

Háskóli Íslands

Hugvísindasvið

Sagnfræði

**The discourse of anti-Communism and its
influence on the history of Communism in
Iceland during the interwar period**

Ritgerð til BA í Sagnfræði

Pontus Järvstad

Kt.: 180487-3879

Leiðbeinandi: Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir

October 2014

Abstract

The mainstream writing of the history of Communism today emulates the discourse of anti-Communism in the past. How we perceive Communism is to a large extent predetermined by the forces that fought against it. Communism is embodied as the Soviet Union, as the atrocities of Joseph Stalin and as the repressiveness of the state. But this does not constitute the lived experiences of many involved in the popular struggle of the working class elsewhere, people who either identified with Communism or who got persecuted as Communists. The traditional history of Communism does not make this distinction and sees different movements as extensions of Soviet foreign policy. A Cold War logic is applied to a century of Communism, to where even experiences of the interwar years are set in this context. Communist movements are seen as subordinate to the will of the Soviet Union, sleeping fifth columns waiting to disturb the peace.

This essay sets out to explore this problematic nature of the history of Communism and its consequences both internationally and in Iceland. In the first chapter the origins of anti-Communism, the discourse it created and its influence on history writing is analysed. The second chapter explores Icelandic historiography of Communism and especially analyses the style and narrative of two major books about the Communist movement in Iceland, these are *Sovét-Ísland, óskalandið* by historian Þór Whitehead and the other is *Íslenskir kommúnistar* by political scientist Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson.

One of my findings is that the triumphalism of the traditional historical narrative of Communism leads to an extremely polarised understanding of history. It leads to a denial of a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the history of Communism. The open-ended process of producing and reproducing history is thereby closed off. We are to be content with the version of the victors, because might makes right.

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Introduction

Historicism justifiably culminates in universal history. Nowhere does the materialist writing of history distance itself from it more clearly than in terms of method. The former has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive: it offers a mass of facts, in order to fill up a homogenous and empty time.

-Walter Benjamin "On the Concept of History"

The belief in the objective pursuit of history results in source-centric, positivistic traditional history and triumphalism, as skilfully shown by Walter Benjamin in 1940 in his text "On the concept of History". It was his last text before he committed suicide in order to escape the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. The construction of history is a subjective and discursive process. The political fault lines of the present political discourse are reproduced in the construction of images of the past. If there is awareness of these parameters, then the conflicts of interest can be exposed. We can then start constructing history as open-ended and diverse, full of conflict and chaos. This abyss will hopefully bring about narratives enriched with a multiplicity of theory and methodology. If the subjectivity of the constructor is not acknowledged, then the universalism inherently constructed in the process will not be recognized. Such history is limiting and ahistoric, denying access to the sociality of human relations and to the material conditions of the past. Subduing the history process to universalism, without questioning the universalism itself, will create big narratives of homogeneity and exclusion. It will tell a story of a world where the working class, women and marginalized groups of race, gender and sexuality have no agency. A world where these groups have no autonomy, where their story will not be told. This is the narrative by default as it is, because it reproduces established power structures with its discourse: the power structures of class, gender and race. This historic narrative is one of the victors, a narrative where 'might makes right'. The sympathy with the victorious rulers of the past validates and mandates structures of inequality and exploitation in the present.

This relates to writing about Communism. The mainstream writing of the history of Communism today emulates the discourse of anti-Communism in the past. How we perceive Communism is to a large extent predetermined by the forces that fought against it.

Communism is embodied as the Soviet Union, as the atrocities of Joseph Stalin and as the repressiveness of the state. But this does not constitute the lived experiences of many involved in the popular struggle of the working class elsewhere, people who either identified with Communism or who got persecuted as Communists. The traditional history of Communism does not make this distinction and sees different movements as extensions of Soviet foreign policy. A Cold War logic is applied to a century of Communism, to where even experiences of the interwar years are set in this context. Communist movements are seen as subordinate to the will of the Soviet Union, sleeping fifth columns waiting to disturb the peace. However, this is not the only narrative of anti-Communism. Its origins stretch further back in time.

Therefore I will intend to give a short overview of the history of anti-Communism and its discourse in the first chapter. What are the origins of anti-Communism and how did it develop? What discourse did it construct and how does it relate to the making of the history of Communism today? I will also explore how Communism has been and is conceptualized and the problematic nature of the discourse involved in this process. I will also have a short overview over the differences between the traditional and revisionist histories of Communism. On what points does the traditional history differ from other narratives about Communism? The history of American anti-Communism will be particularly explored. The reason for this is that America has been leading the development of the discourse of anti-Communism. With the defeat of Nazism in 1945, American anti-Communism became the dominating one. Do answers to all these questions provide us with a deeper understanding of the historiography of Communism?

In the second chapter I will give a short overview over the Icelandic historiography of Communism and then explore two Icelandic historical works in particular. In Iceland, a nuanced historical study of Communism is particularly important due to its pivotal role in the labour movements of the early 20th century - especially so in labour organising and anti-fascism. The labour movement developed later in Iceland compared to other Nordic countries. As a consequence, the ideological narrative of Social Democracy got challenged from an early stage by Communism. In Iceland, unlike other Nordic countries, the Communists presented a real challenge towards Social Democracy in the political landscape. This uniqueness has been explored by some Icelandic historians. However, the historical discourse and understanding of Communism is dominated by narratives discrediting lived experiences of the radical left in Iceland. This is accomplished by portraying the Socialist and

Communist movements as something foreign, not native to Iceland. It denies agency to a labour movement and instead often paints it as conspiratorial. In many ways this discourse seems to have similarities to the anti-Communist discourse of the interwar period. Can this connection be found?

Two major Icelandic history books will be the basis for this research. One is *Sovét-Ísland, óskalandið* by Þór Whitehead and the other is *Íslenskir kommúnistar* by Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson. These two books dominate the current Icelandic historiography on Communism with the exception of a few historians that have chosen a different narrative. Since the publication of these two books there has not been any new research on Communism in Iceland. What are the similarities between Whitehead and Gissurarson's book and where do they differ? What kind of criticism have they gotten from the scholarly community? Is the style of the books aligned with the anti-Communist discourse of the time the books set out to explore? The two books span the period from the interwar years to the end of World War II and beyond. I will limit myself to the interwar period, the formative years of the radical left and the early activities of Communists in Iceland.

Chapter.1 - Historiography of Communism and the history of anti-Communism.

Left politics in the 20th century were largely defined and dominated by the party politics of Social Democratic and Communist parties. These movements shared a common past in the popular movement of the working class dating back to the 19th century. They got their mandate from this mass movement and it was from the working class that they drew their legitimacy. This explanatory model for the popularity of left ideologies is the narrative of Geoff Eley's book *Forging Democracy*. In his book, he claims that during the formative years of democracy from 1870 up till the First World War, and even after that, Socialist parties and the labour movements behind them were on the front lines, struggling for democracy and basic human rights.¹ He especially stresses that they were decisive in this struggle and that rights achieved were not given as an act of charity:

Let there be no mistake: democracy is not “given” or “granted”. It requires *conflict*, namely, courageous challenges to authority, risk-taking and reckless exemplary acts, ethical witnessing, violent confrontations, and general crises in which the socio-political order breaks down.²

Throughout the book, Eley is critical towards Stalinism and the repressiveness of the Soviet Union, but nevertheless he sees a multitude in Communism and describes the movement's contribution to the democratic legacy throughout the century and in many countries, through anti-fascism and broad left government coalitions.³

This narrative of a people's history is challenged by traditionalist historians such as Robert Service. In his book, *Comrades*, he conceptualizes Communism around the different nation-states of the eastern bloc. Instead of looking at Communism as a multitude of struggles and interests, the nation-states are the main representations of Communism. Other concepts such as class are usually excluded entirely from the narrative. He sees them as more or less the same; except for cultural nuances, the character of Communism remains the same. This character or nature for him is totalitarianism, a theory that allows him to equalize Fascism and Nazism and Communism.⁴ This theory puts all the bad guys in one basket and comfortably divides the world into good and evil. Robert Service writes about Communism as if it were an organism; an organism that was programmed by its “founding fathers” of

¹ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy*, p. 4-6.

² *Ibid*, p. 4.

³ *Ibid*, p. 492-493.

⁴ Robert Service, *Comrades*, p. 1, 4-9.

Marx and Engels to contain “dictatorship, terror and civil war”. The open-ended theories of Marxism are seen as the “Ideological dispute [that] informed the genes of Marxism”, while the Marxists that were not peaceful had “inherited the authoritarian strands of Marxism’s DNA.”⁵ This becomes a sort of political biology where political strategy is predetermined by ‘genes’ and not shaped and formed as a reaction to the socio-political order, as experience (social, material). Even after Communism is dead, it mutates and infiltrates other clouds of ideas like an evil seed:

All such leaders from Mussolini and Hitler down to Bin Laden ... were influenced by Communist precedents even while regarding it as plague bacillus. Communism has proved to have metastasising features. It will have a long afterlife even when the last Communist state has disappeared.⁶

Traditionalism and Revisionism

These two examples of historical narratives serve us as ideal types for how the historiography of Communism is divided. The latter one of Robert Service is an example of the traditional narrative of Communism. It defines Communism to very narrow parameters and uses this concept for all expressions of Communism all over the world. Here the state which calls itself Communist is the biggest agent of history. Most often, the state in this narrative is represented by the Soviet Union. All other expressions of Communism are subordinated and controlled from the state. Whether they be labour strifes or social unrest, they all originate from directives set by the state (even though they happen in other countries). The nature of such events are seldom put in to a social context but rather explained in terms of ideas and ideology. Robert Service illustrates this well when he talks about the infectious nature of Communism. The narrative of Geoff Eley serves as an example of a revisionist (although a mild one) approach to Communism. Sometimes it is a polar opposite to the traditional narrative. It usually tries to differentiate between different expressions of Communism and tries to stress the uniqueness of each country’s social struggle. Here the social movement and ‘the people’ serve as the agent of history. Their origin is explained through resistance towards the socio-political order because of material conditions.

