

Abstract

Through the inter-war period, the USSR became an example of 'socialism in action' that the British labour movement could both look towards and define itself against. British visitors both criticized and acclaimed aspects of the new Soviet state between 1919 and 1925, but a consistently exceptional finding was the Soviet prison. Analyzing the visits and reports of British guests to Soviet prisons, the aims of this article are threefold. Using new material from the Russian archives, it demonstrates the development of an intense admiration for, and often a desire to replicate, the Soviet penal system on the part of Labour members, future Communists, and even Liberals who visited Soviet Russia. It also critically examines why, despite such admiration, the effect of Soviet penal ideas failed to significantly influence Labour Party policy in this area. Finally, placing these views within a broader framework of the British labour movement's internal tussles over the competing notions of social democracy and communism, it is argued that a failure to affect policy should not proscribe reappraisals of these notions or the Soviet-Labour Party relationship, both of which were more complex than is currently permitted in the established historiography.

Keywords:

Labour Party, Soviet Communism, Social Democracy, Prisons

Throughout the inter-war period, the British labour movement's encounters with Soviet Russia proved a formative experience. Attitudes towards the Soviet state varied greatly. Over time, the positions of the 'moderate' and 'far' left in Britain, contested most visibly by the Labour Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) respectively, were further entrenched. At a fundamental level, the experiences of Soviet Russia in Britain pitted two competing visions of society against one another. On the one hand, the Labour Party, a gradualist, constitutionalist organization, pressed for social democracy; on the other, the CPGB sought revolutionary overthrow and the advent of a communist state. How the labour movement experienced Soviet Russia in its earliest years thus forms a vital part of the ideological history of the left in Britain. Through individual, Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (TUC) delegations, sceptics, moderates and believers alike visited the revolutionary state. Some travelled back to Britain converted; sceptics usually returned unconvinced; and sympathisers having seen what they wanted to see.

This much is now commonly known, the contours of the relationship between the labour movement and the USSR having received a healthy amount of attention from historians.¹ A number of broader problems, however, remain insufficiently addressed. While an implicitly teleological understanding of Labour's 'forward march' has itself been challenged, it has nevertheless continued to absorb the Soviet issue, tending, for example, to

¹ See for example Bill Jones, *The Russia Complex: The British Labour Party and the Soviet Union* (Manchester, 1977); Andrew J. Williams, *Labour and Russia: The Attitude of the Labour Party to the USSR, 1924-34* (Manchester, 1989); Stephen Richards Graubard, *British Labour and the Russian Revolution, 1917-1924* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956); Morton H. Cowden, *Russian Bolshevism and British Labor, 1917-1921* (New York, 1984); Stephen White, *Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution: A study in the politics of diplomacy, 1920-1924* (London, 1979); Daniel F. Calhoun, *The United Front: The TUC and the Russians, 1923-1928* (Cambridge, 1976); Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43* (Manchester, 2000).

separate definitively Stalinism and communism from the parliamentary socialism of the Labour Party in the 1920s.² As Kevin Morgan notes, as a destination in the 1930s and beyond, ‘nothing could be more apt’. But the process of its attainment requires revisiting.³ Consequently, a dichotomized conflict between social democracy and communism has often been taken for granted, despite questions having been raised over ‘how much socialism’ the Labour Party felt it could commit to, or even whether the purpose of the party had been to create a socialist Britain.⁴ A further problem, symptomatic of an approach that has sought rigid demarcations within the left (Fabianism, co-operation, syndicalism, guild socialism, communism) where perhaps identities were more pliant, has been the fact that, somewhat paradoxically, those who appeared to have least in common with the Soviet Union often found most to gain there during visits. Most expressly, those ‘holding to basically non-statist conceptions of socialism’, like George Lansbury, a future Labour Party leader, were more attracted to the state-dominated socialism of the Soviet Union than British state socialists like Ramsay MacDonald, Labour Party Prime Minister, and Philip Snowden, his Chancellor.⁵

Soviet Russia presented a complex problem for the British labour movement, whose members were often romanced by workers’ revolution while rejecting its actuality.⁶ The

² Thorpe, ‘Stalinism and British Politics’, *History*, 83 (1998), 608-27.

³ Kevin Morgan, *Bolshevism and the British Left. Part One: Labour Legends and Russian Gold* (London, 2006), 12-13.

⁴ David Howell, *MacDonald’s Party: Labour Identities and Crisis, 1922-1931* (Oxford, 2002); Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900-1931* (Oxford, 1994); A.W. Wright, *G.D.H. Cole and Socialist Democracy* (Oxford, 1979); F.S. Northedge, *Britain and Soviet Communism: The Impact of a Revolution* (London, 1982), 182; Ben Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge, 1977), 196-7; Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* (Oxford, 1983), 247.

⁵ Morgan, *Bolshevism, Part One*, 11; 19.

⁶ Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933* (London, 1986), 47-65.

rejection of Marxism by the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a more radical body than Labour itself, complicated matters further, and precipitated a conspicuous grey area on the left-wing political spectrum that became fertile terrain for the competing visions of British social democracy and communism.⁷ The details of this tussle, and the complicated and often ambiguous relationship between the left and the USSR through which it was often played out, have yet to be teased out in fine-grained analyses.

Recent scholarship has begun to address this. Kevin Morgan's *Bolshevism and the British Left* has sought to show how little the 1920s and 1930s can be 'reduced to the relatively simple alignments of the immediate post-war decades', and how a number of different cleavages obscure understandings of the Labour-USSR relationship. Jonathan Davis has re-evaluated the influence of the Soviet Union upon the British Labour Party and its function as an 'exemplar', demonstrating that, while Labour disagreed with a majority of Soviet policy, the USSR nevertheless became a 'key definer' of the Labour Party's own brand of socialism.⁸ Both scholars have opened up a new vista within which the historiographical view of Labour's inevitable 'forward march' can be further challenged, and the commonalities and distinctions between budding social democracy and communism re-examined in greater depth.

This article takes up the lead provided by Morgan and Davis, and seeks to embrace the complexities and ambiguities of the period—intensified by the Soviets' duplicitous style

⁷ Macintyre, *Proletarian Science*, 14-15.

⁸ See Morgan's three volumes on *Bolshevism and the British Left*. Here *Part One*, 14-15; 21; Jonathan Davis, 'Left out in the cold: British labour witnesses the Russian Revolution', *Revolutionary Russia*, 18, 1 (2005), 71-87; 'A new socialist influence: British labour and revolutionary Russia, 1917-1918', *Scottish Labour History*, 48 (2013), 158-79; 'Labour's political thought: the Soviet influence in the inter-war years', in Paul Corthorn and Jonathan Davis (eds), *The British Labour Party and the Wider World: Domestic Politics, Internationalism and Foreign Policy*, rev. edn (London, 2012), 64-85.

of cultural diplomacy—that spawned from Labour’s relationship with the Soviet Union. On the necessity of unearthing the complications of the socialist position, Morgan notes that these ambiguities are best emphasized ‘as soon as any subject is brought into sharper focus’.⁹ This article takes the early visits of the British left to Soviet Russia, and specifically to Soviet prisons, as that subject.

Early visitors were influential in establishing the trend of what would later be known as ‘fellow-travelling’, or the rise of the *poputchiki*. Initial journeys in 1919 were wholly unofficial, but were soon followed by officially sanctioned visits of the Labour Party and the TUC in 1920, as well as the Second International, whose delegation to Menshevik Georgia in the same year included future Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. The TUC returned to the USSR in 1924 proffering reciprocal Soviet visits to Britain, before Walter Citrine, made TUC General Secretary in 1925, followed them to Russia.

