Communist MP: Willie Gallacher and British Communism

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Introduction

The rescue of leading British Communists from obscurity continues has become something of a minor sport among labour historians in recent years. Since the 1980s there has been a qualitative revolution in our knowledge of many of the first generation leaders of the Communist party of Great Britain (CPGB). Harry Pollitt, Rajani Palme Dutt and J. T. Murphy have all received more than competent biographical attention, while J. R. Campbell at least begins to twitch into the field of vision, albeit at times fleetingly. Perhaps it is hardly surprising that, for some others, there is no imminent prospect of release from the shadows: it is hard to imagine even the most enterprising of researchers conjuring up a biography of Arthur Macmanus, Tom Bell, or Albert Inkpin; still harder, perhaps, to picture even the most malleable of publishers obliging them if they did.

Yet obscurity was not the fate of William Gallacher in his own lifetime, and it seems peculiar that it should increasingly have proved to be the case since his death in 1965. By that time, he had been one of the leading figures in the CPGB for almost half a century, and had been one of its most publicly recognisable figures at least since his election to parliament at the 1935 general election. But he has remained a two-dimensional historical figure in an increasingly three-dimensional picture. Gallacher is interesting, however, not only for himself, but also as an illustration of many features of Communist politics in Britain in the half-century after the Russian Revolution.

In what does Gallacher’s significance lie? First, he was a survivor. Unlike Macmanus, he did not die young; unlike Bell, Inkpin, and Andrew Rothstein, he survived the changes of line and leadership at the end of the 1920s; unlike Pollitt and Campbell, he was not even temporarily deposed in the crisis over the change of line in 1939. Most remarkable of all, he survived even Dutt and Pollitt as a leading figure within the party: although Dutt outlived him, it was
Gallacher who lasted longer as a serious force at the top of the CPGB. This unique longevity raises important issues, and tells us a great deal about the leadership of the Communist party.

Second, Gallacher stands out as one of the most significant public figures the party ever produced. In the whole history of the party, only Pollitt, if anyone, eclipsed him in this respect. This owed a great deal, of course, to Gallacher’s election to parliament in 1935, and the fact that he was able to hold his seat at the next general election, ten years later. Almost fifteen years in parliament (he lost the seat in 1950) gave Gallacher a prominence that could never be rivalled, beyond the party at least, by people like Dutt and Campbell, however important they were in inner-party counsels.

Third, Gallacher’s career illustrates very well many of the complexities of the relationship between British Communists and world Communism. These complexities are particularly marked for much of the period of the existence of the Communist International (Comintern) between 1919 and 1943. Such references to Gallacher as exist in literature on this subject are often one-dimensional, lack detail, and are, in some cases, plainly misleading. Study of Gallacher establishes the complexities and nuances of the Comintern-CPGB relationship far more clearly than caricatures of an unproblematic Stalinist will allow.

Fourth, Gallacher is interesting as someone who very largely created his own image. To a considerable extent, the Gallacher we have had handed down to us has been the Gallacher constructed by Gallacher himself. In a sense, this is true of everyone – we all create our own narratives, and hone them endlessly, without even realising that we are doing it. But Gallacher’s doing so was more purposeful and intentional than is usually the case. Beginning with his first autobiography, Revolt on The Clyde (1936), continuing with The Rolling of Thunder (1947), a second edition of Revolt (1949), and Rise Like Lions (1951), and concluding with his posthumously published Last Memoirs (1966), he moulded the image of a man who had been a conscientious, but unformed, militant in the period before 1920, when he
had been ‘set right’ by Lenin, and who had, thereafter, been a disciplined Communist in all respects. As will be seen below, this self-created image was somewhat at variance with the reality.

It is, therefore, time to at least attempt to move towards a keener appraisal of Gallacher than has been offered thus far. This paper will not claim that Gallacher was a great original thinker. Such a claim would be patently absurd. In many ways, Gallacher thought with his fists, and was a politician of passion: not for him the cold calculation of a Dutt or even the strategic manoeuvring of a Pollitt. Nor was he in any sense a constant rebel against the Comintern or Soviet line. For much of his career he was loyal, and put any misgivings to one side. But hopefully it will emerge that he was somewhat less of a stooge than he has sometimes been portrayed.

Gallacher and the Formation of the CPGB

Much controversy has surrounded Gallacher’s involvement in the formation of the CPGB: indeed, it is the one part of his career that has excited serious investigation by more than a handful of scholars. As Chairman of the Clyde Workers’ Committee during and immediately after the First World War he had, by 1920, achieved a certain fame and notoriety as one of the leaders of shopfloor militancy in Britain. As such, he came to the attention of the Soviet leadership, which was keen to establish a united Communist party in Britain, and so invited Gallacher to the second world congress of the Comintern in Moscow in the summer of 1920. Lenin and his colleagues were firmly of the view that such a body should use parliamentary means, at least for propaganda purposes. Parliamentary activity would be a good way of bringing the party before the workers, and of exposing the limitations of reformism. At the same time, they also believed that the new organisation should seek affiliation to the much larger and stronger Labour party, again not because they had any illusions that it was committed to radical change, but, in Lenin’s vivid phrase, to support its leadership ‘in the same way as the rope supports a hanged man’. 
These views were not entirely congruent with those that Gallacher had been propounding. From an early stage in his political career he had regarded parliamentary action as futile, and although he had been a member of numerous left-wing bodies, had always held the Labour party in contempt. Syndicalism had appealed to him around the time he visited the United States in 1913, and he remained committed to direct action. Indeed, Gallacher is often seen as having remained a disciple of the Scottish Marxist, John Maclean, right up to the time he left for Russia as a stowaway aboard a Norwegian ship in July 1920.

