We would ask whether it is not positively ridiculous to trumpet calls for revolution into the world this way, without sense or understanding, without knowledge or consideration of circumstances.

Marx and Engels¹

[The Third Period] is of extraordinary importance for us today. It illustrates and illuminates the whole problem of sectarianism – it is the only large scale example of a fundamental cleavage within the leadership. . . . It is, in short, a period rich in historical experience and one that must become part of the political heritage of all our activists. . . . The New Line as it developed was based upon the theory of ‘social-fascism’ – and the first necessity in the approach to these years must be an assessment of this theory.

John Saville²

The summer 1999 issue of Historical Materialism included a review article by Matthew Worley in which he reflected on recent evaluations of the history of

¹ Marx and Engels 1976, p. 294.
the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).\textsuperscript{3} In a journal with this title and the explanatory rubric ‘research in critical Marxist theory’, I anticipated an essay in socialist historiography. My expectations were encouraged by the quotation from Marx and the declaration from John Saville urging the necessity for Marxist politics and Marxist history which prefaces Worley’s piece. For those of us who still believe that, however difficult its realisation may be, ‘another world is possible’, meticulous assessment of the party of the Russian Revolution which engaged some of the best militants of the British working class in the intractable task of building a socialist Britain, is a matter of more than academic interest. Critical understanding of its political trajectory from its foundation in 1920 to its collapse seventy years later remains an indispensable part of educating new generations of workers in the immense and immensely varied problems of creating socialist organisations on both a national and international basis.

In seeking to contribute to this project, socialist historians strive to recover, evoke and explain the past to better help us comprehend the human condition, understand the present and construct the future. Perceiving history as ontological and political, they seek to educate, to inspire and instruct. In doing this, they bring not dogmatism but scholarship to their writing, to their use of sources, interpretations and assessments. If the extent to which we can learn direct, specific lessons from the very different circumstances of other times is questionable, the elusive, complex truths of the past can be weapons in the struggle today; they must be fought for forensically. But socialist historians bring socialist values to their interpretations and assessments. Without reducing the uniqueness of the past and its people, denying its difference or pillaging it for parables, they make judgements based on these values.

For my own part, the indispensable framework in which I locate the CPGB is that of the Russian Revolution and its degeneration. From my studies of British Communism, I conclude that what was fundamental in shaping the CPGB, its politics, culture and ethos was, despite the impact of very real national pressures, its relationship with the USSR. What was primary in its development was the hegemony of Russian politics – politics which came to reflect the isolation and subsequent undermining of the revolution and the

\textsuperscript{3} Worley 1999. Thanks to Ian Birchall and Alan Campbell for valuable comments on this essay.