In the US, up until the 1970s the traditional narrative dominated the historiography of Communism. The American Communist party (CPUSA) was never really influential in the

⁵ Robert Service, *Comrades*, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 482.

conventional party political landscape, in comparison to its European equivalents. But it influenced the movement of organised labour, especially during the 1930s and 1940s, and other social movements (e.g. civil rights movements). The first comprehensive scholarly works on American Communism were Theodore Draper's books *The Roots of American Communism*, published in 1957, and *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period*, published in 1960.⁷ Draper was approvingly labelled as a 'professional anti-Communist', he published his books at the height of the Cold War and tumult of McCarthyism. His style either explored the internal politics of the CPUSA or the official politics of the Cold War.⁸ The narrative that he set became the dominating one for years to come. Although the historians of Communism at the time came from different backgrounds, most of them shared an anti-Communist perspective.⁹ According to famous traditionalist historian Harvey Klehr, the general conclusion was:

All of these books argued that the CPUSA was subordinate to the Soviet Union, possessed a totalitarian ideology, could not by its nature be a "normal" participant in a democratic polity, and had no legitimate place on the democratic left.¹⁰

This consensus was challenged by a generation of young historians, many with their background in the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. With a less politically repressive climate in the US after the Vietnam War, these new academics could talk with old Communists about their lived experiences with them having less fear of persecution.¹¹ Also, these historians set out to understand rather than persecute American radicalism. Revisionist historian Maurice Isserman explained:

The new history of Communism has examined particular communities, particular unions, particular working class and ethnic cultures, particular generations, and other sub-grouping[s] within the Party. Though critical of the CP's authoritarian internal structure, and its overall subservience to the Soviet Union, the new historians have been alert to the ways in which the American

⁷ Harvey Klehr & John Earl Haynes, "Revising Revisionism", p. 452.

⁸ Michael E. Brown, *The historiography of Communism*, p. 1.

⁹ Harvey Klehr & John Earl Haynes, "Revising Revisionism", p. 453.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 453.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 453-454.

CP was shaped by the environment in which it operated and by the people who enlisted under its banners ... nobody was born a Communist.¹²

However, not all revisionists were willing to admit to Soviet influence. When many traditionalists were cynical towards social movements, some revisionists were naïve towards the Soviet influence on the CPUSA. At the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of the archives, this weakness became more apparent. Several claims made by the traditionalist historians were backed up by the findings in the archives. Mountains of documents from Comintern archives and CPUSA correspondence backed up claims of massive financial support from the Soviet Union, Comintern's management of the top leaders and the policy of the CPUSA, and CPUSA support of Soviet espionage during the World War II. Many revisionists had to revise their narrative about the degree of CPUSA's subservience towards the Soviet Union. But the basic tenets of the revisionist narrative still stood; the idea that there was a difference between the rigid and static party leadership and the organic and fluid character of social movements and the rank and file members.¹³

Anti-Communism

A reoccurring theme of the historiography of Communism is the role of anti-Communism in shaping and constructing the historical discourse about Communism. Anti-Communism has many roots that stem from different ideologies and cultures. Its origins and purpose vary depending on which historical narrative you chose. The important common denominator is how the image of Communism is constructed, how its followers are traitors to the nation, loyal only to the Soviet Union, how its members act in conspiracy and secrecy to undermine the national institutions and interests. Indeed the question of patriotism is of pivotal importance for the question of political legitimacy. In America, the historiography of anti-Communism is almost as vast as that of Communism. Also, the construction of one has had a huge influence on the other. The traditionalists usually see anti-Communism as a legitimate response to a real threat and the revisionists usually see it as a disproportionate response of state repression that undermined democracy.¹⁴

¹² Maurice Isserman, "Three Generations: Historians", p. 539–40.

¹³ Harvey Klehr & John Earl Haynes, "Revising Revisionism", p. 455-462.

¹⁴ Marc J. Selverstone, "A Literature So Immense", p. 7-8.

United States

Historian Morten Thing sees the first Red Scare of 1919-1920 as the first example of anti-Communism. It was a campaign started by Attorney General Mitchell Palmer and executed by the FBI. With intimidations and deportations, organized labour and people sympathetic towards ideologies on the left, were suppressed.¹⁵ The FBI played a major role in the shaping of anti-Communism in America, and the interwar years was a critical period. Traditionalist historians such as Richard Gid Powers and John Earl Haynes see anti-Communism as a rational and responsible response to the threat of Communism. However, they state this from a Cold War perspective (the degree to which Soviet spies had infiltrated American institutions and the left were far greater during the Cold War than previous eras). In his book *Red Scare FBI and the origins of AntiCommunism in the United States, 1919-1943*, historian Regin Schmidt argues that this is not sufficient as an explanatory model for American anti-Communism. His research shows that anti-Communism stretched further back in time, during the interwar years before the Soviet Union posed any security threat to the USA. Schmidt claims that it had more to do with a growing state's conservative and bureaucratic search for social-political-economic order and stability rather than a response to an external Communist threat. Industrial-political leaders demanded that the federal government would deal with Communists and anarchists. In this sense American anti-Communism got shaped by an institutional ideology of a police organisation. This conservative understanding of society, meant seeing workers as largely loyal and content with the institutions and laws. This was the framework to understand social unrest and labour strife. Because most people were content, the logic followed that there were no social explanations for social unrest. Logic dictated that the 'perpetrators of crime' had to be identified, they were few individuals working to conspire against the content people and the state. They did this by infiltrating unions and institutions and agitating the masses. In this process social politics for change got delegitimized as conspiracies. The perpetrators were criminal aliens (Bolsheviks) poisoned by foreign ideologies. This indicates an origin of anti-Communism that makes any explanation of motives more complex, even under the period of the Cold War, anti-Communism is not just anti-Sovietism. It had to do with containing social unrest and radicalism that came as a consequence of social problems connected to industrialization, urbanization and immigration. This happened through an increase of political surveillance and control of oppositional elements. These elements were everything from black civil rights activists, organized labour,

¹⁵ Morten Thing, *Anti*, p. 13.

to Communists and anarchists. It included breaking of strikes and suppression of black discontent. The FBI functioned to suppress and contain threats to the existing social-political-economic order, everything from maintaining white supremacy to a perpetuation of class society.¹⁶

By personifying these movements for social change and discrediting them as being caused by subversive elements, the Bureau drew attention away from a serious political debate on the reasons for unrest and undermined attempts to introduce fundamental structural changes.¹⁷

Germany

Anti-Communism became a vital part of state building not only in the USA. In Germany it became a part of gaining the support of industrialists and bankers in Hitler's coming to power. Nazism was a promise of a pacified labour market by crushing the unions and an upholding of private property/enterprise and initiative.¹⁸ Anti-Communism played a pivotal role in the Nazi ideology and it was a legitimizer of the existence of the Nazi regime and a tool of its diplomacy and foreign policy. An anti-Semitic anti-Communism was the biggest element of Nazi propaganda that targeted both a domestic and a foreign audience. Hitler claimed that the Russian revolution was orchestrated by the Jews, as a way of attaining world domination through Communism. Nazism saw Communism as a Jewish conspiracy, an extermination of Jewish Bolshevism united racist politics with expansionist ambitions, the goal of a destruction of the Soviet Union. After Hitler came to power in 1933, minister for propaganda Joseph Goebbles merged several anti-Communist organisations into one which became the Anti-Komintern. Goebbles intended to build an international anti-Communism under the leadership of Germany. The director of the Anti-Komintern was Adolf Ehrt who was one of the main ideologues of German anti-Communism at the time.¹⁹ His book *Communism in Germany The truth about the Communist conspiracy on the eve of the national revolution* was published in 1933 and translated into several languages. The book describes how Communists planned insurrection on the eve of the Nazi takeover, and how Nazism wishes to save the world from Bolshevik chaos. Communism in Germany is conceptualized through armed uprisings, conspiracy and treason. With this framework

¹⁶ Regin Schmidt, *Red Scare*, p. 9, 20, 86-94, 361-363.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 364.

¹⁸ Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, p. 99-103.

Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936*, p. 448.

¹⁹ Lorna L. Waddington, "The Anti-Komintern", p. 573-577.

Nazism is legitimized. Everything that Communists worked for in Germany was done for the sole purpose of a perpetuation of the armed uprising;²⁰

Whether it was a question of the sexual disintegration of the young during the nude bathing ... whether the unemployed were encouraged to form bands to rob provision stores ... or whether the peasants were encouraged to offer resistance to compulsory auctions, it was always a question of preparatory measures for the armed rising.²¹

The Communist organizations are described as both mass organizations and as shady conspiracies. The conspiracy is described as the security culture within the organizations with encryptions of messages and the making of fake passports. When repression drove the Communist organizations underground it is seen as an act of preparation for conspiracy for an uprising. Communism is conceptualized as a foreign conspiratorial parasite on the national body. Everything is done with the interest of the Soviet Union in hand, and as a betrayal to the German nation. Or as Ehrt writes “Communism ... is ... an uninterrupted ... betrayal of land and people”. High treason is explained as all activities that target state institutions of security and police such as the S.A. and S.S.²²

Spain

This discourse of treason and conspiracy became the dominating discourse of anti-Communism at the time (often excluding the anti-Semitism). Through political education the Anti-Komintern was extensively involved in psychological operations in Spain during the civil war. The Spanish Civil War became a focal point of anti-Communism in the interwar period. The discourse of anti-Communism became important for justifying the reactionary uprising of Franco and the nationalist and fascist rebels. In this context the Soviet Union was solely to blame for the civil war. The war was not really a civil war, but rather a war between the Spanish people and the Soviet directed republican government. The idea of the Communist conspiracy was widely used. Fascism was popularized and seen as the only force fit to face the threat of Communism. This anti-Communist discourse about the war was widely cited and distributed through the media.²³ The Spanish Civil War also became a focal

²⁰ Adolf Ehrt, *Communism in Germany*, p. 7-9.

