gide was repelled by being offered ‘all the prerogatives and privileges which I abhorred in the old world’, since he had not failed to observe the widespread poverty in the USSR.\textsuperscript{18} He also discovered that the officially approved ‘criticism and self-criticism’ was a sham. Although he was on the kind of politically sanitized conducted tour which had deadened the intellectual faculties of many another foreign visitor during this period of ‘high Stalinism’, Gide, in contrast to them, wrote:
It is not the Party line which is discussed or criticized, but only the question whether a certain theory tallies or not with this sacred line. No state of mind is more dangerous than this, nor more likely to imperil real culture. Soviet citizens remain in the most complete ignorance of everything outside their own country and – what is worse – have been persuaded that everything abroad is vastly inferior to everything at home. On the other hand, although they are not interested in what prevails outside their country, they are very much interested in what foreigners think of them. What they are very anxious to know is whether they are sufficiently admired abroad . . . what they want from them is praise and not information.  

In contrast, Arthur Koestler, a central European Communist in the fullest geographical sense – born in Budapest to an Austrian mother and Hungarian father, educated in Vienna, but a member of the German Communist Party from 1931 – was able to rationalize the poverty he saw at first hand in the Soviet Union in 1932–33, including the ravages of famine in Ukraine. He remained in the Communist Party until 1938. What finally led to his resignation was his experience as a journalist with the republican side in the Spanish Civil War and, still more, the purges in the Soviet Union in 1936–38, in which his brother-in-law and two of his closest personal friends were arrested on absurd charges. Koestler’s influential novel Darkness at Noon, published in 1940, sensitively portrays an old Bolshevik, Rubashov, arrested and shot at the age of forty – the same age as was Nikolai Bukharin, to whom Rubashov bears a resemblance, when he was shot in the Great Purge. Rubashov is persuaded that his ‘last service to the Party’ is to confess to the fabricated charges brought against him in order ‘to avoid awakening sympathy and pity’ among the population as a whole, since the arousal of such feelings would be dangerous for the party and the Communist cause.

Social and Psychological Appeals

In the case of non-ruling Communist parties, it was not generally the poorest in the community who joined – not so much the unemployed or unskilled workers as skilled and semi-skilled workers. What was true of the British Communist Party membership applied also to many other European parties – the recruits were drawn largely from well-organized sections of the working class, notably engineers, miners, and builders. There was also generally a fair sprinkling of teachers, especially those who had themselves come from politically conscious working-class backgrounds. The Scottish and Welsh coalfields provided some of the CPGB’s leading members, and
though the party’s General Secretary over many years, Harry Pollitt, was a Lancashire boilermaker before becoming a full-time party official, the English membership of the party was never proportional to their overwhelming numerical predominance in the British population. After the lengthy period in which Pollitt and Palme Dutt were the principal duo within the CPGB, members of Jewish origin (discussed in a broader context in the next section), as well as Scots, held a large number of positions of leadership. The Welsh miners’ leader, Arthur Horner, who, after heading the South Wales Miners’ Federation, became Secretary-General of the National Union of Mineworkers, was also one of the most prominent Communists from the 1930s to the 1950s. For a leading party member he showed an unusual independence of mind and a willingness to defy party discipline – to the extent that he was accused as early as 1931, and on more than one subsequent occasion, of ‘opportunistic deviations’ and of ‘Hornerism’. Irish immigrants to Britain, many of whom worked in the building industry, were quite strongly represented in the Communist Party, even though the Catholic Church in Britain, as elsewhere, was in the forefront of opposition to the Communists. A number of the Catholic converts to Communism were, indeed, rebelling against their upbringing.

While the Communist Party attracted people who were vehemently opposed to conventional religion, it is notable how many members of non-ruling Communist parties (as distinct from party members in Communist states) have compared their belief in the party to religious conviction. That applies to many who remained in the Communist Party as well as those who left it. The religious-like zeal of their commitment to the Communist cause was especially true in the smaller parties, whether these were clandestine organizations in authoritarian regimes or more open ones within democracies. It also, however, varied over time. It was more true of those who joined the Communist Party before, rather than after, 1956 when Nikita Khrushchev’s speech to the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU, with its attack on Stalin, inadvertently exposed the myth of the party’s infallibility.