What happened next has usually been portrayed, not least by Gallacher himself, as a rapid conversion. Gallacher began his time in Russia by putting forward his own views forcefully, speaking at the congress against parliamentary activity and affiliation, and in favour of ‘red’ unions. But by the time he returned to Scotland, Gallacher had adopted Lenin’s views. This led to his working hard to bring Scottish Communists into the CPGB, which had been formed in London while the second congress had been taking place. This, in turn, brought him into headlong conflict with Maclean, who wanted to see the formation of a separate Scottish party. Gallacher’s work paid dividends as Maclean’s efforts foundered while a small number of Scottish Communists entered the CPGB, with Gallacher at their head, at the second unity convention of January 1921. For some people, this was an unforgivable betrayal which marked Gallacher down as no more or less than a slave of the Kremlin. Further, they would argue, it was the start of a lifetime of such slavishness.

There is no need to doubt that Gallacher’s visit to Moscow, and specifically his encounter with Lenin, were significant in influencing his behaviour in 1920-21. For one thing, it finally cleared up confusion as to what the tactics of the Comintern were. It does not seem fanciful to argue that Gallacher was already clear that affiliation to Moscow was the best way forward before he arrived there. What had been in doubt, however, was what this meant in practice. Earlier in the year, for example, it had been unclear as to what extent the Comintern was
embracing parliamentarism and affiliation, with its Amsterdam-based Western European
Secretariat (WES) pushing a leftist line very strongly.\textsuperscript{14} The abolition of the WES in May
1920 had been the start of a process of clarification which had continued with the publication
of Lenin’s \textit{Left-Wing Communism} (which specifically criticised Gallacher). The meeting with
Lenin finally brought full clarity to the position.

Lenin undoubtedly ‘played’ Gallacher very cleverly. He was careful to flatter his visitor, to
make him feel important. Gallacher cannot but have been impressed by the fact that a
successful revolutionary – \textit{the} successful revolutionary – met him alone, and discussed
politics with him at length. Lenin, of course, was becoming a master of such sessions: even
among British leaders, Bell and Murphy were both later to follow Gallacher in devoting a
chapter of their memoirs to their meeting with the Communist demi-god.\textsuperscript{15} He cannot have
found Gallacher too difficult a nut to crack: the latter lacked the ideological and theoretical
grasp to put up a convincing case against Lenin’s carefully prepared arguments.\textsuperscript{16} Lenin
himself was shrewd enough to bend somewhat in Gallacher’s direction. For example, he was
careful to hint that he was himself not wholly convinced of the parliamentary/affiliationist
line; and he passed Gallacher notes during the congress sessions criticising the British
Socialist Party, whose members made up the bulk of the CPGB’s membership on its
formation, but whom Gallacher held in low regard.\textsuperscript{17}

But while Lenin’s wiles were important, there was also a wider context. Other pressures were
also pushing Gallacher in the same direction as Lenin. His political position prior to meeting
Lenin was not as firm as he was subsequently to allege. For one thing, his oft-remarked
alliance with the Scottish Marxist John Maclean had, in reality, been shaky since the middle
of the war, when Maclean had attacked Gallacher and the CWC for not taking a principled
anti-war stand.\textsuperscript{18} Gallacher was always a man who believed in loyalty, but also that loyalty
was a two-way street: in other words, he was a believer in reciprocity. It does not seem
entirely fanciful that he now welcomed the chance to pay back Maclean for earlier slights.
Second, the Socialist Labour party, with which Gallacher had latterly been associated, was by now in headlong decline, much damaged by the splits in its leadership over whether or not to become involved in the CPGB. Third, the fact that others formerly sceptical about affiliation and parliamentarism, like Murphy, were going into the CPGB weighed with Gallacher: the prospects for any alternative were looking bleaker by the day. Fourth, the prospects for an anti-parliamentary, anarcho-syndicalist, position were beginning to look very dim. The shop stewards’ movement could not maintain its impetus once peace came, and was left in an essentially defensive position. That position itself was coming under pressure now, as the Labour party’s advance showed that there was at least some potential in parliamentary politics. Fifth, the labour movement was weakening at the workplace, the crucial locus of syndicalist activity: the government was now attacking the labour movement and employers were fighting hard, with the help of groups like the Economic League, against known militants. This process was further compounded by the economic downturn that began to hit Britain hard in the late summer of 1920. If at any point over the period between the second Comintern congress and the second unity convention Gallacher had any doubts about accepting Lenin’s advice, he had only to look to the lengthening dole queues to be reminded of how far worker militancy was being forced into retreat. Finally, the rapid refusal of the Labour party to accept the affiliation of the newly formed CPGB helped. The prospect of actual co-operation receded, and was replaced by a slogan around which most Communists could agree to unite.

Of course, it suited Gallacher to present things rather differently: in his recollections of the time, and not least in his various autobiographies, he was keen to contrast the naïveté of his former position with the clarity that followed the intervention of a ‘real Bolshevik’. But this should not lead us to the false conclusion that he simply took Lenin’s orders regardless of wider considerations. It was the fact that Lenin’s advice fitted the situation as Gallacher was coming to see it that made the advice so easy to follow.
Gallacher and the Early Years of the CPGB

Gallacher’s adhesion to the CPGB at the second unity convention in early 1921 brought him the post of vice-president of the party; and this meant that he was soon playing a leading role in the party’s affairs. He soon realised that it was not in the healthiest of states: indeed, it was failing to expand and moving rapidly towards bankruptcy. As he subsequently told it, Gallacher had then to fight against his fellow party leaders to establish a party commission to investigate and report on the position, and to make recommendations; he also had to fight against them in appointing to the commission members relatively independent from the party leadership, who could be expected to offer a more serious critique. Again, this has tended to make Gallacher look like something of a Moscow stooge, since the Comintern clearly wanted a degree of change within the party at this time.