The purpose of these trips for the Labour Party was generally two-fold: to witness first-hand the experiments of the new Soviet Government, before reporting back to the labour movement in Britain; and to refute the ambushes of the right-wing press that had undermined the non-Communist British left since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.¹⁰ But there was also a third, less conspicuous aim for the labour movement: to learn from Soviet Russia. Despite varied British responses to the Russian revolutions, pockets of enthusiasm and fascination among the rank-and-file of the labour movement persisted, the myth of Soviet democracy manufacturing an ‘emotional identification’ with the Soviet state.¹¹ Such identification led

⁹ Morgan, *Bolshevism, Part One*, 16.

¹⁰ Davis, ‘Left out in the cold’, 71.

¹¹ See White, ‘Soviets in Britain: the Leeds convention of 1917’, *International Review of Social History*, 19, 2 (1974), 166; Graubard, *British Labour*, 39-40; Davis, ‘A new socialist influence’, 163-4; *Herald*, 24 Mar 1917; Ian Bullock, *Romancing the Revolution: The Myth of Soviet Democracy and the British Left* (Alberta, 2011), 99-101; Jones, *Russia Complex*, 6.

the *New Statesman* to ask, in early 1920, just what might be gained by studying the Soviet system as a ‘vital and important experiment’. Its optimistic answer was the ‘prospect of real improvement in the character of our own ... institutions’.¹²

The visits were significant for the Bolsheviks too, who sought not only survival as a nascent regime, but to engineer world revolution through their revolutionary organization, the Communist International (Comintern).¹³ Failing in the latter, the Comintern turned instead ‘to winning the Western masses through the creation of a large movement of public opinion favourable to the USSR’.¹⁴ Foreign delegations to Soviet Russia provided ideal opportunities for influencing and manipulating guests. British delegations were the first and, through the early 1920s, some of the most frequent guests to be subjected to the Soviets’ new brand of cultural diplomacy. And at the heart of this diplomacy was the unlikely—though punctiliously calculated—institution of Soviet prisons.

The article seeks to further the work of Morgan and Davis by examining the experiences of the British labour movement of this less obvious and ‘inherently ordinary’ site of Soviet cultural diplomacy. Focusing on the visits of the British left to Soviet Russia through the early 1920s, with a particular emphasis on the presentation of Soviet prisons, and utilizing new material from the Russian archives, it seeks to understand the impact upon the left and the consequences for the ongoing tussle between social democracy and communism. It presents three findings. First, it demonstrates the development of an intense admiration for, and often a desire to replicate, the Soviet penal system in the 1920s. Many British visitors,

¹² *New Statesman*, 6 Mar 1920.

¹³ See *Izvestiia*, 30 Dec 1920, and Lev Kamenev’s speech at the Tenth Party Congress, 1921. All-Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik), *Desiatyi s’ezd RKP(b), Mart 1921g.* (Moskva, 1933).

¹⁴ Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-40: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (London, 2007), 37.

both moderate and far left, struggled to contain their approbation for Soviet developments in penal politics, further strengthening the positive image of the communist state they would peddle to the labour movement at home. Soviet prisons proved more than just an attractive facet of ‘communism in action’, to be studied and admired from afar. Instead, many observers sincerely desired the transposition of these ‘communist’ institutions onto a social democratic Britain. Endearing visitors all the more to the fledgling state, these institutions became the closest of any Soviet idea to be assimilated into the British socialist programme of the 1920s.

Second, the paper examines the concrete consequences of this approval for British socialism. Visits to Soviet prisons reinforced a growing perception among the left of the Soviets as ‘progressive’ and humane, parrying the interminable barrage of Conservative anti-Bolshevik propaganda. Yet despite such admiration, little change was effected in terms of Labour Party policy. Through Soviet Russia, the eyes of the left were opened to the issues of penal reform, yet Labour gave paltry attention to the matter, let alone attempt to fashion Bolshevik-styled prisons in Britain. Soviet prisons appeared to offer a credible, radical alternative to the dysfunctional prison regime in Britain, but upon returning home this admiration was suffocated by party leaders eager to present Labour as a moderate force equipped for government. Russian associations, even those based ostensibly upon humane, progressive ideals—and on an increasingly bipartisan issue—were considered too menacing to Labour’s prospects when dressed up in Soviet garb.

Finally, the paper brings these novel perceptions of an unexplored aspect of Soviet life into ‘sharper focus’, placing them within the broader framework of the British labour movement’s internal tussles over competing notions of social democracy and communism. Soviet prisons highlight a unique case in which British guests were subjected to Soviet developments that were, on the whole, positive and authentic: guests were not necessarily

‘duped’, or wholly misled. And while social democracy ultimately triumphed over communism in Britain, the case of Soviet prisons demonstrates that this should not proscribe reappraisals of the complexities of this relationship. Despite few policy consequences, a more nuanced understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the period highlights the significant role of these formative years in cutting across cleavages and skewing the normative boundaries that dictated what was acceptable to aspiring social democrats in Britain.¹⁵

Soviet kul'tpokaz and British interests

In his *Political Pilgrims*, Paul Hollander suggested readers would be ‘startled’ to learn that among the Soviet institutions which appealed most to foreign guests in the inter-war period, ‘prisons ... ranked high’. ‘Western visitors, and especially intellectuals’, he claimed, ‘found Soviet penal institutions among the outstanding accomplishments of the regime’—a perception that continues to form one of the ‘most fascinating aspects of the pilgrimages’ to the Soviet Union.¹⁶ On the whole, these statements were true for the majority of guests hailing from the British labour movement. Throughout the earliest visits of the movement in the 1920s it was frequently the case that the Soviet penal system was considered *the* outstanding Bolshevik accomplishment.

In early seminal works on fellow-travellers to Soviet Russia, Sylvia Margulies and David Cauter lamented visitors for lacking ‘the tools necessary to probe beneath the Soviet

¹⁵ Macintyre, *Proletarian Science*, 47-60.

¹⁶ Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba* (New York, 1983), 142.

façade'.¹⁷ More recently, these previously reputable exegeses of 'the blindness of Western intellectuals' in the Soviet Union have been repudiated, based as they were on ideas of a faith impervious to rational explanation, a championing of the experimental limits of rationality and science, or the 'alienation and estrangement' of visitors which underlay their search for utopia. As Michael David-Fox notes, following the opening of the Russian archives, single master narratives such as these have become insufficient, not least because it is now 'increasingly clear that far from all intellectual observers' of the USSR 'sought or found utopia'.¹⁸ This was indeed the case with early British visits. Criticisms were many, but the consistently exceptional finding was the Soviet prison.

Much of David-Fox's work revolves around analysis of the Soviet practice of *kul'tpokaz*, or the presentation of culture, developed by the Bolsheviks throughout the 1920s and 1930s. A principal feature of *kul'tpokaz* was the exhibition of 'model' Soviet institutions—factories, schools, farms, hospitals, prisons—that showcased the best of Soviet development, or at least the progress considered most amenable to westerners: genuine models (in some cases), yet wholly atypical within the broader Soviet system. The aim of these models was to 'prompt foreigners to generalize from unrepresentative samples', and to foster a 'favourable picture' (*blagopriiatnuiu kartinu*) of the Soviet Union among its guests to be disseminated through the reports of delegations.¹⁹ Most British delegations and individual travellers committed to publishing accounts of their visits, and the Bolsheviks utilized this as a key facet of *kul'tpokaz*. At the conclusion of the first official British labour delegation in

¹⁷ Sylvia R. Margulies, *The Pilgrimage to Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners, 1924-1937* (Madison, 1968), 208; David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (London, 1973), 116.

¹⁸ Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (Oxford, 2012), 244-6.

¹⁹ David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 98-101; 116; *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 25 Feb 1925.