It is important to recognize that many Western Communists joined the party dedicated to building a better society worldwide. If, however, they were to maintain their ideals while conforming to the twists and turns of policy – emanating in most of its essentials from Moscow – this required considerable intellectual contortions. Above all, it meant believing that those in higher authority knew better than they did what policies and tactics were required for Communism to prevail or holding the overriding belief that the long-term goal justified disciplined obedience and the suppression of doubts about any particular change of tack. At the time at which he joined the American Communist Party, Howard Fast felt that he had ‘now
become part of an edifice dedicated singularly and irrevocably to the ending of all war, injustice, hunger and human suffering – and to the brotherhood of man'. Even after he had broken with Communism and had become a severe critic of it, Fast wrote: 'Intimately, I know only the Communist Party of the United States; yet of this tiny organization I can say, honestly and forthrightly and under oath if need be, that never in so small a group have I seen so many pure souls, so many gentle and good people, so many men and women of utter integrity.' To the extent that this was true – and it does not sit well with turning a blind eye to, or condoning, mass terror in Stalin’s Soviet Union – it was more applicable to rank-and-file members than to the party functionaries, who were in the forefront of defending the indefensible. The Communist Party leaders in Western democracies displayed no qualms about defending the arrests and executions in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. And Earl Browder, the American Communist Party leader, just six weeks before the signing of the Nazi–Soviet Pact, denounced rumours of a German–Soviet rapprochement, saying there was as much chance of that happening ‘as of Earl Browder being elected President of the Chamber of Commerce’. He duly swung into line when the unthinkable occurred.

The life of the Communist Party member within a Western democracy also had something in common with that of members of a sectarian Church. Membership was extremely arduous and demanding. Such time as was left for social life was spent in the company of party comrades. People met their spouses in the party, and when this was not possible because of the underrepresentation of women, the male spouse was expected to recruit his wife to party membership, and usually did. A less common case was that of Betty Dowsett, who qualified as a doctor in 1943 and worked for the Medical Research Council before being dismissed, apparently on political grounds, in 1949. She became a bus conductor, married her driver, and before long succeeded in adding him to the ranks of the British Communist Party.

For some who joined the Communist Party, a search for belief and a craving for certainty were important parts of their psychological make-up. One English Communist, Douglas Hyde, moved from being a young Methodist lay preacher, with an interest also in other religions, to becoming a Communist activist for twenty years, finishing up as news editor of the CPGB party newspaper, the Daily Worker, before resigning from the party in 1948 to become a proselytising member of the Catholic Church. Although Hyde’s political memoir, I Believed, written in the late Stalin period, is also a reasoned attack on Communist Party strategy and tactics, it holds that a majority of those attracted to Communism in those years were ‘subconsciously looking for a cause which will fill the void left by unbelief, or, as in my own case, an insecurely held belief which is failing to satisfy them intellectually and spiritually’. Raphael Samuel, who, when he
left the CPGB, was not tempted by any religious substitute but became one of the leading intellectual voices of the British New Left, has written: ‘Joining the Party was experienced as a momentous event, equivalent in its intensity, as numerous memoirs testify, to taking a decision for Christ, and it is indicative of this that new recruits, according to a phrase in common currency, were those who had “seen the light”. By the same token full-time organizers – translated rather than elected to their posts – were obeying a vocation or call.”

Although joining the party was less often seen in quite such terms in a mass party such as that in Italy, a study of the PCI by Robert Putnam in the 1970s found that, as compared with other Italian political activists, whether of the left or right, Communists defined ‘their satisfactions more often in terms of commitment to broad ideals and goals, less often in terms of opportunity for personal influence’. Italian Communist deputies were found to be much more optimistic at that time than their political opponents, and inclined to describe their politics as ‘life itself’ or as ‘not a career, but a mission’. The generalizations of Raphael Samuel about Communism as like ‘a church militant’ are, on the whole, more applicable to Communist parties which were out of the mainstream of their countries’ political life than to those of, say, France, Italy or Finland, and they applied more to some generations of Communists – particularly those who joined at any time between the Bolshevik revolution and the death of Stalin – than to those who became party members as late as the 1970s. Nevertheless, there is a broad applicability to Communist parties internationally in what Samuel writes on the basis of his own intra-party experience:

The ambitions of the Communist Party – and the self-perception of members – were unmistakably theocratic. Organizationally, we conceived ourselves to be a communion of the elect, covenanted to a sacred cause. Politically, we aspired to be teachers and guides. As a visible church, we traced an unbroken line of descent from the founding fathers, claiming scriptural precedent for our policies . . . Authority in the Party was theocratic too, an institutionalized form of charisma which operated at every level of Party life. Reports were handed down with all the majesty of encyclicals and studied as closely as if they were Bible texts.”