Three points need to be made, however. First, it is clear that, despite Gallacher’s later claims, there was little real resistance to some form of commission from the other leaders of the party, and considerable support for the idea from the party grassroots – in other words, this was not simply a Moscow Diktat. Second, although Gallacher did side with Moscow against his fellow leaders in wanting a commission largely independent of the leadership, this was also the view of the majority at the March 1922 party congress. Finally, it is worth noting that the commission finally appointed – comprising Dutt, Pollitt and Harry Inkpin – was in fact more independent than the Comintern representative in Britain, Michael Borodin, wanted. Indeed, at this stage Gallacher can be seen as being with Dutt and Pollitt as part of a reforming faction who wanted change further and faster than the Comintern did.

The commission did its job, and significant reforms to the party followed. However, the reforming coalition soon began to break down. By late 1923 there were the beginnings of serious divisions. In particular, Gallacher was angered by the decision of the Comintern to replace him as head of the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions with Pollitt. He promptly broke off relations with the reformers and refused to sit on any
committee of which Dutt was a member. Even so, he continued to be a central figure in the party: he was retained on the payroll when others were forced out, and remained a member of the politbureau. It was, perhaps, a sign of a sense that Gallacher could fight the party’s corner with the Comintern that he was selected in June 1925 to be the next representative of the party in Moscow, even though the importance of his work in Britain led to a delay in his dispatch. This was crucial, since it meant that he was still in Britain that October when the government decided to arrest leading Communists, of whom Gallacher was one. He was sentenced to a year in prison and thus excluded from the party’s leadership for the tumultuous events of 1926, when the nine-day General Strike and the six-month coalmining lockout would offer the party an ultimately all-too-brief period of expansion and influence.

Gallacher and Class against Class

The CPGB’s failure to capitalise on the apparent opportunities of 1926 was ultimately to lead it towards a significant leftwards shift. In this move to ‘class against class’, Gallacher’s role was important, but complex. He was a very late convert to all the ramifications of the ‘new line’, and, for some time, resisted strongly pressure from Moscow and sections of the British party to abandon the tactic of the united front. But, once he had accepted the need for change, he had all the zeal of the convert, and – unusually – was able to retain his position as a leading figure without too much difficulty. Ultimately, however, he was to move away from it, gradually, in the light of experience, but also helped by a slight moderation of the Moscow line.

In the aftermath of the failure of the General Strike in 1926, there were strong moves within the party to shift leftwards in recognition of the failure of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) general council, and particularly the left-wingers thereon, to seek the radicalisation of the dispute. In late 1926, Gallacher played a leading part in rebutting criticism from leftists like Murphy and Robin Page Arnot, and in resisting their pressure for a more radical line. For the time being, he and those who agreed with him were largely successful: at the seventh ECCI
plenum (November-December 1926) was able to secure a compromise favourable to the party leadership. Throughout 1927, he continued to resist major change. His chairing of the China Commission at the seventh plenum appears to have made a good impression on the Comintern, and meant that he was probably in a somewhat privileged position for some time to come in their eyes.

Gallacher did, however, start to become increasingly irritated at the party leadership’s enervation as the party lost members, and at one point threatened to emigrate to Canada unless there was a clarification of where the party stood. For the time being, this did not push him towards a more radical political position. Even when the Comintern began to move leftwards at the end of 1927, Gallacher resisted. At meetings in Moscow, he rubbished the views of people like Murphy as the kind of ultras-leftism that Lenin had condemned in *Left-Wing Communism*. In a sense, this was a political act on Gallacher’s part: but it was also charged with emotion, as was typical in his case. He hated Murphy, the leading advocate of change at this point, and this hatred influenced him strongly. Conversely, he loved the memory of Lenin, and felt that this memory was being besmirched. As in 1920, however, his fundamental aim was the promotion of Communism; he was persuadable on tactics. He was fairly confident against apparatchiks like Max Petrovsky (the Comintern representative to the British party) and upstarts like Murphy. But when ‘real’ revolutionaries, like Stalin and Bukharin, spoke out in favour of change that December, Gallacher appears to have panicked temporarily. In Moscow at that time, he and Albert Inkpin, the party secretary, accepted a resolution which shifted the party a long way to the left. But this was a decision taken under pressure and on the hoof. Once back in Britain, he supported Inkpin in arguing that the line was not to be changed very far and, in particular, that they should not oppose the Labour party at every turn, but merely sharpen their criticism of that organisation. In short, he was offering a twist to united front tactics, rather than a root-and-branch shift to class against class. In January 1928, the CPGB’s central committee accepted Gallacher’s presentation of the line by 16 votes to 6.
Gallacher continued to wriggle against the Comintern’s new line during 1928. Even at the ninth ECCI plenum in February 1928 – usually seen as the moment at which the Comintern effectively embraced class against class – he took the view that the existing leadership was safe and that a relatively small step to the left would probably be sufficient. Even so, Gallacher was breaking with the right of the party. In the early months of 1928 he was critical of Andrew Rothstein’s heavy-handed attempts to censure Dutt, and attacked the right-wing editor of the *Workers’ Life*, Tom Wintringham, for his crude attempts to pretend that nothing at all had changed. He further tried to show his loyalty to the Comintern by opposing strongly Murphy’s plans for an intermediate organisation, the National Workers’ Political Federation, between Labour and the Communists.

But Gallacher was still playing his own game. He remained unconvinced of the new line, but realised that he needed to genuflect in its direction if he was to retain Moscow’s confidence. However, he also recognised that a success for united front policies might force a reappraisal of the *detail* of the British party’s tactics. Accordingly, he became the leading Communist in negotiations with left-wing ILPers, like John Wheatley and James Maxton, and the Miners’ Federation Secretary, Arthur Cook, for a campaign against the rightward shift of the Labour party. It was Gallacher who drafted the manifesto for what became known as the Cook-Maxton Campaign. While avoiding too close an identification with the right-wingers on the central committee, whom he continued to criticise, he was still trying to work towards a success for united front policies that would have the effect of blocking the ultra-left’s advance. But the campaign had little hope of success given the imminent prospect of a general election at which Labour could expect to fare well under its existing moderate leadership. It was a flop.

