Editors’ note: In the trajectory of the Lovestone group over the four years stretching from the beginning of 1937 to the end of 1940 – as its very axis slips away – we can see a significant leftward shift followed by an even more dramatic veering to the right, and eventual collapse.

‘One Soviet tractor is worth more than 10 good foreign Communists’, was a comment circulating among highly placed Communists in the USSR during the first Five-Year Plan (1928–32), a comment which Isaac Deutscher suggests ‘reflected the tenor of the intimate talk about the Comintern in Stalin’s entourage’. Of course, the first Five-Year plan involved the implementation of Stalin’s ‘revolution from above’ that pushed through the forced collectivisation of land (generating famine and millions of peasant deaths) and the rapid industrialisation policies, all of which was projected as Stalin’s orientation of ‘building socialism in one country’. This had been a major dividing line between Stalin and Trotsky, around which the Lovestoneites had taken Stalin’s side, just as they had supported ‘the general line’ of the first Five-Year Plan, designed to create ‘socialism’, which for Stalin meant a modernising transformation of Russia from an agricultural backwater into an industrial power. Yet it was Stalin’s orientation, backed by the Lovestone group, that ended up cutting the ground out from under them. The contempt for the Comintern, reflected in the remark about tractors, was in turn reflected in the Soviet leaders’ tightening of their domination over its member parties, the better to manipulate them in the interests of the USSR’s foreign policy; that foreign policy – after the disastrous consequences of ‘Third Period’ policies – would by 1935–6 swing into the direction of shrugging off class struggles and revolutionary possibilities in order to secure anti-Hitler alliances with ‘democratic’ capitalist governments. In the title of one of his last studies, historian E.H. Carr aptly labelled this period as ‘the twilight of the Comintern’. At the same time, back in the USSR, authoritarianism and brutality, necessary features of the ruthless modernisation policies of Stalin’s ‘revolution from above’, had closed off any pluralistic tendencies within the Soviet leadership and directly contributed to the initiation of the bloody repressions and purge trials that began with erstwhile allies of Trotsky (Zinoviev and Kamenev), to which the Lovestoneites could give at least uneasy support, but ultimately extended to their own ally Nikolai Bukharin.1

The general denigration and devaluation of the Communist International, and of its member parties, as an actual or potential revolutionary force would naturally pose a serious threat to Lovestone and his co-thinkers. These would-be revolutionaries had – along with Lenin and other leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution – devoted ‘the whole of their lives’ to this global entity to which, since 1929, they had been seeking readmission. In the excerpts offered here from Lovestone’s scathing critique, ‘The People’s Front Illusion’, we can see a group fighting for its very raison d’être. The critique is extended in the Lovestoneite defence, in the Spanish Civil War (1936–9), of the revolutionary-socialist orientation of their co-thinkers and comrades in the United Marxist Workers Party (POUM), led by International Communist Opposition militant Juan Marín and former Trotskyist Andrés Nin. Examples provided here are a classic report by the anonymous eyewitness, ‘Lambda’, on ‘The Truth of the Barcelona Events’ (introduced by Bertram D. Wolfe), and Will Herberg’s ‘Jacobin Defence in the Spanish Civil War’ – but Wolfe himself went to Spain, producing the short book *Civil War in Spain*, which also reprinted excerpts from George Orwell’s just-published book *Homage to Catalonia*. Their reports of the Soviet-Stalinist repression of revolutionaries in Spain overlapped with a dramatic shift in the Lovestoneite discussion of Stalin’s purge trials. Lovestone’s ‘The Meaning of the Soviet “Purge” Trials’ (July 1937) continued to give credence to charges against Zinoviev, Kamenev and others in the first purge trials of 1936 (and commended Stalin’s ‘great contributions to the growth and progress of the USSR and to the cause of the international labour movement’), but sharply challenged the second round of trials in 1937 as reflecting authoritarian weaknesses of the Stalin regime. In the following year, however, there was a third round of trials which targeted their old friend, Nikolai Bukharin. ‘Workers Age’ now ran an editorial – ‘Another Moscow Trial! A Statement’ – which denounced all of the trials and announced that ‘Stalin’s reactionary crusade of bureaucratic self-preservation is bringing havoc and devastation to the Soviet Union’, while Bertram D. Wolfe headlined his comments (made at a public meeting organised by the heretofore shunned Trotskyists) with the generalisation: ‘Stalinism Menaces World Labor Movement’.3

---

2 Wolfe 1937.
3 Serious studies which provide corroboration of their account, in addition to the work of E.H. Carr previously cited, include Broué and Termine 2008, Bolloten 1991 and Durgan 2007. The purge-trials in the USSR are dealt with in works by Deutscher, Tucker and Cohen previously cited, as well as in: Medvedev 1989, pp. 327–519; Getty and Naumov 1999; Rogovin 1998 and Rogovin 2009.