

The Comintern, Communist Women Leaders and the Struggle for Women's Liberation in Britain between the Wars: A Political and Prosopographical Investigation, Part 1.

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The literature on Communist women is sparse and touches tangentially on the lives of female activists, even those who participated in the Communist Party leadership. This is the first part of a two-part article which examines 15 of the 18 very unusual women who figured on the Central Committee (CC) of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) between 1920 and 1939. It outlines Communist perspectives on women's liberation documenting their roots in the Marxist analysis associated with Frederick Engels, August Bebel and Clara Zetkin, pioneered in the Second International and the German Social Democracy (SPD), taken up by the Bolsheviks, and adopted in the early 1920s by the infant Comintern. It discusses the strengths and weaknesses displayed by this theoretical tradition and its critique of its rival, feminism. It traces attempts to translate it into practice in Britain thwarted by the resilience of conventional consciousness and the development of Stalinism. In that context, the article adopts a prosopographical approach. It provides a statistical survey of the leading women who made up a mere 13% of CC membership between the World Wars. High turnover hindered female cadre building; 83% of our subjects served only a single term. The cohort was more middle-class than male CC representatives or women in the party at large. While 60% had Communist partners, in a surprising 70% of these cases the woman was more prominent politically. Children and family did not preclude high levels of activism and greater loyalty to the CPGB measured by longevity of party membership than their male CC counterparts. The second part of the paper explores the lives and careers of individual women leaders.

Keywords: Gender; Comintern; Communist Party of Great Britain; Prosopography; Bebel; Zetkin; Feminism; Women's Liberation

Introduction: opening the books

Communist history has been about chaps.¹ The historiography has devoted scant attention to women activists, a stricture which certainly applies to Britain. Pioneering accounts of the British party (CPGB) gave little consideration to gender and women remained largely absent from studies written in the aftermath of the opening of the Comintern archives.² An early

¹ Or at times gentlemen. The British ambassador to the USSR could remark of Stalin, 'The chap's a gentleman': quoted in John McIlroy, 'Foreword', in Paul Flowers, *The New Civilisation? Understanding Stalin's Soviet Union, 1929–1941* (London: Francis Boutle, 2008), p. 7.

² Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London: A. & C. Black, 1958); L.J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966); Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy, *Under the Red Flag: A History of Communism in Britain* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999); James Eaden and David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

twenty-first-century survey of the CPGB between the world wars dedicated two pages to female members; the ensuing text was liberally sprinkled with the names of female Communists but parsimonious in expanding upon their background and experience.³ The single substantial exploration of Communism and women between 1920 and 1939 was researched during the 1970s without access to the Comintern archives. Nonetheless, Sue Bruley amassed an array of evidence, and her text is strong on oral sources, notably interviews with 18 survivors active before 1929. Subsequent documentary discovery amplified the detail but did not invalidate the substance of a study sensitive to context and collective biography which remains unsurpassed in this field.⁴

A particular virtue of Bruley's work, which distinguishes it from much of the academic literature published since the opening of the Comintern records in the 1990s, is its concern with the Marxist theory on which the CPGB was founded, as well as the feminism and suffragism it rejected. The revolutionary tradition the party inherited repudiated biological determinism and denied that women's oppression was inevitable and had always existed. It was, rather, contingent on class divisions and a warrant for its transience was evidence that such divisions had not been present in pre-history: there had been, and there would be, societies characterised by sexual equality. Communists found authority for this in Frederick Engels' *The Origin of the Family* which explained female subordination in terms of the family form which in turn reflected changes in the relations of production.⁵ Synthesising historical materialism and the anthropology of Lewis Morgan, Engels argued that 'primitive communism' had been subverted by economic change. In consequence, women were displaced from key productive roles and subjected to male domination. The material basis of

³ Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party of Great Britain between the Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 30–32.

⁴ Sue Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1920–1939* (New York: Garland Press, 1986).

⁵ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm>.

‘the historic defeat of the female sex’ lay in shifts from hunter-gathering to agriculture, new technologies, generation of a surplus, and its appropriation by men. Development of the forces and relations of production led to elimination of collective ownership, the emergence of private property, monogamy, the patriarchal family, male inheritance and a novel, *unequal* division of labour which confined women to the domestic sphere, to child bearing, child rearing and housework. Capitalist accumulation benefitted from the reproduction of the labour force and the unpaid labour women contributed by nurturing successive generations of workers. In Engels’ metaphor, ‘The wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production ... In the family he is the bourgeois; the wife represents the proletarian.’⁶

The path to any future liberation of women lay through working-class victory in the struggle against capitalism, the proletarianization of women, their entry as full members of the working class into socialised production – which included the domestic economy – and the remaking of relations between the sexes in a socialist society.⁷ Women’s liberation⁸ was

⁶ Engels, op.cit. at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch02d.htm>. Later anthropologists disputed Engels’ insistence that male supremacy had not always been a feature of the past – for discussion, see Eleanor Burke Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance: Collected Articles on Women Cross-Culturally* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008); Karen Sacks, *Sisters or Wives: The Past and Future of Sexual Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982). For a recent study which questions the evidence that oppression did not exist in early society, see Heather A. Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁷ For appraisals see Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg: Women’s Liberation and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Hal Draper, ‘Marx and Engels on Women’s Liberation’, *International Socialism*, 44 (1970), pp. 20–29; Chris Harman, ‘Engels and the Origins of Human Society’, *International Socialism*, new series, 2: 65 (1994) at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1994/xx/engels.htm>; Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory* (1983; Leiden: Brill, 2013) and the Introduction, Susan Ferguson and David McNally, ‘Capital, Labour-Power and Gender Relations’, in *ibid.*, pp. xvii–xl; Sheila Margaret McGregor, ‘Engels on Women, the Family, Class and Gender’, *Human Geography*, 14: 2 (2021), pp. 186–197. See also Chris Knight, *Blood Relations, Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

⁸ The term became popularised after the arrival of ‘the women’s movement’ in the USA from the late 1960s and the UK from 1970. It was, however, used in the period under discussion here – see for example, Clara Zetkin, ‘For the Liberation of Women’ (1889), in Philip S. Foner (ed.), *Clara Zetkin: Selected Writings* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), pp. 45–50. The term was also used in introducing the history of the woman issue to later generations – see Draper, ‘Marx and Engels on Women’s Liberation’, op.cit. In the interests of universalism, ‘liberation’ seems preferable to ‘emancipation’ which was more commonly employed in our period.

integral to the emancipation of humanity and that demanded the supersession of capitalism and replacement of the family as an economic unit of society. Engels had no time for the rival philosophy of feminism which located women's oppression predominantly in male domination rather than capitalist economics, in sex rather than class. Feminists mistakenly sought to improve women's position largely through legislative advance within capitalism driven by autonomous movements which mobilised women of all classes but excluded men. Moreover, as Richard Evans emphasised, 'Nineteenth-century feminism was and remained an essentially middle-class movement.'⁹ Perceiving it as rationalising the capitalist status quo and reconfiguring frictions within the bourgeoisie, Marxists considered it a distraction for working-class women whose interests lay in revolution not reform. 'The separate women's-rights business' was for Engels 'a purely bourgeois pastime.'¹⁰

Bruley acknowledges the 'enormous contribution' of Engels but understates the importance of his collaborator, August Bebel, in rooting these ideas in the international socialist movement. Bebel emphasised women workers' dual oppression, their economic and social dependence on the male breadwinner *and* their exploitation by capitalism.¹¹ As a leader of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Second International, he

⁹ Richard J. Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840–1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 144.

¹⁰ Engels to Bebel, 1 October 1891, quoted in Draper, op.cit., p. 27.

¹¹ Bebel's *Die Frau und der Sozialismus (Woman and Socialism)* was published in Zurich in 1879. Banned in Germany, a second edition appeared in 1883 under the title *Die Frau in der Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft (Women in the Past, Present and Future)* which was also proscribed until 1891. The book went through reprintings and revisions and enjoyed a mass circulation: Anne Lopes and Gary Roth, *Men's Feminism: August Bebel and the German Socialist Movement* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 22, 29, 32, 35–37. Clara Zetkin claimed Bebel's book 'must not be judged according to its positive aspects or its shortcomings. Rather, it must be judged within the context of the times in which it was written. It was more than a book, it was an event – a great deed': Clara Zetkin, *Only in Conjunction with the Proletarian Woman will Socialism be Victorious* (1896), at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1896/10/women.htm>; Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 105, notes that among German workers, 'The most popular Marxist writing by far was Bebel's *Women Under Socialism*.' The first English edition was published 1885 as *Woman in the Past, Present and Future*. It appeared before Bebel had made revisions in light of Engels' *Origin*. Daniel De Leon's translation, *Woman Under Socialism* (1904) was read by later Communists. For the impact of the book in Britain, see Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 29–36.

encouraged women to act for themselves and did much to stimulate the working women's movement in the face of revisionist reluctance and embedded sexism. His work became well-known on the left in Britain and the German experience profoundly influenced the early Comintern.¹²

Bruley makes a number of points about Classical Marxism pertinent to the Comintern and CPGB. Characterization of the pre-war feminist movement as 'bourgeois' was, she argues, 'a distinct over-simplification of the British feminist experience'. Its leadership and policies 'were certainly bourgeois but within it were important strands of socialist feminism'.¹³ She cites the working-class composition of the suffrage movement in Lancashire and Cheshire which campaigned for better conditions for working-class women and Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes. However, the Northern movements did not adopt revolutionary politics and although the experience helped make Pankhurst a revolutionary, that epithet does not fit her organisation during the suffrage era. Whatever their social make-up and militancy, these movements were entirely compatible with capitalism. The Workers' Socialist Federation subsequently founded by Pankhurst was a different kettle of fish. In terms of overall characterisation, these strands were of insufficient weight to invalidate analysis of suffrage feminism as a restricted reformist movement.¹⁴ The question relates rather to the stance Communists should adopt towards a militant reformism

¹² August Bebel (1840–1913), the son of a Prussian officer, became a carpenter and collaborated with Wilhelm Liebknecht in developing the socialist movement in Germany under the influence of Marx and Engels. Chair of the SPD, from 1892 until his death, he combatted revisionism but lacked any clear conception of revolution, opposed Rosa Luxemburg's mass strike strategy and his vision of socialist transformation remained bounded by parliamentarianism: see Jurgen Schmidt, *August Bebel, Social Democracy and the Founding of the Labour Movement* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

¹³ Bruley, op.cit., p.88.

¹⁴ As Clara Zetkin put it: 'I daresay "radical feminists" did push forward with their needs and demands; yet for all that, the bourgeois women's movement considered as a whole, in theory and in practice, remained more "moderate" and "sensible". Behind them stood the broad stratum of women of the middle class and intelligentsia who were deeply conscious of the mastery of big capital': 'The Bourgeois Women's Movement', in *Clara Zetkin: Letters and Writings, Revolutionary History*, new series, 1 (2015), p. 139.

which contains radical protagonists and attempt to take it further in the knowledge that argument is usually more successful than denunciation.

More persuasively, Bruley observes that Marxists from Engels to Lenin failed to address precisely how the proletarianization of women and socialisation of domestic work would dissolve the patriarchal family and the sexually-based division of labour.¹⁵ They certainly stressed objective factors – change in the forces of production led to monogamy and would create the material basis for removing it – rather than highlighting the importance of active human agency in remedying millennia of female subjection. While later Marxists, notably Hal Draper, read Engels more tentatively,¹⁶ many early leaders assumed that women in early socialist society would continue to carry the burdens of communal living and child rearing – assumptions which raise questions about the depth of their critical probing of gender and its transformation.¹⁷ Moreover, despite the discourse of enlarged personal freedoms and the dissolution of oppression in face of new relations of production, there was ambivalence or opposition on the part of male leaders to the exercise of those freedoms in the sphere of sexual relations and control over reproduction.¹⁸ We will revisit these points later in this essay.¹⁹

Bruley goes on to describe the stuttering response of the CPGB after 1920 to Comintern pressure to develop a Communist women's movement. The economism, workerism and masculinism which pervaded the party, its prioritization of agitation in trade

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 20, 60–61.

¹⁶ Draper, *op.cit.*, p. 25, argues that Engels envisaged the possibility of comradesly and free sexual unions based on love replacing the family as an economic unit.

¹⁷ Bruley, *op.cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 60–61, 89. Engels saw periods of great agitation as times when sexual fetters were cast aside and distinguished between free love as part of every great revolutionary movement and free love as a philistine fad: Draper, *op.cit.*, p. 28; Engels, 'The Book of Revelation' (1883), at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/religion/book-revelations.htm>.

¹⁹ See below, pp. 32, 36, 49–50. See also John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'The Comintern, Communist Women Leaders and the Struggle for Women's Liberation in Britain between the Wars: A Political and Prosopographical Investigation, Part 2', forthcoming, pp. 17, 57, 59–61, for gender relations in the CPGB leadership.

unions and the workplace in strategic industries such as mining and the metal trades, as well as the potency of capitalist ideology and its impact on individual Communists, drove disregard of agitation among women and attention to the domestic economy and sexism. With a tiny base among women in industry, housewives were viewed predominantly as ancillaries or antagonists in typically male strikes. Underpinned by hostility to feminism coupled with declining interest in women's issues from a Stalinized Comintern and the retreat from radicalism underway in the Soviet Union, the CPGB internally replicated the male power, gendered divisions of labour and sexual ideologies of capitalist society. Particularly from 1924, 'Bolshevisation's message of discipline and commitment appealed to no more than a scattering of women. They remained a minority within the party, typically confined to clerical, secretarial, technical and social tasks and under-represented in positions of authority. Many rejected 'women's work', pursued 'general' activities and aspired to emulate their male comrades.²⁰

She distinguishes between women 'cadres' and 'supporters', particularly between 1920 and 1933 but across the whole period. The former were 'usually single or married to a party member and childless ... within the party they expected to be involved in the mainstream of party activities. The party guaranteed them sexual equality and they took this to mean emancipation from anything designated "women's work"'.²¹ They were 'easily distinguishable' from 'supporters' who 'tended to be married to party activists and have several children ... [they] placed their domestic responsibilities before their political involvement'.²² These categories were not fixed, and women might switch between them with changing circumstances.²³ With the turn to cross-class politics and emphasis on

²⁰ Bruley, *op.cit.*, pp. 92, 115–120, 135.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 122–123; see also p. 136 and p. 254: 'Cadre women reacted in a hostile way to being restricted to "work among women".' At times Bruley conflates such general hostility to work among women with their more specific opposition to activity in separate women's sections: e.g. pp. 92, 115–119.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

collaborating with non-party women and middle-class organizations, she introduces a third category, the ‘feminist cadre’, committed to the party but interested in wider ‘women’s politics’ and family and welfare issues.²⁴ Bruley’s text makes reference to nine of the 18 leading women activists who sat on the CPGB Central Committee (CC) in the interwar years, but they are generally mentioned in passing with minimal biographical details.²⁵ How far did the additional 50% of CC members fit Bruley’s categories? How far does recent research justify her categorization, particularly with reference to leading women who were active in different periods between the wars? How feminist were ‘feminist cadres’? There is scope here for further work.

There are similar lacunae regarding women activists in Karen Hunt and Matthew Worley’s study of the 1920s. These authors advocate ‘a contextual approach’ which moves beyond party leaders and the Comintern; foregrounds rank-and-file women activists, situates them in ‘the women’s politics of the period’; acknowledges the commonalities Communists shared with activists in other parties; and recognises the influence until the mid-1920s of the suffrage movement on CPGB women – continuities personified in a small number of figures, notably Dora Montefiore and Helen Crawfurd.²⁶ We shall return to the latter points but there are other problems.²⁷ The paper devotes only a handful of sentences to the Marxist theory on which the CPGB was based, which opposed the earlier British feminism to which the authors attribute continuing influence on female Communists. There is terse allusion to the Comintern Theses. The authors note they were shaped by Clara Zetkin but make no reference to her entrenched antipathy to feminism and suffrage politics.²⁸ Twice the amount of space is

²⁴ Ibid., p. 227.

²⁵ Bruley refers to Isabel Brown, Helen Crawfurd, Kath Duncan, Mavis Llewellyn, Dora Montefiore, Marjorie Pollitt, Rose Smith, Beth Turner and Lily Webb. (Mrs Thomas is mentioned incidentally in a footnote).

²⁶ Karen Hunt and Matthew Worley, ‘Rethinking British Communist Party Women in the 1920s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 15:1 (2004), pp. 1–27.

²⁷ See Mellroy and Campbell. ‘The Comintern, Part 2’, op.cit., pp. 6–7, 10–11 and passim.

²⁸ See Foner, op.cit.; *Revolutionary History*, op.cit.

allocated to under-evidenced ‘continuities’ between CPGB women and these movements (pp. 9–21) as is accorded to more significant ‘discontinuities’ (pp. 21–26).

Hunt and Worley assert that the ‘continued focus of historians on the leadership and “high politics” of the party means that we have less of a sense of how gender impacted on the political experience of individual communists, particularly those whose main focus remained in their local communities’²⁹. However, their survey tells us very little about individuals whose focus remained in their local communities. On the contrary, it draws frequently, even predominantly, on individuals who played a more extensive role in the party. Bruley’s interviewees, they justifiably remark, were ‘elderly communist loyalists’ – by implication ‘cadres’ rather than ‘supporters’ – whose memories ‘coloured’ her depiction of the CPGB’s attitude to women’s work. But their article does little to repair this deficiency and simply underlines the difficulties faced by all scholars researching ‘supporters’ who have left less trace on the record.³⁰ Fundamentally, it remains far from clear in relation to *women* Communists, that historians *have* focussed unduly on members of the leadership – we have already observed that in the single extended text on women, Bruley mentioned only 50% of those female activists who sat on the CPGB’s leading body, the CC, between the World Wars.