Part of the attraction of Communism for many – and it was an especial comfort for members of the smaller parties – was the emphasis in the doctrine on inevitability. If all history was a history of class struggles in which the penultimate stage – before the establishment of socialism and its higher phase, a classless communism – was the assured victory of the proletariat, led by its vanguard party, then it was possible to look to the future with
optimism. As one former member of the British Communist Party put it: ‘The emphasis on inevitability in the theory is a tremendous comfort. It counterbalances the discouragement of failure in one’s own lifetime.’

While this psychological dimension to the appeal of Communism was of significance quite generally, there were other, still more important factors at work in the countries where Communism was most successful. Asian Communism, as will become clearer in later chapters, owed much of its success in China, Vietnam, Laos and Korea – as well as its significant support, which fell short of taking power nationally, in India, Indonesia and the Philippines – to its identification with anti-colonialism and national liberation. While in the West European countries where the Communist Party was strongest, nationalism did not play anything like so large a role, there was in the French Communist Party a strong identification with a current to be found more broadly in French society – namely, resistance to the encroachment of American culture, not to mention suspicion of the American military presence in Western Europe following the Second World War. Of course, the emphasis of the PCF on the French revolutionary tradition and the attempts of Communist intellectuals to present themselves as ‘the zealous guardians of French culture against the rising tide of American barbarity’ ran up against the contradiction ‘between a class-based and national conception of culture’. No less of a contradiction was the French Communists’ acceptance of the ideological and, to some extent, cultural hegemony of Moscow at the same time as they made a virtue of rejecting that of Washington, New York and Los Angeles. That is not to deny that French Communism had its own indigenous roots. Although the development of the Soviet system after 1917 exerted a strong appeal to French intellectuals, their identification with the PCF rested on ‘the particular blend of Marxism, Leninism, and Jacobinism which was so unique to the political culture of the French left’.

Up until the end of the 1970s, Communism appealed to a broad range of French intellectuals, but their influence within the party was kept within strict limits. The major constituency of the party consisted of workers, and not only did they predominate within the membership but most of the leading positions within the party were held by people who began as manual workers. For these officials of proletarian origin, social and economic conditions had been of prime importance at the time of their recruitment. France and Italy differed in this respect. A study of Communist mayors conducted in the 1970s in those two countries found that 40 per cent of the French mayors named economic and social (or occupational group) factors as their reasons for joining the Communist Party, whereas only 7 per cent of the Italian mayors stressed such motives. For the latter, resistance to
fascism had been the key factor. In the late Stalin period a comparison of the French, Italian, British and American Communist parties found that the PCI, as befitted the largest Communist Party in Western Europe, was the most integrated with the broader society and the least indoctrinated. It contained the largest contingent of people who had not been exposed to official Communist doctrine prior to joining the party and the largest proportion who received no doctrinal training once they were within it. The PCI was the most ‘normal’ of West European Communist parties in its psychological relationship with its own society. It wielded power successfully in a number of localities. However, unlike the French Communist Party, it was not allowed entry into any national government coalition – not, at least, until after the party had been disbanded and had re-emerged in the 1990s in social democratic colours.

Communists of Jewish Origin

One significant aspect of party membership is the extent to which Communism attracted recruits from long-settled indigenous populations or from recent immigrants. Ethnicity as a factor was played down in Communist doctrine. What mattered was class origin and class solidarity. And in countries such as China, Korea and Vietnam, the party attracted the nationals of those countries rather than any particular minority. This was true, in the main, also for the largest European non-ruling parties. In both Italy and France the parties had a mass membership – apart from the periods when they were forced underground by the fascist regime in Italy and the wartime Vichy regime in France – and both the rank-and-file and the party officials overwhelmingly came from the indigenous population.

In contrast with these two cases, and as distinct especially from Asian Communism, relatively recent immigrants were massively overrepresented in the Communist parties of many other countries. As a study by the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem noted, in much of Europe, the Americas, and South Africa, Jews in particular ‘at various times and in various places were disproportionately represented in the Communist movement (be it in the total membership, the apparatus, or the leadership)’.

