The ‘Third Period’, the Sixth Congress and the Elimination of Opposition, 1928–9

The Comintern announced the ‘Third Period’ at the end of the 1920s. The first period had been after the Bolshevik Revolution, when revolution was possible in several countries. The second period, in the early 1920s, had been marked by the ‘stabilisation’ of world capitalism and the need for united-front tactics to gain influence among the working class. The Seventh ECCI Plenum in late 1926 declared that a new period of revolution had begun, and over the next several years Communist parties began to adopt ‘left’ tactics, including denouncing social democrats as ‘social fascists’ and refusing to work with or vote for them under the slogan ‘class against class’. In many countries, Communists split from established trade unions with social-democratic leaderships, and formed ‘red’ unions.

The Third Period confused many Communists, and still confuses historians. While Stalinism, at bottom, was a right-wing development in the Communist movement, abandoning the perspective of world revolution, this was masked by ‘leftist’ Third Period rhetoric. For many Communists, the Third Period must have appeared to be a return to the militancy of the post-war revolutionary period, especially since Third Period concepts seemed to echo the language of early Communism, even if their application was different.1 Like Stalinism as a whole, the ideology of the Third Period evolved to fit the needs of the Soviet bureaucracy, so that it meant different things at different times.

The origins of this turn are also hard to tease out. In domestic Soviet terms, it reflected Stalin’s move against Bukharin and the ‘right’ in favour of industrialisation and collectivisation. It was also an attempt to deal with the danger posed by a growing layer of wealthy peasants (‘kulaks’) hostile to the Soviet government. The turn also undercut Trotsky’s Left Opposition by adopting elements of its programme, usually in more extreme (and brutal) forms. By the end of the Third Period and the turn towards the ‘Popular Front’ (in 1934–5), Stalin was the unrivalled head of the Soviet Union.

On international terms, the Third Period reflected the failure of open class-collaborationism that had lead to disasters, such as the British general strike in May 1926 and the Shanghai massacre in April 1927. Although the Third Period

1 See Worley 2004, pp. 3, 6.
was ultimately aimed at the Bukharinite ‘right danger’, Bukharin remained the leading Comintern ideologue through 1929 and helped to lay the basis for the turn. This chapter does not intend to unpack all the nuances of the period. Rather, it will examine how the rise of Third Period Stalinism affected the American Communist Party. The nature of the intervention of the Communist International—now more openly led by Stalin—was new. Instead of offering political guidance and trying to persuade dissident Communists, the Comintern insisted on ‘subordination’ and ‘loyalty’, and threatened harsh discipline against those who did not submit.

In early 1928, Lovestone and his faction were in charge of the American party and enjoyed the apparent support of the Russian leadership. In the first portion of 1928, the party’s main concerns were the coal miners’ union, the needle trades unions, and the upcoming elections. In May, Pepper returned to the US, and (under the name Swift) resumed his place in the Political Committee.

During this time, Trotskyism appeared to have no support in the party except for Antoinette Konikow in Boston, some Jewish leftists on the fringe of the party, and vilified ex-Communists such as Lore and Eastman. This did not stop Engdahl, in Moscow, from criticising the party’s leadership for a tepid anti-Trotsky campaign. In response, the party stepped up its efforts, largely under the direction of Wolfe. In early 1928, he drew up a twenty-page outline of a presentation against Trotsky, along with a covering note requesting reports from branch meetings on how members voted on anti-Trotsky motions.

At a February 1928 CEC plenum, Wolfe gave an hour-long presentation on the fight in the Russian party, and the plenum approved a two-and-a-half-page motion against the Russian opposition. This was not aimed at any