Yet given the significance of this cohort – arguably we could expand Bruley’s classification to include a category of women who figured in the party’s leadership – its consideration by historians may be judged an important aspect, even the logical starting point, for gendering Communist history.³¹ Despite their relative importance, many of its

²⁹ Hunt and Worley, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³¹ In a number of papers, we have argued that the CC, as the leading body which embraced national and local leaders, was reasonably representative of the leadership of Communist parties. Particularly after Stalinization, decision making was often moulded by the smaller Political Bureau (PB) and Secretariat whose members were also members of the CC: see on this, John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, ‘Towards a Prosopography of the American Communist Elite: The Foundation Years, 1919–1923’, *American Communist History*, 18: 3–4 (2019), pp. 178–181; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, ‘The Early British Communist Leaders, 1920–1923: A Prosopographical Exploration’, *Labor History*, 62: 5–6 (2020), p. 425; and see Harvey Klehr, *Communist*

members remain sparsely documented and some obscure.³² That this contingent has been under-researched is attested by Hunt and Worley's essay. It makes no mention at all of four of the 10 women who were part of the CPGB leadership – which we have defined elsewhere as membership of the CC – in the period they studied.³³ Moreover, their treatment of the remaining six leading women is frequently perfunctory. Marjorie Pollitt, for example, is simply named as a party wife with no further detail about her activities, Lily Webb is mentioned in passing as noting the success of Communist work among women in Manchester. The same applies to Beth Turner – she is recorded as National Women's Officer and two of her speeches are quoted, and Kath Duncan, whose contribution to the CPGB's 10th Congress is cited.

Such truncated reference to figures who are far from well-known is not reserved for the CC members of the 1920s. Rose Smith, co-opted to the committee in 1930 and a longstanding leader, figures only in a list of names of members of the CPGB predecessors – as do other activists about whom little is known and little revealed in their article, Florence Baldwin, Minnie Birch and Beth Davies. Molly Murphy and Hettie Wheeldon are described only as party wives and activists who applied their unelaborated upon and largely unknown experience as suffragettes to the CPGB.³⁴ The latter assertion is under-evidenced and given

Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Elite (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), pp.10–11.

³² Unlike others in Bruley's 'cadre' and 'supporter' classification, the women elected to the CC participated, at least formally, in the direction and management of the CPGB. They were thus distinctive in relation to these categories.

³³ It is worth observing that only three of our 18 CC members have entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and a further two in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, although Communists are proportionately very well represented in both these serials.

³⁴ Hunt and Worley, *op.cit.*, pp. 10, 11, 13, 18, 6. Wheeldon died in childbirth less than 4 months after the CPGB's foundation. Any activism within it was ephemeral and it remains unclear whether she was a member of the SLP; Murphy's activity in the CPGB was sporadic. See now Maurice J. Casey, 'From Votes for Women to World Revolution: Suffragettes and International Communism', in Alexandra Hughes-Johnson and Lyndsey Jenkins (eds), *The Politics of Women's Suffrage: Local, National and International Dimensions* (University of London Press, 2021), pp. 331–352. This essay provides useful information and adds Rose Cohen and Violet Lansbury to Hunt and Worley's list of CPGB members who had supported the suffragettes – although neither were subsequently prominent in the Communists' pursuit of the woman question. Casey's essay affirms the mutual hostility between Communists and feminists.

the small number of women cited, we should be wary of positing a significant, specific link between experience as a suffragette and affiliation to and practice in the CPGB, largely on the basis that both organisations espoused militant direct action. The latter was not distinctive to these two bodies; it was a common feature of all movements based on mobilisation. For example, one historian has documented the role former suffragettes played in the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Mosley supporters even hazarded: ‘the women’s suffrage movement might, uninterrupted by [the war], have been the direct inspiration and forerunner of the Fascist movement’.³⁵ Whether Hunt and Worley are dealing with ‘leaders’, ‘cadres’ or ‘supporters’, only snippets of information about individuals, the majority of whose lives have not been documented elsewhere, are provided. Consequently, we get a very limited idea of their history, identity, personality, purpose, and political weight; and very little ‘sense of how gender impacted on the political experience of individual Communists’, still less ‘a new understanding of what party membership meant to individuals’.³⁶

In his discussion of the life-cycle of Communists active in the interwar period, Thomas Linehan assembles useful material on Communist marriages and child-rearing, reminding us of the considerable distance between Marxist critiques of the institution and the practice of Communists.³⁷ His innovative narrative is freighted with fragmentary illustrations drawn from the lives of the thousands of Communists who passed through the party over these two decades. Specific focus on particular sub-groups which might generate more manageable populations and yield more rigorous conclusions and any half-way holistic engagement with life histories is largely eschewed. There is, for example, no mention of 12 out of 18 women elected to the CC during the period covered by the volume.

³⁵ Julie V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain’s Fascist Movement* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 168, quote from *Action*, 14 January 1939.

³⁶ Hunt and Worley, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

³⁷ Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920–1939: From the Cradle to the Grave* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), particularly pp. 12, 26, 67–91.

Adopting what they claim, ‘very loosely ... may be described as a prosopographical approach’,³⁸ Kevin Morgan and his colleagues mount a similarly selective examination of the multitude of women who were members of the CPGB in the 70 years from 1920 without a representative sample. If we return to our 18 CC members from the 1920s and 1930s, these authors make no mention whatsoever of seven. The remaining 11 are touched upon in cursory fashion. There is, to cite a few examples, half a sentence on Marjorie Pollitt, a sentence and a half on Lily Webb. There are two references to Annie Cree – as the first housewife on the CC and a former member of the SDF; and contributing an article criticising the imbalance of activity between husbands and wives in the party and suggesting a one-day-a-week role reversal. Kath Duncan is cited twice as a London schoolteacher recommending women’s sections in South Wales as a model and claiming inability to retain members through failure to discuss women’s issues was related to fear of feminism. We are told that the Yorkshire textile worker Beth Turner was the first National Women’s Organiser, that she commented on Communist resistance to feminism, emphasised the need for wives to support husbands in strikes and sometimes respected the convention of calling married comrades ‘Mrs’. Mavis Llewellyn features in two paragraphs which tell us little more than she was a schoolteacher of some standing in Wales who influenced Lewis Jones’ s novel, *We Live*. Elsewhere her clipped description of Jones is quoted. The lives and activities of none of the above, it should be stressed, are extensively documented in the historiography.³⁹

More generally, Morgan et al. observe that obstacles to progress within the CPGB were, outside ‘the class-based affirmative action of the Third Period, greater for working-class women: leading women party members were far more likely than their male counterparts to have middle-class professional backgrounds’.⁴⁰ Noting the high incidence of

³⁸ Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society, 1920–1991* (London: Rivers Oram, 2007), p. vii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 70, 176, 64, 156–158, 161, 65–66, 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

party intermarriage, they conclude: ‘In two-thirds of the cases where we have relevant data, both male and female partners were already communists before their marriage, and in a third of them the woman was the first to have joined the party.’⁴¹ These statements may or may not be true: no statistical evidence or workings are provided for the first and the second does not derive from a representative sample.⁴²

A tighter, more systematic approach to prosopographical investigation which employs qualitative methods to construct more informative biographical profiles *and* quantitative methods based on representative samples derived from smaller, more manageable populations seems in order. It may prove a superior means of advancing recuperation and analysis than random, scattergun techniques light on biographical detail and evasive on statistical methods which provide insights but generate conclusions questionably representative of populations of thousands over decades. Prosopography is conventionally defined as ‘the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives’.⁴³ It has the virtue, when properly applied, of making manifest the precise population to be studied and rendering visible and verifiable the methods, materials and calculations employed to study it. It involves the assembly and presentation to readers of data about the subjects of study, sufficient to enable their common and diverse characteristics to be enumerated, analysed and compared by reference to defined categories such as their origins, inherited class position, ethnicity, gender, religion, education, occupation, affiliation, experience and destination.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁴³ Lawrence Stone, ‘Prosopography’, in Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 45.

⁴⁴ For recent work, see, for example, Christine McLeod and Alessandro Nuvolari, ‘The Pitfalls of Prosopography: Inventors in the *Dictionary of National Biography*’, *Technology and Cultures*, 47: 4 (2006), pp. 757–776; Peter Cunningham, ‘Innovation Networks and Structures: Towards a Prosopography of Progressivism’, *History of Education*, 30: 5 (2001), pp. 433–451; Samantha Jayne Oldfield, ‘Narrative Methods in Sports History Research: Biography, Collective Biography and Prosopography’, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32: 15 (2015), pp. 1855–1882; Lisa Taylor, ‘The Women’s Amateur Rowing Association, 1923–1963: A Prosopographical Approach’, *Sporting History*, 38: 3 (2018), pp. 302–330. And see *Guide to the*

Prosopographical studies may emphasise biographical profiles or statistical analysis: they are more complete and satisfactory when they employ both and muster a manageable population whose basic characteristics are embodied in a lexicon or biographical dictionary.⁴⁵ Gaps in the data relating to individuals and between individuals may be unavoidable, some protagonists may elude the researcher's net. It is a matter of degree. The disabling impact of absences depends on their extent and significance:

In any historical group, it is likely that almost everything will be known about some members of it and almost nothing at all about others: certain items will be lacking for some and different items will be lacking for others. If the unknowns bulk very large and if, with the seriously incompletes they form a substantial majority of the whole, generalisations based on statistical averages become very shaky indeed, if not altogether impossible.⁴⁶

We should also remember that 'studies confined to 10% or 20% of the group about which enough is known depend for their reliability on the recorded minority being a genuinely random sample of the whole. But this is an unlikely assumption since the very fact that more than usual has been recorded about the lives and careers of a tiny minority indicates that they were somehow atypical.'⁴⁷

To test not only the potential but the problems of a prosopographical exploration of Communist women, it appears appropriate to start with the *leadership* of parties on a number of grounds. The work has not been done and it is worthwhile. In hierarchical, bureaucratic, centralist, minimally democratic and, by the end of the 1920s, Stalinist organisations, the leadership played a key role in shaping the party and its culture; interacting with the Comintern; disseminating policy; and grooming and directing those who would implement it; and sponsoring future leaders. The party leadership constitutes not only an important but well

Principles and Practice of Prosopography, https://prosopography.history.ox.ac.uk/course_syllabuses.htm; McIlroy and Campbell, 'Towards a Prosopography', op. cit., pp. 177–179.

⁴⁵ *Guide to the Principles and Practice of Prosopography*, https://prosopography.history.ox.ac.uk/course_syllabuses.htm; McIlroy and Campbell, 'Towards a Prosopography', op. cit., pp. 177–179.

⁴⁶ Stone, op.cit., p. 57.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

delineated and relatively small population in which some individuals will be well known and others less so. There is a need for more archival spadework on the latter but in some cases also on the former group for whom, in a historiography which strongly reflects authorial values, a second opinion may be useful. As with previous work, we have taken the CC, which embraced the large majority of leading elements, as a plausible proxy for the national leadership and limited ourselves to one party, a manageable time span and a restricted population.⁴⁸

Before proceeding to our study of the 18 women whose membership of the CC of the CPGB between 1920 and 1939 made them part of the leadership, it is important to outline the context in which they operated. We turn to examine the ideas and policies which influenced the CPGB's attempts to pursue the cause of women's liberation in the first two decades of its existence.

‘A single and indivisible struggle’: the ideas of the Third International

The hegemonic influence on the CPGB's stance on women's liberation was the Comintern. The party's lodestar was the Soviet Union. Members who visited Russia through the period reported the position of women had been transformed, compared it favourably with the situation in Britain and emphasised 'their regard for the Communist Party, the guide and

⁴⁸ See note 27, above. A number of other women prominent among British Communists during these years might be mentioned, among them Stella Browne (1880–1955), campaigner for birth control; Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960), a leader of the Workers' Socialist Federation and Communist Party-British Section of the Third International, influential in events around the party's foundation before her expulsion in 1921; Ellen Wilkinson (1891–1947), former suffragette and Guild Socialist, left in 1924 and was subsequently Minister of Education in the 1945 Labour government; Bessie Braddock (1899–1970), a local leader, quit around the same time and was later Labour MP for Liverpool Exchange; Salme Murrik (1888–1964), a Comintern representative who married R. Palme Dutt and exercised influence in the party's first years; her friend, Mary Moorhouse (1889–1975), former Guild Socialist and organiser of the National Federation of Women Workers, had links with the Comintern via the Dutts, later married Salme's first husband and lived in Scandinavia; Kay Beauchamp (1899–1992) on the CC in 1943 and a graduate of the International Lenin School, was an indefatigable campaigner from the late 1920s; Dora Cox (1904–2000) who married Idris Cox, was a CPGB organiser in the late 1920s and early 1930s; Nan MacMillan (1906–2002), a London schoolteacher, joined the CPGB in 1929, was prominent in the National Union of Woman Teachers and served as President (1939–1941). Unlike members of the CC, these activists had no formal role in developing and directing party policy.

leader of the Russian workers [and] their devotion to the Soviet Government'.⁴⁹ The ideas which animated CPGB politics were debated at the first two Comintern Congresses and International Conferences of Communist Women, codified at the Third World Congress in July 1921 and further discussed at the Fourth Congress in the winter of 1922.⁵⁰ They remind us of the influence the revolutionary wing of the Second International exercised on the early politics of the Third and confirm the significance and richness of the Comintern's first four Congresses. The Comintern Theses reiterated that women were doubly oppressed: not only by capitalism but by their role in the family. 'Women's enslavement' was rooted in economic dependence on the capitalist boss *and* the male breadwinner. Exploitation was primary but intertwined with oppression. Demands for formal equality, the extension of the suffrage, civil marriage and correlative familial rights within capitalism propounded by reformist parties and feminists would not of themselves alter subjugation. 'Women of the working masses will be free only when they can take part in ownership of the means of production and distribution and the leadership of society in general.'⁵¹

If the overthrow of capitalism was indispensable to emancipation, the agency of working-class women was essential to its realisation: 'it is not possible either to win power or to achieve communism without active support by the broad masses of women of the proletariat.'⁵² Socialist advance required rejection of cross-class alliances: 'The Third Congress of the Communist International warns working women against any collaboration or compromise with the bourgeois feminists.'⁵³ What was vital was class politics and

⁴⁹ Beth Turner et al., *Women in Russia* (London: CPGB, 1928), p. 16. The report even recorded the excellent conditions in female prisons, the inmates 'maintained their own discipline and addressed the Governor as "Comrade"' (Ibid., p. 25).

⁵⁰ For developments between 1919, when the Comintern was founded, and summer 1921, see Jean-Jacques Marie, 'The Women's Section of the Comintern from Lenin to Stalin', in Christine Fauré (ed.), *Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 424–429.

⁵¹ John Riddell (ed.), *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), pp. 1011–1012.

⁵² Ibid., p. 1010.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 1012.

partnership between male and female wage slaves. Contrary to feminism: 'It is not the united effort of women of different classes that makes communism possible but rather the united struggle of the exploited.'⁵⁴ The struggle against sexual oppression and capitalism was indivisible.

The Comintern was sensitive 'to the great danger to the revolution represented by the masses of women workers, housewives, office workers ... who have not been encompassed by the movement'.⁵⁵ Chained to the home, they were prone to 'passivity and backwardness'; vulnerable to counter-revolutionary propaganda, they could constitute 'a pillar of support' for reaction.⁵⁶ To reach such women, Communist parties needed special structures – a central women's department, women's commissions and women's organisers. This was not intended to stimulate the segregation of men and women in the party that Communists criticised in feminist movements. These structures would be neither autonomous nor gender-specific in composition. In accordance with the conviction that there was 'no special women's question, no separate sphere of women's work', men must participate in these bodies and the party leadership would direct their work.⁵⁷ Affiliates were required to publish a women's paper with supplements in the general Communist press. It was essential to fight prejudice and male chauvinism in society and the party and ensure female members possessed equal rights and responsibilities with men. Nonetheless, Communists had to oppose 'any special status for [female members and] promote the integration of working women as collaborators with equal rights in the leading bodies of the party, the unions and co-operatives'.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1010.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ There was, however, a calibrated element of gender-specific representation. Membership of the national women's committees, for example, would be proposed by the national women's conference – but required endorsement by the party congress. The women's committee could then take decisions – but they were subject to 'the agreement' of the national leadership: Clara Zetkin, 'Guidelines for the Communist Women's Movement', in *Revolutionary History*, op.cit., p. 59.

⁵⁸ Riddell, op.cit., p. 1019. 'It is desirable not to organise separate courses and schools. Instead, every party school should include a compulsory course on the methods of work among women' (ibid., p. 1024). There were, however, concessions to 'separatism'. For example, it seems to have been acknowledged that training women

Formulated when the Comintern believed Europe was on the cusp of a revolutionary breakthrough, the emphasis was on the maximum programme, although the common criticism that progress awaited socialism is mistaken. Communists should campaign for equal rights in the here and now. They should formulate and pursue demands which advanced the condition of working-class women and invoke progress in the Soviet Union to mobilise support for them – but always in relation to the final objective. It ‘should not be their main goal to win reforms within the bourgeois system. Rather they should utilise demands of working women in order to point women toward achieving their demands ... along the path of revolutionary struggle, of struggle to achieve the proletarian dictatorship’.⁵⁹ In her introductory speech, Zetkin, the Theses’ main author, claimed the forward movement of the working class suggested the conquest of power in the current ‘white hot atmosphere of capitalist economic collapse and civil war’.⁶⁰ But she indicated a more pessimistic future

members in Communist ‘theory and practice’ required special attention ‘whether this comes through the general educational institutions of the party, through special female reading or discussion evenings, etc.’: Zetkin, ‘Guidelines’, op.cit., p. 57.

