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Canadian Communism at the Crossroads, 1956–1957: An Introduction

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JIM LAXER, A TEENAGER IN TORONTO in the 1950s, lived through the year 1956 quite differently than most Canadian youths of his time. Many boys would have been fixated on the Montréal Canadiens, who won the first of five consecutive Stanley Cups in that year. Raised in a Communist family, Laxer certainly shared some of the concerns of other adolescents his age. But unlike most of his cohort, Jim was taken aback by the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, his father, Robert, lamenting that the beloved leader of the Soviet Union would “not be able to finish his work.” Four years later, Bob Laxer somberly announced to his family, “We are leaving the Party. We’re going to do it very quietly. There will be no formal resignation.” Discretion notwithstanding, a young Jim Laxer thought the events of 1956–57 a “bombshell,” a personal political detonation that brought the “pillar that had defined my existence from the moment of my birth” crumbling down.¹ What had happened between Stalin’s death in 1953 and a series of developments in 1956–57 that saw the Laxer family and hundreds of others like them relinquish their affiliation to the Communist Party?

1. James Laxer, *Red Diaper Baby: A Boyhood in the Age of McCarthyism* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004), 141, 163–164, 173.

In a 1956 speech before a closed session of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Nikita Khrushchev announced that crimes against socialism had been committed by the once-revered “Uncle Joe” and that Stalin had encouraged a destructive “cult of the personality.” All of this, as well as disturbing reports of the repression of dissident mobilizations in Soviet-controlled parts of eastern and central Europe, gave rise to a series of recriminations and reassessments. Laxer’s father, recently returned from an eye-opening trip to the Soviet Union, joined other Canadian Communists in an opposition movement, insisting that revolutionary socialists had to right the wrongs of the past and ensure that their party, led by Tim Buck, strike out in new directions. Gérard Fortin describes one meeting in Toronto, conveying something of the tense, combative atmosphere of the times:

Buck’s face was like thunder as we criticized the Party for slavishly copying the Soviet Union, told them that the situation had changed and we now needed a Communist Party concerned primarily with Canada and the Canadians (while, of course, maintaining all respect for the Soviet Union and its great achievements). Our statement was received in dead silence. As we walked out of the meeting I remember Stanley Ryerson, one of the few members from English Canada who could speak French, hissing at us as we passed, “*Traîtres!*” (Traitors!)²

In the end, no consensus could be reached among Canadian Communists in 1956–57. Those resistant to change carried the political day. The year 1956, a long time coming, revealed fault lines in Canadian Communism’s project. Such political fissures, like so much of the history of communism, had their origins in international developments that would reverberate within the local, regional, and national peculiarities of Canada.



THE HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNISM in the 20th century, like that of the capitalism it sought to overturn, is replete with crises. Vladimir Lenin’s death in 1924 and the leadership struggle that ensued, culminating in Stalin’s consolidation of power within the CPSU and the Communist International, was undoubtedly an early crisis, albeit one that defied easy understandings. It set the stage on which others would unfold. These would include the 1937–38 Moscow Trials and their revelations of how far Stalin and his prosecutors were willing to go in slandering and killing off potential critics.

A number of abrupt “turns” in Communist international policy, most associated with Stalin’s conviction that the task of revolutionaries was to consolidate “Socialism in One Country,” further troubled many on the revolutionary left. From these shifts in programmatic approach flowed Comintern directives, sometimes anticipated by activities around the world that suggested the remaking of perspectives and practices, as in the movement away from the

2. Gérard Fortin & Boyce Richardson, *Life of the Party* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1984), 202.

class-against-class orientation of the Third Period to the more conciliatory politics of the Popular Front in the years from 1932 to 1935. But on occasion quite startling reversals left communists stumbling to change course, as between 1939 and 1941, with the shift in Moscow's positions on the nature of World War II: it was first a war to be supported, then it was an imperialist war to be opposed, and then, finally, it was a people's antifascist war. All of this conditioned a political climate in which questioning Comintern authority was at best discouraged and at worst suppressed, denied a hearing. As one British Communist who attended a Moscow summit in September 1939 recalled saying to himself, on hearing the characterization of the war, "That's it. There's nothing to be done. An imperialist war it is."³