May 1920, for instance, Lenin thanked the visitors for ‘having become acquainted with the Soviet system ... despite their extraordinary subjection to bourgeois prejudices’—the Soviet leader aware of the significance of dispersing knowledge, or indeed misconceptions, of the USSR throughout key foreign states.²⁰ Soviet determined analysis of foreigners and the state’s tailoring of visits to their interests accelerated dramatically through the 1920s and 1930s; but for the first British visits of 1919/20, model prison sites were impressive enough.

On the eve of the first British visits in 1919, socialists in Britain were being re-awakened to contemporary issues surrounding the British penal system. Since 1895, when the Gladstone Committee reported on the state of British prisons, sparks of great change had failed to materialize, instead setting in motion a collection of slow-burning, unexceptional reforms. By 1914, a greater challenge to the antiquated Victorian penal system appeared to be taking shape through a number of progressive reforms. The Probation of Offenders Act (1907), the Prevention of Crime Act and the Children Act (1908), the Mental Deficiency Act (1913) and the Criminal Justice Administration Act (1914) introduced borstal training for youth offenders, prohibited capital punishment for offenders under the age of sixteen, expanded the scope for mitigating factors in determining sentences, and gave greater flexibility for paying fines, with the overall effect of reducing imprisonment rates substantially.²¹

²⁰ ‘Lenin to the British workers’, 30 May 1920, in Xenia Joukoff Eudin and Harold H. Fisher (eds), *Soviet Russia and the West, 1920-1927: A Documentary Survey* (Stanford, 1957), 54.

²¹ Tim Newburn, *Crime and Criminal Justice Policy*, 2nd edn (London, 2003), 12-13; Leon Radzinowicz, ‘Introduction’, in Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government, Volume 6: English Prisons Under Local Government* (London, 1963 [1922]); John Laurence Pritchard, *A History of Capital Punishment with Special Reference to Capital Punishment in Great Britain* (London, n.d.), 17-18; Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in Twentieth-Century England* (Harlow, 2011), 201.

These reforms were a corollary of more wide-ranging changes taking place within the international field of penal policy. In the early twentieth century, western understandings of criminality were distancing themselves from ideas regarding the moral weakness of offenders. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso's 'popularised ... notion of genetically determined, distinct criminal types' was promoting the ideas that would prompt the Eugenics movement and theories of degeneration; but broader internationalist trends were instead focusing on new approaches that rejected the 'classical' school of criminology, in which criminality was understood as a natural feature of the human condition, and which utilized universalized punishments according to the crime committed.²² Emerging 'neoclassical' ideas rejected the assumption that the rational offender was deterred by punishment, and sought more individualized treatments. These approaches also increasingly emphasized the formative role of the environment, especially in its economic aspects, in accounting for criminality. Based on increasingly empirical studies and positivist methodologies, a new transnational epistemic community was materializing, recasting policy debate at the level of the International Prison Commission and its quinquennial congresses.²³

The British left engaged intermittently with these changes, but were less occupied by penal reform in general. Nevertheless, a number of woolly socialist approaches to penal policy had developed in the late nineteenth century that interacted with both the liberalism

²² Emsley, *Crime, Police, and Penal Policy: European Experiences 1750-1940* (Oxford, 2007), 181; John Tierney, *Criminology: Theory and Context*, 2nd edn (London, 2006), 51; David Garland, 'British Criminology Before 1935', in Paul Rock (ed.), *A History of British Criminology* (Oxford, 1988), 2. See also Daniel Pick on Charles Goring's mass study *The English Convict* (1913), in Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge, 1989).

²³ Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880-1930* (Ithaca, 2008), 124-5; Garland, *Punishment and Welfare: A History of Penal Strategies* (Aldershot, 1985); Emsley, *Crime, Police, and Penal Policy*, 189.

and radicalism that informed the politics of emerging left-wing groups in Britain. William Morris and the Socialist League, for instance, understood crime as being reducible to the issue of private property: under a socialist order, as property and industry were socialized, motivations for crime and crime itself would, it was thought, naturally cease. The power of public opinion, or civic virtue, in regulating societal conscience was a significant aspect of Morris' utopian approach to crime.²⁴ Other socialists, like Sidney Webb and a number of Fabians, advocated sterner punitive treatment and an engagement with emerging Eugenic ideas. These notions were represented most brazenly by H.G. Wells, who, alongside George Bernard Shaw, intermittently entertained recommendations for isolating and killing 'degenerates', and the use of lethal chambers.²⁵

Few other socialists gave much attention to the issue, though exceptions arose in Robert Blatchford, owner of the patriotic socialist newspaper *The Clarion*, and Edward Carpenter, the socialist philosopher and activist. Blatchford and Carpenter both advocated an end to the dominance of classical theories of criminality, and looked to neoclassical ideas and the individualization of the treatment of the criminal, in conjunction with socialist reform, as the future of penal politics. Carpenter was a particularly prescient advocate of the indeterminate sentence, and like much of the labour movement drew on his liberal heritage in

²⁴ William Morris, *News from Nowhere; Or an Epoch of Rest, Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance* (London, 1970 [1890]), 49; 68-71; *The Commonweal: The Official Journal of the Socialist League*, 19 June 1886; Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship and Republican Liberalism* (Oxford, 1997), 79; Gregory Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge, 1989), 113.

²⁵ John Shepherd, *George Lansbury: At the Heart of Old Labour* (Oxford, 2004), 61; H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London, 2005), 95-6; 100; *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought*, 3rd edn (London, 1902), 300-1; *Mankind in the Making*, 2nd edn (London, 1903), 37; 63-4; 68-72; 99-101.

order to attack the uniformity of contemporary methods of punishment in Britain.²⁶

Following their respective authorial outputs, though, penal reform was seldom discussed until the outbreak of war in 1914.

The war brought penal politics squarely onto the left's agenda. Scepticism about the British prison system intensified as wartime conscientious objectors were arrested, court martialled and imprisoned. Conscientious objectors 'posed moral conundrums in a liberal society, especially for Liberal politicians', and both the Labour Party and the ILP began to call vociferously for their release at party conferences.²⁷ Demands by left-wing publications intensified as the war proceeded and as figures from the left began to experience for themselves the plight of conscientious objectors.²⁸ In particular, the experiences of Fenner Brockway and E.D. Morel, both ILP-ers, and the liberal-leaning Quaker, Stephen Hobhouse, each of whom were imprisoned, lent them authority as they began to act as mouthpieces for the labour movement on issues of conscientious objection and penal reform.²⁹

²⁶ Robert Blatchford, *Not Guilty: A Defence of the Bottom Dog* (London, 1906); Edward Carpenter, *Prisons Police and Punishment: An Inquiry into the Causes and Treatment of Crime and Criminals* (London, 1905). Both these figures, like Wells, took issue with socialists' faith in the power of public opinion to pressure individuals to conform to certain values and norms, a tradition stretching back to John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) and William Godwin's *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794).

²⁷ Alyson Brown, *English Society and the Prison: Time, Culture and Politics in the Development of the Modern Prison, 1850-1920* (Woodbridge, 2003), 137; John Rae, *Conscience and Politics* (London, 1970), 207.

²⁸ *Herald*, 3 Feb 1917; 10 Mar; 26 Jan 1918; 2 Feb; 16 Feb; 2 Mar.

²⁹ Stephen Hobhouse, *The Silence System in British Prisons* (London, 1918), 1; *An English Prison from Within* (London, 1919), 15; Fenner Brockway, *Prisons as Crime Factories* (London, 1919), 4-5; 7-8; E.D. Morel, *Thoughts on War: The Peace and Prison* (London, 1920), 66-8.

