

Introduction

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Travel, at once a pervasive and obscure aspect of communist life, has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention in its own right. For many decades, the historiography of communist movements and parties has focused primarily on high politics – questions that mirrored the political contentions of the twentieth century. Within this framework, the relationship between national parties, the Comintern, and Moscow has been a central concern. The idea that communist parties were essentially ‘transplantations’ of revolutionary Bolshevik ideology, later evolving to represent the aspirations of the Soviet state, was contradicted by arguments that these parties quickly developed distinct national characters.¹ These distinctive national parties often gained significant support after the Second World War, because of the prominent role communist parties had played in the anti-fascist resistance. In all these arguments about the relationship between national and Soviet parties, however, there was a methodological nationalism that obscured the transnational nature of the communist phenomenon and the multifaceted interactions among parties, movements, groups and individuals.

In the final decades of the twentieth century, communist studies began to reflect the tectonic shift in the discipline toward social history or ‘history from below’, paving the way toward explorations of the social and cultural dimensions of communist history. This scholarly trajectory persists into the present. Among the themes that have shaped and continue to shape the scholarship are the examination of the social composition communist parties;² the study of the communist movement in rural areas;³ and the exploration of communist mobilisation among women.⁴ These themes, previously overlooked by traditional histori-

ography, have become central to understanding the complex dynamics and the multiple facets of the twentieth-century communist movement. After the opening of the Soviet archives in the 1990s, the newly available materials and the trend in social history became mutually reinforcing. A new era in communist and Cold War history had dawned. But scholars remained preoccupied with delineating the dynamics between the centre and the periphery.⁵

The turning point toward comparative, transnational and international perspectives came in the early 2000s with the publication of a series of collective volumes that broke with the constraints of the centre-periphery relationship.⁶ Soon afterwards, historians of communism began to adopt a transnational approach – an approach that had already proven to be an invaluable tool in related fields of historical research, such as anti-fascism and anti-communism.⁷

The frequent relocations of cadres and members of communist parties, the establishment of a unifying community of revolutionaries within the framework of the Communist International and the global objective of socialist revolution render the history of communism ‘by definition transnational and comparative’.⁸ As demonstrated by Brigitte Studer, during the interwar period, the nomadic lives of numerous interwar professional revolutionaries, both men and women, comprised a transnational milieu, that of the Communist International.⁹ The Comintern era thus marks a high point in the arc of transnational communist activity. Importantly, it also coincided with refugee flows and mass displacement in the wake of imperial dissolution after the First World War, which contributed significantly to the growth of the communist movement. Recent volumes by Margarite Poulos and Kostis Karpozilos on Greek communism are a case in point. Poulos’ s focus on Greek and Soviet-Greek professional revolutionaries at the Comintern universities sheds new light on the linkages between gender, refugee displacement and radicalisation between the wars, while the work of Kostis Karpozilos surveys the international character of the Greek communist movement from its inception in 1912 to the collapse of the junta in 1974.¹⁰ Lisa Kirschenbaum’s focus on the Spanish Civil War presents a powerful portrayal of international communism in the Stalin era. The International Brigades constituted an experience that, albeit

diverse in nature, decisively contributed to the formation of a distinct transnational communist-antifascist identity shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War.¹¹

One of the most significant outcomes of the transnational turn has been the redirection of scholarly attention from the European centre to the peripheries of the international communist movement. For instance, contributors to the recent collective volume *Transnational Communism Across the Americas* reveal new and unexpected dimensions within American communisms, especially regarding the interrelations between nations, political organisations and individuals.¹² Similarly, a recent book on the Comintern and the Global South has underscored the relationship as a negotiated one, wherein local actors not only accepted the influence of the Soviet leadership within the international communist movement, but also actively exerted their influence on policy formation.¹³

Transnational methodology has unlocked multiple previously obscured aspects of the history of communism – including party formation;¹⁴ party cultures;¹⁵ ethics;¹⁶ modes of struggle;¹⁷ and the relationship between intellectuals and communism. It has been especially useful in tracking the life trajectories of women who became involved in the communist movement, unveiling their motivations and aspirations, as well as the challenges of communist mobilisation as women.¹⁸ This relationship was shaped not only by the transference of concepts or the exchange of ideas but also by the existence of international networks operating across different regions of the globe.¹⁹ Even a cursory examination of international and transnational activism from the interwar period to the years of the Cold War has illuminated the global scope of the communist women's movement and the complex relationship between communism and feminism in its various incarnations dating back to the Second International.²⁰ Recent scholarship which examines the relationship between communism and Black liberation;²¹ youth;²² and diaspora radicalisation;²³ highlights once again the limitations imposed for many decades by adherence to methodological nationalism.

