

The Sino-Soviet Split and the New Communist Movement

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The Sino-Soviet Split – the antagonization and breaking down of relations between China and the Soviet Union in the 1960s – had major reverberations throughout the global communist movement. While most of the effects of the Split were found in Asia and Europe, the United States’ communist movement also was profoundly impacted by these ideological trends as they trickled into the dying mass movements of the 1960s. The Sino-Soviet Split revitalized a nascent Marxist Left in the United States under the banner of the New Communist Movement – however, it ultimately killed the very trends it enlivened via increasing sectarianism within the movement.

The Sino-Soviet Split has its roots pre-dating the Chinese Civil War but was catalyzed in Nikita Khrushchev’s speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1956. In this document, First Secretary Khrushchev denounced the crimes and cult of personality attributed to his predecessor, Joseph Stalin. Quoting Marx, Engels, and Lenin, Khrushchev provided examples and precedent of the Marxist-Leninist tradition rejecting such individualist authority. He also used historical examples to showcase the evident ineptitude of Stalin’s leadership and policies regarding foreign intervention and the purging of CPSU members.¹

This speech shocked the international communist movement and caused a great deal of unrest and instability throughout the socialist sphere as well as within the USSR itself. As Andrew M. Smith’s thesis, *Which East Is Red?*, indicates, a number of Soviet and Eastern Bloc radicals opposed what Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization stood for:

Small gatherings of protest began in Moscow, Leningrad, and Stalingrad, albeit with no major unrest. In one particular case, however, confusion and contempt turned to rage, and in early March of 1956 the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic—Stalin’s birthplace—became a storm-center of pushback by common Soviet citizens against the earliest stages of Destalinization.²

One of the largest, and most influential, detractors of the Twentieth Congress speech outside of the Soviet Union was the Communist Party of China (CPC). Later that year, the CPC would issue a rebuttal to the speech, politely congratulating the Soviet Union for its efforts in self-critique and correcting past mistakes, while emphasizing the positive contributions Stalin presented to the international communist movement.³ This would be closely followed by another statement, more firmly reiterating China’s stance against Khrushchev’s statements in light of the

1 Nikita Khrushchev, “Speech to 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U.” (speech, Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, Moscow, February, 24-25 1956).

2 Andrew M. Smith, “Which East Is Red? The Maoist Presence in the Soviet Union and Soviet Bloc Europe 1956-1980” (MA thesis, Georgia State University, 2017), 12.

3 Editorial Department of *Renmin Ribao*, *On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Peking: Foreign Language Press), 1959.

Hungarian and Polish revolts of 1956.⁴ A long-budding contradiction between the two socialist powers was accelerated.

By 1963, this contradiction could no longer be resolved by non-antagonistic means. On July 14, 1963, an *Open Letter* published in the CPSU's official party newspaper, *Pravda*, crafted a polemic against China's critiques on the Soviet Union and the international communist movement.⁵ The CPC responded with a series of unbridled attacks on Khrushchev and the CPSU, reiterating its defense of the legacy of Stalin, as well as berating Khrushchev's application of "peaceful coexistence" with capitalism, perceived collaboration with capitalist imperialism, and abandoning the dictatorship of the proletariat by re-establishing the bourgeois line within the CPSU.^{6,7,8} This culminated in an all-out polemic on Khrushchev instituting a revisionist line of "phoney communism."⁹ While Khrushchev was removed later that year, the relations between China and the Soviet Union remained damaged, culminating in a militarized border clash in 1969.

In Europe, the Sino-Soviet split had a significant impact on socialist geopolitics, not only within the socialist sphere but in communist parties across the continent. Literature has been written on the Sino-Soviet split's impact on Western Europe. For example, in Italy and France, where mass communist parties existed in a real political fashion, popular fronts were the rule of the day. The Communist Party of Italy was veering rightwards as a result of its own internal revisionism and only sided with Soviet interests in vague rhetorical gestures, whereas the Communist Party of France was staunchly adherent to Moscow's ideological line while maintaining the popular front at home. Support for China and the Maoists was mainly found in isolated intellectual circles and in struggling communist sects throughout the rest of Western Europe, where socialism was floundering amid perceived capitalist prosperity.¹⁰

Very little literature, however, has been written on the Sino-Soviet split's effects on the American left. Khrushchev's secret speech also had a profound impact on the communist movement in the United States of America. The Communist Party USA (CPUSA) was already dealing with the dual-crisis of McCarthyism and Browderism—a tendency within the party characterized by a peaceful reformist transition to socialism and collaboration between classes championed by ex-General Secretary Earl Browder. In the wake of re-constitution in 1944 after

4 Editorial Department of *Renmin Ribao*, *On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Peking: Foreign Language Press), 1959.