As the 1940s gave way to the 1950s, with Hitler defeated in good part because of the military sacrifices of the Soviet Union, the virulently anticommunist climate constrained the possibility of alternative voices being raised. Obvious crises within Communism were perhaps less likely to be addressed as the ugliness of McCarthyism led to an endless hounding of adherents of the Soviet Union. Their understanding of communism had been forged in struggles against racism and anti-Semitism, on industrial union picket lines, and in the antifascist campaigns so decisive to those who came of political age in the 1930s and 1940s.

By the 1950s these crises included growing awareness that all was not well in Stalin's Soviet Union and its European satellites. The Stalinist show trials of the 1930s – by which the leadership of Old Bolsheviks who had advanced the cause of the revolutionary working class in 1917 had been either summarily executed, following torture, threats to their families, and coerced confessions, or banished to the Gulag – were revived.

The Slánský Trial (1952) targeted a fictitious Czechoslovakian "anti-state conspiracy centre," bringing fourteen Communist officials to trial; eleven were executed and three given life sentences. Instigated to crush any dissident movements comparable to Tito's Yugoslavian break from Stalin, the repression took on the trappings of anti-Semitism. Eleven of the defendants were Jewish and targeted as such by the Soviet ringmasters orchestrating the trial, who demanded that the accused confess to all manner of crimes, including leading "cosmopolitan" and Zionist plots against socialism and espousing pro-capitalist ideas. A generalized assault on Jews in the Communist Party ensued. Coinciding with this repression, a "Doctors' Plot" was supposedly uncovered inside the Soviet Union, in which predominantly Jewish physicians were alleged to have been involved in a conspiracy to kill Soviet leaders. Forced confessions and an outpouring of anti-Semitic propaganda followed, much of it consistent with a growing Great Russian antagonism to ethnic minorities in general. Stalin died of a stroke before the full brunt of the anti-Semitic

3. Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Problems of Communist History," in *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1973), 5.

repression could be unleashed, and in the years after 1953 the Soviet Union opened the Pandora's box of reckoning with Stalin's leadership.⁴

This was the background to what would be the greatest crisis of international communism to date: the revelations delivered in the so-called secret speech by Nikita Khrushchev on 25 February 1956.⁵ In that speech he explicitly named Stalin as the architect of the Doctors' Plot, one of many transgressions that the Soviet leader was guilty of propagating against socialist morality and humanity – repugnant acts in which Khrushchev and others had, of course, been deeply involved.

Throughout 1956 dissidents mobilized in countries like Poland and Hungary, demanding that their Communist states be reformed. This culminated in Soviet suppression of these campaigns, the most dramatic and deadly case being the crushing of a Hungarian reform uprising that erupted over the course of October and November 1956. Workers' councils constituted an opposition to the ruling apparatus and people's militias battled Soviet troops and their Hungarian counterparts. As the old authority collapsed, a new government, led by Imre Nagy, disbanded the state police, declared that it would withdraw from the Warsaw Pact, and promised free elections. On 4 November 1956, a Soviet invasion struck down the rebellion as tanks rolled into Budapest: Nagy was deposed, tried, and executed in 1958. With Soviet rule reconstituted and the reform impulse crushed, 200,000 Hungarians fled their country.⁶

These events precipitated a crisis of international communism, in which Communist parties throughout the world were thrown into turmoil. Dissident factions demanded a rethinking of what being a communist meant. Calls for change were loud and long; many communists simply resigned from parties to which they had been dedicated for decades. Jewish communists were especially troubled, and while some remained aligned with the Soviet Union and the Communist organizations affiliated with it, many did not.