In 1919, the Executive of the Labour Research Department (LRD) established the Prison System Enquiry Committee, claiming the moment ‘opportune for a detailed investigation’ to ‘bring new points of view to bear upon the problem’.³⁰ The committee would not report until 1922, though, and its remit was in any case restricted to the analysis and critique of the current system, rather than planning its reform. The problems were thus left unaddressed in the intervening years. Labour and the ILP continued to call for penal reform, the release of remaining conscientious objectors, and the pledge of a first Labour Government to instigate the required ‘transformation’.³¹ Penal experiments were monitored by the Labour press, but it was to be the left’s visits to Soviet Russia that would most catch the eye.³²

First visitors, 1919/20

The first visitors to Russia in 1919/20 formed an enthusiastic group. They included Arthur Ransome, journalist and sympathetic witness to the Russian Revolution, M. Philips Price, *Manchester Guardian* correspondent, future Labour MP and Bolshevik sympathiser, and H.G. Wells. Other travellers included Professor William T. Goode, another *Manchester Guardian* correspondent, Colonel Cecil Malone—a Liberal MP who converted to the communist cause and the CPGB following his visit—and George Lansbury, Labour MP and Soviet Russia enthusiast. Prisons were certainly not atop the agendas of these unofficial travellers. The ordeals of conscientious objectors, however, ensured the issue held great contemporary prominence in labour circles, and the publication by the British Government of

³⁰ Stephen Hobhouse and Fenner A. Brockway (eds), *English Prisons To-Day: Being the Report of the Prison System Enquiry Committee* (London, 1922), v.

³¹ *Labour Party Nineteenth Annual Conference Report*, 1919, 165; 173-4; *ILP Annual Conference Report*, 1919, 15-16; 20; *Labour Leader*, 6 May 1920.

³² *Herald*, 4 Aug 1917.

confusing and contradictory propaganda on Russian prisons prompted greater interest in the topic.³³ And it was prisons that stood out during these early visits, each guest admiring the institutions they visited. Ransome, for example, inspected several prisons in Yaroslavl and chose to dine with Soviet Executive Committee members in the prisons themselves, given their ‘astonishingly clean’ facilities and good-quality food. The British prisoners of war he saw in the Moscow Butyrka were also said to be treated well.³⁴

Malone reported positively on the frequency with which minor criminals were released from incarceration, praising Soviet emphasis on reform and the practice of granting liberty to prisoners for the purposes of employment, provided they returned to their cells by evening.³⁵ Goode likewise reported wholly positive experiences of Soviet prisons.³⁶ Lansbury’s approbation, though, was the fiercest.³⁷ Lansbury felt compelled to search for new terms to describe what he saw, for the ‘prisons ... were not prisons in the ordinary sense’. ‘I can only call them free prisoners ... It was difficult to see where the prison came in’.³⁸ Lansbury felt a new approach was being cultivated towards criminality in Russia. The importance of the deterministic role of the environment as propagated by the Bolsheviks was facilitating a new allowance ‘for the causes which bring’ prisoners in, and appeared to Lansbury ‘to affect their whole treatment’. The Soviets believed that prisons should be

³³ *A Collection of Reports on Bolshevism in Russia* (London, 1919), reports 2-4, 6, 10, 18 and 22.

³⁴ Arthur Ransome, *The Crisis in Russia, 1920* (London, 1992 [1920]), 48-9; 53; 127.

³⁵ Colonel Malone, M.P., *The Russian Republic* (New York, 1920), 73; 82-3. See the entry on Malone in Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. VII (Basingstoke, 1984), 159-65.

³⁶ W.T. Goode, *Bolshevism at Work* (New York, 1920), 94-7; 134-5; *In Russia: Splendid Order, Wonderful Organisation and Good Conditions for Everybody* (Melbourne, 1920), 23-4.

³⁷ George Lansbury, *What I Saw in Russia* (London, 1920), 114-15; 118-20.

³⁸ Lansbury, *What I Saw*, 122-6. See also *Red Russia in 1920* (Melbourne, 1920), 9.

eradicated, and the ‘reformatory character’ of the prisons that functioned during Lansbury’s visit was, he believed, the beginning of this conquest. In one of the most effusive passages on any Soviet subject in his report, Lansbury concluded: the ‘Bolsheviks have led the way in being more humane, more considerate in their treatment’ of prisoners ‘than any other Government’; they have ‘set the world an example’. ‘Western civilization has something to learn from Soviet Russia’.³⁹

It is significant that during these early visits Soviet authorities possessed nothing like the cultural-diplomatic apparatus which came to dominate future trips of foreigners—the ‘mass production of delegations’, in the words of Profintern General Secretary, Solomon Lozovsky. Their methods were improving all the time, but botched visits still occurred.⁴⁰ Consequently, much of what early British visitors saw—and hailed—of Soviet prisons was relatively accurate, if not quite the entire picture.

Peter H. Solomon has demonstrated, for instance, that already in 1919 the Bolsheviks were engaging in a moderate and rational approach to the problem of crime, issuing a range of decrees that prohibited executions, permitted defence counsel and established a legal review system.⁴¹ But there were, of course, limitations to these ‘progressive’ trends. Anne Applebaum notes the ambivalence of the Soviets towards ‘traditional criminals’, who were perceived as potential Bolshevik allies. No special punishments were considered necessary for these criminals, as over time the revolution would remove ‘social excess’ as the cause of their crimes. ‘Class enemies’, on the other hand, were created by the revolution and required

³⁹ Lansbury, *What I Saw*, 126-9; 133; *Red Russia*, 9.

⁴⁰ Quoted in David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 103.

⁴¹ Peter H. Solomon, Jr, ‘Soviet penal policy, 1917- 1934: a reinterpretation’, *Slavic Review*, 39, 2 (1980), 195. For further ‘progressive’ measures and the decriminalization of homosexuality see Elizabeth A. Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, 2005), 2; 8-11; Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago, 2001), 115-25.

far harsher punishments. Thus, in early Soviet Russia there arose two prison systems: a 'regular' system housing 'traditional' criminals and run by the People's Commissariat of Justice (Narkomiust); and a second controlled by the secret police, the Cheka (later the GPU, OGPU, and NKVD), that housed class enemies and political prisoners.⁴² The objectives of the 'regular' system would have been 'perfectly comprehensible in "bourgeois" countries: to reform the criminal through corrective labour'. The first Bolshevik criminal code would have 'warmed the hearts of the most radical, progressive criminal reformers in the West'.⁴³

In British labour circles, however, the first rosy glow of socialist Soviet prisons had little impact for a number of reasons. At a general level, the international development of criminology as a social science had been arrested by the First World War, its most overt effect being the fifteen-year delay between the convocation of the eighth (1910) and ninth (1925) International Prison Congresses. In Britain there was, as a result, no established criminological enterprise or contemporary research, and a receptive audience was lacking.⁴⁴ Within the Labour Party, the veneration expressed by Lansbury and his fellow travellers was continually tempered by the emergence from Russia of conflicting reports of wretched conditions, terror and torture in prisons.⁴⁵ Ambiguity and contradiction among moderates did much to dampen enthusiasm, casting doubt upon the veracity of Soviet communism. More

⁴² Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London, 2004), 29; 35.

⁴³ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 29; 35.

⁴⁴ Seán McConville, 'Hearing, Not Listening: Penal Policy and the Political Prisoners of 1906-1921', in Lucia Zedner and Andrew Ashworth (eds), *The Criminological Foundations of Penal Policy: Essays in Honour of Roger Hood* (Oxford, 2003), 260.