5 *Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, "Open Letter of the Central Committee of the CPSU to All Party Organizations, to All Communists of the Soviet Union," in *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press), 1965, 526-86.

6 Editorial Department of *Renmin Ribao* and *Hongqi*, "On the Question of Stalin," in *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press), 1965, 115-138.

7 Editorial Department of *Renmin Ribao* and *Hongqi*, "Peaceful Coexistence — Two Diametrically Opposed Policies," in *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press), 1965, 259-301.

8 Editorial Department of *Renmin Ribao* and *Hongqi*, "Apologists of Neo-Colonialism," in *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press), 1965, 185-219.

9 Editorial Departments of *Renmin Ribao* and *Hongqi*, *On Khrushchov's Phoney Communism and Its Historical Lessons for the World* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press), 1964.

10 William E. Griffith, "European Communism and the Sino-Soviet Rift," in *Communism in Europe: Continuity, Change, and the Sino-Soviet Dispute*, ed. William E. Griffith (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1964), 11-14.

being dissolved into a political action group by Browder, several factions arose within the CPUSA accusing party members, particularly within the national leadership, of revisionism. Principal among these early critics within the party leadership was William Z. Foster, long-time rival of Browder and successor to the position of General Secretary.¹¹

Another notable, and more radical, critic of CPUSA leadership and Browderist revisionism was Harry Haywood. Haywood was a proponent and author of the Black Belt self-determination thesis, which posited that Black Americans within the Black Belt South, where they constituted the majority of the population, had the right to self-determination, up to and including secession from the United States.¹² The CPUSA adopted this policy in 1926, but later rejected it in 1944 under Browder. Haywood was loyal to the party and to the Soviet Union, but fought an uphill battle to maintain his thesis after the party's reconstitution.

In his autobiography, *Black Bolshevik*, Haywood discusses the National Committee meeting of 1956. The right wing of the CPUSA, led by *Daily Worker* editor John Gates and taking inspiration from Khrushchev's 1956 speech, discussed abandoning Marxism-Leninism and Soviet allegiance, reorganizing the party, and reconsidering peaceful transition—effectively reviving Browderism.¹³ Chairman Foster presided over the meeting, representing the center faction of the Party. This reaffirmed the Party's dedication to the principles of Marxism-Leninism while stressing unity overall and decrying “left sectarianism” among the more militant far-left factions of the party as the principal danger to establishing said unity.¹⁴ This unity could not be maintained, however, due to the antagonism between the factions among the right-wing of the party, who wanted to reform it into something entirely different, and the left-wing, who would not condone revisionism and believed in the value of militant and potentially violent struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

As a result, a number of left and ultra-left anti-revisionists within the party, including Haywood, split from the CPUSA to form the Provisional Organizing Committee to Reconstitute a Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (POC) in the United States in 1958.¹⁵ Haywood was expelled from the POC in 1958, and the CPUSA the following year—however, the POC continued into the early 1960s. A secret FBI report from 1962 reveals that the POC had unconditionally aligned itself with China and against the Soviet Union, alongside the most militant anti-revisionist segments of the Sino-Soviet Split:

[Chairman Armando Roman] reiterated the POC stand that Premier KHRUSHCHEV's policy proposes revisionism and that the people of the U.S.S.R.

11 William Z. Foster, “The Struggle Against Revisionism,” in *Marxism-Leninism vs. Revisionism* by William Z. Foster, et al. (New York: New Century Publishers), 1946, 71.

12 The Communist International, “Extracts from an ECCI Resolution on the Negro Question,” in *The Communist International: 1919-1943 Documents, Volume II: 1923-1928*, ed. by Jane Degras, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 554.

13 Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press), 1978, 605-607.

14 Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 608.

15 Ibid., 622-623.

are being taken for a ride by the wrong party down the wrong road. He said that the POC stands one hundred per cent for the policy stated and followed by Albania and Communist China.¹⁶

Despite dissolving due to isolationism and internal sectarian strife, the POC laid an important foundation for the anti-revisionist communist movement within the United States, taking inspiration from the lessons of the Chinese revolution and leveraging Maoist critiques of revisionism toward both the Soviet bloc and the CPUSA.