The most written about experience is that of the Communist Party of Great Britain. A cohort of historians led by Edward (E. P.) Thompson and John

4. Among many discussions, see David Brandenberger, "Stalin's Last Crime? Recent Scholarship on Postwar Soviet Antisemitism and the Doctors' Plot," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, 1 (2005): 187–204. On the post-1953 de-Stalinization, see Alec Nove, *Stalinism and After* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975); Isaac Deutscher, *Russia after Stalin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969).

5. For Khrushchev's speech and other relevant material, see Grey Hodnett, ed., *Resolutions and Decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, vol. 4, *The Khrushchev Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).

6. Writing on the Soviet suppression of 1956's reform initiatives is extensive, as evidenced in Mark Kramer, "The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises in Hungary and Poland: Reassessments and New Findings," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, 2 (April 1998): 163–214. Still useful is a first-hand account, written by a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB): Peter Fryer, *Hungarian Tragedy* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1956). Fryer was subsequently expelled from the CPGB.

Saville broke from the CPGB with the fanfare of a publication program – the mimeographed *Reasoner* followed by ten numbers of a small journal, *The New Reasoner* – announcing the need for a new and dissident communism, one that would eventually feed into the formation of a New Left.⁷ If Thompson's and Saville's initiatives have captured the attention of generations of radical historians, their endeavours were the tip of an iceberg of discontent. Long-standing dissatisfaction finally cracked loyalties that reached back decades. Between 1946 and 1955 CPGB membership had declined precipitously, falling from just over 42,000 to under 33,000. Stalwart party patriarch Harry Pollitt blamed "the intellectuals" for the turmoil in the CPGB, but the crisis of 1956–57 extended well beyond this stratum.⁸ Workers – blue and white collar alike – and Jews and housewives and staffers at the *Daily Worker* resigned in droves; 10,000 CPGB members departed between 1956 and 1958.⁹

If there were some Communist parties that weathered this storm with less turmoil than others, no party was untouched, not even the relatively secure French Communist Party (PCF). It managed to retain its hold on approximately one-quarter of the electorate in 1956. In spite of calls for de-Stalinization on the part of many prominent French intellectuals, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, the PCF proved relatively unrepentant. One early assessment of communism in France in the aftermath of 1956 concluded that "if Stalin was officially banished, his ghost remained."¹⁰

France was one end of a spectrum where there were no exceptions to the rule that 1956 took a heavy toll on the allegiance commanded by Moscow-aligned Communist parties. What one American Communist, Al Richmond, described as the "Khrushchev thunderbolt" was received by Palmiro Togliatti,

7. Among many commentaries that might be cited, see Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1959); Bryan D. Palmer, "Reasoning Rebellion: E.P. Thompson, British Marxist Historians, and the Making of Dissident Political Mobilization," *Labour/Le Travail* 50 (Fall 2002): 187–216; Wade Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-Up of Britain* (Boston & Leiden: Brill, 2013); Michael Newman, "Thompson and the Early New Left," in Roger Fieldhouse & Richard Taylor, eds., *E.P. Thompson and English Radicalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 158–180. Central to understanding the crisis of communism in Britain in 1956 are two collections of documents and commentaries: Cal Winslow, ed., *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014); Paul Flowers & John McIlroy, eds., *1956: John Saville, E.P. Thompson and The Reasoner* (London: Merlin, 2016).

8. Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, 30.