Gallacher, as usual, reacted emotionally. Frustrated and angry with what he saw as the ineptitude and backsliding of Cook and Maxton, he attacked them fiercely. This was the end
of his efforts to resist class against class: indeed, in March 1929 he broke irrevocably with the moderate majority on the central committee. The majority wanted to accept the general terms of the Comintern’s ‘closed letter’ criticising the party’s performance, but to challenge its detailed criticisms. Gallacher joined Idris Cox, Walter Tapsell and William Joss in opposing this tepid response.\(^{38}\)

He had come to support class against class because he could see no better alternative. Clearly, he was influenced by Moscow. He had, after all, spent some months there in 1927-8 as party representative to ECCI, and could see how things were changing in the Soviet Union. He realised that he could not easily remain a leading Communist and resist the new line. At the same time, he had tried – practically rather than rhetorically – to resuscitate the old line, or at least to twist the detail of the new one, through Cook-Maxton. But the failure of that campaign had convinced him, finally, that there was, at least for the time being, no future for the united front. In short, Moscow played a very important part in Gallacher’s political shift. But it also owed something to concrete British realities. And, more uniquely in Gallacher’s cased, it also owed a great deal to a visceral reaction against ‘pseudo-lefts’ like Cook and Maxton.

As in 1920, so in 1929, Gallacher took to the new approach with all the zeal of the convert; as in 1920, he probably welcomed the chance to fight for a fresh and clear line in place of a stale and compromised one. By mid-1929 the increasingly embattled moderate leadership of the party was trying to oust him from the politbureau (although he was able, with Petrovsky’s help, to remain on that body and, indeed, to become one of a new three-member secretariat along with Pollitt and Campbell).\(^{39}\) He was also attacking the moderation of the party’s press.\(^{40}\) Gallacher’s timely change of line had saved him from the fate of his former political apprentice, Campbell. Whereas the latter was thrown off the politbureau at the Leeds Congress in November 1929, Gallacher retained his position and emerged as one of a new, five-member secretariat along with Pollitt, Tapsell, Cox and William Rust.\(^{41}\)
At first, Gallacher’s behaviour in the new leadership was largely indistinguishable from that of the fiercest ultra-leftist. He tried to make class against class work. He was prominent in the vindictive treatment meted out to former right-wing leaders of the party like Rothstein, Inkpin, J. R. Wilson and Ernest Cant. In March 1930 a Comintern agent, Jakob, who had spent four weeks in Britain, reported that the group making all the running in the leadership comprised Gallacher, Rust and Arnot, with Pollitt standing rather awkwardly to one side.

In 1930, however, a number of developments began to propel Gallacher away from the extreme sectarian approach he had taken up. He realised, for one thing, that the new line simply was not working, and that his own association with it was discrediting him. He was strongly criticised, for example, for the failure of the 6 March ‘International Day of Struggle’, yet realised that more than his own failings were to blame. As head of the party’s industrial department, he had raised the perspective of a new red union in mining, yet had gained no significant support for the idea and had been forced into a humiliating withdrawal of it. Dispatched to Bradford for the woollens strike that spring, he found a state of demoralisation within the party there; and although his organising efforts did bring some results, notably the recruitment of over 200 new members, the loss of those members immediately the strike ended suggested the dismal state into which the party was falling. Finally, his abysmal performance as Communist candidate at the Shipley by-election – in the woollens area – that November showed him, once and for all, just how isolated from ‘the masses’ the party had become.

In the face of all this failure, Gallacher’s alliances with the ultra-left began to fragment. Of course, his antipathy towards Dutt was longstanding. But his relations with Rust broke down when Gallacher attacked the dourness of the newly-launched Daily Worker, of which Rust was editor. His relations with Tapsell collapsed over the latter’s failings in the Bradford woollens strike. Conversely, his relationship with Pollitt blossomed. Pollitt was himself
moving towards a more open break with the ultra-left by arguing that the party must work within the reformist unions, while paying its class against class dues by keeping up a stern rhetorical offensive against the Labour party. This suited Gallacher well. The two men came to form a strong alliance, along with Campbell, at the top of the party. Again, emotion and ‘loyalty’ were significant. The leftists had let both Gallacher and the party down: they must be repaid in kind. Pollitt and Campbell, on the other hand, reciprocated Gallacher’s commitment and effort, and therefore they were rewarded with a strong loyalty which, at times, appears to have gone beyond the cold logic of rational political calculation.

Thus it was Gallacher who, returning from Moscow with Pollitt in August 1930, told the Politbureau sternly that it must now regard Pollitt as the party’s leader, in accordance with Comintern wishes, a devastating blow to the ‘young turks’, like Rust and Tapsell, who had been making much of the running hitherto. Gallacher continued to employ the rhetoric of class against class. But beneath this veneer he was working closely with Pollitt and Campbell, who were taking advantage of something of a softening in the Comintern line to reposition the party. This was apparent in his support for the ‘January resolution’ in 1932, and also in his ferocious interventions against Dutt and Rust in the pre-congress discussion of trade unionism later that year, when he accused Dutt of factionalism and acted, in effect, as a shock troop for Pollitt in coming out for the explicit approval of rank-and-file Communist activity within reformist unions. By late 1932, the leftist of 1929-30 could attack sectarianism as ‘an actual cancer eating out the very heart of the Party’.

