Conclusion

This study ends with the expulsion of Lovestone in 1929 and the subsequent Browder leadership. In addition to ending the party’s first decade, this marked a qualitative change in the party: the party leadership was now fully Stalinised. Any opposition to Stalin’s leadership, be it from the right or left, was expelled. The party accepted without opposition Stalinist concepts such as ‘socialism in one country’ and the right of ‘self-determination’ for American black people, as well as the ideology of the Third Period.

In some ways, the Stalinist nature of the American Communist Party is obvious. Yet recall that Stalinism means more than loyalty to the dictates of Stalin. The Stalinisation of American Communism meant its transformation from a party dedicated to workers’ revolution into a social-democratic party that sought to pressure the American government for policies benefitting the Soviet government. The reformist, social-democratic aspects of Stalinism were clear in the popular-front period in the mid-1930s. In the five years of the Third Period, however, this was not the case.

During this period, the CP’s rhetoric was the most revolutionary it had ever been, at least since the heady days of the Red Scare. According to one study of Communist pamphlets: ‘By January 1930 the American Communist Party had launched a propaganda campaign to convince Americans that the social and economic crisis of the Depression necessitated a communist revolution’. In 1932, Foster published a book, Toward Soviet America. No wonder one historian titled his study of this period ‘A Final Stab at Insurrection’. (Although it should be noted that this ‘insurrection’ was more rhetorical than real: the CP never attempted to seize power, a move that would have been suicidal in the United States).1

Certainly, many Communists took the revolutionary rhetoric of the Third Period at face value. The study of Communist pamphlets identified several characteristics of this propaganda that must have appealed to revolutionaries: an emphasis on revolution and class struggle; a focus on Marxist theory (albeit as interpreted through Stalin); attacks on Democratic politicians (including President Roosevelt); polemics against Socialists and trade-union leaders for betraying the working class. Instead of trying to make alliances with liberals and petty-bourgeois intellectuals and professionals, the Communists stressed the need to destroy capitalism and replace it with socialism. In its actions too the party appeared revolutionary. Communists were at their most

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1 Burgchardt 1980, p. 376; Foster 1932; Ryan 2004. See also Bellush and Bellush 1980.
heroic during this period, as they formed militant unions against the AFL, fought Jim Crow, and organised the unemployed. Although marked by ideological errors and eccentricities such as dual unionism, ‘self-determination’ for black Americans, and the belief that the collapse of capitalism was posed, the Third Period in the United States had more positive effects than in other countries. In fact, the problems with the Third Period were more immediate and more apparent for Communists outside the US. For example, the theory of ‘social fascism’ contributed to the German Communists’ refusal to organise against the rise of Hitler, demonstrating that the Comintern in the early 1930s was anything but revolutionary. This illustrates the importance of viewing the American Communist Party within an international context: the anti-revolutionary nature of the Third Period is less obvious in the United States, where there was little chance of revolution, than in European countries that faced revolutionary situations.\(^2\)

It may appear strange, then, to pose the Stalinisation of the CP in the early 1930s as an abandonment of a revolutionary perspective. This is one reason that Cannon and his Trotskyist followers had a hard time recruiting dissident Communists in this period. Communists believed that they were fighting for Communism. Nonetheless, many of the party’s leaders had already accepted the idea that their role was to serve as a transmission belt between the Stalinist Comintern and the American party. Thus, when the Comintern officially abandoned the Third Period in favour of the popular front, the same leaders had no problem courting the same ‘social fascists’ whom they had opposed until recently. Above all, the contradictions of the CP in the early 1930s demonstrate that Stalinisation was neither an obvious nor smooth process. However, by 1929 the programmatic and organisational foundation had been laid for the party’s subsequent social-democratisation.

This poses the issue of the main tragedy of the American Communist Party. Although the party was hindered by various internal weaknesses—especially factionalism—it is unlikely that anything the party could have done by itself could have broken through the conservatism of the period and ‘made a revolution’. Intensive Comintern guidance, on a political and tactical level, helped the party hold out during this period. As Michael Goldfield has argued, in this context, the party’s accomplishments in the decade, although disparaged by

\(^2\) Burgchardt 1980; like most scholars, Burgchardt is critical of the Third Period. The few sympathetic scholarly treatments of this period include R.D. Green and Isaacson 2012 and J. Green 1972; see also Devinatz 2007. Writers on the CP’s work among blacks tend to be more sympathetic to the Third Period; see Goldfield 1980, Goldfield 1985; Kelley 1990.