9. Figures of membership decline in this paragraph are from Flowers & McIlroy, eds., *1956*, 6, 38.

10. David Cauter, *Communism and the French Intellectuals, 1914–1960* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), 56. See also, for a more micro analysis, Fiona Haig, "De-Stalinisation? Grassroots Responses to the xxth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in France's 'Var rouge,'" *Modern and Contemporary France* 23, 3 (2015): 285–305; Haig, "Democratic Centralism or 'Centres' of Power in the French Communist Party Var Federation: A Glimpse of Party Culture in 1956," *Modern and Contemporary France* 24, 1 (2016): 71–94.

a founder of the Italian Communist Party in 1921, with “surprise ... grief ... bewilderment ... perturbation.” Among the ranks of Italian Communism, the reaction was more visceral, the response more decisively direct: 200,000 simply dropped affiliation with their Moscow-aligned political organization.¹¹

Communists in the United States, as Maurice Isserman shows, and as any number of memoirs recall, were torn asunder by the crisis of 1956. Communists referred to 1956 as a year of “joyless agonies,” a “shock” that left one “queasy,” “the greatest crisis of [my] life.” For Dorothy Healey, who confessed to much uneasiness about party life and politics throughout the 1940s and 1950s, “Nothing had prepared me for the magnitude of what we were hearing.”¹² As much as the bombshell that was 1956 was an endnote to years of consternation, as Communists wrestled with the meaning of allegiance to a Soviet regime that many had come to question they were forced into new spaces of self-reflection. Joseph Starobin described US party members in the months before Khrushchev’s repudiation of a Stalinist “cult of the personality” as existing in a “vast intellectual black market in which many of us traded, half in a daze, unable to voice everything on our minds.”¹³ Yet that darkness of doubt and troubling interrogation plummeted to new depths and previously unimaginable intensity in 1956–57. Letters poured in to the *Daily Worker* excoriating William Z. Foster and those “tankmen” around him (a reference to the Soviet armoured vehicles rolling into Hungary) who clung to the Stalinist past. “A schism is developing between the Old Guard bureaucrats and those who feel the party will disintegrate unless it breaks sharply with its undemocratic past,” wrote one disgruntled participant in what was becoming a highly charged public debate. For this reformer, the issue was simple: “those members of the party who cannot give up the self-comfort of dogmatism ... will succeed

11. Al Richmond, *A Long View from the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 367; Alessandro Iandolo, “Unforgettable 1956? The PCI and the Crisis of Communism in Italy,” *Contemporary European History* 23, 2 (May 2014): 259–282; Tobias Abse, “Palmiro Togliatti and the Italian Communist Party in 1956,” *Revolutionary History* 9, 3 (2006): 182–207.

12. Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death Agony of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), esp. 1–34. Among the memoirs of American communists that bring to the fore the significance of the crisis of 1956, see, for instance, Richmond, *Long View*, 367–386; George Charney, *A Long Journey* (Chicago: Quadrangle: 1968); Dorothy Healey & Maurice Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers: A Life in the American Communist Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 150–171, quote from 153; John Gates, *The Story of an American Communist* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1958); Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett & Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 380–398.

13. Joseph Starobin, “1956 – A Memoir,” *Problems of Communism* 15, 6 (1966): 65, quoted in Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 249. See also Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943–1957* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

in wrecking the party if their attitudes and policies prevail.”¹⁴ Tens of thousands may have left the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) as a consequence of this crisis, with Richmond estimating that party membership shrank by “two thirds in less than a decade.” John Gates claimed that the debacle witnessed an immediate exodus of roughly 12,000. The CPUSA, boasting of an exaggerated membership of 50,000 to 75,000 at the end of World War II, could likely command the allegiance of no more than 3,000 entering the 1960s.¹⁵