⁵⁹ Riddell, op.cit., p. 1019. Women should particularly be drawn into struggles over housing, prices, unemployment and ‘the wretched conditions of children’. While supporting welfare measures, creches and nurseries, the Comintern seems to have assumed a continuing special role for women in childrearing and the home. A welfare role for Communists was also proposed: ‘capitalist methods of bringing up children are imperfect [women’s committees] should direct the attention of working women to practical methods of improving workers’ home life proposed and supported by the party’ (ibid., p. 1020).

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 780. Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), a schoolteacher, active in the socialist movement from the age of 21, was the driving force in the initiation of International Women’s Day in 1910. The leading light in the pre-1914 Socialist Women’s International, she opposed the war and was a member of the Spartacus Group, the Independent Social Democratic Party and from 1919 the German Communist Party (KPD). Marginalised in Germany after 1922, she led the Comintern Women’s Secretariat from Moscow until its enforced enfeeblement after 1925 and was a deputy in the Reichstag 1920–1933. As a critic of ‘Bolshevisation’ and the Third Period she was under a cloud but remained active. One of Luxemburg’s biographers claims ‘in spite of her close attachment to Clara Zetkin, the disparity of their intellectual capacities obstructed the friendship. It was only Clara Zetkin’s acceptance of Rosa’s primacy and her agreement with nearly every view propounded by Rosa on important questions that enabled the latter to put up with Clara’s personal obstinacies and her political sentimentality’: Peter Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (1966; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 12. Elizabeth Ettinger, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life* (London: Pandora Press, 1986), p. 101, similarly judges Zetkin a populariser who ‘never has her own opinion’ and ‘became Stalin’s mouthpiece’. Neither explores her career or her work on the woman question. Another historian notes fairly that she never broke officially with Stalinism but refers without evidence to ‘the pernicious role she played in socialist politics after 1919’: James D. Young, *Socialism since 1889: A Biographical History* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1988), pp. 168, 177. It is important to acknowledge the major contribution she made to the early KPD and Comintern and to work among women from the 1890s to the mid-1920s. In her seventies, she opted for a mixture of compliance with developing Stalinism and offering what she judged constructive criticism – she justified the expulsion of Trotsky and Zinoviev from the Russian party as necessary for party unity and cohesion: Gunter Werniche, ‘Clara Zetkin’s Opposition to

when, with ‘a measure of bitterness’, she contrasted recent advances made by socialist women with the inadequate support provided by the infant Communist parties. Mobilising women, she reiterated, was as important as mobilising men. Male and female Communists must unite to pursue women’s work: ‘as for the comrades who do not gather and train women to be conscious partners in revolution, I call them conscious saboteurs of the revolution’.⁶¹ Harsh words but they were part of the currency of a disputatious Congress in which some of the sentiments on display went beyond forthrightness to reflect entrenched male attitudes. Responding to his ultra-left German critics, Karl Radek remarked, ‘we only want to say that we are not hysterical women but men’.⁶² In a quarrel over the aborted insurrection, the ‘March Action’ in Germany, the Hungarian leader, Bela Kun, described Zetkin as an ‘utter hysteric’ and went on to claim ‘the old woman is suffering from senile dementia’; a purveyor of ‘lying gossip’, despite his ‘sentimental feelings towards the old fighter’, she ought to emulate Paul Lafargue and Laura Marx by committing suicide.⁶³ Such vituperation was also applied to men, notably the former German leader, Paul Levi, and Zetkin knew how to take care of herself. But it hardly boded well for an equal partnership between the sexes dedicated to female emancipation.

At the Fourth World Congress in 1922, Zetkin repeated that the work of the Comintern Women’s Secretariat had ‘nothing to do with any feminist tendencies’. Agitation

Sidelining of Comrades in the Comintern and KPD in the Mid-1920s’, in *Revolutionary History*, op.cit., pp, 115–127, particularly p. 122.

⁶¹ Riddell, op.cit., p. 781. Of internal party structures, Zetkin remarked: ‘We call these bodies *women’s committees* because they carry out work among women but not because we consider it important that they consist only of women’ (ibid., p. 785). In the same session Alexandra Kollontai emphasised the point: ‘We name this structure not a women’s committee but a committee for work among our comrades’ (ibid., p. 792). She also noted the lack of progress in the Soviet Union in moving women into responsible and leading positions. Zetkin was assisted at the Comintern by Hertha Sturm (1886–1945), an SDP member since 1911 who joined the KPD in 1919. Like Zetkin, condemned in the KPD as a ‘rightist’, she worked with her in Moscow, 1924–1928 and was later jailed and tortured by the Nazis.

⁶² Riddell, op.cit., p. 237.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 1088–1089. On the softer side of things, orthodox conceptions of the nature of the female sex were suggested by Lenin’s innocently avuncular instruction to the German Communist, Fritz Heckert, that he ‘make up’ for his unjust criticism of Zetkin by presenting her with a bouquet of roses: ibid, p. 651.

among women must be part of ‘the collective work’ of every Communist party and not be regarded as incidental or inferior. She did introduce an important qualification: ‘Every man is welcome to take part in the special Communist work carried out among women’ although ‘in general’ women themselves were ‘the quickest, most astute and most effective’ in dealing with the problems of working-class women. And she concluded, in a statement with implications for future practice: ‘For reasons of expediency and for a practical division of labour inside the party ... women should be called on first and most often for activity in the special committees for Communist work among women.’⁶⁴ In a context where, under the platform rhetoric, Communists of both sexes sometimes harboured ‘the prejudices linked to women’s social role’,⁶⁵ Zetkin’s more conditional comments provided the makings of an excuse for disregarding the Theses’ insistence on male engagement in activity directed towards women workers. They underlined the scope for interpretive leeway and confusion. With the benefit of hindsight, we can perceive tensions between Zetkin’s proselytising zeal and the prevailing consciousness of some leading Communists, tensions which would be exacerbated as the revolutionary mood of 1919–1921 was rolled back and ‘socialism in one country’ developed.

The newly formed International Women’s Section of the Comintern consisted of Alexandra Kollontai, Varvara Kasparova and Zlata Lilina from the Soviet Union, Lucie Colliard from France and Hertha Sturm from the German party – with Zetkin as general secretary. In the early 1920s it would enjoy a reasonable amount of autonomy and prestige. But it faced a difficult situation. While a degree of progress was registered in the Czechoslovak, Dutch, Swiss and Nordic affiliates, the situation in France and Germany was difficult – and the same could be said of Britain.⁶⁶ On the other side of the equation, past

⁶⁴ Zetkin’s speech at 4th World Congress of the Comintern, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1922/zetkin03.htm>.

⁶⁵ Riddell, *op.cit.*, p.1015.

⁶⁶ Marie, *op.cit.*, pp.429–433.

exemplars, the élan of the youthful Comintern, the power and pedigree of the ideas expounded by Zetkin and her comrades, and their embodiment with the support of Lenin and Trotsky in the jurisprudence of the international movement – all held the promise of a bright future for the women’s liberation struggle.

The Third International and the theory of women’s liberation: antecedents and influences

Inspired by Engels and Bebel, and spearheaded by Zetkin from 1892, the German women’s movement engaged with political and educational issues, recruited women into the trade unions and campaigned for equal pay, maternity rights and childcare. Autonomous until 1908 when women across Germany were permitted to join political bodies, the movement was always linked to the SPD and reflected its policies. After 1908 it was integrated into the party, the influence of the revisionism increased and Zetkin was marginalised.⁶⁷ *Die Gleichheit (Equality)* founded by Zetkin and Emma Ihrer and intended as a cadre rather than a mass paper, reached 125,000 readers by 1914. Bebel declared, ‘of all the existing parties, the Social Democratic Party is the only one that included in its programme the complete equality of women and their liberation from every form of dependence and oppression ... *There can be no liberation of humanity without the social independence and equal rights for both sexes*’ (original emphasis).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Evans, *The Feminists*, op.cit., pp. 159–165; Foner, ‘Introduction’, in Foner, op.cit.; Werner Thönnessen, *The Emancipation of Women: The Rise and Decline of the Women’s Movement in German Social Democracy, 1863–1933* ([1969]; London: Pluto Press, 1973), pp.39–71. For background, see Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905–1917: The Great Schism* ([1955]; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁶⁸ August Bebel, ‘Introduction’ to *Woman Under Socialism*, no pagination, new translation in Hal Draper, *Women and Class: Towards a Socialist Feminism* (Alameda CA: Center for Socialist History, 2013), p. 250; Hal Draper and Ann G. Lipow, ‘Marxist Women versus Bourgeois Feminism’, in Ralph Miliband and John Saville (eds), *The Socialist Register, 1976* (London: Merlin Press, 1976), p. 191. Emma Ihrer (1857–1911) was a leading supporter of women’s emancipation and original publisher of *Die Gleichheit*. She was the only woman on the General Commission of German Trade Unions. See also Tony Cliff, *Class Struggle and Women’s Liberation* (London: Bookmarks, 1984). The Marxist position on class, gender – and race – was encapsulated in 1880 in the programme Marx composed for Jules Guesde’s Parti Ouvrier: ‘the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race’: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/05/parti-ouvrier.htm>.

Draper discusses the antagonism to feminism which has discomforted some modern historians. He notes that the term German Marxists applied to feminists, *frauenrechtlerinnen*, usually translated as ‘suffragettes’ or ‘bourgeois feminists’ is more precisely rendered as ‘women’s rightsters’, in other words campaigners who ‘make women’s juridical rights under the existing social order the be all and end all of their movement and program by *detaching the question of women’s rights from the basic social issues by making it a separate question*’ (original emphasis).⁶⁹ Revolutionaries, in contrast, integrated and unified the struggle to liberate half of humanity with the struggle to liberate all humanity; far from accepting the limits set by the existing order, they sought to destroy the system that set them.

The substance of the Marxists’ objection to the ‘women’s rightsters’ or ‘legalists’ was that they were single-issue, single-sex *reformists* whose fragmented vision was bounded by a system which privileged the material interests of the property-owning class, the bourgeoisie – rather than their social composition *per se*, although that was relevant to action. Fundamentally, feminism was fated to fail and in doing so to disorient women workers. Pursuing a universal vision, revolutionaries resisted the accommodation to the sectionalism of reformist feminism favoured by the revisionist, gradualist wing of the SPD. That did not mean co-operation was beyond the pale. On specific issues which advanced the economic interests and welfare of working-class women, strengthened their independence, confidence and consciousness and pointed them towards the goal of socialism, the two movements, as Bebel had stressed, could march separately but strike together.⁷⁰ But there could be no *carte blanche* for joint endeavour with what he termed ‘the enemy sisters’; no circumscription of proletarian goals to placate feminists. Attempts in 1894 to mobilise working-class women to back a petition sponsored by 22 women’s rights organisations humbly imploring the Kaiser to

⁶⁹ Draper, *Women and Class*, op.cit., p. 232.

⁷⁰ Bebel, op.cit., n.p., in Draper, *Women and Class*, op.cit., p. 249.

outlaw prostitution, were rejected by Zetkin, who aimed at ‘a clean break with feminism’, as an attempt to subordinate socialists to the bourgeois movement.⁷¹ The following year, she criticised revisionists in the SPD who wished to support a petition addressed to women ‘of all parties and all classes’ calling for rights of assembly and association for females: ‘not one proletarian signature for this petition’.⁷²

The tradition of class politics and aversion to both liberal reformism and gradualist socialism was present in Britain, although it achieved nothing like the dimensions and reach of the German movement which animated the revolutionary wing of the Second International. The SPD dwarfed the Social Democratic Federation, an organisation disfigured by the confused, chauvinistic politics of the leadership around H.M. Hyndman. Decentralised and riddled with political deficiencies and ideological contradictions for most of its existence and that of its successors – the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the British Socialist Party (BSP) – the attitudes of its small but diverse membership to the woman question ranged from the misogyny of Belfort Bax to the Zetkin-influenced approach to liberation of Dora Montefiore. The future Communist, Harry McShane, a supporter of John Maclean in the BSP, remembered that Glasgow socialists read Engels and Morgan, without necessarily drawing lessons for practice.⁷³ From 1909, a group of women led by the BSP supporter, Mrs Bridges Adams, tried to establish a Working Women’s College at Bebel House in London to provide ‘a link between the Labour movement and the most forward spirits of all classes in the feminist movement’.⁷⁴ There was insufficient support from either the trade unions or the suffragettes of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU).⁷⁵

⁷¹ Clara Zetkin, ‘On a Bourgeois Feminist Petition’ (1895) at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1976/women/3-zetkin.html>.

⁷² Ibid. Engels commented: ‘Clara is right. Bravo Clara’: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1976/women2/2-3-zetkin.htm>.

⁷³ Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), pp. 34–35.

⁷⁴ ‘Objectives of the Working Women’s Labour College, 1912’, in John Atkins, *Neither Crumbs nor Condescension: The Central Labour College, 1909–1915* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen People’s Press and the Workers’ Educational Association, 1981), p. 77.

⁷⁵ W.W. Craik, *The Central Labour College* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), pp. 102–103.

The historian of the Hyndman groups, Martin Crick, concludes that despite exceptions, most members and the majority of its 3-400 female adherents opposed the suffrage movement with its acceptance of property qualifications for the vote as a middle-class diversion from adult suffrage and the struggle for socialism. They believed ‘working women form part of the working class and their emancipation is bound up with the emancipation of that class ... the issue is a class issue and not one of sex.’⁷⁶ Pointing to the diversity of views in the organisation, Hunt concedes that the SDF was generally hostile to feminism but failed to articulate a clear and consistent Marxist perspective. Citing antagonism to feminism from activists such as Montefiore and Kathleen B. Kough – ‘SDF women are strongly opposed to the “feminist” movement’ – she concludes in an ahistorical observation which invites scepticism that many of its tiny female membership ‘held views and organised around issues which we can recognise as feminist. It does not matter that they never identified as such’.⁷⁷

Like Montefiore, the sometime SDF and Socialist League activist, trade union organiser and collaborator of Engels, Eleanor Marx, was a conscious critic of feminism. She reported from the Brussels Congress of the Second International which had drawn a line between bourgeois peace campaigners and ‘the economic peace party, the socialist party which wants to remove the causes of war’:

The Congress equally stressed the difference between the party of the ‘women’s-rightsters’ on the one side, who recognised no class struggle but only a struggle of sexes, who belong to the possessing class and who want rights that would be an injustice against their working-class sisters, and, on the other side, the real women’s party, the socialist party, which has a basic understanding of the economic causes of the present adverse position of working-women and which calls on the working-women to wage a common fight hand-in-hand with the men of their class against the common enemy, *viz.* the men and women of the capitalist class.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Martin Crick, *History of the Social Democratic Federation* (Keele: Ryburn Publishing/Keele University Press, 1994), p. 228, quoting *Justice*, 25 June 1904. Crick repeats Bruley’s comments on the working-class nature of suffragism in Lancashire and East London: *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷⁷ Hunt, *op.cit.*, pp. 52, 251.

⁷⁸ Eleanor Marx, ‘How Should We Organise?’ (1892) at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/drapper/1976/women/5-emarx.html>.

The SDF/SDP/BSP's competitor, the small Socialist Labour Party (SLP), whose former members took a leading part in the formation of the CPGB, likewise subscribed, to different degrees, to the tenets of women's liberation adumbrated by Engels, Bebel and Zetkin. CPGB founding member, Tom Bell, recollected discussion of *Women Under Socialism* at mealtimes in his Glasgow workplace. When the future leading Communist and then SLP activist, Arthur MacManus, became enthusiastic about the suffrage movement, Bell 'tempered his ardour by my conviction that the middle-class women were merely using the working women to get the franchise for themselves, after which they would let the working women down.'⁷⁹ James Connolly, at this time an SLP activist in Scotland and America, mounted a rare challenge to the orthodoxy which prevailed after the publication of the SLP patriarch, Daniel DeLeon's translation of Bebel in 1904. The great Irish socialist, a firm believer in monogamy and its perfectibility, criticised Bebel's 'quasi-prurient revelations of the past and present degradation of womanhood' and rejected any hint of co-operation with feminists which encouraged 'the fatal habit of looking outside our own class for help to the members of a class whose whole material interests are opposed to ours'.⁸⁰ The party had never been asked for its views on matters which, like religion, were best left in the private sphere.

Like their US counterparts, the British DeLeonites upheld orthodoxy. A considered statement composed by Lily Gair Wilkinson in 1910 began on an uncompromising note – 'Throughout the whole period of civilisation, woman has been a slave'⁸¹ – and continued in

⁷⁹ Thomas Bell, *Pioneering Days* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1941), pp. 96, 85–86.

⁸⁰ Donal Nevin, *James Connolly, 'A Full Life'* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2006), p. 232. The incident, together with other differences, disrupted his relationship with DeLeon and provoked Connolly's exit from the SLP.