The seeds of what would become the outspoken, anti-revisionist, and openly Maoist New Communist Movement (NCM) lay in the death throes of the New Left in the late 1960s—specifically, in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In 1969, a highly radicalized SDS National Convention in Chicago ushered in a dramatic split in the organization that ultimately killed it. In an attempt to maintain a solid and cohesive ideological line, the SDS purged itself of influence from the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) and its SDS Caucus, the Worker-Student Alliance. With pressure from the eminent Black Panther Party, which criticized the PLP for revisionism, a growing number of SDS members supported the expulsion of PLP membership. Opposing the PLP was the Revolutionary Youth Movement faction, which was itself divided into the Weatherman—made up primarily of the Ohio-Michigan and Columbia collectives—and the Revolutionary Youth Movement II (RYM II), led by Michael Klonsky and Bob Avakian. Important to note is that the Ohio-Michigan collective, while enacting their tirade on the PLP during the first day of the National Convention, “began to chant ‘Mao, Mao, Mao tse-Tung’ and waved their little red books.”¹⁷ Mao, China, and the discourse of the Sino-Soviet Split became the centerpiece of the anti-revisionist fervor that would characterize the NCM.

The Weathermen, who would later be known as the Weather Underground, eventually took control of the national seat of the SDS, but the position mattered little, as the influence of the SDS was in steep decline.¹⁸ The RYM II emerged as the most energized faction and attempted to form a short-lived national organization. Emerging from the RYM II were the Bay Area Revolutionary Union (RU), led by Bob Avakian, and the October League (OL), led by Klonsky. Both factions engaged in tactical unity and struggle with one another, but gradually drifted in separate political directions.

Another organization arose to become just as influential as the RYM II organizations and became involved in the NCM milieu, though not intentionally—the Communist League (CL). The CL arose out of expelled members of the POC in the 1960s.¹⁹ Coming out of the CPUSA struggle itself, as opposed to the New Left student movement that spawned the October League and

16 Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Provisional Organizing Committee for a Marxist-Leninist Party (POC)*, by Special Agent Robert M. Jackson. NY 100-136078, 1962. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/1956-1960/fbi-poc.pdf>.

17 “SDS Convention Split: Three Factions Emerge,” *The Heights*, July 3, 1969, 1. <https://newspapers.bc.edu/cgi-bin/imageserver.pl?oid=bcheights19690703&getpdf=true>.

18 “RYM-2 Meets,” *Guardian*, September 17, 1969. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/rym2-meets.htm>

19 Communist League, “The Dialectics of the Development of the Communist League,” 1972. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/ccl-dialectics.htm>.

Revolutionary Union, the Communist League held them in disdain. The CL held a critical stance toward both organizations' RYM II legacies, critiquing their allegiance to the youth movement by saying that "[t]hey made no distinction between the great Soviet proletariat and the handful of revisionists who have seized power in the USSR. Within the USNA [United States of North America], they denied all the glorious history and struggles of the CPUSA. And in general, they ignored the history and struggles of the world's proletarian fighters."²⁰ By entering this debate and maintaining relevancy and legitimacy within the Marxist-Leninist movement within the US, they placed themselves squarely within the confines of NCM discourse.

Bill Epton, civil rights activist, ex-Chairman of the PLP, and editor of *Proletarian Cause* – a limited-release single-issue Maoist journal – described the budding NCM as “petty bourgeois ex-students who were at one time active in various anti-[PLP] factions within SDS, students formerly associated with SNCC [Student National Coordinating Committee] ... various off-shoots from the Black Panther Party and, not a few, broke from the PLP... A more recent development is the new unaffiliated Marxist-Leninist forces that are entering the arena.”²¹ In addition to being an accurate description of the revolutionary current forming, it is a stunning example of the level of criticism and revolutionary optimism characterized by the NCM.

As the NCM grew and developed, a number of groups inspired by the energy of the depleted mass movements of the 1960s exploded into the fray; however, the OL, RU, and CL remained at the forefront of the movement. Each group was actively involved in party-building campaigns, in the hopes of establishing a vanguard party within the United States that could replace the CPUSA and adequately handle building a Marxist-Leninist revolution.

The Revolutionary Union (RU) began with the establishment of the National Liaison Committee, a pre-party formation between the RU, the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization, the Black Workers Congress, and the Asian-American radical group I Wor Kuen. The organization was short-lived. The RU denounced its detractors from the other organizations of the National Liaison Committee, comparing their nationalism to the Jewish Bundists who were opposed by Lenin in the October Revolution.²² I Wor Kuen, however, responded with a rebuttal explaining why they left the National Liaison Committee and reaffirming the revisionism and white chauvinism upheld by the RU. It is important to note that I Wor Kuen mentioned that “the RU spread the rumor that we had a secret member of the Venceremos organization in our central committee and that we were very close to the Communist League.”²³ This indicates the disunity and antagonism brewing between the major players of the NCM. Indeed, the OL also spared no

20 Communist League, “On the ‘Young Communist Movement’, Part 1,” *People’s Tribune*, August 1973. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/cl-replies-2.htm>.