The international character of the communist movement made travel inherent to it. Indeed, the necessity and scale of travel was unprecedented in the history of modern political movements. Mobilisation,

co-operation, co-ordination, solidarity, persecution and exile – imposed by both anti-communist states and by the Soviet state itself – entrenched travel in the lives of communists across the globe.²⁴

The phenomenon of communist travel per se did not draw scholarly interest until well into the transnational phase of the historiography. However, it had long been recognised in International Relations theory, which interpreted it chiefly as a strategy of global communist infiltration and a vehicle for the discursive influence of Soviet-type regimes on the West.²⁵ It had long been a feature in the autobiographies and biographies of communist activists, who treated it as an essential cog in the process of politicisation, exposing activists to new, at times unexpected, realities, and introducing them to novel ideas and practices.²⁶ Travel facilitated their integration into transnational networks of individuals who shared common ideals and aspirations. In numerous instances, mobility transformed capitals, cities and ports that were frequent destinations for communist activists into revolutionary hubs where hope for the success of the global revolution thrived.

From its inception, the Soviet state functioned as a nexus for revolutionaries hailing from diverse geographical, social and cultural backgrounds. As evidenced, inter alia, in a recent article by Burak Sayim, the journey to the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), established at the behest of the Communist International in 1921, constituted, for many interwar communists, ‘a rite of passage towards the Cominternian militant habitus and a site of political transformation’.²⁷ Previously, Lana Ravandi-Fadai directed her scholarly attention towards the case of Iranian students at the KUTV, and their role in shaping Soviet orientalism;²⁸ while Kirasirova has researched the Arabic sector of this unique multinational Soviet institution.²⁹ Subsequent inquiries into the KUTV have further contributed to elucidating the significance of these cultural and educative journeys for the international milieu of interwar communism.³⁰ Concurrently, mobility emerged as a constituent element of the lived experience of communists who disseminated revolutionary ideals beyond the confines of Europe, as demonstrated by Ali Raza’s work on colonial India.³¹

Travel also constituted a central dimension of the cultural diplomacy activities of the Soviet Union, in the development of which

the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), founded in 1925, played a leading role.³² In a period during which the nascent Soviet state encountered significant diplomatic challenges, cultural diplomacy emerged as a critical factor in enhancing the Soviet Union's image on the international stage.³³ In recent years, the significance of Soviet cultural diplomacy has also been highlighted in countries within the European periphery, as well as in countries far removed from the European centre.³⁴

Indeed, owing to the initiatives of VOKS, a considerable number of intellectuals visited Soviet territory during the interwar period.³⁵ In many instances, these visitors documented their impressions, subsequently disseminating them and shaping public opinion in their respective countries.³⁶ This group included intellectual women who had the opportunity to witness at first hand the advancements concerning the position of women, and to develop their feminist perspectives.³⁷ Soviet intellectuals also travelled to capitalist countries during this period, and thus, in turn, helped to shape the cultural policies of the Soviet Union.³⁸ Later, the thaw in cold war relations under Khrushchev ushered in a new era of cultural exchange between East and West in the guise of the Cultural Agreement (1958-1988). The agreement facilitated visits to the US and the Soviet Union for tens of thousands of Soviet and American scholars, students, scientists, engineers, artists and others. As Yale Richmond has argued, the programme that 'raised the Iron Curtain' also ultimately led to its demise.³⁹

The practice of intellectuals travelling from capitalist countries to the Soviet Union was not solely driven by the efforts and initiatives of Soviet cultural diplomacy. It was also fuelled by the intense and deep-seated convictions of individuals. Many individuals embarked on these journeys to witness at first hand the practical application of their ideological beliefs, particularly in the 1930s, during a period of crisis that prompted a widespread rejection of the Western model of parliamentary democracies and European culture more broadly.⁴⁰ Within this intellectual and political milieu, Moscow came to be regarded by many as a 'fourth Rome'.⁴¹ The fascination of Western intellectuals such as André Gide with the Soviet state was rooted not only in their limited understanding of the realities on the ground, but also in a profound repudiation of the Western model during the interwar period.⁴² Nor were trips from Western countries to

the USSR made solely by intellectuals. The Soviet Union identified itself as a workers' state and, within this framework, also hosted numerous labour delegations. These included delegations of female workers, with the Soviet authorities emphasising their gender and urging them to serve as witnesses to the improvement of women's status in the Soviet Union.⁴³ The Soviet state appears to have implemented a series of measures aimed at maximising the positive outcomes of visits by foreign travellers; and the role played by Soviet guides was crucial to this endeavour.⁴⁴