⁸¹ Lily Gair Wilkinson, *Revolutionary Socialism and the Women's Movement* (Edinburgh: Socialist Labour Press, 1913), p. 2. Lily Gair Wilkinson (1873–1957) was born in Falkirk where she married Arthur Wilkinson in 1909. She was subsequently involved in the Anti-Conscription League and the Anarchist Educational League and wrote *Women's Freedom* (1913). The couple subsequently lived in London and Italy where they were friends and neighbours of D.H. Lawrence and Frieda. Scotland's People, Statutory Registers of Births, 1873,

similar vein. It was necessary for the SLP to declare its position on the suffrage struggle, particularly as ‘bourgeois feminists have received great support in their campaign from many reformists calling themselves socialists who, pretending to serve the cause of women, serve that of the enemy instead.’⁸² Marxism shared common ground with feminism insofar as both opposed the conventional wisdom that women were inferior in crucial ways to men which justified their subordinate status, an orthodoxy Wilkinson refuted by reference to Morgan, Engels and Bebel. Ending women’s subordination required revolutionary not reformist solutions: ‘Feminism claims equal political and social rights for women as for men *within the framework of the present social system*. Socialism claims that even if this were fully achieved, it would be no true emancipation of women. Only those women would benefit who belong to the privileged or propertied class’ (original emphasis).⁸³ An extension of the suffrage with property qualifications as accepted by the suffragette mainstream would exclude working-class women; if they were granted the vote, it would not ameliorate oppression, for in a capitalist society power lay in property and control of production:

The real interests of the workers are not bound up in more political enfranchisement but in the emancipation of all men and women alike from the power of capital ... The enemy of the workers is not the male sex but the capitalist class. This class is made up of both men and women.⁸⁴

The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) operated in a harsher environment. The task of developing the work again fell on a small group of women who like Lenin believed that, so far as was consistent with the constraints of Tsarism, their party should emulate the SPD and strive to realise the demands of the RSDLP constitution for the emancipation of women. But in this sphere Lenin was no Bebel and women activists had to shift for themselves. The aftermath of the 1905 insurrection witnessed unsuccessful initiatives

and Marriages, 1909; Ancestry.com, Death Index, 1957; Kathy E. Ferguson, ‘Anarchist Women and the Politics of Walking’, *Political Research Quarterly*, 70: 4 (2017), pp. 708–719.

⁸² Gair Wilkinson, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 21.

to create a women's commission which a majority opposed as a concession to feminism. In 1907, Kollontai formed the Society for the Mutual Help of Working Women and the following year organised a successful intervention in the All Russian Congress of Women where the working-class group drew 'a clear line of demarcation between the bourgeois suffragettes and the women's liberation movement of the working class of Russia'.⁸⁵ Inessa Armand, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Konkordiya Samoiloa and Anna Ulyanova, were among those who continued to develop and practice emancipatory ideas when Kollontai was forced to emigrate, subsequently collaborating with Zetkin in Germany and Britain.⁸⁶ Regular contributions by Samoiloa in *Pravda* presaged the launch of *Rabotnitsa (Woman Worker)* which popularised issues facing women within the perspective expressed by Kollontai that significant progress could not be made by feminists aiming at a liberalised regime but required a revolutionary movement of female and male workers:

The feminists seek equality in the framework of the existing class society, in no way do they attack the basis of this society. They fight for prerogatives for themselves without challenging the existing prerogatives and privileges ... The feminists see men as the main enemy ... Proletarian women have a different attitude, they don't see men as the enemy and the oppressor, on the contrary they think of men as their comrades. The women and the male comrades are enslaved by the same social condition, the same hated chains of capitalism.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* (1926) at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1926/autobiography.htm>.

⁸⁶ The French-born Inessa Armand (1874–1920) joined the RSDLP in 1904, became a Bolshevik and close confidante of Lenin in exile and Head of Zhenotdel, 1918–1920; Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952) joined the RSDLP in 1899 and supported the Mensheviks from 1906; emigrated 1908 and joined the Bolsheviks in 1915; Commissar of Social Welfare, 1918 and Head of Zhenotdel, 1920–1922; she led the Workers' Opposition and later worked in the Russian Diplomatic Service; Nadezhda Krupskaya (1869–1939) was a founder of the RSDLP. Co-worker and wife of Lenin, she worked in education after 1917 and supported the United Opposition of Trotsky and Zinoviev from the mid-1920s; Konkordiya Samoiloa (1876–1921), joined the RSDLP in 1903, and was a founding editor of *Pravda*; Anna Ulyanova (1864–1935), a revolutionary from 1886, was the older sister and collaborator of Lenin, later a member of the RSDLP Central Committee and head of the department for the protection of children; and see Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁸⁷ Alexandra Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question* (1909), at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1909/social-basis.htm>. Cathy Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai: Writings from the Struggle* (London: Bookmarks, 2021); Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1979).

Bolshevik women criticised the role of the family. They emphasised that working-class women had to play an active role in liberating themselves and combat double standards of morality if proletarianization and socialisation of the domestic economy were to represent steps to emancipation. Unless women remade themselves, institutional change might civilise the existing division of labour but maintain its essentials in post-capitalist society. In Germany, opposition to ‘separatism’ and the assertiveness of female activists was expressed in sexist behaviour which ranged from bad language, jokes and ‘banter’ to the call from the revisionist SDP Reichstag representative, Edmund Fischer, that women should return to the home.⁸⁸ The German movement attempted to advance socialist culture in the here and now rather than waiting for the collapse of capitalism. The SDP warrened society with counter-cultural organisations. However, progress in pre-figuring post-revolutionary relations between the sexes was, as it was in Britain, very restricted. Among the Bolsheviks, ‘separatism’ was identified with feminism and development of divisions in the party but underpinned by male chauvinist attitudes. Kollontai remembered that as early as 1905 with the rejection of the plan for a women’s commission, she realised ‘how little our party concerned itself with the fate of the women of the working class and how meagre was its interest in women’s liberation’.⁸⁹ In 1921, Lenin reflected: ‘Scratch a Communist and find a philistine. Of course, you must scratch their sensitive spot, their mentality as regards women.’⁹⁰

It would constitute a recurring problem. Eradication was never prioritised by the leaders of the Bolsheviks, the Comintern or the national sections – and women were

⁸⁸ Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (Oxford: Berg, 1988), p. 141; Richard J. Evans, ‘Politics and the Family: Social Democracy and the Working-Class Family in Theory and Practice before 1914’, in Richard J. Evans and W.R. Lee (eds) *The German Family: Essays in the Social History of the Family in 19th and 20th Century Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 275.

⁸⁹ Kollontai, *Autobiography*, op.cit.

⁹⁰ Clara Zetkin, ‘Lenin on the Women’s Question’, at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm>.

sometimes cautious of raising ‘divisive’ issues. It remains open to speculation what practical implications many revolutionaries took from the pioneering texts and how they influenced activity beyond the podium. But by 1920 a coherent Marxist approach to women’s liberation distinct from feminism and equal-rights suffragism had found a place on the revolutionary left. It is necessary to emphasise the point as some accounts are muddled. One avowedly Marxist survey of the British labour movement concludes:

In Germany and Russia the socialists had shown an early understanding of the ‘woman question’ and had, not without opposition, declared their support for equal rights, the women’s franchise and for women’s self-organisation within the socialist movement. The writings of Lenin, Bebel and Clara Zetkin consistently advocated such policies and were debated within the Second International.⁹¹

Other left-wing historians have lamented the superseding of ‘early feminism’ associated with utopian socialism by the Marxist coupling of sexual and class oppression and the primacy accorded the latter.⁹² Disregarding the fact that Zetkin and Kollontai denounced feminism, latter-day feminists have claimed: ‘The history of feminism in the Communist movement can be traced through the biographies of women such as Klara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai.’⁹³ In contrast, reflecting on the German Communist’s abhorrence of the feminism she encountered, her support for class struggle over class conciliation, a revolutionary party over a reformist movement, and her disdain for ‘the universal sisterhood’ of women, Gisela Notz remarked: ‘It is pointless to place Zetkin in pigeonholes in which she never would have

⁹¹ Mary Davis, *Comrade or Brother?: The History of the British Labour Movement, 1789–1951* (London: Pluto Press, 1993), pp. 114–115.

⁹² Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 30; Barbara Taylor, ‘Socialist Feminism: Utopian or Scientific?’, in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 158–163.

⁹³ Michelle Barratt, ‘Feminism’, in Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 190. Similarly, Karen Hunt, op.cit., p. 52, claims that Montefiore ‘by today’s criteria would be described as a feminist’. Nowhere in a book, which she describes as ‘a feminist history’ (p. 7), does she define feminism. The implication of her text is that a feminist is someone who places sex before class. However, if we turn to Montefiore, it is to find her writing of the feminists of the era Hunt is discussing: ‘they try to stir up a sex war instead of preaching a class war ... they fail to get a hearing because they are stirring up a hysterical form of feminism’: Dora Montefiore, *Some Words to Socialist Women* (1907) at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/montefiore/1907/xx/pamphlet_socialist_women.htm.

wanted to be placed. She was neither a feminist nor a “left feminist” – the latter were unknown in her time.’⁹⁴

Yet there continues to be no shortage of contemporary writers who categorise revolutionary Marxists as ‘feminists’ or ‘socialist feminists’. Any validity such characterisations possess rests on the reductionist claim that Zetkin, Kollontai, Montefiore and others were feminists because, like feminists, they advocated women fight for equal rights with men. Echoing academic dictionary definitions of feminism as ‘a doctrine suggesting that women are disadvantaged in modern society and advocating equal opportunities for men and women’,⁹⁵ this is analytically unhelpful because it ignores the class-struggle paradigm within which these women advocated and fought for equal rights, the political framework which distinguished them from contemporary feminist thinkers and activists. Precision is sacrificed for conflation and decontextualization, sometimes in pursuit of a useable past and historical pedigree. During the period under study in this paper, the label ‘socialist feminist’ was for Marxists, a conflicted couplet, a contradiction in terms: one could not be a revolutionary socialist and hold that the over-riding factor in women’s double oppression was sex not class.

One contemporary feminist is critical of the German Marxists’ employment of the term ‘bourgeois feminist’, insisting that the epithet compresses the complexities of the class structure at a time when many feminists were schoolteachers, clerks and administrators.

Amplifying differences of emphasis between Bebel and Zetkin, Marilyn Boxer perceives the

⁹⁴ Gisela Notz, ‘Clara Zetkin and the International Socialist Women’s Movement’, in *Revolutionary History*, op.cit., p. 17.

⁹⁵ Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner (eds), *Dictionary of Sociology* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 96. David Robertson, *The Penguin Dictionary of Politics* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 125, states: ‘At the root, the movement seeks equal political and social rights for women as compared with men.’ Where academic feminists define their terms, they frequently do so in extremely broad fashion: for example, Cheryl Law, *Suffrage and Power: The Women’s Movement, 1918–1928* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), pp. 3–4, where feminist bodies are defined as: ‘Any groups that have tried to change the position of women, or the ideas about women’ while the concept of a women’s movement ‘was an inclusive term encompassing the work of party and non-party groups engaged in improving women’s lives’.

latter as dividing the movement in Germany and internationally, and serving women badly.⁹⁶

However, the prior issue for Marxists was not social composition. It was strategy and insistence that the abolition of women's subjugation as a sex depended on transformation of the existing *bourgeois* order – an aspiration which most feminists did not envisage and sometimes feared. As Bebel put it:

The larger portion by far of the women in society engaged in the movement for the emancipation of women do not see the necessity for such a radical change. Influenced by their privileged social standing they see in the more far-reaching working-women's movement dangers, not infrequently abhorrent aims which they feel constrained to ignore, eventually even to resist. The class antagonism that in the general social movement rages between the capitalist and the working class ... turns up likewise on the surface of the women's movement'.⁹⁷

Zetkin was at one with Bebel. She wrote in 1928:

The counter-revolutionary power of organised feminism is not a result of the alignment of the ladies and the bourgeoisie but of its disappointing paralysing influence on the great masses of working women whose will and activity is concentrated on the struggle between the two sexes in order to reform society instead of the revolutionary struggle between classes.⁹⁸

If we concede that 'bourgeois' over-simplifies matters – although Marxism took account of intermediate strata while, in the end, posing a binary class antagonism – the adjective should be read contextually as denoting women who rejected proletarian revolution and believed reform within capitalism would suffice to liberate women.

In recognising the power of the Marxist tradition, we must acknowledge its deficiencies in practice. Evans observed of the pre-1920 period: 'The writings of Bebel and

⁹⁶ Marilyn J. Boxer, 'Rethinking the Socialist Construction and the International Career of the Concept "Bourgeois Feminism"', *American Historical Review*, 112: 1 (2007), pp. 131–156, provided a useful review of the secondary literature; Marilyn J. Boxer, 'Clara Zetkin and France: Eight Year Exile, Eighty Year Influence', in Marilyn J. Boxer and John S. Partington (eds), *Clara Zetkin: National and International Contexts*, Socialist History Occasional Publication No. 31 (London: Socialist History Society, 2013), p. 20, draws a similar conclusion regarding what she terms the 'straw man' of 'bourgeois feminism'.

⁹⁷ Bebel, 'Introduction', op.cit., n.p.

⁹⁸ Clara Zetkin, 'The Bourgeois Women's Movement', in *Revolutionary History*, op.cit., p. 140. She noted: 'The feminists either do not see or do not want to see that the decisive factor between full, social human liberty and slavery is the fact that bourgeois society, which is based on the capitalist mode of production, is divided into exploiters and rulers on the one side and exploited and ruled on the other ... Membership of one or the other class is in the last resort decisive for the situation and way of life of women not their community as a sex': *ibid.*

Zetkin were the basis for socialist theory on women's emancipation in every country but socialist practice was another matter.⁹⁹ Its influence on politics and life outside the conference hall and socialist periodicals was restricted. Did 1917 inspire change? 'The October revolution', Trotsky remembered, 'honestly fulfilled its obligations to women.'¹⁰⁰ The Bolsheviks transformed the legal status of women. From 1918, legislation on property ownership and inheritance, protections at work, equal pay, marriage, maternity, abortion, rights to children and divorce equalised their position with that of men in the home, workplace and society and provided rights in advance of those prevailing in capitalist countries.¹⁰¹ Zhenotdel, the Women's Department, headed by Armand and Kollontai and then from 1922 by Sofia Smidovich, fostered literacy classes, political education, creches, communal laundries and dining rooms and consumer co-operatives. There were attempts to undermine patriarchal authority and curb abuse of women and children: 'The revolution made a heroic effort to destroy the so-called "family hearth".'¹⁰² But the Women's Department was underfunded and the 'woman question' never prioritised.¹⁰³ By 1926, the marriage rate was higher than in 1923; female unemployment pushed women back into the home and reliance on the male breadwinner.¹⁰⁴ The family endured. Sexual politics, still less 'free love', had never been popular with the Bolshevik leaders. Lenin expressed surprise in 1920 that at the delegate meetings convened by Zhenotdel, sex and marital problems figured high on the

⁹⁹ Evans, *The Feminists*, op. cit., p. 177. For an account of the development of Zetkin's ideas, see Richard J. Evans, 'Theory and Practice in German Social Democracy, 1880–1914: Clara Zetkin and the Socialist Theory of Women's Emancipation', *History of Political Thought*, 3: 2 (1982), pp. 285–304.

¹⁰⁰ Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p. 139.

¹⁰¹ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, The State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 1–58; Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar, *Women and Work in Russia, 1880–1930: A Study in Continuity Through Change* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 173–211.

¹⁰² Trotsky, op.cit., p. 139.

¹⁰³ Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development and Social Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 54–73; Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 127–146; Anne McShane, 'The Will to Liberate', *Weekly Worker*, 10 January 2019, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰⁴ S.A. Smith, *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890–1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 342.

agenda: 'I could not believe my ears when I heard that the first state of proletarian dictatorship is battling with counter-revolutionaries of the whole world ... and active Communist women are discussing sex problems.'¹⁰⁵ He pronounced that: 'Promiscuity in sexual matters is bourgeois. It is a sign of degeneration.' By 1925, Kollontai and 'free love' had been side-lined and Ministers advised: 'Drown your sexual energy in public work ... if you want to solve the sexual problem, be a public worker, a comrade not a stallion or a broodmare.'¹⁰⁶

There was little sustained attempt to challenge male gender roles: 'fundamentally, the Revolution reconfigured rather than unseated the dominant masculine norm'.¹⁰⁷ Understandable against the background of civil war and the New Economic Policy, the resilience of traditional attitudes did not bode well for the Comintern. Its progress depended on mobilising men as well as women yet, as in the Soviet Union, male chauvinism and indifference constituted powerful barriers. Lenin was conscious of the difficulties:

Agitation and propaganda work among women, their awakening and revolutionising, is regarded as an incidental matter which only concerns women comrades ... That is wrong, quite wrong. What is the basis of the incorrect attitude of our national sections? In the final analysis, it is nothing but an underestimation of woman and her work. Yes indeed!¹⁰⁸

The challenge to the national parties was clear:

Our Communist work among women, our political work, embraces a great deal of educational work among men. We must root out the old 'master' idea to its last and smallest root in the party and among the masses. That is one of our political tasks, just as is the urgently necessary task of forming a staff of men and women comrades well trained in theory and practice to carry on party activity among working women.¹⁰⁹

Solving it would prove more difficult.

The CPGB and working-class women: turning theory into practice?