⁴⁵ See *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (hereafter GARF), Moscow, f. R-8419, op. 1, d. 16, l. 2; Wells, *Russia in the Shadows* (New York, 1921), 16; 119; F.M. Leventhal, 'Seeing the future: British left-wing travellers to the Soviet Union, 1919-32', in J.M.W. Bean (ed.), *The Political Culture of Modern Britain: Studies in Memory of Stephen Koss* (London, 1987), 213.

significantly, rash policy overhauls were anathema to a party that had matured under the gradualist politics of its leader and architect, Ramsay MacDonald. Socialism, for MacDonald, would arise from the success of capitalism; there was little need to rush developments on the basis of new, flashy ideas.⁴⁶

Labour and the ILP continued to call for penal reform at party conferences, and the LRD's Prison System Enquiry Committee was by now underway, though this was far more the result of wartime experience than the discoveries of mercurial Britons in Russia. Admiration for the Soviet penal system appeared to run deep among visitors and their rank-and-file supporters; but under the tutelage of MacDonald little changed with regard to penal politics in Britain or the left's relationship with Soviet Russia. In 1920, the CPGB was founded at Moscow's behest, providing an alternative to Labour on the left in Britain and intensifying the struggle between social democracy and communism.

Official visitors, 1920 and 1924

In May 1920, the constitutionalist social democracy of the Labour Party was put to the test against revolutionary Soviet socialism, as the first official Labour-TUC delegation arrived in Russia. In the wake of the First World War, the British had assumed the leading role in the Second International, and despite the broad ideological composition of the delegation, the Bolsheviks prepared to impress, *Krasnaia Gazeta* proffering impassioned greetings to the guests 'from all our hearts' (*ot vsego serdtsa*).⁴⁷ Overall, the visit ran relatively smoothly. Only four members of the delegation—Ethel Snowden, ILP-er and wife of Philip, Margaret

⁴⁶ J.R. MacDonald, *Socialism and Society* (London, 1909); *Socialism and Government* (London, 1909); *A Policy for the Labour Party* (London, 1920).

⁴⁷ Bruno Naarden, *Socialist Europe and Revolutionary Russia: Perception and Prejudice, 1848-1923* (Cambridge, 1992), 324; 387; *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. II (Moskva, 1958), 473; *Krasnaia Gazeta*, 12 Mar 1920.

Bondfield of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, Charles Roden Buxton, the delegation's secretary, and George Young, a former Etonian, diplomat and now Labour member acting as one of three special advisors to the delegation—visited Soviet prisons.⁴⁸ Upon their return to Britain, the delegation published an official report described variously as 'an appeal to "fair play"', 'enlightening' and 'impartial'.⁴⁹ The shortcomings of Soviet Russia were outlined as the delegation had perceived them and, in contrast to earlier visitors' reports, prisons were not mentioned.⁵⁰

Individual reports of the visit, while mostly positive, also showed little interest in prisons, and it was the delegation's only female members who relayed their encounters with Soviet prisons.⁵¹ Snowden, otherwise so critical of Russia, praised the 'splendid' efforts of Soviet scientists in 'the treatment of the morally defective as sick and not wicked people'. She also visited the old tsarist prison in the Peter and Paul fortress in Petrograd, describing the cells in a curious, somewhat complimentary observation: 'gloomy', but 'twice as big as

⁴⁸ For detailed accounts in the literature see White, 'British Labour in Soviet Russia, 1920', *English Historical Review*, 109, 432 (1994), 621-40 and P. Gurovich, *Pod'em angliiskogo rabocheho dvizheniia v 1918-21 gg.* (Moskva, 1956). See the entry on Harold Grenfell in Joyce M. Bellamy, David E. Martin and John Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. IX (Basingstoke, 1993), 102-16.

⁴⁹ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, 8; Morgan, *Bolshevism, Syndicalism and the General Strike: The Lost Internationalist World of A.A. Purcell* (London, 2013), 116; Calhoun, *United Front*, 34; W.P. Coates and Zeldia K. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London, 1945), 29-30; Leventhal, 'Seeing the future', 214.

⁵⁰ See *Report of the British Labour Delegation to Russia, 1920* (London, 1920), 6-9.

⁵¹ See Robert Williams, *The Soviet System at Work* (London, 1920); H.N. Brailsford, *The Russian Workers' Republic* (London, 1921); and Clifford Allen, *Plough My Own Furrow* (London, 1965), 146-7.

the cells of an English prison'.⁵² Bondfield's visit was equally fleeting, her assessment stymied by an inability to overcome the sour odour of the prison bakery. She did conclude, however, that inmates had 'much more freedom' than their British equivalents, noting the prohibition of solitary confinement. Prisoners, she claimed, 'were probably better off than outside'.⁵³ Interestingly, no British guest who had previously been in prison visited a Russian penal institution; the practice of comparing domestic prison experiences and 'new' Russian methods was a tactic that the Soviets would employ effectively throughout the 1920s.

On their part, the Soviets revelled in revealing to domestic audiences the 'special delight' (*osobennym vostorgom*) and unanimous conclusion (*edinodushnomu zakliucheniiu*) of the delegation.⁵⁴ Soviet newspapers monitored visitors' telegrams sent back to Britain, while Soviet officials went further and sought to 'teach' the delegation exactly what to see and what to learn.⁵⁵ But, once more, the efforts of the Soviets and their British conduits in influencing Labour Party policy were stifled, and the concrete consequences of the visit were negligible. The most notable impact of the 1920 delegation was perhaps the increased interest of Bondfield in the area of penal reform. Bondfield addressed the inaugural conference of the Howard League for Penal Reform in 1921, and stressed her view of prisons as 'utterly unnecessary'. Britain had, she declared, to 'sweep away entirely the old style of prison, and

⁵² Ethel Snowden, *Through Bolshevik Russia* (London, 2012 [1920]), 97; 105. On the 'medicalization' of Soviet penology see Beer, *Renovating Russia*.

⁵³ Trades Union Congress Library (hereafter TUC Library), London Metropolitan University, Margaret Bondfield Papers, Folder F, C6/1, Bondfield's diary, 19 May-15 June 1920. Parts of her diary are recorded in Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (London, 1948).

⁵⁴ *Krasnaia Gazeta*, 16 May 1920; 8 June; 17 July.

⁵⁵ See *Bednota*, 14 May 1920; 16 May. The Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin allegedly implored the British delegation to be 'more alert' than they presently were. Hoover Institution Archives (hereafter Hoover), Stanford University, California, Nicolaevsky Collection, Box 692, Folder 6 (reel 619), G. Aronson, 'The English Workers' Delegation in Moscow'.

... humanis[e] ... our institutions' so that 'we may ... see the day when there will be no prisons left in this country'.⁵⁶ Bondfield failed to mention her experience of Soviet prisons, but it is notable that when the report of the Prison System Enquiry Committee was published in 1922, it heralded Russia as having much for Britain to learn from.⁵⁷

This, however, was where Russian associations ceased, as the Labour Party now had greater concerns. The party's strategy through the 1920s of maximizing 'support through ... broad areas of consensus' and 'playing down distinctive policies' soon began to foster electoral success. Designed to displace the Liberal Party in Parliament and to prove Labour's fitness to govern, the approach suffocated radical ideas under the orthodox reign of the 'Big Five' in the party leadership. The effect was to shore up the gradualist, social democratic foundations of the party, to close out the Communists, and to engage with the Soviet Union on exclusively pragmatic lines.⁵⁸ Given MacDonald's own praise of Menshevik Georgia following his 1920 visit, and his antipathy to the subsequent Bolshevik invasion, the diffusion of Soviet-styled ideas to the echelons of the Labour leadership was almost impossible. Officially, 'there was already a great distance between Labour and the USSR',⁵⁹ but deep admiration lingered among many visitors and rank-and-file party members.

⁵⁶ Margaret Bondfield, 'Prisons and the Public', *The Howard Journal: A Review of Modern Methods for the Prevention and Treatment of Crime and Juvenile Delinquency*, 1, 1 (1921), 32-5.