There is no one explanation for this, although part of the answer is to be found in the position occupied by Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That goes some way to explaining not only the high incidence of Jewish participation in the Russian revolutionary movement and in East European Communist parties but also the disproportionately large number of Jews in such Communist
parties as those of the United States, Britain and South Africa, since it was from the Russian Empire and from other parts of Eastern Europe that the Jewish immigrants came.

Communist and socialist parties drew their support predominantly from the cities and large towns, and in both their Russian and Eastern European places of origin and the countries to which they emigrated, Jews were an overwhelmingly urban community. Over centuries they had been banned from owning land throughout most of Eastern Europe and so their economic activity was concentrated in the urban commercial economy, whether as traders and entrepreneurs or as workers in manufacturing industry. Clearly, Jews could not belong to parties which were defined by Christianity or be much attracted either to peasant parties or to parties representing the interests of the wealthier landowners. Nor could they readily become members of nationalist parties, especially since the latter more often than not were anti-semitic in both ideology and political practice. Thus, the internationalism of Communism drew many young radicals of Jewish origin into the Communist movement as well as, where they were available, into socialist parties of a social democratic type. The fact that people from a Jewish background came to occupy a disproportionately large and prominent place in Communist parties does not, of course, mean that they were anything other than a small minority within the Jewish population. Indeed, joining the Communist Party meant distancing themselves not only from Judaism but also from distinctive Jewish customs. Alec Nove notes the irrelevance of the origins of Jewish Communists – with the significant possible exception of a greater attachment to internationalism – when he observes of the Soviet Union in the 1920s:

Few would deny that Jews played a disproportionate role in the first decade of the Soviet regime. But since the individuals concerned had broken with Jewish traditions, it is hard to discern what difference their origin made to their ideas. The excesses of War Communism, under the joint impact of ideology and war emergency, destroyed the livelihood of millions of Jewish craftsmen and traders. The many Jewish parties were anti-Bolshevik. However, there was internationalism. Thus, it may not be accidental that ‘right’ ideologues of ‘socialism in one country’ (Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsky) were Russian, while the ‘lefts’ who opposed them (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Trotsky, Radek) were Jews.

In Poland, the Communist Party was banned for most of the inter-war period and so party membership statistics are not precise. Nevertheless, one careful study notes that the proportion of Jews within the pre-World
War Two Communist Party of Poland (KKP) 'was never lower than 22 per cent countrywide, reaching a peak of 35 per cent (in 1930)' 41. In Poland, as in many other countries, Jews were partly reacting against anti-semitism and their own marginality in society. There was the more general factor that 'given a certain level of literacy, education, and exposure to the injustices of society, members of discriminated minorities are more likely than others to join radical movements for change'.42 There was also much revolutionary romanticism, encapsulated in the remark of one Polish Communist of Jewish origin that 'We waited for the revolution as for the messiah' and of another that 'I believed in Stalin and in the party as my father believed in the messiah'.43 Communism may have appealed 'to a certain Jewish sense of justice and redemption', but it has also been appositely observed that 'the involvement of individuals in this radical movement was in most cases an act of rebellion against the traditional world of their parents or against the concern with particularistic Jewish issues as expressed by movements such as Zionism . . .'.44

Of all Western Communist parties, there was none in which Jews were so overrepresented as that of the United States. This was especially true just after the Russian Revolution and in the earliest years of the Comintern. It was a time and place when internationalism was carried to an extreme. At one New York mass meeting in 1917, Trotsky spoke in Russian and the other speakers in German, English, Finnish, Lettish, Yiddish and Lithuanian.45 In the early years of the CPUSA, the great majority of members were foreign-born. When the party abandoned foreign language branches as its basic unit of organization in 1925, it lost half its membership (dropping from just over 14,000 to a little over 7,000) in one month. During the 1920s, the Yiddish equivalent of the American Daily Worker had a larger circulation in the United States than the Worker itself.46 It was not until 1936 that 'the Party was able to claim that a majority of members were American-born'.47 As late as the 1930s and 1940s, approximately half of the party members were of Jewish origin, many of them from Eastern Europe.48