²¹ Ibid, p. 9-10.

²² Ibid, p. 31-36, 59.

²³ Lorna L. Waddington, “The Anti-Komintern”, p. 582-586.
Michael E. Chapman, “Pro-Franco Anti-Communism”, p. 644.

point for anti-Communism because many wealthy people had an easier time accepting the Christian corporatism of Franco than Hitler's anti-Semitic Nazism. In a way the supporters of Franco were more diverse than the supporters of Hitler. Supporters of Franco could at the same time criticize Hitler's anti-Semitism without giving up the fight against anti-Communism. One such supporter was Ellery Sedgwick the editor of the progressive and liberal *Atlantic Monthly*. He saw Fascism as the only medicine against Communism. In his view Fascism existed purely because of the fear of Communism, if Communism was destroyed then Fascism would fade away.²⁴ During the interwar period anti-Communism was exclusively a right-wing ideology. The parts of the left that was critical towards the Soviet Union did not label themselves as anti-Communists. In general there was unwillingness amongst the left to use anti-Communism due to its right-wing connotations and its denial of the meta-physical-philosophical aspects of the word Communism. Anti-Communism became such an essential part of the ideologies of Fascism and Nazism that it eventually led to a decline in its general popularity towards the end of the interwar period. It was no longer sufficient concept for states that saw themselves in opposition to both Communism and Nazism.²⁵

From anti-Communism to Totalitarianism

Anti-Communism and anti-fascism were eventually replaced with anti-totalitarianism. An example of this shift can be seen within the American lobbying organisation National Civic Federation (NCF). The NCF sought for a pacified labour market and collaboration between the classes. They had a long history of anti-Communism and anti-radicalism. The organisation initially welcomed and supported the Nazi takeover in Germany because of its extreme anti-Communism. It also saw opposition to Nazi Germany as dangerous because they felt anti-fascism encouraged radicalism. The NCF published Adolf Ehrt's book *Communism in Germany* in the United States. The organisation thought that the fight against Communism was more important than any threat to the Jews. When the popularity of Nazi Germany started to decline the NCF abandoned its pro-Nazi anti-Communism. A growing American nationalist discourse saw Nazism as another foreign ideology from Europe. In his essay "Nazism, the National Civic Federation, and American AntiCommunism", historian Alex Goodall argues that it was not an ideological shift in the NCF that made it abandon Fascism, but rather the realization that such an alignment would damage the organisation

²⁴ Michael E. Chapman, "Pro-Franco Anti-Communism", p. 641-642, 650.

²⁵ Morten Thing, *Anti*, p. 16-18.

credibility as patriots. In this context anti-totalitarianism was implemented together with the idea of un-American activities.²⁶ Patriotism brought popularity to the concept of totalitarianism in America. It became widely used in media and the academy during the late 1930s. The political systems that it meant to describe such as Fascism were considered as an attractive political, social experiments before that period.²⁷ The broad-brushing characteristics of the term served the diplomatic interest of the US government before World War II. In April 1938 the Secretary of the Interior of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration wanted to condemn the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, but his speech was altered and the word 'fascism' was exchanged with 'totalitarianism'. It was thought of as less offensive to international relations to have generalizing criticism of both the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, than to criticize Nazism in particular.²⁸ This proved to be the winning discourse in America up until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and US entry into the war. During the joint invasion of Poland in 1939 the sentiments of equating the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany was especially high. Forgetting the Soviet Union's attempts of forming an anti-German alliance before that, Stalin was seen as having finally embraced fascism. The two states were anti-capitalist, anti-Christian and anti-democratic. This discourse was also widely circulated in the entertainment industry. Famous screenwriter Fredrick Hazlitt Brennan invented the term Commu-Nazi in one of his stories. The analogies between Communism and Nazism got toned down during the height of the war in service for wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, but it resurged again towards the end of the war.²⁹

Problematic Analogy

This was the discourse that came to shape the critical perception of the Soviet Union on the brink of the Cold War. In their 1970 essay "Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia", historians Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson argues that, after Germany was defeated in 1945 the *feindbild* of Nazi Germany was conveniently transferred to the Soviet Union.³⁰ In 1947 president Harry S. Truman remarked; "There isn't any difference [between] totalitarian states. I don't care what you call them, Nazi, Communist or

²⁶ Alex Goodall, "Diverging Paths", p. 53, 57-58, 64.

²⁷ Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, "Red Fascism", p. 1046-1047.

²⁸ Alex Goodall, "Diverging Paths", p. 49-50, 64.

²⁹ Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, "Red Fascism", p. 1046, 1049-1052, 1059.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 1046.

Fascist...."³¹ Adler and Paterson claims that the need for constructing an enemy image overrode the need for an understanding of fundamental differences between different states and ideologies. Totalitarianism became vaguer and more propagandistic in these developments. With it came the idea that the US could expect the same of the Soviet Union as of the Third Reich, and that the 1940s and 1950s would be a replay of the 1930s. Around this time Hannah Arendt's famous book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published and it perpetuated this discourse both in the public and within the academy. Arendt claimed that both the Soviet Union and the Third Reich showed indifference towards the interest of the masses and that this was the main principle of the totalitarian nature of both regimes. This notion was criticised Adler and Paterson.³² They argued that Arendt;

... avoided the important distinction between one system proclaiming a humanistic ideology and failing to live up to its ideal and the other living up to its antihumanistic and destructive ideology only too well.³³

Adler and Paterson recognized some similarities in the repressiveness of the states in question, but they pointed out that the assumption that the similarities were total neglected the fundamental difference between the fascist expansionist military doctrine and the USSR interest for revolutionary movements. Even though Marxist ideas were corrupted by Soviet politicians, there are still differences, and ignoring these meant that the idea of the collapse of capitalism was mistaken for another fascist *Lebensraum* doctrine. Even a more concrete historic analogy such as Hitler-Stalin has been superficial and misleading. While Nazi foreign policy was bent on massive territorial expansion in all directions of the compass, the Soviet Union concentrated on the areas of direct importance in its west. Adler and Paterson argues that totalitarianism serves as a fictional state of affairs, a state best illustrated in the dystopian books of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. But as a concept for understanding the repressiveness of states or deciding foreign policy it is often misleading and unfocussed. From these nightmarish conceptualizations the conclusion was drawn that ultimately Communism was worse than Nazism. This was explained through the idea of the "Fifth

³¹ Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, "Red Fascism", p. 1046. (Comment of May 13, 1947), Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States. Harry S. Truman. Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January I to December 31, 1947 (Washington, D. C., 1963), 238.

³² Ibid, p. 1046-1049.

³³ Ibid, p. 1049.

Column”. That sleeping cells of Communism were hiding everywhere in society waiting for the right moment to do the bidding of the Soviet Union.³⁴

The Black Book

That Communism equals Nazism or that it is worse than it is one of the controversial points that the book *Le Livre noir du Communisme: Crimes, terreur, répression* is trying to make. It was first published in France in 1997 and it coincided with the 80th anniversary of the October Revolution. It is a massive compendium of 858 pages over the repressiveness and mass killings of Communist states. It quickly became a best seller and created a lot of controversy in France and beyond.³⁵ The controversy largely builds on the introduction to the book written by Stéphane Courtois. In it, he claims that Communism is comparable to and worse than Nazism. Courtois comes up with the estimate of 100 million dead under Communist regimes and he blames the specific/singular theory of the Holocaust (that it was unique and unprecedented) for leading to an ignorance and little previous attention of Communist crimes.³⁶ However, this is not entirely true. The crimes of Communism were widely published after WWII but it was not until the 1980s that the Holocaust got wider publicity. Before that, even many intellectuals on the left avoided bringing light to the racism of Nazism. It did not fit with the Marxist methodology, an analysis that the Nazi regime was another fascist state that worked as a tool for capitalist domination, racial genocide could not be comprehended within that logic.³⁷

Some of the first to criticize Courtois’s introduction were the book’s co-authors Nicolas Werth and Jean-Louis Margolin. They publicly disavowed the introduction in several articles and interviews. They stated that Courtois had an obsession to come up with the number 100 million deaths, a number that was not supported by the book. While Werth estimates a total of 15 million deaths in the Soviet Union,³⁸ Courtois comes up with the number 20 million dead.³⁹ This is not the only case where estimates of deaths are exaggerated

³⁴ Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, “Red Fascism”, p. 1061-1064, 1054-1055.

³⁵ Anson Rabinbach, “Communist Crimes and French Intellectuals”, p. 61.

³⁶ Stéphane Courtois *et al.*, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. 9, 14-15, 23.

³⁷ Anson Rabinbach, “Communist Crimes and French Intellectuals” p. 63.

Ronald Aronson, “Communism’s posthumous trial”, p. 238.

³⁸ Anson Rabinbach, “Communist Crimes and French Intellectuals”, p. 61-62.