⁵⁷ Hobhouse and Brockway, *English Prisons To-Day*, 464-5; 590; 594; 606.

⁵⁸ Thorpe, 'The 1929 general election and the second Labour government', and John Callaghan, "'Bolshevism run mad": Labour and socialism', in John Shepherd, Jonathan Davis and Chris Wrigley (eds), *Britain's Second Labour Government, 1929-31: A Reappraisal* (Manchester, 2011), 20; 33; 172. Labour's 'Big Five' included MacDonald, Snowden, Arthur Henderson, J.R. Clynes and J.H. Thomas.

⁵⁹ *Bor'ba*, 4 Dec 1920; The National Archives/Public Record Office (hereafter TNA), Kew, PRO 30/69/1753/1, MacDonald's Diary, 10 Oct 1920; Stephen F. Jones, 'Introduction', in Stephen F. Jones (ed.), *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012: The First Georgian*

The next TUC delegation to the USSR came in November 1924. Labour had since occupied governmental office for the first time, and had worked hard during its nine months in power to forge a new relationship with the Soviet Union through diplomatic and trade negotiations.⁶⁰ The formation of a minority Labour government was a ground-breaking step, but for a number of reasons—a limited time in office, a lack of preparation and a consciousness of the need for moderation—the government set a modest programme that fell short of its previously espoused socialist reconstruction.⁶¹ Its greatest achievements came in foreign policy, especially regarding relations with the USSR, where MacDonald pursued a pro-Soviet policy that had less to do with any shared beliefs than with pragmatism and the pursuit of international peace.⁶² Far less was achieved by the government, however, on the issue of penal reform, despite the LRD's report, *English Prisons To-Day*, and its stinging criticisms of the British penal system. Great faith was placed in the Home Secretary, Arthur Henderson, to advance the cause of reform, but his stint in office was characterized by caution.⁶³ The regular surfacing of the topic proved of little interest to Henderson, who left office following a somewhat unproductive tenure.⁶⁴

Republic and its Successors (London, 2014), 1-2; Thorpe, 'Stalinism and British Politics', 618.

⁶⁰ Richard W. Lyman, *The First Labour Government* (London, 1957), 205.

⁶¹ John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government* (Basingstoke, 2013), 68.

⁶² Davis, 'Labour and the Kremlin', in John Shepherd, Jonathan Davis and Chris Wrigley (eds), *Britain's Second Labour Government, 1929-31: A Reappraisal* (Manchester, 2011), 151.

⁶³ 'The Abolition of Capital Punishment', *Howard Journal*, 1, 3 (1924), 114; 'Capital Punishment', 'The Home Secretary's Policy', and 'Habitual Criminals', *Howard Journal*, 1, 4 (1925), 191; 198-9.

⁶⁴ TNA, CAB 23/47/Cabinet 12(24), Cabinet Conclusions, 13 Feb 1924; CAB 23/47/Cabinet 18(24), Cabinet Conclusions, 5 Mar 1924; CAB 23/47/Cabinet 21(24), Cabinet Conclusions,

In the years since the first delegation to Russia, Soviet prisons had been gaining international notoriety, with particular regard to the alleged treatment of non-Bolshevik socialists, and the British labour movement responded with its own written protests to the Soviet leadership.⁶⁵ Both the USSR and the labour movement sought, with difficulty, to sustain the relationship that had built through 1924, but the bombshell of the Zinoviev letter and the ‘red scare’ of the 1924 election left Labour reeling. All the movement’s major tribulations appeared to lay at Russia’s door.⁶⁶ The Soviets were concerned at the ‘strong confusion’ (*sil'noe zameshatel'stvo*) they recognized among the British labour movement, and attempted to placate the left in anticipation of the imminent November delegation.⁶⁷ Rigorous British enquiries were anticipated, but the Soviets were nevertheless confident that delegates would, following their visit, produce a ‘tremendous and useful [*gromadnuiiu i poleznuiiu*] work for us’.⁶⁸ Despite Russia’s perceived role in Labour’s election catastrophe, a ‘shared belief in socialism’ still tied many Labourites to the USSR, and the delegation produced the ‘useful’ work the Soviets desired.⁶⁹

17 Mar 1924; *Parliamentary Debates* (Lords), 56, 14 Feb 1924, 157; 56, 18 Mar 1924, 778-98; (Commons), 169, 18 Feb 1924, 1298; 170, 6 Mar 1924, 1576; 173, 7 May 1924, 463W; 173, 30 June 1924, 950-1W; 176, 7 Aug 1924, 3202-9; Shepherd and Laybourn, *First Labour Government*, 91.

⁶⁵ Hoover, Mel’gunov Collection, Box 11, Folder 64.

⁶⁶ *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. VII (Moskva, 1963), 27; 53-5; 62-5; 98-9. Harvey Wish, ‘Anglo-Soviet Relations during Labour's First Ministry (1924)’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 17, 50 (1939), 400-3.

⁶⁷ *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii* (hereafter RGANI), Moscow, f. 89, op. 73, d. 34, l. 5; f. 89, op. 73, d. 34, l. 1; f. 89, op. 73, d. 37, ll. 1-2; and f. 89, op. 73, d. 38, l. 1.

⁶⁸ RGANI, f. 89, op. 73, d. 32, ll. 1-2; f. 89, op. 73, d. 33, l. 1; and f. 89, op. 73, d. 34, l. 1; *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii* (hereafter RGASPI), Moscow, f. 17, op. 2, d. 164, l. 217.

⁶⁹ Davis, ‘Labour and the Kremlin’, 152.

Publishing just one collective report, the delegation praised aspects of Soviet life and the state, especially the move towards a more mixed economy under the New Economic Policy, understood as an early Soviet compromise.⁷⁰ Unlike the 1920 report, a great deal of interest and detail was committed to the delegates' experiences of Soviet prisons. A.A. Purcell, of the National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association, who was chair of the delegation, president of the TUC, and the only delegate who also travelled to Russia in 1920, epitomized this change, showing far greater interest in the issue.⁷¹ Overall, the visitors 'were pleased to see that prisoners in what were once the worst prisons in Europe ... are treated with a very great humanity, and get good opportunities for a fresh start'.⁷² Speaking to prisoners in the socialist Butyrka in Moscow, the delegation praised the Soviet judicature and the decentralized system—the very aspects of the British system criticized by the LRD report:

The whole system of prison administration and the treatment of non-political prisoners in Soviet Russia is based on the latest theories of criminal psychology. The humanising of prison life is a striking feature of the Russian administration ... and is apparently working with the most excellent results. The atmosphere ... is now more that of a workshop of free workers than of a house of detention or jail.⁷³

⁷⁰ TUC Library, Fred Bramley Papers, Box 1, B1/22, 'Signed agreement of delegates' (n.d.); Calhoun, *United Front*, 124; Davis, 'Labour's political thought', 68-9.

⁷¹ *Leningradskaiia Pravda*, 4 Dec 1924.

⁷² TUC, *Russia: The Official Report of the British Trades Union Delegation to Russia and Caucasia in November and December, 1924* (London, 1925), xvi.

⁷³ TUC, *Russia*, 16-17; 132.