Paradoxically, although Communist parties such as those of the United States and Great Britain were marginal to the mainstream of politics, the act of joining them was for immigrants partly a way of overcoming their marginality and seeking integration in the new country.49 In the words of Raphael Samuel: 'For my mother’s generation Communism, though not intended as such, was a way of being English, a bridge by which the children of the ghetto entered the national culture.'50 Joe Jacobs, who was secretary of the Stepney branch of the CPGB in East London in the late 1930s, has described how, as a Jewish working-class youth, he got into conversation at street corners with older men who discussed at length the Russian
Revolution, adding: ‘The names and places talked about were familiar to us because many of our parents had come from Russia and Poland.’ The conversations ranged also over local and national events in Britain, and soon Jacobs was being invited to meetings, classes and demonstrations, ‘all of which I was only too pleased to attend’. Before long, he had been recruited by these older Communists into the CPGB. As a historian of the relationship between Jews and Communism in Britain observes: ‘Here we can detect the combination of Jewish cultural memory and the partial integration of the second generation into British society – common themes in Jewish Communist biographies.’

The rise of fascism in the 1930s led radicals in many European countries and in North America into the Communist Party. Its threat was perceived especially strongly by Jews and, to the extent that the Communist Party appeared to be the most unrelentingly anti-fascist of political parties, this drew a substantial number of Jewish recruits to its ranks. Taken in conjunction with the apparent collapse of capitalism in the early 1930s, Communism seemed to some young Jewish intellectuals the obvious alternative. Indeed, Eric Hobsbawm, who was born in 1917 and whose family moved to Berlin in 1933, argues that there was practically no choice:

What could young Jewish intellectuals have become under such circumstances? Not liberals of any kind, since the world of liberalism (which included social democracy) was precisely what had collapsed. . . . We became either communists or some equivalent form of revolutionary marxists, or if we chose our own version of blood-and-soil nationalism, Zionists. But even the great bulk of young intellectual Zionists saw themselves as some sort of revolutionary marxist nationalists. There was virtually no other choice. We did not make a commitment against bourgeois society and capitalism, since it patently seemed to be on its last legs. We simply chose a future rather than no future, which meant revolution.

Hobsbawm adds that ‘the great October revolution and Soviet Russia proved to us that such a new world was possible, perhaps that it was already functioning’. Although he remained a member of the British Communist Party during decades after others had left, the ebbs and flows of Soviet policy challenged the faith of less dogged members. What Jason Heppell says of the Communist Party of Great Britain was true of Western Communist parties more generally: ‘The CP . . . was dependent on the lottery of Soviet policy: with the Nazi–Soviet pact of 1939, it had a losing ticket, but with the German invasion in 1941, it became a winner.’ If Communists of Jewish origin played a disproportionately large role in the
leadership and membership of Marxist-Leninist parties, they were also to become a disproportionately large component of the victims of Communist purges – an aspect of the relationship between Jews and Communism that will be discussed in later chapters.

Recruitment to Ruling Parties

As was noted as early as the Introduction to this book, joining a Communist party in a Communist state was a very different matter from joining a non-ruling party. It was still voluntary up to a point, but obligatory if an individual wished to pursue a career in particular professions. It was also an enormous asset for those ambitious for success, whatever their occupation. To belong to the ruling group in a Communist state, whether at the national or local level, party membership was obviously a prerequisite, since the party organs themselves wielded most power. At the top of the hierarchy these were constituted by the Central Committee and its departments and the two inner bodies, the Politburo and the Secretariat. At the city level it was the party’s City Committee and its inner body, the party Bureau, which was the ultimate local authority. There was a similar structure in the regions of the country and the urban and rural districts. For officials within ministries and for army and security police officers, party membership went with the job. Since, however, in Communist states the party did not normally include more than 10 per cent of the adult population in employment within its ranks, this meant that the party ‘saturation’ was much greater in some professions than others. The more ideological a profession, the greater the incidence of party membership. Thus, in research institutes, social scientists and academic lawyers would, overwhelmingly, be members of the Communist Party, whereas membership was more optional for mathematicians and natural scientists. It was optional, too, for creative writers and others in the artistic professions. In any career, however, to belong to the party assisted advancement and it was essential for those who wished to move into the higher administration of their profession.