³⁹ Stéphane Courtois *et al.*, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. 4.
 Ronald Aronson, “Communism’s posthumous trial”, p. 233.

by Courtois.⁴⁰ At first Courtois states that he does not want to compare Nazism and Communism based on the “hierarchy of cruelty” but then he does it anyway:⁴¹

But the intransigent fact demonstrate that Communist regimes have victimized approximately 100 million people in contrast to the approximately 25 million victims of the Nazis. This clear record should provide at least some basis for assessing the similarity between the Nazi regime ... and the Communist system.⁴²

Moralising accounts are also used for this analogy, such as that a child who died in a forced famine is not worth less than a child who died in the Warsaw ghetto. Although this claim is indisputable, it says nothing about the difference between starvation induced by the state designed to quell independent farmers and a genocide directed by the state to exterminate the Jewish people.⁴³ Courtois co-authors Werth and Margolin reject the Nazism-Communism analogy, saying that Communism is an ideology of human liberation while Nazism is a racist doctrine that discards a large part of humanity. Also, Werth noted that extermination camps never existed in the Soviet Union. They also rejected the idea that the mass killings were rooted in the Communist ideology. Communism was not equally bloody everywhere and most victims died during 10 years of Soviet rule and 15 years of Chinese rule and a majority of these in famines.⁴⁴ With this in mind it seems important to differentiate between the Holocaust and the mass killings under Communist regimes. In his review of the *Black Book*, historian Anson Rabinbach says:

the Holocaust is not reducible to the sum of its victims or to the method of their annihilation. Nazism’s premise was a metaphysical commitment of the regime to the complete disappearance of the Jews.⁴⁵

This does not mean that mass killings under Communist regimes were lesser crimes. But they were different and they require an analytical approach that separates state policy from ideology. Genocides under Communist regimes like the ones by Stalin in Ukraine or by the Khmère Rouge in Cambodia were not done for the sake of extermination but for enforcing

⁴⁰ Ronald Aronson, “Communism’s posthumous trial”, p. 238.

Anson Rabinbach, “Communist Crimes and French Intellectuals”, p. 62.

⁴¹ Stephane Courtois *et al.*, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. 15.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Anson Rabinbach, “Communist Crimes and French Intellectuals”, p. 62.

⁴⁴ Ronald Aronson, “Communism’s posthumous trial”, p. 238-239.

⁴⁵ Anson Rabinbach, “Communist Crimes and French Intellectuals”, p. 66.

compliance and maintaining political control.⁴⁶ Overall the *Black Book* serves as a trial against Communism as an ideology. It is Communism that is guilty of mass murder, not Stalin, Mao or Pol Pot. It is a political trial against an ideology. The ultimate goal, according to Martin Malia, the author of the preface, is to “effectively shut the door on utopia.”⁴⁷ This reactionary political project eventually becomes the major limitation on the historical methodology of the book. All acts of violence during certain time periods and geographical areas are blamed on Communism, ignoring the context of war and social strife. Such are the accounts of violence in Vietnam, Cuba and Angola. A Year Zero theory is created where brutality first began with Communism, when in fact the institutions of state that executed the repression existed long before the Communist takeover. Violence and repression preceded Communism.⁴⁸ It quickly becomes a kangaroo court of history. A trial with no standards of justice and where the verdict is predetermined. But Courtois searches for justice in the likes of the Nuremberg Trials. Whether it was their intention or not this discourse worked in the favour of extreme right in Europe at that time. Neo fascists such as Jean-Marie Le Penn could legitimize politics of the old Vichy collaborators. If the Communists were as “bad” as them, why were “they” allowed in government politics and not “us”. These flawed comparative studies and universalism opens up for all kinds of apologetics.⁴⁹

State Sponsoring the Analogy

An abandonment of the singular theory of the Holocaust has been the cornerstone of modern Nazi-Communism analogy. The problematic nature of this development is the topic of historian Jan Selling’s essay “Ideologisk Kamp om Levande Historia”. In it he writes about the Swedish state sponsored Holocaust awareness project of *Forum För Levande Historia*. In 1997, the actions of neutral states during World War II were heavily criticised. Around the same time, a poll in Sweden showed that around a third of the youth denied the existence of the Holocaust. This at a time when racism and right-extremism was growing in Sweden. In parliament it was decided unanimously to start a nationwide information campaign about the Holocaust. This led to the publication and distribution of the book *Tell Ye Your Children...* in 1998 by Stéphane Bruchfeld and Paul A Levine. Overall the intentions of the project were to honour the memory of the Holocaust and to fight against racism and anti-Semitism. Historian

⁴⁶ Anson Rabinbach, “Communist Crimes and French Intellectuals”, p. 66.

⁴⁷ Stéphane Courtois *et al.*, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. xx.
Ronald Aronson, “Communism’s posthumous trial”, p. 232.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 234-235, 240.

⁴⁹ Anson Rabinbach, “Communist Crimes and French Intellectuals”, p. 64-65.
Amir Weiner, “The Black Book of Communism (review)”, p. 452.

Yehuda Bauer became an import advisor to the project and he stressed the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust. It did not take long for the perceived consensus to break down. Right-wing politicians asked why only the crimes of Nazism got so much publicity when the death toll of Communism was higher. It was their opinion that the Gulag was comparable to and even worse than the Holocaust and that right wing politics had nothing to do with Nazism.⁵⁰ The first comparison was between Stalinism and Nazism, then the Gulag together with the Holocaust became the textbook example of genocide. Communists and Social Democrats shared the responsibility of these crimes because they sang the same song; The International. Historian Paul A. Levine saw these developments as troubling. He argued that there are empirical and conceptual reasons for differentiating between different cases of genocide. He thought it disappointing that after 55 years of ignoring the subject, the Holocaust only got 3 years of attention before Sweden thought it was enough. When a right-wing government came to power in 2006, the shift of emphasis was complete. The new awareness project about the crimes of Communism was characterized by the use of the concept of totalitarianism and the ideology of anti-Communism. Now controversial theories of causality were presented, where the Russian revolution was to be blamed for the Holocaust (Richard Pipes) and Karl Marx to be blamed for genocides under Communist regimes.⁵¹

En del forskare menar dessutom att det just är kravet på radikal jämlikhet som oundvikligen leder till terror och förtryck i de kommunistiska samhällena.⁵²

Anti-racism was replaced with anti-totalitarianism or anti-Communism and efforts of resuming the focus towards the racism of Nazism failed. The theory of totalitarianism does not explain why an extermination of the Jewish people was attempted under Nazism but not under Communism. The theory of totalitarianism is not a good explanatory model to help us understand structural oppression such as racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia. Jan Selling argues that an original project of Holocaust awareness has now lost some of its credibility - it has become an ideological Trojan horse of the political right.⁵³

⁵⁰ Jan Selling, "Ideologisk Kamp om Levande Historia", p. 267-270.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 269-273.

⁵² "Förntelsen och brott mot mänskligheten under kommunistiska regimer", *Forum för levande historia* <http://www.levandehistoria.se/perspektiv-bakgrunden-till-handelserna-i-sovjet-kina-och-kambodja/forintelsen-och-brott-mot> (Downloaded 15.Sep 2014).

⁵³ Jan Selling, "Ideologisk Kamp om Levande Historia", p. 273-277.

Settling scores

With totalitarianism's theory of total analogy between Communism and Nazism, Soviet Union and Third Reich, follows the logic that the perpetrators of Communism should face the same justice as those under Nazism. Because of the infeasibility of a Nuremberg of Communism, the trial is instead played out in the discourse itself. Communists and sympathizers of Communism are targeted and put on trial for the atrocities of Communist regimes. Even though the individuals were not active in carrying out the atrocities they were still accomplices because of their ideological alignment. Even people who were not even born back then are accomplices because of their fascination with revolution and their usage of icons that can be connected to revolt, such as the red flag and the International. A usage of those symbols is seen as a cover-up of the crimes of Communism.⁵⁴ This conflict has its origins in older political fault lines. A discourse is being reproduced and because Communism and the Soviet Union are “dead” an attempt of settling the score is made. Historians write these histories of Communism to change the perception of Communism among their colleagues, but its audience becomes much bigger than that. Historians such as Francois Furet and Tony Judt wanted to understand the appeal of Communism to intellectuals despite it being comparable to and worse than Nazism. Furet sees the historical determinism of dogmatic Marxism as one explanation, that Communism was the next stage of history, a society beyond capitalism, it was inevitable. Other reasons were the triumphalism over a “successful” revolution and the Soviet Union’s victory over Nazism. In his essay “Communism's posthumous trial”, Ronald Aronson argues that with a one-sided intention of building a case against Communism, Furet is eliminating a possibility of constructing a context and understanding of Communism's appeal. Contemporary knowledge based on present discourse replaces a historical understanding of past material circumstances and available discourse at that time. A Cold War logic replaces an attempt of understanding of social conditions under a time period spanning two world wars. A brutality that not only affected Soviet Communism. It was a time when “tough-mindedness” reassured political sincerity. And a time when the achievements of Soviet Union in equality and civil rights were no less real and important than its atrocities. In the case of French intellectuals, Aronson makes the important case that the Soviet Union was just a distant horizon. The most important thing was the local class struggle, Russia mattered less than France. Within the discourse and conceptions of the time, supporting the working class and resistance meant

⁵⁴ Stephane Courtois *et al.*, *The Black Book of Communism*, p. 11, 21.

supporting the French Communist Party. In this framework, the Soviet Union was seen as an ally to the working class; many of those who opposed capitalism were prepared to overlook the repressiveness of this state.⁵⁵ Also, Aronson points out that those who most fiercely opposed the Soviet Union and Communism often had an agenda of their own:

They understood that, like Hitler, many of the voices attacking Communism most fiercely had their own agenda: to support the status quo in France and to protect a world system that meant poverty and unemployment, colonialism and war ... wasn't anti-Communism a way of avoiding talk about capitalism?⁵⁶

Each side refused to a large degree see its own faults and recognize each other's strengths. Ignoring this point, together with the importance of local class struggle, leads to a simplistic narrative. The narrative becomes increasingly ideological (anti-Communist) and gets simplified into a binary of good and bad guys. Such is the case with historian Tony Judt who writes about different French intellectuals' inability to recognize and speak out against Soviet atrocities and other intellectuals' courage for doing so. Aronson claims that in his binary style Judt misses the complexities and nuances of the time, those who he considers good become only good and those who he considers bad become only bad. The limitation to this narrative can be illustrated by the example of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Satre. While Albert Camus was critical towards the Soviet Union he was largely oblivious or passive towards the crimes of colonialism in Algeria. As for Jean-Paul Satre, he is pictured as a blind follower of Soviet Communism when he in fact was very critical towards Stalinism and at times towards the French CP.⁵⁷

Ronald Aronson claims that it is impossible to understand the crimes of Communism without looking at the crimes of Capitalism. The atrocities of both systems needs to be understood. Otherwise it becomes triumphalism. Similar crimes against humanity that have been ascribed to Communism could just as easily be ascribed to Colonialism or Capitalism. Indeed such a book has already been written. It is called *Le Livre noir du capitalisme* and was published by a group of scholars in 1998. Their estimates of victims who died in capitalism far exceeds those who died under Communism. However, they are aware of the complexity of their project. They ask themselves whether all deaths can be indicted to one economic

⁵⁵ Ronald Aronson, "Communism's posthumous trial", p. 224-228.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 227.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 228-232.

system or ideology specifically or whether the deaths have to do with additional factors or an interaction between several parameters.⁵⁸

But just as Communist violence cannot be fully understood without being placed in the context of what the left saw as bourgeois violence, from Verdun to Hiroshima, so Communist moral blindness can only with great distortion be treated all by itself, lifted from the life-and-death struggle with bourgeois society and capitalism's own historical crimes.⁵⁹

Settling accounts

Settling the score is a process which aims at determining who is on the right and wrong side of history. Settling accounts becomes a way of trying to end the historical process itself, trying to create a one and final narrative that can function as a universalism upon which to build. Several historians of Communism are actually ex-Communists. With this in mind, their works become accounts of their own coming to terms with their own personal experiences. But often included in this process is a tendency to make their personal accounts universal or general. Sociologist Michael E. Brown illustrates this problem by showing that conclusions such as “socialism never became important in the United States because of the disillusionment with the October Revolution”, create a universalism that excludes all other explanatory models. It is a specific question with a generalizing answer.⁶⁰ For some constructing history needs to happen in a hurry, a sense that history is strictly limited to availability of witnesses and sources. Especially so after the end of constructed conceptions of time such as epochs or periods, witnesses needs to be collected before they die. However, such an enterprise has its limitations. Because of its inherent narrative-centred and not theoretical style, it denies a multiplicity of narratives and theory. According to Michael E. Brown, here lies the problematic nature of historical works such as that of Theodore Draper. Draper writes massive books about Communism, collects accounts of expelled Communists and tries to settle the accounts on the history of the movement itself. His own experience is largely built around his disillusionment with Communism, because of this he becomes the final witness, his books are his own testimonies. Any narratives challenging his would simply be ‘beside the point’. Instead of problematizing events and their actors to open up the historical discourse for further work and understanding, the doors are closed on history with

⁵⁸ Ronald Aronson, “Communism’s posthumous trial”, p. 243-245.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 245.

⁶⁰ Michael E. Brown, *The historiography of Communism*, p. 74.

conclusion and illustration. Here the evil seed or origin is constructed, it gives the idea that the future was predetermined because Communism was always homogenous. Its followers merely disciples of dogma and foreign conspiracy. The autonomy of individuals and multiplicity of movements are denied. History that goes against this narrative are for example the work of Eric Hobsbawn, E. P. Thompson or Joan W. Scott. These historians create an understanding of history while being self-critical and critical to universalism. Critical towards categories and appearance of unity. It means a deconstruction of classic political history of great events and leaders and with this reclaiming the subjectivity of the people. Tools of post-structuralism to understand discourse also become important, how the sources are in a constant dialogue with both the past and the present. A good example is Robert Dawnton's "The great cat massacre" in which a historical understanding of present and past discourse gives us an opportunity not to be limited to a conception of French workers as cat killing monsters but also to see their acts as an unarticulated act of social defiance and discontent.⁶¹ These are examples of styles that open up the narrative, which makes it possible to be critical towards universalism. To include considerations or agents that were previously ignored or excluded. To make history a dialogue.

⁶¹ Michael E. Brown, *The historiography of Communism*, p. 79-80, 84-89, 90-92, 104-105.

Chapter 2. Historiography of Icelandic Communism

The historiography of Icelandic Communism has its origins in the general working class history of Iceland. The first extensive academic works on the topic appeared in the 1970s. In 1970, historian, and son of the famous Communist Einar Olgeirsson, Ólafur R. Einarsson published his book *Upphaf íslenskrar verkalýðshreyfingar 1887-1901*. In 1976 Svanur Kristjánsson published his book *Íslensk verkalýðshreyfing 1920-1930*. The first scholarly historical work exclusively only on Communism was published by Þór Whitehead in 1979 and was called *Kommúnistahreyfing á Íslandi 1921-1934*.⁶² While Einarsson and Kristjánsson were influenced by social and labour history, Whitehead's book was mostly a political history of the Communist movement in Iceland. He was influenced by a traditionalist standpoint towards Communism. He emphasized the importance of the Comintern and the Soviet Union for the Icelandic Communist movement. The opposite of this was Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir who in her essay *Vinstri andstaðan í Alþýðuflokknum á árunum 1926-1930* downplays the overall importance of Comintern in the development of the Communist movement in Iceland. Svanur Kristjánsson is critical towards both perspectives, in his essay "Kommúnistahreyfingin á Íslandi Þjóðlegir verkalýðssinnar eða handbendi Stalíns?". He stresses the importance of Nationalism in the popularity of Icelandic Communism. He compared Communism in Iceland with the other Nordic countries. He also stresses the importance of the views of the rank and file and the marginalised working class in Iceland, as opposed to an over-concentration on central leadership. Kristjánsson thinks it is important to remember the nationalistic character of Icelandic Communism.⁶³ In the years between 1980 and 1990, several university students wrote essays about labour history on different topics, amongst others, discussing the role of women in the class struggle. From 1990 onwards, there was a lot of history of regional labour movements and different organisations.⁶⁴ In 2008 Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir published her book *Nýtt Fólk*, in which again the nationalistic nature of the labour movement in Iceland is explored, and the book also introduced the theoretical analysis of the discursive processes in shaping the class consciousness amongst Icelandic workers.⁶⁵

⁶² Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, *Í samtök, Saga ASÍ*, p. 11-13.

⁶³ Svanur Kristjánsson, "Kommúnistahreyfingin á Íslandi", p. 230-233, 236 (Footnote 7). Skafti Ingimarsson "Fimmta herdeildin", p. 153-155.

⁶⁴ Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, *Í samtök Saga ASÍ*, p. 11-13.

⁶⁵ Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, *Nýtt Fólk*, p. 335-344.

Anti-Communism shapes the discourse

In 2006, Guðni Th. Jóhannesson published his book *Óvinir Ríkisins*, which was a state-centred historical overview of state surveillance and phone tapping of radical political elements during the Cold War. The book was published at a time when there was a big debate in the media over the legitimacy and degree of the state's intrusion of people's privacy.⁶⁶ In this debate, Þór Whitehead wrote an essay in defence of the Icelandic state and the necessity to meet the threat of Communism. This eventually led to the work on his book *Sóvet-Ísland* that was published in 2010.⁶⁷ These developments serve as a good example to illustrate how the historical debate about anti-Communism shapes the general historiography of Communism itself. With his book, Jóhannesson had explored the murky nature and dark rooms of the state. He describes cases of breaches of privacy through state surveillance, a persecution that affected the professional lives of some of these people. There was also cooperation between the Icelandic security service and the CIA and FBI.⁶⁸ Jóhannesson explains the state's surveillance as caused by a general fear of Communism at the time. A fear of a Communist takeover or a Soviet invasion. In this context, Jóhannesson sees the actions of the state as understandable.⁶⁹ Unlike Regin Schmidt,⁷⁰ Jóhannesson takes a classical approach to anti-Communism. It is this approach that traces the origins of a state's anti-Communism to a general fear of Communism, instead of seeing it as originating from a reaction towards social movements that challenged the current socio-political order.⁷¹ In his article "Sérstakar aðgerðir gegn sósíalistum", Þórarinn Hjartarson is critical towards the historical representation of the state surveillance. Hjartarson sees it as originating in a reaction of employers and the state to a strong labour movement, rather than as a fear of invasion or Communist takeover. He traces the start of surveillance back to the big transportation strike of 1935. Overall Hjartarson feels that Whitehead and Jóhannesson ignore the strength of the labour movement at the time. This he claims is what the state was afraid of, rather than specific Communists. In this sense, Whitehead and Jóhannesson do not conceptualize Communism within the social context of the labour movement.⁷² Here there is a connection between the discourse of anti-Communism and the historiography of Communism. With the scholarly discussion between Jóhannesson

⁶⁶ Rósa Magnúsdóttir, "Ritdómar ÓVINIR RÍKISINS", p. 226.