Detailed portrayals were given of ‘socialist’ prison workshops, the functioning of communal dormitories and prisoners’ roles in the operations of the institution. The role of reformation, and in particular of bestowing upon inmates useful trades and skill sets, particularly impressed the delegation.⁷⁴ Delegates also sampled prison food (declaring its superiority over British equivalents), observed prisoners purchasing goods with their trade union-rate wages, and complimented the mixing of male and female inmates.⁷⁵

Only John Turner, founder of the United Shop Assistants’ Union, was remotely critical of prison institutions. Daniel F. Calhoun claims that Turner, an anarchist who became heavily involved in the campaigns of Emma Goldman—the American anarchist deported to Russia—against the Bolsheviks’ treatment of political prisoners and the repression of free speech, ‘thought prison conditions were wretched’. This is only true in part. Turner commented displeasingly on the rumoured conditions of those prisoners held on Solovki, and ‘sought to have representations made on behalf’ of political prisoners while in Russia.⁷⁶ But he also praised the humane treatment of regular prisoners. Turner’s own protests against the Bolsheviks are significant for reinforcing the powerful reach of the Soviets’ *kul’tpokaz*; for, despite his remonstrations, Turner still agreed, in general, with the delegation’s conclusion that Soviet prisons were much more humane than even four years prior: ‘[T]he Soviet Government was achieving most remarkable results [and] ... set[ting] an example that, if it is to be followed, will require a fairly radical reorganisation in States that are at present leading Europe in these matters’.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ TUC, *Russia*, 132-4.

⁷⁵ TUC, *Russia*, 132-5; TUC Library, Bramley Papers, Box 1, B1/23, ‘Draft Official Report’.

⁷⁶ Calhoun, *United Front*, 96; 125; Morgan, *Bolshevism, Part Three*, 169.

⁷⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 29 Jan 1925; 6 Feb; 6 Apr; Morgan, *Bolshevism, Part Three*, 161-73; TUC, *Russia*, 135.

International indignation did little to temper the delegates' zeal for Soviet Russia.⁷⁸ In early 1925 Ben Tillett, a Labour agitator of the Transport and General Workers' Union, published the only individual report of the visit, equally positive in its assessment. And epitomizing the uninhibited enthusiasm of the delegation, John Bromley, founding member of the General Council of the TUC and an early ILP-er, noted in an unusual interview that if he ever had to go to prison, he hoped it would be a Russian prison.⁷⁹ In the same year, Khristian Rakovsky, the Soviet Trade Representative to England, boasted to the Politburo of his certainty that the British delegates found Soviet prisons 'exemplary' (*obraztsovymi*). Rakovsky was, with good reason, increasingly assured that the Soviets could 'find sympathy' (*mozhno naiti sochuvstvie*) for Soviet Communism among the English working classes.⁸⁰

Throughout the 1920s the British left remained, in essence, a force for moderation; it was not until the fall of the second MacDonald administration (1929-31) that the Labour Party lurched leftwards towards socialism. In 1931, at a time of national, financial and ideological crisis, Labour sought, in Philip Williamson's words, 'soothing socialist images' and 'truths'.⁸¹ Yet, through the 1920s moderation was often effaced at the individual party member level in favour of radical, socialist endeavours. Frustrated at the failure of the first Labour government to advance socialism, and under the persuasive influence of (perceived)

⁷⁸ Social Democratic Labour Party of Georgia, *The British Trade Union Delegation and Georgia* (Paris, 1925); British Committee for the Defence of Political Prisoners in Russia, *Russia and the British Labour Delegation's Report. A Reply* (London, 1925); Friedrich Adler, *The Anglo-Russian Report. A Criticism of the Report of the British Trades Union Delegation to Russia from the Point of View of International Socialism* (London, 1925).

⁷⁹ Ben Tillett, *Some Russian Impressions* (London, 1925), 12; *Manchester Guardian*, 6 Feb 1925.

⁸⁰ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 164, ll. 218-19; David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 41-2; 47-8.

⁸¹ Philip Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy and Empire, 1926-1932* (Cambridge, 1992), 378-80.

‘socialism in action’ in the USSR, individuals and organizations like the ILP were brought into open conflict with the gradualist social democracy of the Labour leadership.⁸²

Witnessing the alleged construction of communism in Russia brought back with these core members of the labour movement not ‘soothing’ images, but ideas that excited and galvanized visitors and their followers. Communist ideas of Russian provenance invigorated British socialists as Soviet methods blurred the lines between acceptable social democratic and communist ideas in Britain. Admiration for the image of the Soviet penal system increased; the difficulty continued to lie in carving out the political space in Britain (or indeed within the left) ‘to enunciate these socialist “truths”’, and in penetrating Labour Party policy.

Walter Citrine visits, 1925

Unlike Paul Hollander’s readers in the 1980s, British visitors to the USSR after 1925 had little reason to be ‘startled’ by Soviet prisons. As the number of foreign delegations visiting Russia increased, the showcasing of prisons proved politically expedient, and the number of model prisons in Moscow increased accordingly.⁸³ European left-wing organizations praised Soviet institutions as ‘comradely’ (*tovarishcheskoe*) or bearing the stamp of ‘justice and kindness’ (*spravedlivosti i dobroty*), and claimed their replication would ‘benefit all mankind’ (*pol’zu vsemu chelovechestvu*).⁸⁴ The Soviets were, of course, keen to show off

⁸² Keith Laybourn, ‘The Independent Labour Party and the second Labour government c.1929-31: the move towards revolutionary change’, in John Shepherd, Jonathan Davis and Chris Wrigley (eds), *Britain’s Second Labour Government, 1929-31: A Reappraisal* (Manchester, 2011), 115.

⁸³ GARF, f. R-8419, op. 1, d. 122, l. 1, ‘*Spisok mest zakliucheniia goroda moskvy*’.

⁸⁴ GARF, f. R-4042, op. 2, d. 384, ll. 15; 38; 41; f. R-4042, op. 1, d. 31, ll. 20; 29.

such praise in domestic newspapers.⁸⁵ Soviet information gathering and the tailoring of visits to the ‘political tasks of the moment’ increasingly took in affairs relating to penal politics, too.⁸⁶ In August 1925, the ninth International Prison Congress was due to be held in London, the first Congress in fifteen years. Despite not attending, the Soviets kept a close watch on the events of the Congress, translating and analyzing international press coverage, with a particular focus on the newspapers of the British labour movement.⁸⁷

One month later, TUC Assistant General Secretary, Walter Citrine, crossed into Russia with his fellow trades unionist George Hicks. Citrine travelled to the USSR six times throughout his life, and admitted to an enthusiasm for early delegations to Soviet Russia.⁸⁸ Recent scholarship has highlighted how regularly the visits of Citrine have been overlooked in Soviet-Labour history—a curious oversight given his role as a ‘powerful figure in the wider labour movement’, ‘in defining its domestic and foreign policies, and its attitudes towards communism and the Soviet Union’.⁸⁹ Citrine’s accounts have shown him to be one of the more discerning early travellers. Willing to criticize openly the aspects of the Soviet system he disagreed with (the difficulties he saw with the position of trade unions, issues surrounding female labour, and the apparent indifference of Soviet politicians to the mass poverty he encountered in Russia), Citrine provided pragmatic assessments of Soviet life as a whole as he experienced it. Not seeking to make grandiose statements, his accounts are arguably some of the most objective.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ *Izvestiia*, 6 Mar 1927; ‘Tiur’ma bez reshetok’, *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 21 Aug 1927.

⁸⁶ David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 103.

⁸⁷ GARF, f. R-4042, op. 1, d. 32, ll. 1-22; f. R-393, op. 1a, d. 167, ll. 1-3, ‘*Ob uchastii v mezhdunarodnoi tiuremnoi konferentsii*’.

⁸⁸ Walter Citrine, *Men and Work* (London, 1964), 88.

⁸⁹ Davis, ‘An outsider looks in: Walter Citrine’s first visit to the Soviet Union, 1925’, *Revolutionary Russia*, 26, 2 (2013), 148.

⁹⁰ Davis, ‘An outsider looks in’, 151-2; 155-6; 159-60.