THE REPERCUSSIONS OF 1956 were thus felt around the world. The Communist Party of Canada (CPC), then known as the Labor-Progressive Party (LPP), was, like its global counterparts, thrust into the maelstrom. Karen Levine provides an account of the crisis of 1956–57 within Canadian communism. Her discussion of this event was written in the late 1970s as an undergraduate essay at the University of Toronto, prepared for a Canadian labour history course taught by Professor David Millar. Levine was no doubt drawn to the history of Communism and the 1956–57 rupture because of her background. Both her parents were lifelong social justice activists, in the trade-union movement and women’s movement, and had been members of the LPP for a time. That connection may have facilitated her access to figures who played significant roles in the tumultuous reconfiguration of Canadian Communism. She spent time talking with Communists and former Communists in 1976 and 1977, two decades after the tension-ridden fracturing of global Communism. They provided her with material, some of it unpublished, as well as their recollections, a rich foundation on which to revisit the crisis of Canada’s Communist Party. Levine’s interviews, complemented by other oral testimony gathered by David Chudnovsky earlier in the 1970s, as well as a preliminary foray into available primary documentation, highlight how much remains to be understood about Canadian communism.

The document published below offers a detailed exploration of the different positions and factional alignments that coalesced within the LPP in the context of Khrushchev’s speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU and the subsequent Soviet military intervention in Hungary. Written before much of the modern writing on Canadian Communism was published, Levine’s essay is an exceedingly useful distillation of the political currents that surfaced among CPCers in what was a crossroads for the left of the 1950s. It adds new layers

14. Quoted in Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer*, 27; Isserman provides extensive coverage of the positions espoused in letters to the *Daily Worker*. On Foster and the hard-line Soviet defence in 1956, see James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Communism* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 252–266; Edward P. Joanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 337–347.

15. Richmond, *Long View*, 367; Gates, *American Communist*, 193.

of understanding to subsequently published works, including a number of accounts of participants in the events of 1956–57, including Tim Buck. Levine outlines how distinct 1956 groupings formed inside the CPC at the interface of positions situated in the particular regional political economies, class structures, and ethnocultural makeup of Canada, highlighting how appreciation of the “limited identities” of the country’s social history were refracted in the crisis of Communism.¹⁶

Buck’s *Reminiscences*, published posthumously, was based on interviews taped for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and were intended to be used as the basis for a history of the Communist Party of Canada. The book apparently displeased the CPC leadership of the 1970s and did not appear with the party press, which issued its own biography of Buck, put together by Oscar Ryan. Neither volume has much of substance to say about the crisis of 1956–57. An official history of “Canada’s Party of Socialism,” published in the early 1980s, deals with the period in much more detail. It structures the narrative of events Levine covers in a predictably partisan manner, decrying the “revisionist” and “opportunist” elements who demanded reform and a changed relationship to the Soviet Union in the aftermath of Khrushchev’s 1956 revelations and the suppression of the “counter-revolutionary coup” in Hungary.¹⁷

Much of the memoir literature addressing Canadian Communism and 1956–57, written after Levine’s rendition of events, is either quite truncated on commentary relating to the crisis or confined by its self-serving nature.¹⁸

16. See J. M. S. Careless, “Limited Identities in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 50, 1 (March 1969): 1–10.

17. William Beeching & Dr. Phyllis Clarke, eds., *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck* (Toronto: NC Press, 1977), esp. 392–399; Oscar Ryan, *Tim Buck: A Conscience for Canada* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1975), esp. 257–260; *Canada’s Party of Socialism: History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1921–1976* (Toronto: Progress, 1982), esp. 193–208. This latter official history references a number of the *Canadian Tribune* and *National Affairs Monthly* articles cited by Levine as well as various writings by Buck but makes no mention of his *Reminiscences*. For evidence of the rift within the CPC over these duelling biographical treatments of Buck, see “The CPC Condemns Publication of Tim Buck’s *Reminiscences* (1977),” Socialist History Project, accessed 25 November 2020, <https://www.socialisthistory.ca/Docs/CPC/YoursIn-79.htm>.