**Gallacher in the 1930s and the Second World War**

From 1933 onwards, the threat of fascism played an increasingly important part in Communist politics. In this period, Gallacher once again showed that he was influenced by Moscow, but that he was also prepared to think for himself. Indeed, the decade was to culminate in a major row within the party leadership about the line to be taken on the Second World War, and Gallacher, as usual, was in the thick of the action.
There can be no doubt that Gallacher continued to move rightwards during the 1930s. He took a strong line in favour of united front initiatives immediately after the rise of Hitler to power in Germany.\(^5\) He was a keen supporter of the party’s move towards united, and then popular, front work in 1933-5.\(^4\) He appeared on a platform at a peace rally in June 1935 with the right-wing Labour leader, Arthur Henderson.\(^5\) His experiences as MP for the Scottish mining constituency of West Fife (from 1935 onwards) alerted him to the need for the Communists to reassure Christians, and particularly Catholics, that Communism need not be a threat to them.\(^6\)

He remained a strong supporter of Pollitt. There were, naturally, disagreements, as in 1936, when Gallacher criticised the French party’s decision (which Pollitt supported) not to take ministerial posts in the new popular front government.\(^5\) That year, he went further right than Pollitt in advocating closer links with ‘left’ bodies, such as the Socialist League.\(^6\) But, on the party’s basic strategy, they were very largely agreed, and Pollitt was shrewd enough to continue to cultivate his colleague’s loyalty.

Gallacher became widely known in British public life, due to his election to parliament in 1935. He had stood for various seats in the 1920s, but never come close to victory. In 1931, though, he stood for the Scottish mining constituency of West Fife against the sitting Labour MP, Willie Adamson. Adamson was a right-wing miners’ leader who had been important in the splits that had taken place in the Fife mining union, culminating in the creation of the Communist-led United Mineworkers of Scotland. Gallacher polled sufficient votes to ensure that Adamson lost the seat, although not well enough to win it himself, a Conservative benefiting from the split left vote.\(^6\) The Communist party was increasingly interested in parliament as a platform from this time onwards, and in 1933 agreed that it would take elections much more seriously than hitherto.\(^6\) In early 1935 there was a proposal that Gallacher should be sent to Moscow as the ECCI representative, but this was resisted by the
Comintern: one of its leading officials, Dmitri Manuilsky, asked ‘Why should we always have to hear him, why not the bourgeoisie?’ At that November’s general election, he was one of only two CP candidates – the rest having been withdrawn in the interests of ‘unity’ – and won the seat, beating both the Conservative MP and Adamson.

As the party’s sole MP, Gallacher was soon accorded a unique status, and a public profile outside the party which could be rivalled only by Pollitt himself. The party, for its part, was proud of its parliamentary representative, and made a lot of him. In the 1920s, the party’s longest-serving MP had been Shapurji Saklatvala, an Indian Parsee who sat as MP for Battersea North in 1922-3 and again between 1924 and 1929. Saklatvala had been a popular figure in his constituency, but had found it hard to make much of an impact in parliament, and had attracted criticism from within the party and in Moscow. The fact that he was no more than a marginal figure in the party leadership did not help; nor, of course, did the party’s ambivalence towards parliamentarism, which was more marked in the 1920 than it was to be a decade later. In addition, though, he had found it temperamentally difficult to come to terms with being the party’s only MP, or to push himself forward in debate. By the time Gallacher became an MP, the party’s attitude towards parliament was less hostile. In addition, Gallacher himself was far less diffident than Saklatvala had been, and was also a central figure in the party leadership. All of this made him qualitatively a very different proposition from the Communist MPs who had gone before him, to the extent that both Pollitt and James Shields described him, at the subsequent politbureau meeting, as ‘the first Communist MP’.

Gallacher proved to be a very energetic MP. He was obviously the representative of his party, and participated in many of the major debates of the period. He was also a conscientious constituency MP, however – indeed, it was his assiduous cultivation of West Fife that helped to explain why he was elected in the first place. For fifteen years, and across the whole gamut of issues, Gallacher could be found making speeches, asking questions and interrupting
those he felt were impugning himself, his party or ‘the working class’. Manuilsky’s wish of 1935, that ‘the bourgeoisie’ should be made to ‘hear’ Gallacher, was amply fulfilled.

But parliament did not just bring Gallacher fame (or notoriety). It also brought him a degree of autonomy, whether he liked it or not. As will be seen below, his position as the party’s sole MP was to save him from the temporary eclipse suffered by both Pollitt and Campbell at the time of the change of line in 1939. But it could also force him to take up positions in public that, willy-nilly, committed him thereafter. As an MP, he had sometimes to respond immediately to new developments, or to the provocations of his political opponents. A good example of this came over the conscription controversy on 27 April 1939, when the Conservative Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, quoted a French Communist to try to show up Gallacher:

The Prime Minister (Mr. Chamberlain): … I do not think that anyone can read the papers of this morning, can read the extracts from the foreign Press, without realising that the statement of the Government’s intentions [to introduce compulsory military service] has brought confidence, relief and encouragement to all our friends in Europe. I noticed, in particular, a passage in a Communist newspaper in France. M. Gabriel Péri said –

Mr. Gallacher: I repudiate him right away.

The Prime Minister: M. Gabriel Péri said:

‘It is impossible to contest the importance of the British decision. As long as this decision was not taken Britain’s promises to Poland, Rumania and Greece were of a more symbolic than practical character.’