21 Bill Epton, “Unite Theory with Practice to Build A Communist Party!” in *Proletarian Cause: Journal of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought*, edited by Bill Epton, 1972.

22 Revolutionary Union, “National Bulletin #13: Build the Leading Role of the Working Class, Merge the National and Class Struggles,” in *Red Papers 6: Build the Leadership of the Proletariat and its Party*, ed. Revolutionary Union (San Francisco: Revolutionary Union Press, 1974). Transcribed by Paul Saba. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/red-papers/red-papers-6/section3.htm>.

23 I Wor Kuen, “On the National Liaison Committee of the RU, BWC, PRRWO and IWK,” *IWK Journal* 1, no. 1 (August 1974). Transcribed by Paul Saba. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/iwk-journal/iwk-letters.htm>.

time in issuing a polemic against its rival: “The RU in fact is liquidating the just struggle of the Black masses for their full national rights. ‘A nation of a new type’²⁴ means that the principles of Marxism-Leninism are thrown out of the window.”²⁵ Once again, the issue of national self-determination of racial minorities was the central point on which the struggle against revisionism stood.

This sectarian bickering only increased in the late 1970s, as Chinese foreign policy began to shift. Mao’s death led to the rise in influence of Hua Guofeng and the hunting down of the Gang of Four; China openly endorsed the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola and National Liberation Front of Angola against the Soviet-supporting People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola in the Angolan Civil War as application of Mao’s “Three Worlds Theory.” As a result of this ideological shift in China, crisis split among the loosely unified and antagonized NCM.

The October League, which had evolved into the Communist Party - Marxist-Leninist (CPML) by 1978, showed support for China. The CPML openly endorsed Hua Guofeng against the Gang of Four.²⁶ Indeed, they launched a polemic against the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), the successor party to the RU, for supporting the Gang of Four: “The RCP, while claiming to be a ‘Marxist-Leninist party,’ is actually opposing the Marxist-Leninists in the world today and particularly the great Communist Party of China.”²⁷ Additionally, the CPML established a line that the “main blow” should be directed at the Soviet Union as the greater imperialist threat, rather than toward the United States.²⁸ This caused the RCP to respond with a polemic addressing that “the two superpowers are equally enemies of the international proletariat... together they comprise the main target of the international united front against imperialism in this period.”²⁹ Arguing amongst themselves, these two organizations, now calling themselves vanguard parties, focused primarily on theoretical disputes on political situations overseas rather than on organizing workers. By this time the CL had quietly evolved into the Communist Labor Party and had focused elsewhere than on inter-party polemics in the NCM.

As the 1970s pressed on into the deeply conservative 1980s, the NCM lost what little constitution it had left. The CPML dissolved into bickering factions and the Communist Labor Party faded into obscurity. While some groups managed to eke out of the wreckage, such as the

24 “A nation of a new type,” as proposed by the RU, was a thesis that posited that Black people within the US still constituted a nation, but that their dispersal from their historical centralization in the Black Belt South limited their ability to practice self-determination.

25 October League (M-L), *Revolutionary Union: Opportunism in a “Super-Revolutionary” Disguise* (San Francisco: The Call, 1974). Transcribed by Paul Saba. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-2/ol-on-ru/part3.htm>.

26 Communist Party – Marxist-Leninist, “World communists denounce ‘gang of four,’” *The Call*, November 27, 1976. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-5/call-gang.htm>.

27 Communist Party – Marxist-Leninist, “Supporting Revisionism: RCP Takes Stand with ‘Gang,’” *The Call*, January 17, 1977. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-5/ol-rcp-gang.htm>.

28 Communist Party – Marxist-Leninist, “Lesson of strategy and tactics: The Direction of the Main Blow,” *The Call*, November 22, 1976. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-5/main-blow.htm>.

29 Revolutionary Communist Party, “Two Superpowers: Equally Enemies of World’s People,” *Revolution*, August 1977. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-5/rep-2-superpowers.pdf>.

RCP, Freedom Road Socialist Organization, and Ray O. Light Organization, all of which still exist today, their relevance has been eclipsed by decades of stagnation. Deeply rooted in the Chinese ideological trends in the Sino-Soviet split and manifested in opposition to the revisionism manifested in the CPUSA, the NCM bounded into American left-wing political discourse. Ultimately the same energy that brought the movement to life with revolutionary fervor ultimately brought about its demise from schismatic sectarianism and an inability to appeal to the broad working class.