⁶⁷ Þór Whitehead, *Sóvet-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 432-433.

⁶⁸ Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, *Óvinir ríkisins*, p. 99-100, 108-113, 101-105.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 56-60.

⁷⁰ See Chapter 1, Subchapter on the United States.

⁷¹ Regin Schmidt, *Red Scare*, p. 19-20, 86-94, 361-363.

⁷² Þórarinn Hjartarson, "Sérstakar aðgerðir gegn sósíalistum", p. 80-84.

and Whitehead about the threat of Communism in 2006,⁷³ Communism became conceptualized first and foremost as a threat to the state, as a conspiracy against the nation. In a sense one could argue that the narrative was predetermined. Writing the history of Communism in Iceland became a defence for anti-Communism and the Icelandic state. Even scholars who did not agree with this narrative were now drawn into a debate where the threat level of Communism became the focal point.

Sovét-Ísland óskalandið

Þór Whitehead's book *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið* starts in the Soviet Union and not in Iceland. It starts with the famous labour organiser Ólafur Friðriksson taking part in the third congress of the Comintern in 1921. Friðriksson returned to Iceland with an orphan refugee in his care. Whitehead describes him as bringing back both a foreigner and a foreign idea. A new chapter was beginning in Ólafur's political life. He became an agitator for the ideology of Communism. The child in his care is not described as a refugee but rather as an adventurous secret Communist translator that was supposed to help Ólafur in his endeavours. His name was Nathan Friedman. Later, when he faced deportation, it led to the first major social unrest in Iceland, called the Hvíta striðið. In the first chapter, a traditionalist narrative is established. Communism is seen as something foreign and dangerous infiltrating the body politic of Icelandic society.⁷⁴ Later on Whitehead writes:

Hatur gegnsýrði kenningar Marx, Leníns, Stalíns, Hitlers og Maós og af því leiddi ofbeldið, sem kostaði óheyrileg manndráp og þjáningar á þessari grimmu öld. Atlögur að lýðræðislega kjörnum bæjarstjórnnum á Íslandi, alþingismönnum og lögreglu, voru af þessum rótum runnar. Fræ hatursins var innflutt úr miðstöðvum heimsbyltingarinnar og kreppan mikla reyndist furðu frjór jarðvegur hér á landi.⁷⁵

From this quote the general style and approach of the book can be analysed. Totalitarianism being one. Nazism is listed together with Marxism and Communism and different leaders of state together with one philosopher. They are all described as advocates of messages of hate and that they are to blame for a century of death and misery. There is also an institutional ideology visible in the quote. Social unrest is merely conceptualized as attacks on democratically elected politicians and police, acts that are described as a practice of those

⁷³ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 432-433.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 11-17.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 222.

hateful ideas. Finally those ideas were something abnormal and foreign to Iceland, an evil seed that found fertile ground in Iceland during the Great Depression.

The book then accounts for all the major cases of social unrest of the period 1921-1946. These events are first and foremost explained as Communist planning, rather than as a result of the Great Depression. Whitehead attributes the responsibility of these events to the leaders of the Communist movement and that they in turn acted on orders from the Comintern. The purpose of these events was either to bring about or to prepare for an armed rebellion. Whitehead then describes how the Icelandic Communists built up arms caches and how they got military training in the Comintern schools of the Soviet Union. Whitehead sees this as the main reason why events of social unrest turned violent. After the armed rebellion, Iceland would be annexed by the Soviet Union: this, with the support of the Icelandic Communists. According to Whitehead this was always the plan, because in 1920 Lenin had predicted the strategic importance of Iceland in a future revolutionary wars. All this threatened the independence of the young state of Iceland that had insufficient executive powers to face the threat of the Communists. This led to extensive arms purchases by the police and to the Keflavik Agreement of 1946. The agreement meant that American troops left the island but continued to use the airport militarily to and from bases in Europe.⁷⁶ It was a prelude for Iceland's future NATO membership.

Political education or military training?

Together with the Comintern, one of the most significant ways in which the Soviet Union would influence the politics of the different national CPs was through the international political party schools. There were three different schools that were active from the early 1920s to the late 1930s. These were the International Lenin School, the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West and the Communist University of the Toilers of the East. The role of these schools is a contested issue amongst historians. Some scholars see them mainly as schools for the revolution, creating soldiers and spies for international Communism, while others see them mainly as rigid political education, raising the future party officials in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The schools usually did not create any future leaders, however there are exceptions such as Josip Broz Tito or Erich

⁷⁶ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 424-426, 409-411, 256-257, 380, 104-105.

Honecker. In most cases no one from a national delegation would reach the upper circles of party leadership. Such was the case with the Icelandic delegation.⁷⁷

In his book *Sovét-Ísland*, Whitehead claims that Icelandic students in these schools got extensive military training.⁷⁸ One of the most outspoken critics to this claim has been philosopher Jón Ólafsson. In the 1990s, he became the first Icelander to study the recently opened Comintern archives. Ólafsson claims that Whitehead's conclusions are not supported by his sources. He also claims that Whitehead uses the same sources as he used, but Ólafsson came to the opposite conclusion. He claims that the Comintern schools were first and foremost used for raising future party officials, in discipline, centralism and Marxism-Leninism. Ólafsson feels that the Comintern evaluations of Icelandic students bear witness to this. They assess the leadership skills and political loyalty of the students. Other aspects that can be considered of a military nature, such as marksmanship and physical exercise, were exceptions to a political and theoretical curriculum. Ólafsson claims that there was no extensive programme of military training. Although some students were sent to Red Army training camps, Ólafsson claims that there are no sources that show that everyone went.⁷⁹ The schools would adjust the education to the legal status of the national CP in question. One example of this was the Finnish delegation, whose party was banned. They adjusted to more clandestine political activity, therefore their delegation also received military training. Whitehead claims that the Icelandic delegation received the same training, while Ólafsson denies such conclusion.⁸⁰ Jón Ólafsson also claims that there are no sources that show that the Icelanders who were in the Comintern schools got a special role in planning demonstrations and strikes. One such example is Jens Figved who was in Moscow for three years. When he came back, he got the job to supervise the politics of the different sections of the Icelandic CP out in the countryside. To make sure they had the right politics according to the Comintern. His job eventually led to inner conflicts in the CP. Conflicts that had nothing to do with practicing violence or combat, but rather about the right ideological line, the relations to Social Democrats etc.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Jón Ólafsson, "Í læri hjá Komintern", p.4-6, 12-13.

Gideon Cohen Kevin Morgan, "Stalin's sausage machine", p. 327-328.

⁷⁸ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 95-98.

⁷⁹ Jón Ólafsson, "Landráðakenning Þórs Whitehead", p. 49- 55.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 54-55.

Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p.94-95.

Svanur Kristjánsson, "Ritfregnir KÆRU FÉLAGAR", p. 326.

⁸¹ Jón Ólafsson, "Landráðakenning Þórs Whitehead", p. 64.

In his review on Whitehead's book, historian Skafti Ingimarsson claims that the legality of the Icelandic Communist movement determined how it conducted business. The Communist and Socialist parties took part in all the major elections in the time period 1930-1968. At the same time, Ingimarsson claims that no armed rebellion against the state ever took place.⁸² Kjartan Ólafsson, another critic of Whitehead's argument, emphasises the importance of the change in policy between Lenin and Stalin. During the 1930s, when most Icelanders went to the Comintern schools, Socialism In One Country was the state policy of the Soviet Union. The world revolution was not a priority anymore. Instead Stalin worked actively to normalize international relations and Comintern was used to spread good publicity for the Soviet Union.⁸³

Relations with Comintern

According to Jón Ólafsson, much of the correspondence with the Comintern is concerned with the Communist's competition with the Social Democrats over the legitimacy over the labour movement.⁸⁴ This competition was the nature of one letter from the Comintern sent in November 1931. This letter Whitehead uses as his prime evidence that the Comintern was ordering Icelandic Communists to be violent. Historian Skafti Ingimarsson studies the letter in his review. The letter is an evaluation over the less than one year old Icelandic CP. In the end of the letter, Communist leaders are criticised for their inactivity during a parliamentary crisis of 1931. During a demonstration, Communist leaders had stopped protesters in front of a row of police officers. The leaders are criticised for being too legalistic, for not taking the lead in radical class struggle. The Comintern argues that at present Icelanders cannot differentiate between Social Democrats and Communists. The Communists have to be tougher. Whitehead sees the letter as evidence that the Comintern gave an order of more organized and brutal violence. Ingimarsson attaches the letter to his review, and it does not mention use of violence at all.⁸⁵ It is also worth mentioning that Hannes Holmsteinn Gissurarson (whose work is discussed below) does not draw the same conclusions as Whitehead and instead just accounts for what the letter says.⁸⁶

⁸² Skafti Ingimarsson "Fimmta herdeildin", p. 164.

⁸³ Kjartan Ólafsson "Nokkrar athugasemdir", p. 93.

⁸⁴ Jón Ólafsson, "Landráðakenning Þórs Whitehead", p. 56.

⁸⁵ Skafti Ingimarsson "Fimmta herdeildin", p. 166-167, 191-194 (Viðauki I).

Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 168, 155-156, 209.

⁸⁶ Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, *Íslenskir kommúnistar*, p. 56-57.