18. A prime example is Stewart Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolkas: My Years in the Communist Party of Canada* (Toronto: Lugs, 1993), 199–200, where the brief comment is unsurpassed in its lack of self-reflection. Smith, an oppositionist in 1956–57, claimed that he and others who broke from the CPC/LPP recognized that “the Soviet state had been a Stalin dictatorship since 1925.” Reading this, you would not know that Smith was one of the most dedicated advocates of the worst excesses of Stalinism, a Lenin School graduate whose sectarianism during the Third Period was widely recognized and quite extreme. See Smith’s pamphlet, published under the pseudonym, G. Pierce, *Socialism and the C.C.F.* (Montreal: Contemporary Publishing Association, 1934). When Togliatti remarked in 1929, “If we don’t give in, Moscow won’t hesitate to fix up a left leadership with some kid out of the Lenin School,” he could have been referring to Smith. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries*, 50. For the perspective of a party member who drifted away from the CPC in the mid-1950s there is Peter Hunter, *Which*

A notable exception is James Laxer's memoir of growing up in Toronto during the age of McCarthyism. Laxer details how a teenager negotiated the crisis of 1956–57 and how the trauma of the times affected the Laxer family. Robert Laxer, a member of the Central Committee, became an ally of J. B. Salsberg, the two men disappointed and disillusioned with respect to the Soviet record of anti-Semitism. But the senior Laxer's 1950s leadership of the LPP also exposed how he was required to report on the behaviour of a western Canadian Ukrainian comrade on a trip to the Soviet Union, where the man's family had been arrested and banished to a Siberian labour camp. Robert Laxer was also chagrined by the failure of the LPP to embrace his approach to the national question in Canada.¹⁹ Unlike Laxer, Bill Walsh remained in the party. His memoir, prepared by Cy Gonick, attests to the difficulty with which Walsh grappled with Salsberg's insistence that the LPP could not be reformed, as well as to the intense private conversations the two men engaged in during the crisis of 1956–57.²⁰ All of this adds to Levine's chronicle.

The best of these recollections confirm Levine's account, adding personal detail and perspective, as in Boyce Richardson's life of the Québec communist Gérard Fortin. It extends understanding of the discontents of the circle of dissidents around Gui Caron and the ways in which this echoed in reassessment of a 1947 factional conflict. This culminated in a resolution condemning a group led by Henri Gagnon, whose criticisms of the LPP included the Toronto-based leadership's insensitivity to the national aspirations of the Québécois, the lack of democracy in the party, and discontent about how mass work was

Side Are You On, Boys: Canadian Life on the Left (Toronto: Lugas, 1988). Hunter's alienation from the party was confirmed by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. But there is too little of substance in the discussion to make Hunter's brief commentary (172–176) enlightening, except perhaps his recollection that Norman Penner's disillusionments were evident before 1956 (173). My own oral biography of Jack Scott has little on the crisis of 1956–57 and contains some errors within Scott's memory of events; it nevertheless suggests that there may have been a little more in the way of agitated discussion within the British Columbia LPP membership than is suggested in Levine's account. Jack Scott, *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927–1985*, ed. Bryan D. Palmer (St. John's: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1988), 131–134.

19. Laxer, *Red Diaper Baby*, 163–174. The crisis of 1956–57 was certainly suppressed in pro-Communist Ukrainian organizations, but discontents with Russification run through the history of this ethnic sector and its important place in Canadian Communism. John Kolasky refers to Ukrainian members drifting away from the party in the aftermath of 1956–57, while those who stayed no longer retained the same loyalty to the Soviet Union, their "faith in the infallibility of the Kremlin leaders ... irretrievably shattered." Kolasky, *The Shattered Illusion: The History of Ukrainian Pro-Communist Organizations in Canada* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1979), 199. The 1950s crisis figures lightly in the most recent discussion of Ukrainian Communists, a reflection of the turn in studies of the left towards cultural subjects, which I allude to below. See Rhonda L. Hinther, *Perogies and Politics: Canada's Ukrainian Left, 1891–1991* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 137–139.