Citrine's unpublished diary reveals his own visit to a Soviet prison in 1925. Citrine and Hicks were shown around the Sokol'niki prison in Moscow, and the features of the trip mirrored the fixed itinerary established as part of the *kul'tpokaz* programme—the prison workshop, dormitories, co-operative store, kitchen, library, courtyard, theatre and visitor rooms.⁹¹ The guests were nevertheless impressed by the prison. Citrine looked positively upon the chances inmates were given to learn trades and to improve their skills while incarcerated, noting the well-stocked prison library. He also praised the communal dormitories, the absence of solitary confinement and the apparent good nature between guards and prisoners. Most impressive, though, and certainly the most 'incongruous' aspect, was Citrine's inspection of the prison theatre. With an amateur orchestra present, the guests were asked to listen to some 'beautiful' but rather 'pathetic' dance music, followed by a rendition of the Internationale. Citrine's response was to ask Hicks: "What sort of place is this we have come to? ... Is it a Fred Karno gaol or a pantomime show?" Hicks could only respond that he did not know, "but I cannot imagine anyone wanting to run away".⁹²

The experience forced Citrine to consider 'how complex a thing is crime'. Using the model of Sokol'niki, the Soviets had successfully presented to Citrine an isolated image of progressive, 'Communist' penalty that matched, and even surpassed, the aspirations of western regimes as proposed a month earlier at the Prison Congress in London. And this, again, had the desired effect for the Soviets. In March 1926, Citrine's account of his prison visit was published in the *Labour Monthly* journal. Citrine made clear his role of describing, rather than analyzing, what he and Hicks had witnessed, and his pragmatism persisted as he claimed: 'I am not able to verify as to whether the institution we visited is typical of the

⁹¹ British Library of Political and Economic Science Archive, LSE, London, Walter Citrine Papers, 1/4, 'Diary of Visit to the Soviet Union, 1925', 1; 88; 235; 238; 241; 247; 251-4; 257; 259.

⁹² Citrine, 'Diary', 236; 239; 247; 251; 253-6; *Men and Work*, 120-1.

Russian system, but we were assured that such was the case'. His overriding message was that the Soviets were 'making a whole-hearted attempt' to exploit 'reformatory treatment' to 'the full', and he considered it a 'remarkably interesting and educative' experiment.⁹³ Citrine reflected in his diary that the prisoners he saw in the USSR 'were not much worse off than ... if they were in the army or navy in any capitalist state'.⁹⁴ Despite the moderation with which he is associated, as well as his rejection of a majority of aspects of the Soviet political, economic and social order, this image of Soviet-styled prisons was one that Citrine was willing to countenance under a social democratic system. The progressive ideas sold to Citrine through the Sokol'niki prison, dressed up as they were in Soviet Communism, complicated the relationship between social democratic and communist norms.

Citrine and Hicks returned to Britain in October. In the same year Citrine succeeded Fred Bramley as TUC General Secretary, and in the wake of the General Strike of 1926 the moderation of Citrine and Ernest Bevin prevailed over the left within the TUC.⁹⁵ In 1927, the Arcos raid ruptured diplomatic relations between Britain and the USSR.⁹⁶ Within this context, Labour continued to chart its course of 1920s moderation, and with Citrine thrust headlong into life as TUC General Secretary there was little chance of his fleeting visit to Russia having great impact upon Labour policy. Penal reform was intermittently motioned at party conferences, but never in connection with socialism or the Soviet Union. In pushing moderation, radicalism was suppressed, even relating to a subject as increasingly bipartisan as penal reform.⁹⁷ The future of socialist prison reform, it seemed to many, lay in Soviet

⁹³ *Labour Monthly*, 8, 3 (1926), 178; 185; Citrine, 'Diary', 237; 255; 257-9; 260.

⁹⁴ Citrine, 'Diary', 255.

⁹⁵ Callaghan, "Bolshevism run mad", 172.

⁹⁶ See Coates and Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, 267-90.

⁹⁷ See 'Mr Clynes. 0 Not Out', *Howard Journal*, 3, 2 (1931), 3-5.

Russia. Yet, half a decade and a national crisis too soon for bold, radical ideas, this socialism ‘had nothing constructive to offer’ a present dominated by a cautious Labour leadership.⁹⁸

Conclusion

Through the late 1920s and early 1930s, prisons continued to form an important part of the Soviet practice of *kul'tpokaz*. Consistently, British delegates upheld the Soviet penal system as an ideal worth replicating. As the 1930s progressed, OGPU-operated institutions proved incredibly successful for the Soviets, and even Gulag sites proved useful propaganda tools.⁹⁹

The experiences of the British left and their attitudes towards Soviet prisons in the early 1920s is a novel, but significant, lens through which the development of the relationship between the Soviet Union and the British labour movement can be re-examined. Through the 1920s there developed a strong admiration on the part of the British left for a Soviet penal system perceived as humane, progressive and replicable. Prisons and the Soviet penal system should be added to the features of Soviet politics and economics that are already recognized as having proved attractive to the wider labour movement in inter-war Britain.¹⁰⁰ Soviet prisons, though, were not merely theoretical attractions. Reports and memoirs of visitors—both moderate and far left, and even some Liberals—demonstrate that guests perceived this revolutionary penal system as an aspect of ‘Bolshevism in action’ that could have been directly transposed onto British society, and would have improved the nation as a result. A

⁹⁸ Robert Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government of 1929-1931* (London, 1994 [1967]), 395.

⁹⁹ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?* vol. 2 (London, 1936), 590; David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 115; Maksim Gorky et al., *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni stalina: istoriia stroitel'stva* (Moskva, 1934); Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford, 2010), 123-60.

¹⁰⁰ Davis, ‘Labour’s political thought’, 73-9.

significant number of Labourite social democrats would have enthusiastically incorporated a small slice of Soviet Communism into Britain.

But this was not to be; the concrete consequences of British admiration were minimal. The rosy revolutionary glow of the ideas and practices that British guests witnessed in Russia soon dimmed upon their return to Britain—a result not of evanescent support or an oft-cited ‘British idiocy’, but of a necessary re-engagement with the major domestic issues facing the labour movement.¹⁰¹ Visitors returned to a movement built on gradualist, reformist foundations; to a Labour Party yet to achieve an electoral majority, locked in a three-party political system, and ultimately under-prepared for the stark realities of governmental office. Furthermore, with Russian influence came ‘Soviet-inspired problems’.¹⁰² That the Labour leadership won out in this struggle for ascendancy between communist and social democratic ideas is not surprising; the timing was simply not right for radical ideas. What is of significance, though, is the variety of figures—from known radicals through to lifelong moderates, the CPGB to the ‘Labour Socialist orthodoxy’—who recalibrated their understandings of the distinctions between communism and social democracy as a result of their experiences of Soviet prisons.¹⁰³

The triumph of social democracy should not proscribe reappraisals of the relationship between communism and social democracy in Britain, nor between Labour and the USSR. A lack of concrete policy consequences does not deny the left’s admiration for what they witnessed in Russia, nor negate the importance of the role of these Soviet ideas. Instead, the evidence highlights that these relationships were far more complex than is currently permitted in the established historiography. Bringing individual subjects into ‘sharper focus’ will continue to aid in teasing out the complexities of this area, and future enquiries should

¹⁰¹ Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War* (Oxford, 2007), 243.

¹⁰² Davis, ‘Labour and the Kremlin’, 152.

¹⁰³ Macintyre, *Proletarian Science*, 61.

extend to other, less explored cultural aspects of Soviet life in order to understand further the intricacies of the Soviet-Labour Party relationship, and to offer alternative ways of thinking about the creation and adaptations of contemporary British political culture.¹⁰⁴

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¹⁰⁴ See Chloe Ward, “‘Something of the Spirit of Stalingrad’: British women, their Soviet sisters, propaganda and politics in the Second World War”, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25, 3 (2014), 435-60.

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