Whitehead sees the Icelandic Communists as being ruled meticulously by the Comintern. Parties connected to the Comintern had to follow the general ideology of the Communist International. But Ólafsson claims that would not hinder individual parties from protesting the suggestions of the Comintern. One such example, Ólafsson claims, is when Brynjólfur Bjarnarsson did not agree with the Comintern when he was in Moscow 1932.⁸⁷ Another example is to be found in the book *Nýtt Fólki* by historian Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir. She mentions that the Communist leader Einar Ólgeirsson claimed that Iceland was pursuing a struggle for independence, and that it was a semi-colony. The Comintern found that perplexing, but, as it appears, gave in. After this there was no disagreement on the issue of independence.⁸⁸

One of the bigger disagreements between Jón Ólafsson and Þór Whitehead has to do with the formation of the Sósíalistaflokkur in 1938 which happened after the termination of the Communist party. Jón Ólafsson sees this as going against the will of the Comintern or at least acting independent from it. Þór Whitehead sees the formation of the new party as a directive from the Comintern. All that we have so far in sources that can tell us about Cominterns reaction is a letter from one Comintern official. This letter recommends against forming a new party. Whitehead denies this person's legitimacy to represent the Comintern and says that the source to show Comintern's approval is out there somewhere.⁸⁹ The new socialist and Communist party Sósíalistaflokkur was also an essentially different party, one that was not a member of the Comintern. Although the new party was more than friendly to the Soviet Union, it at the same time was clearer with its acceptance of parliamentary and majority rule.⁹⁰

Varnarlið verkalýðsins

For Þór Whitehead, one important chapter in the Communist's preparation for the revolution came with the founding of the group Varnarlið verkalýðsins (lit. The worker's defence league) on the 7th of July 1932. It was formed after events of social unrest. These events lead to fighting between workers and police. The police was supported by a right-wing fighting group, called the 'whites' by the Communists. The Vv was supposed to secure the safety of the workers during demonstrations and labour conflicts. It usually dealt with confrontations

⁸⁷ Jón Ólafsson, "Landráðakenning Þórs Whitehead", p. 61-63.

⁸⁸ Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, *Nýtt Fólki*, p. 212-215.

⁸⁹ Skafti Ingimarsson "Fimmta herdeildin", p. 175-176.

Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 348 (Footnote*).

⁹⁰ Skafti Ingimarsson "Fimmta herdeildin", p. 175-181.

with the police, defence against Nazi attacks on 1th of May marches and right-wing groups breaking strikes. It was at a time when bargaining rights were not recognized by employers or the state and union busting was common.⁹¹ Whitehead writes:

Stofnun Varnarliðs verkalýðsins (Vv) var nokkur áfangi í byltingarundirbúningi íslenskra kommúnista. Flokkurinn gat varla ögrað ríkisvaldi “auðvaldsins” á augljósari hátt en með því að stofna opinberlega liðsveit til höfuðs lögreglunni. Þetta var sannkölluð stríðsyfirlýsing við íslenskt lýðræðissamfélag.⁹²

Whitehead connects the formation of the group with the November 1931 letter from Comintern, mentioned earlier, the letter Whitehead saw as a directive to be more violent.⁹³ He also claims that founding a fighting group was one of the Twenty-one Conditions for being able to enter Comintern.⁹⁴ Whitehead takes the Comintern resolution out of context and chooses to ignore certain aspects of it. When one reads through the 21 Conditions one finds one condition that mentions the obligation to start a fighting group. It states:

3. In almost every country in Europe and America the class struggle is entering the phase of civil war. Under such conditions the Communists can place no faith in the bourgeois legality... In all countries where a state of siege or emergency laws make it impossible for Communists to carry out all their work legally, it is absolutely necessary that legal and illegal activity be combined.⁹⁵

The Icelandic Communist Party was legal. This is compared to other countries where Communists were persecuted and the parties were outlawed. There was very little violence in labour conflicts in Iceland compared to other countries where many workers were killed. Jón Ólafsson claims that Whitehead has no sources connecting the formation of Vv with an order from the Comintern.⁹⁶ Skafti Ingimarsson claims that Whitehead's main source for the information about the group is Þorsteinn Pétursson. He was one of the leaders of the group. During the Cold War he would become a Social Democrats and ardent anti-Communist. Ingimarsson questions his reliability as an oral source. Nevertheless, Ingimarsson sees no

⁹¹ Skafti Ingimarsson "Fimmta herdeildin", p. 173-175.

Kjartan Ólafsson "Nokkrar athugasemdir", p. 86.

Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 166-167.

⁹² Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 167.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 167-168.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 148-149.

⁹⁵ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern*, p. 227.

⁹⁶ Jón Ólafsson, "Landráðakenning Þórs Whitehead", p. 57-58.

coherence between Whitehead's description of the group and that of Þorsteinn Pétursson. In another interview that Þorsteinn Pétursson gave, Skafti Ingimarsson finds no mention of any military or revolutionary training of the group. There Þorsteinn Pétursson describes the group as 60-80 men, they trained boxing, they had uniforms, they had no specific rules and they were not that well organized. Ingimarsson believes that Pétursson would not withhold such vital information about military training, especially when being an ardent anti-Communist.⁹⁷ Þorsteinn Pétursson states that the group had no arm caches, although some of his Communist friends and party members had guns.⁹⁸ In his article, Kjartan Ólafsson claims that private gun ownership is not the same as an armed group, at this time many people came from the countryside, where gun ownership was common. Kjartan Ólafsson feels that unless Whitehead can show that there were proportionately more guns amongst Communists, than say conservatives or progressives, then he has no argument.⁹⁹ Shortly after the creation of Vv the other parties created their own groups. After the social unrest Gúttóslagurinn, even the Social Democrats newspaper talked about the need for defending against the violence of the police.¹⁰⁰ Whitehead claims that there are earlier examples of Communists gathering guns. It started with the so called Hvíta strið of 1921 mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. Guns were collected leading up to the events, but Ólafur Friðriksson turned the guns away. After the Hvíta strið, different Communist individuals talked about creating armed groups but nothing happened. Kjartan Ólafsson claims that the leadership of the Icelandic CP took a clear stance and said no. Whitehead sees these talks as evidence for preparation of the revolutionary war.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Skafti Ingimarsson "Fimmta herdeildin", p. 173-175.

⁹⁸ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 237.

⁹⁹ Kjartan Ólafsson "Nokkrar athugasemdir", 88-91.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 88, 91.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 82-85.

Armed rebellion and Icelandic Nazism¹⁰²

There are similarities between the narrative of Þór Whitehead's and that of Adolf Ehr't's book, *Communism in Germany*, discussed above. All the different political activities of the Communists are preparations for overthrowing the state and for a future annexation by the Soviet Union. Parliamentary activity by the new Communist and socialist party Sósíalístaflokkur is taken as a part in the preparation for a revolution. When the party participates in a coalition government with the Conservative party, it is seen as a preparation for revolution.¹⁰³ Skafti Ingimarsson is critical towards this perspective. He sees the parliamentary participation as an indicator that the reformist section of the party was now dominant. Ingimarsson sees it as a sign that the party was gaining independence from Moscow, because participation in a right-wing government could hardly be characterized as a revolutionary act. One of the main advocates for a reformist and parliamentary approach was Einar Olgeirsson, according to Ingimarsson, while the main advocate for a more revolutionary approach was Brynjólfur Bjarnarsson. Whitehead claims that Bjarnarsson came out victorious in their long conflict over the nature of the Communist movement in Iceland. Ingimarsson on the other hand claims that Einar Olgeirsson came out victorious. He sees Olgeirsson's leadership of the new party Sósíalístaflokkur as an indicator of this. Its participation in a coalition government brought legitimization of the Communist movement,

¹⁰² **NOTE:** There is confusion amongst Icelandic scholars over whether the political forces on the extreme right during the interwar period were Nazis, fascists or just extreme nationalists. Some of that confusion has its origins in the first extensive essay written on the subject, called "Nazismi á Íslandi" written by Ásgeir Guðmundsson in 1976. Although he says that the party called Flokkur Þjóðernissinnar was a Nazi party (p.60) its predecessor, Þjóðernishreyfingin Íslendinga, he claims were a mix between Nazis and Conservatives and therefore not a "pure" Nazi group (p.14). This claim is contested in a newly written essay by Gunnjón Gestsson called „Íslenzk æska vakna þú!“ . In it he explores the major publications of both groups and he finds no ideological distinction between the two groups in their discourse (p.7-9 21). The main thing that distinguished them was that in the first group there were some who wanted to cooperate with the Conservative party and were sympathetic to them. Otherwise both groups were both highly anti-Semitic, anti-Communist and propagated Racist eugenics. They were both deeply inspired by Nazism in Germany and saw Communism as a Jewish conspiracy that was guilty of creating current class conflict. Both groups wore and had swastikas as their symbol and requested that members read Mein Kampf (p. 9-14, 21). Therefore Gestsson defines both groups as Fascist's, even though there were some who sympathised with the Conservatives. He chooses to call the two groups Fascist rather than Nazis. This because Gestsson sees Nazism as a specific German type of Fascism (p.1 footnote). However, when reading both Gestsson and Guðmundsson it becomes clear to me that the main inspiration for both groups came from the NSDAP in Nazi Germany, large parts of their manifests were very similar. There was emphasize on Racist eugenics and anti-Semitism, characteristics that were not as popular in Fascist Italy. Therefore I will define them as Nazis.

Sources: Ásgeir Guðmundsson, "Nazismi á Íslandi Saga Þjóðernishreyfingar Íslendinga og Flokksþjóðernissinna.", *Saga* 14:1 (1976), p. 5-69.