Thus Gallacher was committed in public by a characteristically knee-jerk response: and, later in the debate, he continued to emphasise his repudiation of Péri, interrupting a Labour MP to say that ‘no matter what happens in my country I will stand by the workers in this country, and oppose conscription and oppose the Prime Minister’; and he voted with the Labour opposition against conscription. The only problem was that Péri spoke with the authority of
the French Communist party and the Comintern in Moscow. This, in turn, led to a crisis within the CPGB. The central committee, by a majority and in the face of a threat of resignation from Pollitt, repudiated Gallacher’s position. Gallacher was incandescent with rage.\textsuperscript{68}

It seems that, by this stage, and like Pollitt, Gallacher’s faith in the Soviet Union was beginning to be a little shaken.\textsuperscript{69} Again, notions of reciprocal loyalty were important. He was prepared to sacrifice a great deal for the USSR, but the condition for this was that the Soviets treated him, and his fellow British Communists, with a degree of loyalty and respect in return. But Soviet behaviour was rather different from this. For one thing, Gallacher had been shocked by some aspects of the Soviet Terror. He appears to have been somewhat surprised at the extent to which the Comintern itself was purged in 1937-8. In particular, the arrest of Rose Cohen, a British Communist whom he knew well and who was married to Petrovsky (himself purged) roused him to make representations to the British Foreign Office and with the Comintern itself.\textsuperscript{70} The Comintern’s interference (via the French) in the conscription controversy reinforced this impression. Indeed, Gallacher appears to have been so disgusted by the intervention that he refused to attend the meetings at which the CPGB formally changed its line.\textsuperscript{71} It is important not to go too far: Gallacher never questioned publicly any aspect of what was happening in the USSR, and continued to make the ‘correct’ noises about the Comintern. In private, however, his misgivings, combined with a sharper anger over the conscription issue, may well have pushed him to such a position that he was ready briefly to defy the Comintern, or at any rate its more slavish followers within his own party, later in the year.

In that crisis, it was Gallacher’s public profile, specifically his position as the party’s only MP, that allowed him greater leeway than other critics of the party’s actions. Following the outbreak of war in September 1939, as is well known, the party initially issued statements supporting the British and French war effort against Germany, while calling for a new
government instead of the Chamberlain-led National administration. However, under the influence of Moscow and also feeling misgivings about repeating the ‘social patriotism’ of 1914, the central committee then reversed the party’s position at a fateful meeting on 2-3 October. At this meeting, CC members lined up one after another to back the new ‘imperialist war’ line. The only three members who stood out against the change were Pollitt, Campbell, and Gallacher.

The fact that Gallacher opposed the change of line is instructive of his attitude towards the Comintern and the party at this point. There were a number of reasons for Gallacher’s attitude. First, while he realised that the Comintern must be taken seriously, ‘it d[id] not follow that there should be a mechanical acceptance’. In this he was merely taking the line that the party had now come increasingly to a position of maturity, and reflecting his own experiences that the Comintern was one, but only one, factor in the thinking of the CPGB. Second, he actually believed in the ‘war on two fronts’ line supported by Pollitt, ridiculing Dutt’s suggestion that there was nothing to choose between Britain and Nazi Germany: ‘The Fascists and Nazis do not exist to bring about a Soviet Germany’. Third, he was concerned that the new line would isolate the party within the broader working-class movement, as had been the case with the class against class period. Fourth, he felt a clear sense of loyalty towards Pollitt; and, conversely, he was disgusted by the behaviour of those who were, to all intents and purposes, seeking to overthrow him. His contributions to the CC’s discussions are littered with the apoplectic language of which he was so capable: he had ‘never … known anything so rotten, so mean, so despicable, so dirty’; he had ‘never … listened to a more unscrupulous and opportunist speech’ than that of Dutt; he had ‘never had … such evidence of mean despicable disloyalty’ as that demonstrated by Dutt, Rust and Springhall. (Indeed, he declared his unwillingness to work with any of those three in future.) Thus he voted against the change. However, on Pollitt’s suggestion, Gallacher’s name was then recorded as having been in favour of the change: significantly, he blamed Gallacher’s well-known
‘temperament’ for his decision to vote the other way, and in effect stated that, as the party’s only MP, he must not be driven from the party leadership.  

It is worth noting, however, that Gallacher said little about the imperialist war interpretation after his vote was recorded in favour of it. Speaking in the House of Commons immediately after the central committee had changed the line, he was clearly very uncomfortable, and allowed himself to be baited by members of the left-wing anti-Communist Independent Labour party (ILP), who themselves were taking a rather more consistent anti-war line. He remained angry with Dutt, Rust and Springhall, and looked forward to the day when Pollitt would return. In July 1940, he was keen to change the line after the fall of France, even to the extent of seeking Foreign Office permission to travel to Moscow, ostensibly to persuade Stalin to come into the war on Britain’s side, but really to test the water for a change of line. Although there was, ultimately, no formal change, Gallacher’s speeches after the fall of France became much more anti-fascist and defencist in tone. He stressed the need to root out fifth columnists, who had been partly to blame for the collapse of French resistance to the German invasion. He also emphasised the need for a new people’s government, purged of appeasers: this would be better able to pursue ‘the welfare and he defence of the people’, and also to reach agreement with the Soviet Union. Most of his speeches were much less about the ‘big issue’ of the war per se, and much more about the concrete problems that the war situation presented to the working class. Once the Soviet Union was invaded in June 1941, no-one was a more enthusiastic advocate of the line that the war must be won at all costs.

After 1945
At the 1945 general election, Gallacher retained West Fife. There had been hopes that a few more Communists would join him in parliament, but in the event only Phil Piratin, who won Mile End in East London, did so. Worse still, in many ways, the massive parliamentary majority won by Labour meant that any hopes of a Communist-fellow-travelling bloc forcing a weak Labour government’s hand came to nothing. Gallacher lost his seat by a landslide in
1950, and Piratin was also defeated. In West Fife, the onset of the Cold War clearly played a part, although Gallacher himself was inclined to believe that the major reason was the coalminers’ gratitude towards the Labour government for having nationalised the mines. Thereafter, no Communist ever won a parliamentary election in Britain again.