Although the certainties and homogeneity of views among communists were somewhat diminished during the post-war decades, the Soviet Union remained a significant destination for many adherents of communism and radical ideologies, particularly those originating from 'Third-World' countries. One such traveller was the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who journeyed to the Soviet Union in 1963.⁴⁵ Moreover, the Soviet Union continued to extend refuge to political dissidents fleeing from various countries governed by authoritarian regimes. Tashkent, for instance, became home to approximately 10,000 Greek political refugees after 1949.⁴⁶ It was developed by Soviet authorities as an exemplar of developmental progress in the East.⁴⁷ The city attracted numerous leaders from the Third World, including Nehru, Zhou Enlai, Abdel Nasser, Sukarno and Fidel Castro.⁴⁸

After the conclusion of the Second World War, communist homelands multiplied and there were increasing levels of travel between countries within the socialist bloc, reflecting the emergence of what could be described as an 'empire of friends'.⁴⁹ These travels often occurred within the framework of cultural events, conferences and youth festivals.⁵⁰ This policy was later emulated by the people's democracies of the Balkans and Eastern Europe.⁵¹ After 1949 China emerged as a second 'red Mecca', attracting not only young revolutionaries from Europe but also intellectuals from distant lands in search of a revitalized and potentially more dynamic iteration of socialism.⁵² From the 1960s onwards, the small island of Cuba also became a destination for political pilgrimage.⁵³ However, from as early as the 1920s the Soviet state implemented a stringent policy for controlling its borders and restricting the movement of its citizens abroad. Each of the papers in this issue explores the transnational character of twentieth-century communism, and by

extension the formative role of travel in the work, life and identity of its protagonists. Three out of the four articles are set during the high point of communist internationalism between the wars, and trace the lives of individual cadres, covert operatives and intellectuals whose journeys and missions defined the Comintern milieu.

The issue begins with Vasilis Moschos's examination of three famous journeys undertaken by the Greek writer and intellectual Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957) to the Soviet Union during the 1920s. Moschos's paper sheds light on the influence of communism on Nikos Kazantzakis's distinctive worldview, but also elucidates the communist movement's strategic planning regarding the travels of intellectuals from Western countries and the incorporation of these journeys into the cultural diplomacy of the Soviet Union.

Clement Fontannaz examines the Comintern journey from below through the figures of the communist Humbert-Droz couple. Following on from the work of Brigitte Studer, the article rethinks the notions of clandestinity and political work within the communist 'national sections'. The negotiation of borders is examined here, in both their physical and geographical forms, but also in terms of the invisible borders between the individual and the rest of society, especially for communists living on the margins in an increasingly hostile political environment.

Anastasia Koukouna casts a light on the extraordinary life of Miltiadis Porphyrogenis, a Greek lawyer and communist leader (1903-1958) who stood out among his high-ranking peers in the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) by virtue of his academic credentials, fluency in several languages, adept communication skills, and a class location that facilitated dialogue with fellow travellers, bourgeois politicians and figures from diverse national backgrounds. Koukouna's examination of Porphyrogenis's extensive travels underscores the pivotal role of travel as a formative political and social experience for cadres during the Comintern and Stalinist eras, but also recognises the way in which travel manifested a distinct lifestyle for the party elite, distinct from that of ordinary party members.

The final paper shifts to the post-war period, with Greg Billam's examination of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and its efforts to co-ordinate socialist and anti-colonial activism across the

British Commonwealth after the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943. The CPGB's new role as a hub for anti-colonial activity was facilitated by the Communist Parties of Empire Conferences held in 1947 and 1954. These were crucial for the development of networks and the transmission of ideas across Britain's empire in the post-war period, but, as the paper argues, the CPGB's role became fraught with the complexities brought by the Cold War and decolonisation.

This special issue is but a beginning. In conclusion, it is the hope of the editors and the authors that it will inspire further research into the vast and under-explored history of communist travel, and do its part to sustain the momentum driving new directions in the historiography of communism.

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Notes

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