¹⁰⁵ Clara Zetkin, 'Lenin on the Women's Question', op.cit.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted Eley, op.cit., p. 188.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, op.cit., p. 341.

¹⁰⁸ Clara Zetkin, 'Lenin on the Women's Question', op.cit.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

The ideas reviewed above were reiterated by the CPGB throughout the 1920s:

The emancipation of the women from slavery and inequality depends upon the victory of Communism. The Communist women's movement is not a feminist movement ... Communist women are co-workers in the common struggle ... Revolutionary Marxism knows no specific woman question and no specific women's movement. Communism will be achieved not by the united effort of all women of different classes but by the united struggle of all the exploited.¹¹⁰

What proved problematic was their translation into practice by a weak party confronting an unresponsive environment. Publication of the Theses coincided with the onset of depression; sustained unemployment; defeated strikes; decline in union membership and organisation; dissipation of the rebellious mood which had propelled a degree of socialist progress, 1910–1920; the stabilisation of capitalism; and working-class retreat which endured with conjunctural upturns until 1933. Until the later 1930s, there was minimal resistance as expressed through strikes.¹¹¹ The end of the war marked the return of women to the home. Married women made up under 10% of the workforce by the turn of the decade. The bar on employment of wives in white-collar occupations was extended and the female labour force was skewed towards the temporary employment of women who often viewed a job as a prelude to marriage, family and children. Male unemployment forced wives back to work without freeing them from household chores.¹¹²

Pivoting on the breadwinner/housewife model, the family proved resilient and remained a positive in existing working-class culture and consciousness. In a precarious world, the home could be a haven although being a working-class housewife in depression conditions was a demanding occupation. Women's jobs in distribution, clerical and factory

¹¹⁰ CPGB, *Manual of Party Training* (London: CPGB, 1927).

¹¹¹ Andrew August, *The British Working Class, 1832–1940* (Pearson Longman, 2007), pp. 165–202; Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); James E. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain, 1918–1979* (London: Batsford, 1984), pp.19–34; James Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867–1974* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1983), pp.108–118; James Hinton and Richard Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), pp.11–26; Michael Savage and Andrew Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1840–1940* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 76–86.

¹¹² Miriam Glucksmann, *Cottons and Casuals: The Gendered Organisation of Labour in Time and Space* (Durham: Sociology Press, 2000), pp. 52–79.

work were low paid but with patchy union membership.¹¹³ Neither the housewife nor the working woman in a segregated workforce where equal pay for equal work was often an abstract demand, proved receptive to the Communist message. From the mid-1930s, the economy improved, stimulated by re-armament and new industries in the Midlands and the South-East. There were more jobs for women. By 1939, a quarter of engineering workers employed on munitions were women, female union membership moved back to 1920 levels, tighter labour markets enabled unions to campaign for equal pay and welfare benefits, and bars on married women began to be dismantled.¹¹⁴ A changing environment provided greater opportunities. But the CPGB was by now immersed in Popular Front politics and choreographing what was, from a class-struggle perspective, ‘the nauseous spectacle of bishops, Communists, cocoa-magnates, publishers, duchesses and Labour MPs marching arm in arm to the tune of *Rule Britannia*’.¹¹⁵

Most of the literature agrees that despite the arrest of the pre-war forward march of feminism, the movement survived. But it did so in a depleted, debilitated and fragmented form and possessed far less resonance. If the extension of the franchise in 1918 reflected in some degree the activity of the suffragettes, its widening to women under 30 in 1928 could plausibly be attributed to the limited impact of the earlier reform and the tendency of women to vote Conservative.¹¹⁶ One study depicted feminists as ‘a beleaguered band, very much on the defensive: they were bitterly divided over fundamental feminist principles, membership and income of the largest feminist society, the NUSEC [National Union of Societies for

¹¹³ Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), p. 194; Hinton, op. cit., p. 121.

¹¹⁴ Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement* (London: Ernest Benn, 1977), pp. 221–243; Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-war Britain* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹¹⁵ George Orwell in *New English Weekly*, 17 February 1938, reprinted in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 339.

¹¹⁶ Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London: Pandora, 1989); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain, 1914–1999* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 114–139; Bruley, *Women in Britain*, op.cit., pp. 59–91.

Equal Citizenship], was declining rapidly, and the very word feminist had strong pejorative connotations'.¹¹⁷ Another survey dissents – not on the evidence but the conclusions to be drawn from it – and claims rather unconvincingly that the plethora of competing groups produced 'a vibrant, multi-layered network' which 'permeate[d] all sectors of public life'.¹¹⁸ More specifically, Pamela Graves has argued that issues of women's role and status in society ceased to be an issue in labour movement politics after 1931.¹¹⁹ Labour's hostility to co-operation with Communists and the nature and state of feminist organisations meant that united front work based on tactical alliances with working-class bodies was not on the agenda before 1934. But on the face of it, the weakness of feminism provided opportunities for Communists, although of course they were confronted with many of the difficulties that debilitated feminism

And it was not only the situation in Britain but circumstances in Russia which constrained their progress. The Zhenotdel was criticised as a 'separatist' institution, a Trojan Horse for feminism. From 1927, the Stalinists cast it as a barrier to industrialisation while its axing in 1930 was advertised as part of a turn against 'separatism' which had been increasingly opposed by many women cadres who favoured female involvement in the general work of the party.¹²⁰ The course was set for conservatism in policy towards women and the family, symbolised by the outlawing of abortion in the interests of 'the joys of motherhood' and breeding more producers. By 1936 Trotsky could remark of policy in this

¹¹⁷ Harold L. Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s' in Harold L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), p. 62. The number of societies affiliated to NUSEC declined from 220 in 1920 to 67 in 1932: Martin Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism, 1930–1950', in Smith, op.cit., p.147.

¹¹⁸ Law, op.cit., p. 181. The text substantially covers 1914–1924.

¹¹⁹ Pamela Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics, 1918–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 181. She also notes that nearly all working-class women activists joined the Labour Party while the majority of middle-class feminists formed 'non-party' organisations in the 1920s (ibid., p. 118)

¹²⁰ Carol Eubanks Haydyn. 'The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party', *Russian History*, 3: 2 (1976), pp. 150–173; Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Identity in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 51–68.

area: ‘The ABCs of Communism are declared a leftist excess.’¹²¹ Change in Russia influenced the Comintern.

The CPGB had made an inauspicious beginning in mobilising women. Zetkin told the Fourth Comintern Congress at the end of 1922:

In *Britain*, party bodies for the necessary and systematic activity among the female proletariat are almost completely absent. Making reference to the weakness of its material resources, the Communist Party of Britain during the past year has again and again abstained from or postponed establishing the structures required for systematic work among proletarian women. The stimulus and the warnings of the International Women’s Secretariat in this regard have been in vain. No genuine women’s secretariat was established, although one woman comrade was named as an overall party agitator.¹²²

Agitation, propaganda and recruitment among women were engulfed in the disarray of the party’s first eighteen months. The *Report on Party Organisation* adopted at the 1922 Congress, which recommended formation of women’s committees/sections, suggested the Co-operative Women’s Guilds as a promising field for recruitment, and presented minimal demands over equal pay and admission of women to unions, was intended to improve matters.¹²³ The report included one of the few explicit insights into the attitudes of Communists and combatting male chauvinism we encounter in these years: ‘We shall have to fight relentlessly against a great deal of prejudice of this kind in our ranks. Many comrades discourage their wives, sisters and women friends from attending Party meetings or from taking any part whatever in our work.’¹²⁴ Nonetheless, the committee subscribed to backward stereotypes of women when recommending that they organise ‘socials and entertainments’

¹²¹ ‘Stalinism was ‘beating a retreat to the bourgeois models, covering its retreat with false speeches about the sacredness of the “new” family’: Trotsky, op.cit., pp. 151, 146; Goldman, *Women, The State and Revolution*, op.cit., passim.

¹²² Clara Zetkin, Speech to Fourth Comintern Congress, at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1922/ci/women.htm>. The reference to the party agitator is probably to Helen Crawford.

¹²³ Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester, Communist Party Archive (hereafter CPA), CP/CENT/CONG/01/05, Report of the Party Commission on Organisation presented to the Fifth Congress of the CPGB, October 1922, pp. 46, 51. Zetkin had remarked at the 4th Comintern Congress ‘whether these [special] bodies are called women’s secretariats, women’s divisions or whatever’. In the CPGB ‘commissions’ seems to have given way to ‘committees’ and then ‘sections’ without substantial changes in function.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

and the ensuing decade would witness little ‘relentless struggle’ against male prejudice in the party.¹²⁵ A Central Women’s Committee was established in 1922 but appears to have been still-born. A replacement in February 1923 again generated little action. Both bodies consisted of women based in or near London and middle-class women at that. *Ab initio*, and in violation of the thrust of Comintern thinking, ‘work among women’ seems to have been perceived as the business of women – Willie Gallacher was the only man involved.¹²⁶ In Spring 1923, when Jack Murphy reported on the November–December Congress, he underlined the exasperation of the Comintern Women’s Department with the CPGB, concluding, ‘there is no doubt we have to be up and doing’.¹²⁷

A woman’s page was introduced into the *Workers’ Weekly*. But activity in the unions and Labour Party took precedence. It was 1924 before, with Harry Pollitt in the forefront, a sustained attempt was made to take things forward in the context of Moscow’s demand for the ‘Bolshevisation’ of the party. Only a handful of women’s sections were functioning but the appointment of the former mill worker, Beth Turner, as the first National Women’s Organiser and a relatively successful National Women’s Conference heralded a fresh start.¹²⁸ By the following year, 34 women’s sections had been established consisting predominantly of housewives. It was a drop in the ocean compared with the Labour Party which had over 1800 women’s sections and some 300,000 female members, around half its total membership, by the late 1920s.¹²⁹ There were insufficient female industrial workers in the CPGB for its Women’s Department to mount an offensive in the factories while in the absence of efforts to

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ National Archives, UK (NA), CAB 24/138/32, Report on Revolutionary Organisations (RRO), 27 July 1922; CAB24/159/5, RRO, 15 February 1923; *Workers’ Weekly*, 16 November 1923. The 1922 committee consisted of Minnie Birch, Crawford, Nellie Lansbury, Ellen Wilkinson, and Gallacher. Its successor involved Olive Budden, Mrs Jackson, Mrs Packman, Miss Morgan and Crawford.

¹²⁷ J.T. Murphy, ‘The 4th Congress: A Special Report on the Recent World Congress of the Comintern’, *Communist Review*, March 1923, at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/murphy-jt/1923/03/fourth_congress.htm.

¹²⁸ *Workers’ Weekly*, 30 May 1924. Relative success owed something to the employment of Harry Pollitt, an effective organiser, to get things moving and the appointment of Turner.

¹²⁹ Pugh, op. cit., p. 131.

re-educate them male Communists still considered work among women as far down their list of priorities or beyond their remit. The main areas of intervention were the Co-operative Women's Guilds, Labour Party women's sections and union branches. The Co-operative Movement seemed the most fruitful, although the guilds met during the day and consisted largely of housewives.¹³⁰

Judging by discussions at the Comintern's Third Communist Women's Conference in 1924, little attention was given to issues such as birth control, contraception and abortion, still less to woman's condition after the revolution. The pervasive focus was on existing, largely economic struggles.¹³¹ The party's emphasis on recruiting male trade unionists in the metal trades and mining and its masculinist, workerist ethos, was strengthened from 1924 by 'Bolshevisation', which buttressed bureaucratic centralism, demanded hyper-activity and reinforced the marginality of many women members. Nonetheless it was accompanied by Comintern exhortations to intensify the recruitment of women as a mainstream objective: 'we must reiterate most emphatically that work among women is part of our general party work ... the best ground is the factory'.¹³² There was little critical discussion of the family and its role in capitalist economy and society, birth control propaganda was neglected, abortion was sometimes dismissed as 'petty bourgeois' while CPGB theorists opposed family allowances as an attempt to reduce wages.¹³³

The Comintern was preoccupied with what it considered more pressing issues, refracted through the lens of the factional struggle in the Soviet Union, developing Stalinism, and consolidation of 'socialism in one country'. Zetkin was increasingly disillusioned with

¹³⁰ Report of the Seventh Congress of the CPGB, 30 May – 1 June, 1925, pp. 119, 163.

¹³¹ Elizabeth Waters, 'In the Shadow of the Comintern: The Communist Women's Movement, 1920–1943', in Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp and Marilyn B. Young (eds), *Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), p. 42. Bruley, *Leninism*, op.cit., pp. 72–80, suggests that the CPGB had turned its face against agitating on the question of birth control by the end of 1922.

¹³² *Communist Papers*, Cmd 2682 (London: HMSO, 1926), p. 8.

¹³³ Waters, op.cit., pp. 43, 47–51; R. P. Dutt, *Socialism and the Living Wage* (London: CPGB, 1927), pp. 120–127.

the Russification of the world movement. Jean-Jacques Marie sees 1925–1926 as a turning point, signified in Stalin’s terse requiem for social, political and gender equity: ‘We should not play with equality for that is playing with fire.’¹³⁴ It marked ‘the beginning of the Comintern’s rapid relegation of “women’s work” to the scrapheap’.¹³⁵ The Comintern’s Women’s Department had been marginalised and was now merged into the general structures of the Comintern as a bureau of the Stalinist-controlled executive. It continued to supervise affiliates’ activity among working women – it was still expedient to recruit and utilise females. But commitment to the ideas of liberation was increasingly formal and ornamental and pressure on the national parties to prosecute the approach of the early 1920s declined.¹³⁶

Most women members, like their male counterparts in the CPGB, lacked any rigorous grounding in Marxist theory. Their socialisation and acceptance or toleration of proletarian variants of capitalist ideas and values, as well as their restricted, specific weight and subordinate position inside the party, rendered them a limited force for transforming practice. Female membership passed the 20% mark in the aftermath of the General Strike and mining lockout – 1926 also saw the belated appearance of the national paper, *The Woman Worker*. The increase was largely and ephemerally fuelled by housewives from the coalfields, and the numbers of female Communists declined to 16% in 1928 and to around 10% of a diminished membership by the end of the decade.¹³⁷ As a group, they were neither homogeneous nor cohesive.¹³⁸ There was little dissidence and negligible interest in feminism although independent women left the party on an individual basis – Stella Browne because she believed Labour was a more effective arena for proselytising over birth control in face of the

¹³⁴ Quoted Marie, op.cit., p. 434.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.435.

¹³⁶ Waters, op. cit., pp. 50–51.

¹³⁷ Andrew Thorpe, ‘The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–1945’, *Historical Journal*, 43: 3 (2000), p. 784.

¹³⁸ Bruley, *Leninism*, op. cit., p. 120, states: ‘Almost all politically active women in the party did not want to participate in [women’s sections].’ This judgement is largely based on valuable interviews in which 15 out of 18 women active in the CPGB in the 1920s recalled this was their practice. Her research was extensive but in view of the numbers of women in the party through the decade her conclusion may be seen as too firm.

party's neglect, Ellen Wilkinson because her ambitions to become an MP could be better realised without the Communist label, and Bessie Braddock who, like Wilkinson, chafed at the constraints of 'Bolshevisation'.¹³⁹

Men were crucial: quite apart from their sometimes 'supercilious attitude',¹⁴⁰ their abstentionism on work among women constituted a significant factor in the party's inability to engage and mobilise women and embed and advance them in the party. The participation of male leaders such as Gallacher and Pollitt between 1922 and 1924 was brief; while the number of men working in women's sections is unknown, it was in all probability negligible. Competing tasks and Communist men's orthodox conception of the proper division of labour between the sexes, which many women shared, took priority. By 1929 it was evident that the initial conception of a powerhouse Central Women's Department staffed by women *and* men, stimulating a web of dedicated and disciplined sections which agitated on a wide range of issues among women and specialised organisers stimulating recruitment and mobilisation of both working women and housewives while simultaneously securing equality inside the party, had not come to pass. A difficult objective situation and a less than resolute leadership which made little effort to confront male attitudes and their acceptance by female Communists ensured the party's influence over working-class women was limited. Mainstream work became, with some exceptions, men's work. Work among women became 'women's work' and the culture of capitalism together with the conventional division of labour was substantially reproduced in a party dedicated to its abolition. This debilitated the CPGB as an organisation of the *whole* working class and blunted its revolutionary mission.

¹³⁹ All three quit in 1923–1924. For Browne, see Sheila Rowbotham, *A New World to Win: Stella Browne, Socialist Feminist* (London: Pluto Press, 1977); for Braddock's exit, McIlroy and Campbell, 'Early British Communist Leaders', *op.cit.*, pp. 440–441; for Wilkinson's resignation, James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, vol. 1: Formation and Early Years, 1920–1924* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), pp. 242–243.

¹⁴⁰ Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow (hereafter RGASPI), 495/100/340. CPGB Organising Conference, 19 October 1926.

The Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in 1928 ushered in full-frontal Stalinism but broke no new ground on these questions. Nonetheless, it prompted a further spate of demands from the Comintern that affiliates intensify their efforts to recruit working women, concentrate on the factories and unions, strengthen agitation against feminism and reformism and incorporate initiatives addressed to women in the general work of the party under leadership supervision. The beginning of the Third Period saw the end of an era as Zetkin's critique of Stalin's Draft Programme for the Comintern marked the end of a career in sharp decline since mid-decade. With Varvara Moirova supervising the CPGB and Phyllis Neal working on the issues in Moscow, the party was reminded of 'the urgent necessity for a decided improvement in its work among women'.¹⁴¹ At an international conference of female delegates in Moscow, men *were* involved – in a controlling capacity. The Comintern inspectors, Otto Kuusinen and Boris Vassiliev, savaged the Women's Department: it was incapable of deepening impending world-wide radicalisation by organising resistance to the police or aiding workers' self-defence squads in strikes and should be dissolved without further discussion.¹⁴² Moirova ridiculed *The Working Woman*, brandishing a copy of the paper and inquiring, 'Is this what we pay for?'¹⁴³ In King Street there was acceptance that little had been achieved since 1920 as the CPGB leaders continued to recite the mantra that activists must prioritise work among women in industry. There was one significant initiative: following trends in Russia, the Women's Department was suspended and leadership of the new crusade allocated to the PB.¹⁴⁴ As the fantasy of mass working-class radicalisation, which included women, collided with reality, the Third Period failed to change things.

¹⁴¹ *Party Organiser*, May 1932; Clara Zetkin, 'Some Critical Remarks on the Draft Programme', *Communist International*, August 1928; Bruley, *Leninism*, op.cit., pp. 171–185.

¹⁴² Marie, op.cit., 436.

¹⁴³ RGASPI,495/100/604, PB, 20 October 1929. Moirova, the daughter of an Odessa laundress, joined the RSDLP around 1905 and the Bolsheviks in 1917. A protégé of Kollontai, she worked in the Zhenotdel in the 1920s and replaced Sturm at the Comintern.

¹⁴⁴ Harry Pollitt, *The Road to Victory* (London: CPGB, 1932), p. 86.

All in all, Class Against Class

was a disaster for the party. As membership rapidly dwindled, female comrades were fully occupied in trying to keep 'mainstream' party work going and were less inclined than before to conduct work specifically aimed at women. As a result, many women's sections disappeared.¹⁴⁵

The Working Woman ceased publication, but new opportunities surfaced with the emergence of militancy amongst female workers as employers reacted to economic downturn with schemes to 'rationalise' work. The CPGB's intervention in the textile disputes in Lancashire and Yorkshire registered few immediate gains but the failure of the revolutionary rhetoric of Class Against Class to resound with the allegedly insurgent female proletariat impressed on some Communists the need to foreground immediate demands which reflected women's direct concerns such as a married women's right to work, unemployment and maternity benefits and welfare services, and more imaginative, minimal forms of agitation. With the Labour Party often out of bounds and hostility in many union branches, the Co-operative Guilds, which facilitated discussion of peace, welfare, childcare and family planning, became a major forum for fighting 'social fascism'. But the politics of Class Against Class were never far away and there were unsuccessful attempts to launch a party-backed rank-and-file movement of Militant Co-operators.¹⁴⁶

A constant was the sustained invocation of Russia as a beacon which represented the future of womankind:

For women, Soviet Power means full economic and social equality with men, with equality of opportunity in every trade and profession, in the Soviets, the Trade Unions, the Co-operatives, the whole of social life ... For the first time, therefore, women will get equal pay for equal work; they will have ample time off at full pay for confinement with special allowances and free medical service; they will have creches, kindergartens and clinics for their children with the best nursing staff under the supervision of working-class mothers.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Sue Bruley, 'Women Against War and Fascism: Communism, Feminism and the Popular Front', in Jim Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), p. 133.

¹⁴⁶ Communists were also the subject of bans and proscriptions in the Co-operative Movement: see Branson, op.cit., pp. 195–196. CPGB activists published a short-lived, cyclostyled paper, *The Militant Co-operator*, 'Organ of the Militant Co-operators'.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted Branson, op.cit., p. 192.

In any meaningful socialist sense, Russia was far from a beacon and as Stalin's second revolution consolidated its hold on power, the progress of Soviet women stalled and was reversed: 'The elimination of the Zhenotdel put an end to a broader programme for women's liberation.'¹⁴⁸ Henceforth, '[women's position] was shaped in no small measure by the prejudices of male workers and managers and by the short-term imperatives of production. Stalin and his supporters successfully remade the revolution which had encompassed so many different aspirations in 1917, in the image of brutal, breakneck industrialisation.'¹⁴⁹ By March 1929, Zetkin had concluded:

I will feel completely alone and alien in this body which has changed from being a living political organism into a dead mechanism, which on one side swallows orders in the Russian language and on the other spits them out in various languages, a mechanism which turns the mighty, world-historical meaning and content of the Russian revolution into the rules of the game for Pickwick Clubs.¹⁵⁰

The Russian turn against 'separatism' resounded in London. With the suspension of the CPGB Women's Department in 1932, Turner's successor as National Organiser, Rose Smith, reported directly to the PB.¹⁵¹ More change was in the air as the Comintern resurrected United Front tactics and after the Seventh World Congress in 1935 turned to Popular Front politics. The Women's Department of the Comintern Executive had lingered on since the last rites were read over it in 1928. It was now finally dissolved, its termination justified by the alleged need to mainstream the work. Despite formulaic resolutions and observations in keeping with the new line, there was no real debate or decisions about agitation among women at the Congress.¹⁵² In Britain, 'work among women' continued to be

¹⁴⁸ Goldman, *Women at the Gates*, op.cit., p.64.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Horst Helas, 'Clara Zetkin's "Filthy Letter"', in *Revolutionary History*, op. cit., p.128.

¹⁵¹ Gisela Chan Man Fong, 'Shoulder to Shoulder: Rose Smith Who Stood for "Different but Equal and United"', in John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan and Alan Campbell (eds), *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in Biography* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2001), pp. 114–116; Bruley, *Leninism*, op.cit., pp. 184–185.

¹⁵² Marie, op.cit., p. 438.

‘women’s work’; male involvement was rhetorical, token or supervisory. But the goal was no longer a politically cohesive Communist proletarian women’s movement. It was a broader, CPGB-controlled movement which tactically aligned working-class women with their bourgeois counterparts as well as women of varying political persuasions across and beyond the labour movement, with the primary objective of thwarting National Socialism’s threat to Soviet Stalinism. Work with existing women’s organisations would replace earlier traditions which were retrospectively dismissed as ‘narrow sectarianism’.

Driven by Soviet policy, the CPGB embraced patriotism and the national interest in a search for bourgeois allies. Women’s emancipation from capitalism was subordinated to demands for improvements within capitalism, focussed on equal pay, nurseries and maternity.¹⁵³ The family, motherhood and domesticity were celebrated. The good woman was, or aspired to be, a good wife, a good mother and a good home-maker or ‘head servant’ while doing her bit for a democratic Britain and Stalin’s Soviet Union. This is the impression one receives reading the *Daily Worker* of the later 1930s. From 1935, the new approach was exemplified by the Women’s Committee Against War and Fascism, the British section of the Comintern-inspired Women’s World Committee. The presence of a Communist, Hilda Vernon, as secretary, objectives that declared equality for women was unattainable without the abolition of capitalism, and leading positions occupied by party activists, Isabel Brown, Joan Beauchamp and Charlotte Haldane, and the proliferation of Communist contributions to the Committee’s paper, *Women Today*, bespoke CPGB control and its sometimes shrouded anti-capitalism.¹⁵⁴ Facilitated by demands in its Charter on the rights of married women,

¹⁵³ *For a Soviet Britain* (London: CPGB, 1935).

¹⁵⁴ Hilda Vernon (1902–1982) was a member of the ILP group which joined the CPGB in 1935 and remained a lifelong Communist; Joan Beauchamp (1890–1964), a former suffragette, anti-war campaigner and CPGB founder member, was one of the first women to graduate from London University and worked as a journalist; Charlotte Haldane (1894–1969), was the daughter of Jewish immigrants and a journalist married to the eminent scientist, J.B.S. Haldane. Disillusionment with Stalinism followed service as a war correspondent in Russia and she resigned from the CPGB in 1941.

equality in unions, maternity pay, abortion and opposition to war, the project attracted women of diverse political persuasion. Illustrating that women were as deft at manipulation as male Communists, the party demonstrated willingness to suppress political differences, signalled by the emergence of what Bruley called ‘feminist cadres’, such as Vernon and Nan MacMillan, as well as collaborators, notably Maud Brown, who ran the Women’s Department of the National Unemployed Workers’ Committee Movement.¹⁵⁵ The Aid for Spain movement provided another arena where Communist women, ‘worked alongside other socialists, liberals, clergy and even sympathetic Conservatives and political differences were never discussed. It was the party’s most successful venture into Popular Front work.’¹⁵⁶

But old problems persisted. Neglect of day-to-day agitation and propaganda among women was admonished *sotto voce* at the 1937 Congress: ‘While no hard and fast rules should be laid down, all women party members should engage in this work. In the majority of cases, it will be found that this is the most fruitful field of specialised activity for women party members.’¹⁵⁷ This was coupled with significant structural change: in an attempt to overcome the inferior status accorded this field, women’s groups linked to party branches in the same way as factory and street groups, were introduced and women’s committees at district level revived. What had been the norm since the CPGB’s foundation, work among women was the business of women, was institutionalised. Women’s groups were expected to organise around issues such as peace, prices, housing and education, campaign for women’s centres, and provide political education.¹⁵⁸ The Labour leadership rejected collaboration, although there was progress in engaging Labour Party women’s sections and attracting

¹⁵⁵ Bruley, ‘War and Fascism’, op. cit., pp. 134–137, 141–142. Maud Brown (1888–1975), a London postal worker and Labour activist, ran the woman’s department of the Communist-controlled National Unemployed Workers’ Committee Movement from 1929, but was never a CPGB member; for MacMillan, see note 47.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 147.

¹⁵⁷ *It Can Be Done: Report of the 14th Congress of the CPGB*, pp. 302–303.

¹⁵⁸ Branson, op.cit., p.196.

sponsorship for Communist initiatives from prominent Labour activists.¹⁵⁹ By autumn 1937, a National Women's Committee was functioning and there were 25 groups in Scotland, 23 in London and eight in Lancashire. The picture was patchy, and difficulties were reported in Sheffield and South Wales. Things worked best when party leaders pushed the work. In London it was led by the District Organiser, Ted Bramley, although there was still a tendency to farm it out to the groups and the committee was all female.¹⁶⁰

The 1938 CPGB Congress was informed: 'there has been a distinct improvement in the attitude of the Party to work among women. But there are still many comrades who do not realise [its] fundamental importance to the victory of the working class.'¹⁶¹ Women's groups continued to agitate over the cost of living and organise International Women's Day bazaars and knitting bees to raise funds for Spain, although they did conduct political education. Intervention in the Co-operative movement and the Guilds was singled out for praise but tellingly 'a serious weakness is our organising women in industry ... in the main our party is not tackling this in any organised fashion'.¹⁶² Perennial problems reaching women in industry as it revived and the danger of the project being downgraded if separated from mainstream activity, persisted. Women's groups may have increased women's confidence: yet it was arguable that their insertion into the CPGB's machinery of government let men off the hook, facilitated their existing disinterest, removed women further from the mainstream, and affirmed 'women's work is for women'.¹⁶³

The feminist movement remained relatively weak and the term 'feminist cadre' may be misleading: women Communists did not embrace feminism as distinct from entering

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 196–203; Graves, op.cit., pp. 204–212.

¹⁶⁰ RGASPI, 495/14/229, Report to PB, 14–15 October 1937.

¹⁶¹ RGASPI, 495/14/256, Report of CC, 1 June 1937–30 June 1938, to 15th Congress.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ It should be remembered that Marx had supported the creation of women's branches of the First International in 1871 to work alongside mixed branches: *Documents of the First International, vol. 4, 1870–1871* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1965), pp. 290, 442, 541, n.320 at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/pdfs/iwma-jul70-oct71.pdf>.

alliances with feminists and soft-peddalling criticism of them – unless they were hostile to the Soviet Union. By 1939, the Comintern was urging ever broader engagement in cross-class ‘unity’ as the international situation deteriorated and the Committee Against War and Fascism became the Committee for Peace and Democracy. CPGB membership increased to a new high of 18,000 in 1938 but it was estimated that no more than 2,500, less than 14%, were women. This was a fraction of the total membership no greater than in earlier years.¹⁶⁴ Compared with Labour’s multitudes, the CPGB enrolment of women was derisory. Perhaps more disquieting was the comparison with the BUF. The latter’s membership has been estimated at 16,500 in December 1938 and 22,500 in September 1939,¹⁶⁵ with female supporters amounting to around 20% or 25% of the total.¹⁶⁶

The CPGB and women’s liberation: reviewing the record

The engagement of British Communists with women’s liberation in these years constituted a history of unremitting but largely unproductive toil. They proved unable to recruit and retain working-class women in significant numbers, mobilise appreciable forces in campaigns directed against women’s oppression or train a sizeable contingent of female recruits in Marxist leadership. The Bolsheviks provided initial inspiration and the Comintern a framework for action against the background of a new dawn in the Soviet Union. The CPGB did not respond positively. Between 1924 and 1929 it raised its game; but it was increasingly handicapped by Stalinism. Nonetheless, it had at its disposal an impressive, if incomplete, corpus of theory developed from the 1870s and codified by the infant Comintern. It was true in the inter-war years and it remains true today that, as that theory insisted, class constitutes

¹⁶⁴ Bruley, ‘War and Fascism’, op.cit., p. 152; *Discussion*, February 1938; Thorpe, op. cit., pp. 784–785.

¹⁶⁵ Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts to the National Front* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), p. 91.

¹⁶⁶ Stephen Dorril, *Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London: Viking, 2006), p. 227; Gottlieb, op.cit., p. 6.

the fundamental fissure in society which structures and shapes other forms of oppression. Despite changes in the class structure and class consciousness, contrary to the latter-day claims of identity politics and intersectionality, class, gender and ethnicity do not possess equal weight in a persuasive anatomy of social injustice. Class remains the overriding factor.¹⁶⁷ More social mobility for women, closing the gender pay gap, more women in the boardroom, more female financiers, will not transform the nature of capitalism or ameliorate the position of working-class women in general. A capitalism which circumscribes discrimination in the interests of more efficient exploitation remains capitalism. Yet we may also conclude from our review of theory that while class is primary, oppression cannot be reduced to class: oppression existed within working-class institutions, beginning with the family, and Engels, as we have seen, likened the relationship between the sexes to that of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Reflecting, forty years later, on the fraternity English workers displayed in strikes, Trotsky observed:

but to make him raise himself to solidarity with a yellow-skinned Chinese coolie, to treat him as a brother in exploitation, will prove much more difficult, since here it is necessary to break through a shell of national arrogance which has been built up over centuries. And just so, comrades, has the shell of family prejudices in the attitudes of the head of the family toward woman and child – and woman is the coolie of the family – this shell has been laid down over millennia and not centuries.¹⁶⁸

In practice, the Comintern and the CPGB neglected this aspect of the struggle against oppression. Attempts to prefigure relations between the sexes under socialism in the party, the family or in ideological production were negligible. The CPGB did not, as critics have complained, leave immediate problems to be resolved by the advent of socialism. They insisted on minimum demands to improve the position of women on education, training, equal rights, equal pay, maternity and childcare. They were slower to address birth control,

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018); ‘Intersectionality Symposium’, *Science and Society*, 82: 2 (2018), pp. 248–291; Mike Macnair, ‘Intersectionality is a dead end’, *Weekly Worker*, 17 June 2018, pp. 6–7.

¹⁶⁸ Leon Trotsky, ‘The Protection of Motherhood and the Struggle for Culture’ (1925) in Leon Trotsky, *Women and the Family* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 43.

abortion, sexuality – and male power. Zetkin had suggested that working-class women did not need to struggle against men of their own class.¹⁶⁹ This was a half-truth. Valid in economic terms, it passed over male domination in the household. The struggle for equal rights at home was part of the struggle for equal rights in society, an aspect of the struggle for women's liberation from capitalism. To state this was not to embrace feminism or make concessions to it. Yet the CPGB conducted little practical discussion of gender roles or the functions of the family – and did still less to change them – problems that despite the transformations of a century still confront us today in all their complexity. There was no attempt to integrate action in 'the private sphere' with the struggle against capitalism, the progenitor of exploitation and oppression.

Of course, we have to consider the concrete circumstances and the prevailing attitudes of men and women formed in the early years of the century and living through the tough times of the 1920s and 1930s. Thousands of skirmishes and not a few pitched battles were fought at home, Communist households included. The divide between 'the personal' and 'the political' ensured they were not taken up collectively by Communist women or their party. From Bebel to the Comintern Theses, there were intimations about the nature of women and role of reproduction in conditioning it. There was little subsequent debate about what differentiated the sexes, the significance of childbearing and the part biology and socialisation played in creating and confirming gender identities in capitalist societies. As Bruley emphasised, the assumption was that, so far as was foreseeable, women would continue to be the primary carers and child-rearers as the foundations of socialism were laid.