If an average of one in ten adults within the party was a desideratum, and yet in some professions the overwhelming majority of people belonged to the Communist Party, then clearly there had to be categories and occupations underrepresented within the party ranks. That was notably true of women, whose numbers within the ruling Communist parties were very far from reflecting the fact that they generally (as a result of two world wars) constituted more than half the population. Clerical and shop workers – and this point links up with the last, for they were mainly women – were greatly
underrepresented. Peasants also did not have a party presence in proportion to their percentage of the population. So far as the criterion of education is concerned, people with only the most basic levels had a far lower incidence of party membership than those with higher education. The one category of the population where the one-in-ten average was also the norm was that of manual workers, certainly in the case of the Soviet Union.

The appeals of party membership within a Communist state were, naturally, different for different people. For anyone who wanted to be a boss, this was a necessary first step. For many people, however, it was a prerequisite of having the kind of interesting career to which they aspired, and by no means necessarily a political career – for example, an economist, historian, or head teacher in a school. If a person wished to travel abroad from a Communist country, the chances of doing so were very much better if he or she were a party member. For a minority there were also greater privileges – including the possibility to purchase goods from special shops. That applied to those who were members of what was, in effect, the inner party – the nomenklatura.

The nomenklatura consisted both of a list of posts which could be filled only with the permission of a party committee at one level or another – the Central Committee in the case of an editorship of a national newspaper, the city or town committee in the case of a school principal – and a list of people (kept by the party organs) deemed suitable for appointments to such responsible posts. In some accounts the nomenklatura has been treated as if it were a ruling class within Communist states. That was always an oversimplification, for the powers and privileges of a woman teacher who had risen to be head of a school, even though her post was on the nomenklatura of the local party committee, were incomparably less than those of occupants of positions that required the imprimatur of the Central Committee or Politburo. Neither the party membership as a whole nor even those who were on the nomenklatura of a party committee at a local level can sensibly be identified as members of a ruling class. If that term is to be used, and its usefulness in this context is debatable, it would apply, at most, to the full-time party functionaries and to those holding high state appointments which could be filled only with the approval of the central party organs. They certainly constituted an elite, and among their privileges was access to the special shops. Given the shortages in the shops open to the general public in most Communist states at most times, that was quite a perk, even though the nomenklatura shops themselves had less on display than was to be found in a typical Western supermarket or large store.

For those eager for upward social mobility, joining the Communist Party could also be seen as a mark of recognition from the powers-that-be of their
worth and political reliability. In the Soviet Union in the 1920s and even in the 1930s it could, less prosaically, be associated with an idealistic desire to build a just society. A combination of the speed of social change and the effectiveness and all-pervasiveness of Communist propaganda and education meant that in those decades there were many true believers in the construction of socialism and communism. During the Second World War, to join the Communist Party was linked in the Soviet Union with the patriotic struggle against the Nazi invaders of their country. In the early post-war years, pride in the part played by the Soviet army in the defeat of fascism and a patriotic desire to rebuild a shattered country could also be factors leading an individual to seek party membership. In other words, not all who joined ruling parties were careerists. However, the fact that being in the Communist Party was a sine qua non for some careers and an undoubted aid to advancement in others was the single most important appeal of party membership in countries in which the Communists had a monopoly of power.

The distinction between membership of a ruling and non-ruling Communist Party is, then, fundamental. Members in both cases may have shared a sense of mission and of being a group apart – an advance guard of ideologically armed citizens of a future society – but in the case of party members in a capitalist society (whether possessing an authoritarian or democratic regime), they represented a counterculture rather than the official culture. And where they had mass support, as in Italy or France, they were a counter-elite rather than the established elite, whereas in Communist states party membership was a necessary passport to elite status, even if not all rank-and-file members could be said to belong to it. The more idealistic members – in non-Communist and Communist states – believed, especially before fresh light was shed on the realities of Communist rule following Stalin’s death, that a ‘new man’ or ‘new socialist person’ would become the norm in the communist society of the future. In the meantime, they accepted the discipline, arduous work and social bonds which were necessary if they were to hasten the day when a world of harmony would replace the world of class conflict and capitalist exploitation. Within actually existing Communist states, as distinct from the communist utopia of the imagination, lip service to the creation of the ‘new man’ was all too easily combined with an acceptance of privilege and career advantages and conservative defence of a status quo which worked to the benefit of party members, especially those in the higher reaches of the nomenklatura.