After 1945, Gallacher remained a loyal Communist. He was loyal to his leaders, as much to John Gollan from 1956 as to Harry Pollitt up to that point. He was loyal to the Soviet Union, as much so after the events of 1956 as before. Indeed, it is possible to argue that he was much more straightforwardly loyal to Moscow after 1945 than he had been before 1939. In his writings and speeches he often simply repeated the mantras of Soviet propaganda, such as ‘Yankee imperialism’, as the Cold War developed. This increasingly formulaic approach to politics appears to have had a number of causes. First, the Second World War had swept away any earlier misgivings about the nature of the Soviet system. The sheer scale of the USSR’s war effort, and its obviously central role in the defeat of fascism and Nazism, seemed to speak for itself. Furthermore, the expansion of the Communist world, to Eastern Europe and then China, from 1945 onwards seemed to show the success of the system. For a man like Gallacher, who was, perhaps, always more interested in results than in the theoretical niceties of how they were achieved, this was quite enough to conclude any arguments.

Further, the onset of the Cold War seemed to offer the prospect of a new conflict even more destructive than that which had just been waged; and therefore it was a time for Communists to pull together, not argue over details. There may also have been an element of reaction to the renewed rejection of Communists after a brief period of respectability (or at least semi-respectability) during the period after 1941. Between then and early 1945, Gallacher had been more a part of the political ‘mainstream’ than he had ever been before or would be again, jostling amiably with MPs of other parties at Soviet Embassy receptions or turning up to the funeral of veteran socialist and Liberal John Burns, and so on. After a life spent on the outside, this must have been welcome relief; and its withdrawal must therefore have been felt
all the more keenly. Finally, Gallacher’s age must be taken into account. He was advancing in years – he was 64 in 1945, 75 in 1956 – and had lost both his adopted sons in action during the Second World War. Perhaps some of the fight was going out of him: and he might well have calculated that, on a world scale, his generation of Communists had done well enough for now. In this sense, the oft-remarked ‘consolidationism’ of Herbert Morrison and others within the Labour party had its counterpart in the Gallacher generation of leaders within the CPGB.

The other key feature of this period, so far as Gallacher was concerned, was that it saw him continue and complete the construction of himself as an historical figure. This process had begun seriously on his election to parliament: its first significant product had been his first autobiography, *Revolt on the Clyde*, published in 1936. This book was in many ways tendentious, to say the least. It focussed heavily on the period of the Clyde Workers’ Committee and the formation of the CPGB. It glossed over numerous issues. And it said very little about the inner workings of the CPGB, the Comintern, or the class against class period which was, by the mid-1930s, seen as an embarrassment in the context of a CP fighting for closer links with Labour and the unions. It remains, all the same, a powerful book, and its central message – that militancy without the correct theoretical and organisational framework was ultimately futile – fitted well with both the party’s needs and Gallacher’s own political outlook. The book was to be followed by a whole series of further volumes which mixed autobiography and current comment, and which further honed Gallacher’s reputation as a working-class militant come loyal Communist. Some of these volumes added less than others, but his posthumously-published *Last Memoirs* (1966) did offer significantly more detail on a number of points than had been available hitherto (and offer far better insights and information than the more iconic *Revolt*). However, the taboos remained: for example, the narrative ended, effectively, in 1950, so that points of current or recent controversy were largely excluded. The Gallacher who bequeathed himself to History was a figure carefully constructed in the last thirty years of Gallacher’s life, by no-one more than Gallacher himself.
Conclusion

In his capacity as President of the Communist party, Gallacher was one of the main speakers at Harry Pollitt’s funeral in July 1960. Approaching his eightieth year, the one-time Clydeside rebel remained publicly optimistic about the future for the party:

[Pollitt’s] comrades, while they mourn, will pledge themselves to carry forward the task to which he set his hand – a Socialist Britain, free and independent, and a good and peaceful neighbour to all other lands.

And with this pledge in my heart I take my last farewell.92

Yet by 1960 Britain was experiencing almost full employment; living standards for the great majority were rising significantly; and the party, while still having more than 25,000 members, was largely marginal to British life. When Gallacher himself died, five years later, party membership was at a higher level than it would ever be again.93 The party itself was by no means insignificant in the 1960s and 1970s, but the high hopes that had inspired a Scottish brass moulder in early middle age to stow away aboard a ship for Russia in 1920 had not been fulfilled.

Gallacher was not a ‘great’ politician. He lacked the theoretical abilities of a Dutt or a Murphy; he was not in the same league as Pollitt and Campbell when it came to organisation. He could be an effective operator, but all too often he thought with his fists, viscerally rather than cerebrally. But he was significant and does repay study. First, he was a good example of a working-class militant coming into the CPGB and remaining within it. Second, he represented to some extent the way in which many of those militants moved from the ideological and organisational eclecticism of the 1910s into the much more rigid forms represented by Communism. Third, he played a leading role in the party for many years: indeed, he was the only figure between 1921 and the 1950s who never really fell out of the
leading group. Fourth, he was, certainly from 1930 onwards, a leadership loyalist, successively to Pollitt and Gollan, and played a significant part in enabling them to run the party as effectively as they did. Fifth, he was the party’s longest serving, and most prominent, Member of Parliament. But, finally, Gallacher was significant as an illustration of the ways in which a loyal Communist was affected, not just by ‘orders from Moscow’, but also by the objective situation in his own country and by his own ideological inheritance. Willie Gallacher was, in sum, a more significant and complex figure than either the relative neglect of his career by historians, or its misrepresentation by Gallacher himself, warrants.

2 William Gallacher: Born in Paisley, Scotland, in 1881, he first became a leading figure in the Scottish Labour movement during the First World War, when he was acting Chairman of the Clyde Workers’ Committee. He attended the Second World Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1920, where he met Lenin and became a convinced advocate of the newly-formed CPGB; as such, he played a leading role in bringing Scottish Communists into the CPGB at the second unity convention in early 1921, and became the party’s vice-president. In the latter role, he played a leading role in securing the party’s reorganisation in 1922; he also played an important part in relations between the CPGB and the Comintern, and chaired the Comintern’s important commission on China in 1926. In 1929, he was one of the few members of the ‘old’ party leadership to emerge relatively unscathed from the party’s change of line towards a more sectarian position. During the 1930s, he remained a leading Communist, his importance being enhanced by his election as MP for West Fife at the 1935 general election. He held the seat until 1950. He acted as party chairman, 1943-56, and president, 1956-63, and remained active in Communist politics right up to his death in 1965. For further biographical details see W. W. Knox, *Scottish Labour Leaders, 1918-1939* (1984); B. Lazitch and M. M. Drachkovitch, *Biographical Dictionary of the Comintern* (rev. edn., Stanford, CA, 1986); E. T. Williams and C. S. Nicholls (eds.), *Dictionary of National Biography, 1961-70* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 415-16.