20. Cy Gonick, *A Very Red Life: The Story of Bill Walsh* (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2001), 205–214.

being conducted. Gagnon and other francophone leaders in the LPP were forced to resign, and 300 of the LPP's 700 French-speaking members left the party.²¹

As Merrily Weisbord's collective portrait of communist interviewees, *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War* (1983), reveals, the Montréal wing of the LPP was decimated in 1956, with Communists reeling in a state of disorientation, their lives now severed from the party that had given meaning to existence amid capitalist exploitation and oppression. "It was like a mass funeral was taking place in the family," said one ex-Communist, who recalled the metaphorically lethal personal politics of 1956–57: "A large number of people were really dying. There was shock, there was bewilderment, there was a state of insanity." Stanley Ryerson, who had written insightfully on French Canada and was the LPP's leading intellectual, weathered the storm of 1956–57, as he had the 1947 assault on Gagnon. He remained in the party. As Levine shows, and as Fortin made abundantly clear, Ryerson was one of the most vehement opponents of reform and de-Stalinization in 1956–57. Yet by the 1960s he was drifting away from the Communist Party of Canada. He finally left in 1968, with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Fifteen years later, Weisbord presented Ryerson as chastened by the fallout from 1956–57, reflecting on the dogmatism of the 1940s and 1950s: "He hasn't yet written about the 1947 split between the French Canadians and the Central Committee of the Canadian Communist Party, but he has heard that there are books and theses underway. Although Stanley is over seventy and not in perfect health, he is expected to make a pronouncement. Stanley knows this but wishes it would go away."²²

As this memoir literature suggests, biographical treatment of Canadian communists often reflects how acutely the crisis of 1956–57 impinged on the lives of members of the LPP. Gregory S. Kealey's long essay on Ryerson contains a discussion of the events outlined in Levine's narrative, and indeed it draws on the unpublished version. Levine depicts Ryerson as one of the most

21. Fortin & Richardson, *Life of the Party*, 180–189. Québec developments are detailed in Robert Comeau & Bernard Dionne, *Communists in Quebec, 1936–1956: The Communist Party of Canada/Labor-Progressive Party*, trans. Margaret Heap (Montreal: Presses de l'Unité, 1982); Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 122–123; and the fullest recent elaboration is Ian McKay, "Henri Gagnon, Tim Buck, Stanley Ryerson, and the Contested Legacy of the Comintern on the National Question: The Crisis of French-Canadian Communism in the 1940s," in Oleksa Drachewych & Ian McKay, eds., *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 360–386.

22. Merrily Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1983), 221, 227. Weisbord's book is something of a Canadian equivalent of Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), a book animated by the 1956 crisis in US communism. "For me, at twenty," wrote Gornick, "the Khrushchev Report snapped the last thread in a fabric of belief that was already worn to near disintegration" (10).

vociferous defenders of the Communist status quo, seeing him as the leader of a distinct faction even more intransigent than the majority that coalesced around Buck, whereas Kealey presents Ryerson's stands somewhat differently. Those demanding a revision of Canadian Communism's relations with the Soviet Union, reconsideration of democratic centralism, and opposition to the suppression of dissent in Hungary drew Ryerson's ire in the late 1950s, this being regarded as the last gasp of a waning Stalinism.²³ Doug Smith's biography of long-time Winnipeg Communist city councillor Joe Zuken provides insight into the ways in which families and the city's left-wing Jewish community wrestled with the 1956–57 crisis; Joe stayed in the LPP while his wife simply stopped paying dues and going to meetings. When Stalin died, Clara Zuken recalled that she "cried as if I had lost my father," while Joe, beside her, responded to the news with the quiet acclamation, "It should have happened a few years ago."²⁴