What went for the home went in general for the party: it was led by men who took little part in 'women's work' while women by and large played subordinate roles. A long-term member and historian of the CPGB felt that 'its practice in conformity with the

¹⁶⁹ Zetkin, 'Only in Conjunction with the Proletarian Women', op.cit.

prevailing social norms had been routinely and unconsciously sexist throughout its history. Party activists, full-timers and leaders were overwhelmingly male and their ability to perform such roles depended for the most part on the availability of a domestic support system provided by women.¹⁷⁰ The relative absence of criticism bespeaks the consciousness of both male and female Communists. Most activists, particularly leading elements, had little time for reading and study beyond the party press. Engels and Bebel, the woman question, the family, sexuality, were seen as decreasingly relevant to the immediate struggle, even a distraction from it. Some may have believed with Connolly that these were private matters. It is questionable what those who did read the pioneering texts took from them and family life seems to have continued much as before. As Harry McShane remarked:

When I married, my wife came to meetings and joined the Communist Party ... But most of the wives were no different from other working-class wives – looking after the household and doing hours of housework. Although the average socialist looked forward to some vague equality in the new socialist society, on the whole they seemed to think that the family would continue. Its abolition never occurred to them, although some read *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* ... It seems that when they read those books, they were more interested in tracing the origins of society from savagery onwards and the other arguments passed them by.¹⁷¹

It is arguable that more could have been done here and greater efforts made to ensure learned behaviour was unlearned. Accepting that on the one hand the CPGB was neither a prefigurative nor a feminist organisation and that on the other sexism and subordination are not innate but vary between individuals, at least some progress might have been expected of a professed revolutionary organisation. But the reality of the party, its members and leaders, stares us in the face: they were children of their time, they were not well-versed in the Marxist tradition, they did not perceive what they took to be the natural state of affairs, under capitalism and perhaps even beyond it, to be a significant problem.

¹⁷⁰ Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism, 1920–1991* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), p.166.

¹⁷¹ McShane and Smith, op.cit., pp. 34–35.

Intervention in personal matters was associated with the feminism they rejected. It is misleading to conclude that Communist ‘indifference or hostility to feminist agendas was barely dissimulated in the early period’.¹⁷² On the contrary: hostility based on a coherent critique of a sectional, reformist movement which refused to present a challenge to class society and capitalism was overt and continued into the 1930s, its sentiments encapsulated by a 1933 report of a delegation to the USSR, headlined in the *Daily Worker*, ‘No Feminism! We teach them to be class conscious not sex conscious’.¹⁷³ Denunciation was softened in the Popular Front years. But the party’s position was never formally revised. Communists were still to be found quoting Lenin on women’s oppression, holding up Luxemburg and Zetkin as examples of how to combat it, and stressing ‘peculiarly enough we feel that the capitalist system is to blame’.¹⁷⁴ As class collaboration and the search for respectability became entrenched, family values were championed. Despite a bohemian fringe, on cultural issues the CPGB stood to the right of radical feminism. The ahistorical assertion that Communists should have related more constructively to feminist movements is not greatly relevant given the latter’s weakness in the years after the CPGB’s foundation. Marxist theory never ruled out collaboration with feminists which helped forward the cause of working-class women. It all depended on the situation and the balance of forces and suppression of working-class interests was not inevitable. However, the pioneers of Marxism might have been less than enthusiastic about the form collaboration took after 1935.

Initially, provision was made in limited fashion for special representation of women in the CPGB, justified only by reference to a vaguely expressed ‘assessment of the particular spiritual and moral nature of women, their historically conditioned backwardness and the

¹⁷² Morgan et al., op.cit., p.156.

¹⁷³ *DW*, 12 June 1933. See also *DW*, 21 January 1933, for an article on Lenin distinguishing feminism from Communist agitation among women, and *DW*, 18 May 1933, for an article on the Paris Commune: ‘Bourgeois feminism is a pale caricature before the work of liberation of the working women of Paris in 1871’.

¹⁷⁴ *DW*, 14 November 1935, 6 March 1936, 23 June 1937.

special position that they often assume as a result of their domestic work'.¹⁷⁵ While the autonomy espoused by feminists was rejected in favour of creating a democratic centralist party, there was some flexibility. Occasioned by legal constraint, Zetkin's early movement in Germany adhered to SPD politics while remaining organisationally independent. The arrangements adopted by the early Comintern might – had it developed in a healthy direction – have permitted an experiment in practical independence for the women's committees compatible with democratic centralism; but not its bureaucratic mutation. As things turned out, the element of separatism that emerged was the product of failure: the committees evolved as single-sex bodies when they had been intended to involve men, and finally became women's groups. Emasculation produced a form of ghettoization. The importance of the CPGB's inability to achieve its initial ambition should not be minimised. Masculine engagement in this sphere, of itself a token that the mobilisation of the whole party to counter women's oppression, the *sine qua non* for progress, was not just rhetorical, might have helped develop consciousness, laid a basis for education and raised the status of the work. Instead, it became marginalised in relation to the predominantly male party members. Men's right to choose was strengthened. Contrary to Lenin's hopes, work with women remained as 'incidental and inferior' as it had been in 1920. The consciousness of British Communists, the circumstances of inter-war Britain and the power of dominant ideologies were instrumental in what happened. The dominant ideologies included Stalinism, which decisively contaminated the concept of women's emancipation by identifying it with the subjugation of women in Soviet Russia.

Communist women leaders, 1920–1939: a statistical sketch

¹⁷⁵ Zetkin, 'Guidelines', op.cit., p. 57.

We move from the stage and the setting to the *dramatis personae* and attempt to recuperate and discuss the 18 leading women who sat on the CPGB CC between 1920 and 1939. We have been able to elicit reasonably full details of 15 out of 18, a high proportion of our population so that methodologically ‘the unknowns do not bulk very large’. The results are listed in the **Appendix**. The exceptions – Thomas, Phillipson and Jenkinson – require further investigation but their absence does not invalidate what is a large sample which embraces 83% of the total population. The data is derived from a variety of sources including CPGB and Comintern personal files, Security Service reports, party records and correspondence, the local press, Communist periodicals and biographical dictionaries as well as genealogical websites, notably Ancestry.co.uk and Scotland’s People, resources rarely utilised in the study of British Communism. We have employed the documentary record to reconstruct, interrogate and compare a significant, distinct group of Communist women and to test some of the conclusions in the literature addressed above against a more representative, better documented sample.

We turn first to quantification. What can statistical analysis tell us about the women who, in the face of the difficulties we have outlined, still managed to make their way into the party leadership? The **Appendix** demonstrates that the 18 females who served on the 16 CCs elected between 1920 and 1939 represented 12.9% of the committee’s total membership during these years (see **Tables 1–3**).¹⁷⁶ However, the percentage of women on the CC fluctuated considerably: in 1920–1928 it ranged from 0% to 9.1% with a mean of 5.9%; in 1929–1932, from 6.7% to 13.3%, mean: 10.4%; between 1935 and 1939, from 7.4% to 11.5%, mean: 9.6%. Women’s representation was lowest before 1929; it was highest during the Third Period and it continued at a relatively high level in the later 1930s. These figures

¹⁷⁶ Other than their committee membership, qualitative information is lacking for three and this section’s conclusions are largely based on the remaining 15.

have to be viewed in the context of the party as a whole: the percentage of women on the CC was never as great as the proportion of women in the party at large – that varied from 11% in 1922, through an ephemeral 21% in 1926 to around 14% at the end of our period.¹⁷⁷ **Table 1** suggests a degree of stability in the early years with Crawford and Turner featuring on 5 and 4 respectively of the 10 committees, 1920–1928 (**Table 1**). In contrast, none of the 10 women who sat on the three committees 1929–1932 were elected to more than one CC (although Crawford and Turner both served on the January 1929 committee). The three committees 1935–1938 displayed a similar lack of continuity, with the exception of Smith (**Table 3**), although she was not re-elected in 1938.

[Insert Tables 1–3 near here]

Of the 18 representatives, a remarkably high 15 (83%) served on only *one* committee (**Table 4**). Women's turnover was significantly greater than turnover for the CC as whole: during the years 1920–1928, 60.8% of the total membership sat on one or two of the 10 committees; in 1929–1932, 66.1% of the CC members served only once during that period; the comparable figure for 1935–1938 was 54%.¹⁷⁸ The situation is complicated by the varying duration of different CCs – owing to the war, election to the 1938 committee, to take the extreme example, involved five years' tenure compared with a typical duration of one or two years. But it is clear that in terms of continuous experience in the leadership, only Crawford, Turner and Smith represented longevity in the interwar years, and the first two were removed at the end of 1929. Twelve of the 13 (92.3%) women representatives elected between December 1929 and 1939 served only once; the thirteenth, Smith, sat on two committees: see **Tables 2 and 3**. Brevity of tenure is even more surprising given the party's

¹⁷⁷ Thorpe, *op.cit.*, p 784.

¹⁷⁸ McIlroy and Campbell, 'Core', *op. cit.*, p. 25. In 1920–1922, 41.7% of CC members were elected to only one committee; the comparable figure for 1923–1928 was 23.1%: McIlroy and Campbell, 'Early Communist Leaders', *op.cit.*, pp. 432–433; McIlroy and Campbell, 'Leadership of British Communism', *op.cit.*, p. 218; Branson, *op.cit.*, pp. 339–342.

investment in five of our subjects, 27.8% of the group, who had been trained as cadres at the Comintern's International Lenin School (ILS). This was a higher proportion than the 14.8% of male CC members, 1920–1939, admittedly a much larger cohort, who were ILS students and who, in contrast with female graduates, made a lasting impact on the CPGB CC.¹⁷⁹

[Insert Table 4 near here]

It is striking that the great majority – 11 (73.3%) – of the CC women were born in England. Only 2 (13.3%) were Scots, one of whom (Crawfurd) was educated in England, while the second (Duncan) only became a CPGB member when living in London. One (6.7%) was Welsh, while another, although born in Russia, was raised in Wales and London. These figures contrast with those for the entire CC membership over the more limited period, 1920–1928, when just over 60% were English, almost 30% Scots and 8.5% Welsh.¹⁸⁰ There were no women of colour compared with two men of Indian heritage in the 1920s cohort.

Almost three-quarters of these women came from working-class families while more than a quarter, a relatively high figure, had a middle-class background. There was thus a lower proportion of leading women with proletarian origins than pertained on the CC as whole during the 1920s, where 83% were working-class, and in the party generally.¹⁸¹ The working-class women's fathers' occupations spanned the spectrum of labour: five were skilled, four unskilled, one was a miner and one a white-collar worker. There was some variation in the social origins of the CC's female contingent between the three periods. For 1920–1928, two were from middle-class backgrounds, one came from the working class. For the Third Period, 1929–1932, there was at best limited evidence of the 'class-based

¹⁷⁹ John McIlroy et al, 'Forging the Faithful: The British at the International Lenin School', *Labour History Review*, 68: 1 (2003), pp. 99–128; Alan Campbell et al., 'British Students at the International Lenin School: The Vindication of a Critique', *Twentieth Century British History*, 16: 4 (2005), pp. 471–488.

¹⁸⁰ McIlroy and Campbell, 'Core', op.cit., p. 24.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. Nevertheless, the data do not support Morgan et al.'s suggestion, at least for the inter-war years, that 'leading women party members were *far more likely* than their male counterparts to have middle-class professional backgrounds' (emphasis added): Morgan et al., op.cit., p. 162.

affirmative action' of these years invoked by Morgan et al. – three were born into the middle class, six into the working class, whereas in the Popular Front years, 1935–1939, all seven had proletarian origins, although two had become schoolteachers.

Our subjects' occupations displayed diversity. Including Jenkinson, eight (50%) had been employed in factories, workshops or textile mills; one was a working-class housewife; five, almost a third, were schoolteachers, although Smith worked as a munitions worker during the war; two were unambiguously bourgeois. There was only limited evidence of occupational mobility, sometimes achieved through party activities: originally a sugar refinery worker, Henrotte became a well-paid co-operative director, Wesker graduated from the sweatshops to the union office. Half had received only elementary schooling; 26.7% had undertaken some form of higher education, which compares favourably with their counterparts on the CC in the 1920s when eight men, 10.8% of the committee's total membership, had attended university or its equivalent.¹⁸² The spouses of the women leaders generally came from similar social backgrounds to their wives. There were only three examples of cross-class marriages: Duncan's father-in-law was a railway porter, although her husband was a university graduate and teacher, Jessop's father-in-law ran a fur business and Marjorie Pollitt's had been a blacksmith's striker.

With the exception of Wesker, all those for whom information is available came from Protestant denominations. Crawford had a Church of Scotland background, Duncan married in the United Free Church of Scotland and Llewellyn's father was a Welsh Presbyterian deacon. Montefiore and Pollitt were brought up in the Church of England, Brown, Cree, Eden and Turner were baptised and Henrotte married in it; Webb came to politics through a Church

¹⁸² Although teacher training colleges would have been regarded as inferior to universities in these years. McIlroy and Campbell, 'Early Communist Leaders', *op.cit.*, p. 432; McIlroy and Campbell, 'Leadership of British Communism', *op.cit.*, p. 217.

of England social movement; when Usher married in Limerick, a rector in the Church of Ireland officiated. There is no evidence any of the remainder were Roman Catholics.

The group spanned several generations: Montefiore entered a very different world in 1851 to that of her sisters on the CC; the next oldest, her fellow suffragette, Crawford, first saw the light of day 26 years later; and Usher and Duncan were children of the 1880s. The largest group of six were born in the 1890s and had achieved maturity by 1917; only five were under 18 years in that year. Nonetheless, less than half of our cohort— eight including Mrs Thomas – joined the party during its ‘long foundation period’ 1920–1923. This group had a more extensive hinterland of previous political affiliations than later adherents to Communism: three had been in the ILP, two each in the SDF/SDP/BSP, the suffrage movement and Labour Party. The remaining eight, part of the post-1917 generation, joined between 1924 and 1932: two had been ILP members, two were Labour Party activists; four had come directly to the CPGB.

The mean age of the 15 women in 1930, the mid-point of the interwar years, was 37.9 years, a figure distorted by the elderly Montefiore; the median age of 36 provides a more accurate indicator, although still a crude measure given the span of two decades and the relative brevity of tenure of many committee members.¹⁸³ Age at joining the party may be considered a more useful indication of the onset of Communist commitment. On this measure, the mean age was 32.9 years, the median 29 – their affiliation to Communism was not a particularly youthful engagement. There was wide variation in the age at which these women were first elected to the CC, ranging from Pollitt at 27 to Montefiore at 69: the mean age was 38.7 years, the median 39, so our cohort was relatively mature in years when they entered the CPGB leadership. If we look more closely at the ages of those newcomers for

¹⁸³ The mean age of the CC membership in 1920–1928 was 39 years in 1925: McIlroy and Campbell, ‘Core’, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

whom we have birth data during the three phases from 1920 to 1939, there was no great differentiation in age: for 1920–1928, excluding the sexagenarian Montefiore, the mean was 38 years; for the Third Period, which ostensibly aimed to promote ‘young fighting elements’, 36.6 years; for the Popular Front years, an even younger 35.8.

However, the length of time between women joining the party and their first election to the CC was relatively short. While it ranged from Montefiore’s immediate tenure on the party’s formation to Brown’s 19 years of party membership before being elevated to the CC, the mean was 5.8 years, the median 5. While we lack comparable data for their male counterparts, this may reflect a degree of informal positive discrimination to boost women’s participation on the committee in line with Comintern directives. The female representatives appear to have remained more loyal to the party than men. Only one (6.6%) of our 15, Turner, did not remain a lifelong Communist; in contrast, at least 27% of men elected to the CC, 1920–1928, had left the CPGB by 1930.¹⁸⁴

Turning to their marital status, 11 were married, two were technically single but in long-term partnerships, 3 were widowed, ‘Miss’ Phillipson was presumably single while Jenkinson’s situation is unknown. Nine had husbands or partners who were CPGB members displaying varying degrees of activism, while Crawford’s and Eden’s second husbands were also party members. It is noteworthy that in 8 – over 70% – of these 11 party partnerships, it was not the man but the woman who was or became the more prominent Communist.¹⁸⁵ The demands of activism could put strains on a marriage where a husband was a non-member and even contribute to breakdown in the relationship, as seems the case with Eden and Henrotte. Smith experienced the breakup of a party marriage. Our evidence from the CPGB’s first twenty years does not correspond with Morgan et al.’s finding, based on a sample of

¹⁸⁴ McIlroy and Campbell, ‘Core’, *op.cit.*, p.25.

¹⁸⁵ Cf Hunt and Worley’s suggestion that Smith was exceptional in this regard: Hunt and Worley, *op.cit.*, p.10

unknown size, drawn from a seventy-year period, where both husband and wife were CPGB members, that two-thirds had joined the party prior to marriage, and that in a third of cases the female had enrolled first. Only four of our group, Brown, Jessop, Pollitt and Webb – met the first criterion while none met the second. Nor does our leadership sample – with the exception of Webb whose elder brother joined the party in 1920 – support Morgan et al.’s contention that female Communists were more likely to have a parent or sibling who was already a party member.¹⁸⁶

Table 5 summarises the information available on numbers of children born to women representatives. Less than half were childless, a finding which challenges Bruley’s distinction between ‘cadres’ – single or married to an activist but childless – and ‘supporters’ – married to an activist with ‘several children’, as well as Morgan et al.’s conclusion that not having children was a ‘possible corollary or precondition of women taking on major responsibilities within the party’.¹⁸⁷ A corresponding challenge is offered by the equal number of female leaders with two offspring: Brown, Cree, Eden, Henrotte, Pollitt and Smith were all active when they had young children.

[Insert Table 5 near here]

The involvement in party activities of our cohort qualifies Bruley’s suggestion that leading women eschewed ‘women’s work’, for a majority of the representatives at some point directly or indirectly engaged in this arena.¹⁸⁸ During the 1920s, Crawford was co-opted onto the CC to represent women; Turner and Smith were by definition involved as national women’s officers while Brown fulfilled that role 1939–1943; Webb was women’s organiser of the NUWCM in the early 1920s and co-leader of the 1932 women’s hunger march. In the

¹⁸⁶ Morgan et. al., op.cit., p. 151.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p.178.