3 See e.g. H. Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (1958), p. 113, where it is wrongly stated that Gallacher ‘took over as [CPGB] general secretary for a time’ in 1939.

The one study that focuses on Gallacher, a collection of essays published in Communist East Berlin shortly after his death, compounds, rather than eases, the problems outlined here: see P. M. Kemp-Ashraf and J. Mitchell (eds.), *Essays in Honour of William Gallacher* (Berlin, 1966). Something of the tone of this publication can be gleaned from the comment contained within it that Gallacher was ‘the most beloved Scotsman of all times’: R. McIlhone, ‘That man Gallacher’, *ibid.*, p. 57.


V. I. Lenin, ‘*Left-Wing* Communism, an Infantile Disorder’ (1920; Moscow, 1970), p. 93.


Russian Centre for the for the Preservation and Study of Contemporary Historical Documents, Moscow [hereafter RC], 495/100/5, fo. 44, WES, Amsterdam, to ‘The Communists of Great Britain’, n.d. [Feb. 1920].


20 See e.g. Gallacher, *Revolt*, p. 252-3.


22 Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt*, p. 47.

23 RC 495/100/53, fo. 42, Borodin to ECCI Presidium, 24 June 1922.


25 RC 495/100/104, fo. 118, politbureau minutes, 6 November 1923; CP/CENT/CONG/01/06, ‘Report of the central executive committee presented to the national party congress’, May 1924.

26 RC 495/100/227, fos. 87-8, Inkpin to Comintern secretariat, 18 June 1925.


28 RC 495/100/346, fo. 95, CEC 21-2 November 1926.

29 RC 495/100/425, fo. 216, Rothstein to Petrovsky, 2 June 1927.


31 NMLH CP/IND/DUTT/15/01, ‘Resolution agreed at meeting of small commission of Presidium with G. and I.’, 15 December 1927.


33 RC 495/100/493, CEC 7-9 January 1928.

34 RC 495/100/485, fo. 20, Gallacher to Inkpin, 18 February 1928.

35 RC 495/100/497, fo. 56, PB 6 March 1928; fo. 60, PB 9 March 1928.
36 RC 495/100/520, fos. 65-8, Gallacher’s marginal notes on Murphy, ‘Memorandum on ECCI plenum resolution of February, 1928’, n.d. [March 1928].
38 RC 495/100/617, fos. 27-9, Campbell to Bell, 4 April 1929.
41 NMLH, reel 11, PB 2 January 1930.
42 See e.g. RC 495/100/673, fo. 53, PB 23 January 1930.
45 NMLH, reel 11, PB 13 March 1930; RC 495/100/673, fos. 144-52, PB 27 March 1930
48 RC 495/100/673, fos. 68-70, PB 30 January 1930.
50 NMLH, reel 11, PB 28 August 1930.
51 For a fuller discussion of this, see Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, pp. 156-85.
52 NMLH, reel 13, PB 17 September, 4-5 October 1932.
53 NMLH, reel 14, PB 9 March 1933.
54 See e.g. NMLH, reel 15, PB 15 November 1934.


57 NMLH, reel 16, PB 21 May 1936.

58 NMLH, reel 7, CC 10 October 1936.

59 1931 result: C. Milne (Conservative) 12,977 (42.1%); W. Adamson (Labour) 11,063 (35.8%); W. Gallacher (Communist) 6,829 (22.1%). Conservative majority 1,914 (6.3%).

60 NMLH, reel 14, PB 7-8 September 1933.

61 NMLH, reel 15, PB 2 March 1935.

62 1935 result: W. Gallacher (Communist) 13,462 (37.4%); W. Adamson (Labour) 12,869 (35.7%); C. Milne (Conservative) 9,667 (26.9%). Communist majority 593 (1.7%).


64 NMLH, reel 15, PB 21 November 1935.


66 *House of Commons Debates*, 5 series, vol. 346, col. 1348, 27 April 1939. I am grateful to Dr Kevin Morgan for this reference.


69 For Pollitt, see *ibid.*, p. 247.


73 Ibid., p. 93.

74 Ibid., p. 95.

75 McShane and Smith, *Harry McShane*, p. 233.

76 King and Matthews, *About Turn*, pp. 93, 100, 101.

77 Ibid., p. 296.

78 Ibid., p. 299.

79 See e.g. W. Gallacher, *Five Speeches* (n.d. [1940]).


81 McShane and Smith, *Harry McShane*, p. 233.


85 W. Gallacher, *Five Speeches*.

86 1945 result: W. Gallacher (Communist) 17,636 (42.1%); W. W. Hamilton (Labour) 15,580 (37.3%); R. S. Stevenson (National Liberal) 8,597 (20.6%). Communist majority 2,056 (4.8%).


88 1950 result: W. W. Hamilton (Labour) 23,576 (54.8%); P. W. N. Fraser (National Liberal and Conservative) 10,131 (23.6%); W. Gallacher (Communist) 9,301 (21.6%). Labour majority 13,445 (31.2%).


90 See e.g. W. Gallacher, *The Case for Communism* (1948); *The Tyrants’ Might is Passing* (1954).
91 House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George papers, LG/G/25/3, A. J. Sylvester to David Lloyd George, 9 November 1943; Harris papers, HRS/2, Sir Percy Harris, diary, 28 January 1943.