The most extensive accounting of the impact of 1956–57 in this biographical genre appears in Gerald Tulchinsky's *Joe Salsberg: A Life of Commitment* (2013). Tulchinsky provides a full accounting of the Toronto Communist's final agonizing break from the LPP, his long encounter with the anti-Semitism rampant in the Soviet Union finally exploding in a refusal to countenance any longer the compromises that had kept him a loyal advocate of Moscow for three decades. If Salsberg and those around him, as Levine shows, were troubled most by anti-Semitism, they also raised a host of other questions, including the practice of democratic centralism, obeisance to the Soviet Union, and the military intervention in Hungary. But "the Jewish question" was undoubtedly of paramount importance, and one of the many repercussions of the crisis of 1956–57 was the severing of relations between the Canadian Communist movement and the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO).²⁵

Ester Reiter's culturally oriented survey of the Canadian Jewish left provides something of a conclusion to this history. Her book closes with a discussion of the Khrushchev revelations of 1956 and the fissures within the Communist-affiliated Jewish community, which, she notes, "became very personal and bitter and ... went on for three years." Reiter explores this "painful" history in usefully cultural ways, adding importantly to Levine's study.²⁶ Like much recent scholarship on the Canadian communist experience, however,

23. Gregory S. Kealey, "Stanley Bréhaut Ryerson: Canadian Revolutionary and Marxist Historian," in *Workers and Canadian History* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), esp. 56–63. This examination of Ryerson originally appeared in *Studies in Political Economy* in 1982.

24. Doug Smith, *Joe Zuken: Citizen and Socialist* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1990), 159–163.

25. Gerald Tulchinsky, *Joe Salsberg: A Life of Commitment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 95–119.

26. Ester Reiter, *A Future without Hate or Need: The Promise of the Jewish Left in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 263.

the politics of this cathartic moment tend to be skirted.²⁷ Research into Canadian Communism that postdates Norman Penner's engagement with his own history in the LPP crisis seldom tussles with the frictions that emerge from a decidedly political engagement with the questions that confronted Communists in 1956–57.²⁸

Canadian historians find in the Communist Party all kinds of rich veins to mine, offering a range of insightful and intriguing studies. For all of its value, this research nonetheless often seems confirmation of Geoff Eley's admonition that modern academic study can too often lead to "a history of communism with the Communism left out."²⁹ Levine's important, and early, account of the crisis of the Labor-Progressive Party in 1956–57 provides us with a firm foundation on which to reassess and rethink Canadian Communism in the political terms that were uppermost in the convictions and commitments of the combatants of the time. It encourages us to look at what one of the many crises of Communism revealed about a political struggle to recast the organizational structures and activities of the revolutionary left.

27. Much of this can be explained by the attraction of Canadian scholars to earlier periods of Communist experience, when class-struggle politics were clearly evident. Different but significant studies include Stephen L. Endicott, *Raising the Workers' Flag: The Workers' Unity League of Canada, 1930–1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), and many scholarly articles, such as those appearing in a special issue of *Labour/Le Travail* addressing communism (Fall 2005), including John Manley, "Moscow Rules? 'Red' Unionism and 'Class against Class' in Britain, Canada, and the United States," 9–50; Joan Sangster, "Robitnytsia, Ukrainian Communists, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Early Canadian Communism, 1922–1930," 51–90; Bryan D. Palmer, "Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," 91–148. Yet, compounding this chronological focus of Communist studies, which predates 1956, is a concern with the cultural, evident in Candida Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics: Women, Literature, and the Left in 1930s Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Alan Filewood, *Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2011); James Doyle, *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002); Hinthner, *Perogies and Politics*. Of course, the cultural was not immune from the political tensions and traumas of 1956–57, as indicated by Doyle (235–236): most party writers of an older generation stuck with Buck-Ryerson in the crisis, including Margaret Fairley, Joe Wallace, Dyson Carter, and Oscar Ryan. But writers' groups and cultural clubs withered as the late 1950s gave way to the 1960s. For figures such as Wallace, sales of his books were dependent upon Russian editions.

28. Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto: Methuen, 1988), esp. 237–259.

29. Geoff Eley, "International Communism in the Heyday of Stalin," *New Left Review* 157 (May–June 1986), 92.