¹⁸⁸ Bruley’s distinction between ‘cadres’ and ‘supporters’ initially related to the 1920s; however, interviews with activists who joined the party in the late 1920s and early 1930s replicated this division: ‘Many of the activist women held the same views as the cadres of 1923–5’: Bruley, *Leninism*, op. cit., p. 253. She concludes: ‘Cadre and supporter women were found for the whole period up to 1939’: *ibid.*, p. 122, n.86.

1930s, Llewellyn was jointly in charge of women's sections in South Wales; Henrotte and Cree's primary focus was on the co-operative movement while Eden was a tenants' leader from the late 1930s onwards, both activities synonymous with 'women's work'. Some 60% of our sample were therefore engaged in work among women, broadly defined, even if not always exclusively so. Moreover, although Usher and Wesker (and Eden for most of the 1930s) were regarded primarily as union activists, there was a significant proportion of women members in their respective work groups.

There was sustained affinity between the women CC members and the Soviet Union. A large majority, 80%, had visited Russia, often on several occasions, participating in official delegations or attending Comintern congresses. Almost half had spent extended periods in Moscow, either attached to the Comintern's women's or co-operative departments or attending the ILS. While membership of the CC meant that our group were formally elected to the senior ranks of the party, as we have seen, such elevation was generally short-lived and the levels in the party apparatus at which the women operated varied considerably. Only a minority held other paid party positions. Crawford, Turner, Smith and Brown played national roles.¹⁸⁹ Jessop was Yorkshire District Secretary from 1937 while Pollitt worked at party HQ in 1938. However, over time, the unpaid activities of the majority were restricted to their localities and unions. It is to the individual party careers of these women that we switch our attention in the second part of this article.

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¹⁸⁹ Brown later claimed she had been paid only when National Women's Organiser: see McIlroy and Campbell, 'The Comintern, Part 2', *op.cit.*, p. 56. Webb had been unpaid as NUWCM Women's Organiser and after marriage shared the role of district organiser with her husband, the couple living on his salary: see *ibid.*, p. 19.

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Table 1. Women members of the CC of the CPGB, 1920–1928

	Aug. 1920	Jan. 1921	April 1921	Mar. 1922	Oct. 1922	End 1923	May 1924	June 1925	Oct. 1926	Oct. 1927	No. times elected 1920–28
Helen Crawford						√	√	√	√	√	5
Dora Montefiore	√	√									2
Mrs Thomas			√	√							2
Beth Turner							√	√	√	√	4
Total CC membership	14	19	18	24	9	17	23	22	32	30	
% Women members on CC	7.1	5.5	5.6	4.2	0	5.9	8.7	9.1	6.3	6.7	

Note: Mean percentage women on CC 1920–1928 = 5.9%.

Sources: James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, vol. 1: Formation and Early Years, 1919–1924* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), pp. 49, 69, 208, 212–213; L.J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), pp. 54–58, 67, 74, 76, 82–84, 87, 135–136; RGASPI, 495/38/1, Transcripts of the English Commission, June–July, 1923; James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, vol.2: The General Strike, 1925–1926* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), pp. 359–363; Noreen Branson. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), p. 339.

Table 2. Women members of the CC of the CPGB, 1929–1932

	Jan. 1929	Dec. 1929	1932	No. times elected 1929–32
Helen Crawford	√			1
Annie Cree		√		1
Kath Duncan		√		1
Miss Phillipson		√		1
Marjorie Pollitt	√			1
Rose Smith			√	1
Beth Turner	√			1
Nellie Usher		√		1
Lily Webb	√			1
Sara Wesker			√	1
Total CC membership	30	36	30	
% Women members on CC	13.3	11.1	6.7	

Note: Mean percentage of women on the CC January 1929–1932 = 10.4%

Source: Noreen Branson. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp. 339–340.

Table 3. Women members of the CC of the CPGB, 1935–1939

	1935	1937	1938	No. times elected 1935–39
Isabel Brown ¹			√	1
Jessie Eden	√			1
Esther Henrotte	√			1
Betty Jenkinson		√		1
Marian Jessop			√	1
Mavis Llewellyn			√	1
Rose Smith	√	√		2
Total CC membership	30	27	26	
% Women members on CC	10.0	7.4	11.5	

Notes

1. Isabel Brown was co-opted on to the CC in 1939
2. Mean percentage of women on CC 1935–1939 = 9.6%

Source: Noreen Branson. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp. 341–342.

Table 4. Total years of service on the CC by women members, 1920–1939.¹

Name (total number of CCs, 1920–1939) ²	Total years of service
Helen Crawford (6)	7
Rose Smith (3); Beth Turner (5)	6
Isabel Brown (1); Marian Jessop (1); Mavis Llewellyn (1)	5
	4
Annie Cree (1); Kath Duncan (1); Miss Phillipson (1); Nellie Usher (1)	3
Jessie Eden (1); Esther Henrotte (1); Mrs Thomas (1); Sara Wesker (1)	2
Betty Jenkinson (1); Dora Montefiore (2); Marjorie Pollitt (1); Lily Webb (1)	1

Notes.

1. Isabel Brown served on a further two CCs between 1943 and 1947; Henrotte was elected to four between 1943 and 1952.
2. Because CCs were elected at varying intervals of time, there was no simple correlation between the number of CCs to which a woman was elected and her total years of service. For

example, Montefiore served for less than 1 year on the two CCs elected in August 1920 and January 1921 while Cree, Duncan, Phillipson and Usher served for 3 years on the single CC between December 1929 and November 1932.

3. The mean number of years was 3.7; the median number of years was 3.

Sources: As for Tables 1–3; Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1941–1951* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997), pp. 253–254.

Table 5. The number of children of women on the CPGB CC, 1920–1939

Childless	7 (46.7%)
1 child	1 (6.7%)
2 children	7 (46.7%)
Unknown	3

Note: The percentage figures refer to the 15 women for whom this information is available.

Source: Calculated from data in Appendix.

Appendix. Women members of CPGB Central Committee, 1920–1939

Name Date/place of birth Nationality Age joined party	Social origins	Occupation/ trade union	Pre- Communist affiliations	a. CCs 1920–39 b. CCs post 1939 c. Total years on CC, 1920- 39	Joined/left CPGB (date of death) CPGB office	Number of children	Spouse/partner Birthplace Occupation Father's occupation Date of marriage Political affiliation
Isabella, later Isabel, BROWN (née Porter) 1894 South Shields, Durham English 26	Working-class F: Joiner M: Housewife	Sunderland Teacher Training College; teacher; party worker NUT; CAWU	North East Labour College student; LP; ILP delegate to Hands Off Russia Ctee; ILP Left Wing	a. 1 b. 2 c. 5 years	1920 (1984) Lived in Moscow, 1925–26 while husband Comintern Rep.; Editor, <i>The Mineworker</i> (UMS), 1929–30; ILS, 1930–31; Secretary, WIR; Secretary, Committee for the Relief of Victims of Fascism; Secretary, Spanish Medical Aid Committee; National Women's Organiser, 1939– 1943	1	Ernest Henry Brown (1892–1960) Bingley, Yorkshire English Boot repairer; party worker; editor F: Plasterer 1922 NCF; ILP Left Wing; CPGB Relationship with J.R. Campbell CPGB

<p>Helen CRAWFURD (née Jack) 1877 Glasgow Scottish 44</p>	<p>Middle-class F: Owned bakery business M: Housewife F: Presbyterian M: Methodist</p>	<p>Married a Church of Scotland minister (d.1914) and Communist businessman (in 1944); party worker</p>	<p>Temperance movement; WSPU; Women's International League; Vice-Chair, Scottish Division, ILP; ILP Left Wing</p>	<p>a. 6 b. 0 c. 7 years</p>	<p>1921 (1954) Responsible for women's work , 1921–22; Women's Committee, 1922–23; Comintern Congress delegate; Secretary, WIR, 1922; British Workers' Delegation to Russia, 1927; FOSU</p>	<p>0</p>	<p>1. Rev. Alexander Montgomery Crawford (1830–1914). Widower. Scottish Church of Scotland minister F: Dyer 1898 2. George Anderson (1872–1951). Widower. Scottish Master blacksmith F: Master blacksmith 1944 CPGB</p>
<p>Annie CREE (née Mellor) 1891 Chesterfield, Derbyshire English 31</p>	<p>Working-class F: Wages clerk M: Housewife Church of England</p>	<p>Housewife</p>	<p>Labour Party</p>	<p>a. 1 b. 0 c. 3 years</p>	<p>1922 (1957) Sheffield Board of Guardians; Sussex DPC; Brighton Co-op Society Committee; Co-operative Party, General Council member; CPGB Co-operative Department</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>Sidney Herbert Cree (1889–1958) Chesterfield English Fitter and turner; ROP worker F: Tailor 1913 CPGB</p>
<p>Katharine Sinclair 'Kath' DUNCAN (née MacColl) 1888 Tarbert, Argyllshire Scottish 38</p>	<p>Middle-class F: Merchant M: Housewife United Free Church of Scotland</p>	<p>St Andrew's University; school teacher NUT</p>	<p>Suffragette; ILP; Hackney Labour Dramatic Group (WTM);</p>	<p>a. 1 b. 0 c. 3 years</p>	<p>1926 (1954) NUWCM activist</p>	<p>0</p>	<p>Alexander 'Sandy' Duncan (1893–1941) Old Kilpatrick, Dunbartonshire Scottish School teacher F: Railway goods supervisor 1923</p>

							CPGB
Jessie EDEN (née Shrimpton), later McCulloch 1902 Birmingham English 29	Working-class F: Jewellery worker; railway goods checker M: Housewife; munitions worker Church of England	Lucas factory worker TGWU		a. 1 b.0 c. 2 years	1931 (1984) Worked in Moscow, mid-1930s; ILS part-time?; Birmingham rent strike leader; General Secretary, Birmingham Municipal Tenants' Association	2 (both adopted)	1. Albert William Eden (1896–1961) Birmingham English Leather worker F: Self-employed Grocer 1923; separated mid-1920s 2. Walter Baxter McCulloch (1905–1977) Glasgow Scottish Joiner F: Joiner Cohabited from late 1930s; married 1948 CPGB
Sarah Ann Esther HENROTTE (née Bargas) 1894 West Ham, London English 32	Working-class F: Engineer storekeeper, Tate and Lyle sugar refinery M: Housewife	Bag printer, Tate and Lyle sugar refinery; director, Royal Arsenal Cooperative Society NUDAW	Cooperative Women's Guild	a. 1 b. 3 c. 2 years	1926 (1981) Leader, Central Co-op Department; British representative to Comintern Co-op Dept, Moscow, 1930; West Ham branch organiser, 1931; from 1945, Chair, People Press Printing Society (proprietor of <i>Daily Worker</i>)	2	Arthur N. Henrotte (1890–1971) Liege, Belgium; widower; refugee during First World War Musician; electrical instrument maker Emigrated to New Zealand, 1959 1916 Relationship with Harry Pollitt
Betty JENKINSON Sheffield	Working-class	Factory worker		a. 1 b. 0			

				c. 1 year			
Marian JESSOP , later Ramelson 1908 Leeds, Yorkshire English 22	Working-class F: Engineer - toolmaker M: Housewife Socialists, F. Leeds Labour councillor	Textile worker; clerical worker; shop worker; party worker USDAW; CAWU	NCLC activist; Labour League of Youth; LP (expelled)	a. 1 b. 0 c. 5 years	1932 (1967) Yorkshire DPC; ILS, 1935–37; DO; Head of CPGB Propaganda Dept; CPGB Appeals Committee	0	Baruch Ramilevich Mendelson, later known as Bert Ramelson (1910–1994) Cherkassy, Ukraine Russian, Jewish Lawyer; IB Commissar; store manager; party worker F: Religious teacher, fur business 1939 CPGB, DO, National Industrial Organiser
Mavis LLEWELLYN 1908 Nantymoel, Ogmore Vale Welsh 23	Working-class F: Miner M: Housewife Presbyterian	Teacher		a. 1 b.0 c. 5 years	1931 (1978)	0	Relationship with Lewis Richard Jones (1897–1939) Blaenclydach, Rhondda Welsh Illegitimate M: Domestic servant CPGB
Dora Frances MONTEFIORE (née Fuller) 1851 Kenley Manor, Surrey English 69	Middle-class F: Surveyor; railway entrepreneur Church of England	Independent means	Suffragette; WSPU; SDF/SDP/BSP	a. 2 b. 0 c. 1 year	1920 (1933)	2	George Frederick Barrow Montefiore (1850–1889) Brisbane, Australia Australian Merchant 1881
Miss PHILLIPSON				a. 1 b. 0 c. 3 years			

Marjorie Edna POLLITT (née Saul, Brewer by adoption) 1902 London English 22	Middle-class Illegitimate F: Norwich Cathedral organist and choirmaster Adoptive Mother: music teacher, widow of master baker Church of England	School teacher; secretary NUT	ILP	a. 1 b.0 c. 1 year	1924 Emigrated to Australia, 1965 (1991) Comintern Congress delegate; ILS (1929–30); London District Committee	2	Harry Pollitt (1890–1960) Droylsden, Manchester English F: Blacksmith's striker CPGB general secretary
Rosina 'Rose' SMITH (née Ellis) 1891 London English 31	Working-class F: Potter M: Housewife	Infant teacher; munitions worker; party worker; journalist	SDP; BSP; WEA; Sec., Mansfield Labour College	a. 3 b. 0 c. 6 years	1922 (1985) DO; National Women's Organiser, 1929–1932; Comintern Congress delegate; RILU Women's Congress delegate; <i>Daily Worker</i> correspondent, 1934–1955; Chinese Communist Party	2	Alfred Henry Smith (1888–1975) Newbury, Berkshire English House painter 1916, separated early 1930s
Mrs A THOMAS				a. 1 b. 0 c. 2 years	Consultative member, Women's Committee, 1922		
Elizabeth 'Beth' TURNER (née Sands) 1894 Keighley, Yorkshire English 27	Working-class F: labourer; engine tenter M: Housewife Church of England	Worsted spinner; party worker	ILP; Bradford Women's Humanity League	a. 5 b. 0 c. 6 years	1921 (1988) National Women's Organiser, 1924–1929	2	Fred Turner (1891–1950) Bradford, Yorkshire English Engineer's turner F: Warehouseman

							Step-F: Railway drayman 1920; separated
Ellen ‘Nellie’ USHER (née Berry or Berrey) 1882 London English 46	Working-class F: Tailor’s cutter M: Widow; cook, cleaner	Bus conductress; upholstery worker Amalgamated Union of Upholsterers; National Union of Furniture Trade Operatives	LP	a. 1 b. 0 c. 3 years	1928 (1969) Secretary, Women’s Shop Stewards’ Movement; Chair, Westminster CPGB	0	Frank Henry Usher (1892–1914) Islington, London English House porter; regular soldier 1914
Lily WEBB 1897 Ashton-under- Lyne, Lancs. English 24	Working-class F: Iron roller fitter M: Housewife	Cotton mill worker; party worker; Comintern worker; woollen mill worker; farmer Cotton workers’ union; Textile Workers’ Union; TGWU	St John’s Social Crusade (Church of England)	a. 1 b. 0 c. 1 year	1921 (1959) NUWCM National Women’s Organiser; delegate to 2 nd Conference of Working and Peasant Women, Moscow, 1927; Comintern Women’s Section; temporary DO; joint leader National Women’s Hunger March, 1932	0	Morris Fagelzaan, later Fagelson, later Ferguson (1899–1957) Hull English, parents Russian Hairdresser; party worker; bus conductor; farmer F: Glazier 1924 CPGB
Sara WESKER 1903 Ekaterinoslav, Russia Russian 26	Working-class F: Tailor M: Housewife Russian Jewish immigrants	Clothing worker; Comintern worker; Union official NUTGW; UCWU; ULTTU		a. 1 b. 0 c. 2 years	1929 (1971) ILS (part-time, 1931–32)	0	Never married. Relationship with Myer ‘Mick’ Mindel (1909–1994) London English, son of Lithuanian immigrants Tailor; union official F: Carboard box maker CPGB

Abbreviations: **BSP:** British Socialist Party; **CAWU:** Clerical and Allied Workers Union; **CC:** Central Committee; **CUG:** Communist Unity Group; **DO:** District Organizer; **F:** Father; **FOSU:** Friends of the Soviet Union; **IB:** International Brigade; **ILP:** Independent Labour Party; **ILS:** International Lenin School; **LP:** Labour Party; **M:** Mother; **NCF:** No Conscription Fellowship; **NCLC:** National Council of Labour Colleges; **NUDAW:** National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers; **NUT:** National Union of Teachers; **NUTGW:** National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers; **NUWCM:** National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement; **RILU:** Red International of Labour Unions; **ROP:** Russian Oil Products; **SDF:** Social Democratic Federation; **SDP:** Social Democratic Party; **TGWU:** Transport and General Workers' Union; **UCWU:** United Clothing Workers' Union; **ULTTU:** United Ladies Tailors' Trade Union; **UMS:** United Mineworkers of Scotland; **USDAW:** Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers; **WEA:** Workers' Educational Association; **WIR:** Workers' International Relief; **WSPU:** Women's Social and Political Union; **WTM:** Workers' Theatre Movement.