Gunnjón Gestsson, "Íslenzk æska vakna þú!“Orðræða íslenskra þjóðernissinna á fjórða áratugnum”, [http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/18093/42437/2/%C3%8Dslenzk_%C3%A6ska_vakna_%C3%BE%C3%BA\\$0021_or%C3%B0r%C3%A6%C3%B0a_og_allt_%C3%BEa%C3%B0.pdf](http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/18093/42437/2/%C3%8Dslenzk_%C3%A6ska_vakna_%C3%BE%C3%BA$0021_or%C3%B0r%C3%A6%C3%B0a_og_allt_%C3%BEa%C3%B0.pdf) (Downloaded 1.October 2014).

¹⁰³ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 424, 429.

as a legal participator in a parliamentary democracy. Overall Skafti Ingimarsson has criticized Whitehead for categorically labelling Einar Olgeirsson as a revolutionary politician, despite the fact that he regularly took a reformist parliamentary approach.¹⁰⁴

Although both Adolf Ehrt and Þór Whitehead sees every Communist activity as a preparation for the revolution and both view Communism as a foreign conspiracy, there are obvious differences between them. While Ehrt sees Nazism as the answer, Whitehead sees Nazism in Iceland as another sign of extremism and violence. The Nazi group Þjóðernishreyfing Íslendinga and its fighting group Fánalið Þjóðernissinna is seen as a reaction to Communist activity and social unrest, such as Gúttóslagurinn. One extremist group is given the blame for the other. “Öfgar geta af sér öfgar”¹⁰⁵. However, the threat of the Icelandic Nazis are not seen as severe as that of the Communists. Even though the Nazis contributed to the difficulty for the state in maintaining law and order, Whitehead claims that they were willing to help the police in fighting the Communists.¹⁰⁶ Whitehead considers the group as containing more idealized anti-Communists than “pure Nazis”. The leaders of the Conservative party welcomed at first the creation of the Nazi group, because of its anti-Communism. Whitehead sees the general sympathies from the right-wing with Nazism as a trend, which shifted later because of the expansionist ambitions of Nazi Germany. Many of the members were young sympathizers with the Conservative party but wanted to go further in the fight against Communism.¹⁰⁷ They wanted to exterminate it.¹⁰⁸ The Icelandic Nazis thought that the current government was protecting the Communist “traitors”. If the Communists were not dealt with it would lead to another Sturlungaröld, where Iceland would lose its independence.¹⁰⁹ (Sturlungaröld was a medieval period of civil war in Iceland’s history and it ended with Iceland becoming a part of the Norwegian kingdom.) In 1933, one of the Nazi leaders Gísli Sigurbjörnsson published his pamphlet *Sannleikurinn um Kommúnisman*. It was one of the first anti-Communist publications in Iceland. In it Sigurbjörnsson defines Communism as a plague from a foreign land with a hateful and violent message. He sees Communism as a threat against the state and its institutions, and as a destroyer of family and religion. It had to be exterminated.¹¹⁰ The Nazi fighting group was

¹⁰⁴ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 424, 149.

Skafti Ingimarsson "Fimmta herdeildin", p. 186-188, 160-163.

¹⁰⁵ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 218.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 219-220.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 218.

¹⁰⁸ “Heldur viljum við”, *Íslensk endurreisn* 11 May 1933, p. 3.

¹⁰⁹ “Ávarp til Íslendingar!”, *Íslensk endurreisn* 11 May 1933, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ Gísli Sigurbjörnsson, *Sannleikurinn um kommúnisman*, p. 2-6, 9-13, 24, 37, 49.

bigger than the Communist fighting group and more than double the size of the police. The group held shooting practices for its members.¹¹¹ When the Nazis were at their biggest, the threat against Communists increased and confrontations between Communists and Nazis were common. In one confrontation, called the Kolabingslagurinn, the Nazis are portrayed as being mistreated by the Communists.¹¹² When the Communists confronted Nazis and stopped them from having meetings, the Nazis are portrayed as victims. Whitehead sees the violence against the Nazis from the Communists as originating from and being a part of the “hateful” and “merciless” commands of the Comintern.¹¹³

In 1937, during the height of the Spanish Civil War, Einar Olgeirsson writes about the danger of a fascist takeover in Iceland. He wishes to work peacefully and lawfully in democratic means towards Socialism. He claims that the only threat towards democracy now comes from a fascist takeover. If this happened, the working class of Reykjavik are willing to sacrifice their lives for the protection of democracy. In light of what was happening in Spain, he felt that an armed rebellion of capitalists and fascist against democracy was the most dangerous thing that could happen. But he thought it would be dangerous for the Capitalists too, because if they sided with the fascists they would be wiped out.¹¹⁴ Whitehead sees this as a threat of exterminating whole social classes, like what happened in the Soviet Union during the 20th century.¹¹⁵

A threat to independence

In the last chapter of his book, Þór Whitehead claims that the Icelandic state was too weak to meet the attack of the Communists. Whitehead writes that because the state was so weak and the population so small, many foreigners and diplomats questioned how Iceland was going to remain an independent nation with a functioning state. The Communists, he says, challenged the independence of Iceland. Their true fatherland was not Iceland but Russia.¹¹⁶

Það var engin furða þótt minningin um Sturlungaöld sækti mjög að mönnum á þessum árum. Hættan á borgarastyrjöld var hér hvað eftir annað til umræðu frá drengsmálinu svokallaða 1921... Tíð átök minntu menn á það, að þjóðveldið,

¹¹¹ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 219.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 243-244.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 235-236.

¹¹⁴ Einar Olgeirsson, “Leið Íslenska þjóðarinnar”, p. 29-30.

¹¹⁵ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 334-335.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 425-426, 428.

fyrrri tilraun Íslendinga til að halda uppi ríki, mistókst ekki síst vegna skorts á framkvæmdavaldi.¹¹⁷

As shown before, Sturlungaöld became a nationalistic historic analogy that shaped Icelanders' perception of Communism. An analogy of treason and loss of independence. It could be argued that it shapes Whitehead's perception as well:

... ýmislegt væri ótrúlega líkt með sambandi íslenskra kommúnista við Moskvuvaldið og íslenskra hirðmanna við Noregskonung við lok þjóðveldisins ... - Sumt minnir hér sérstaklega á Moskvudvöl Stefáns Pjeturssonar.¹¹⁸

This kind of nationalistic discourse would become very common during the Cold War as well. A political discourse where political opponents were regularly depicted as traitors to the nation. Some were committing treason in the service of the Soviet Union while others acted on the behalf of America and NATO.¹¹⁹

Whitehead feels that the social unrest and labour conflict such as Gúttóslagurinn or Dettifossslagurinn could have led to a real emergency situation. They also show just how weak the state was. He compares Iceland with other western and northern European states, during the interwar years, states that he thinks were more able to meet similar threats.¹²⁰ In order to understand why Whitehead thinks the street fighting of Gúttóslagurinn is so crucial, we need to look closer at his representation of the events.

Gúttóslagurinn

During the Great Depression, class conflict intensified in Iceland. Anti-union activities were strong among the employing class. There were examples of where the employers would deport union organizers from the villages where they operated.¹²¹ This came at a time when the living conditions worsened for the working class. Between the years 1911 to 1930, the population of Reykjavik doubled, going from 15,469 to 33,854.¹²² This created a huge shortage in housing that was not dealt with sufficiently by the authorities. During the period 1929-1934, the general income of people in Reykjavik declined. During the same period,

¹¹⁷ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 427.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 427-428 (Footnote*).

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 424-431, 409-411.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 425-426, 429.

¹²¹ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, *Ísland á 20. öld*, p. 135.

¹²² Hagskinna, Tafla 2.8., p. 96-97.

there was an increase in unemployment.¹²³ There were demands on the government that they would address these issues. The Social Democratic party and the Communist Party suggested implementing a job creation program. This became one of the most conflicted issues in Reykjavik at the time. It eventually culminated in 1932 when two city council meetings ended with street fighting. The second city council meeting was on the 9th of November, when a cut in wages for the workers in the job program was to be implemented. It started with a big demonstration and ended in street fighting. It was later named Gúttóslagurinn, after the house where the meeting took place, the Góðtemplarar (IOGT) house.¹²⁴

***Sovét-Íslands* representation of Gúttóslagurinn**

Whitehead writes extensively about Gúttóslagurinn, how and why it happened. His chapters about Gúttóslagurinn are narrated exclusively through the perspective of the police. There is nothing to tell us about the material circumstances and living conditions of the time. The only reason given for the high attendance on the 9th of November is that both the Social Democrats and the Communists had advertised the event. Social unrest is separated from any social explanation. There is an uncritical approach to the sources. Much of the sources about the events are contradicting, but Whitehead is still able to construct a simple narrative that leaves no questions unanswered. The narrative is first and foremost a piece of police history and coloured with an institutional ideology. It portrays the police as innocent and brave upholders of the law that got life lasting injuries.¹²⁵ Police officers are described in a chivalrous fashion. They are beautiful and noble. The style and words that are used are epic to say the least:

Björn Vigfússon, 33 ára gamall bóndasonur ... fríður maður sýnum og kunnur fyrir íþrótttaafrek. Björn átti síðar eftir að bera vitni um árásina, sem nú var að hefjast úr fundarsalum – áras sem hann beið aldrei bætur.¹²⁶

Another police officer was described in this way:

Á meðal lögregluþjóna, sem eftir lágu í blóði sínu ... var Geir Finnur Sigurðsson, 34 ára gamall bóndasonur ... Geir var heljarmenni að burðum og

¹²³ Ibid, Tafla 3.17., p. 245.

¹²⁴ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, *Ísland á 20. öld*, p. 135. + Ólafur R Einarsson and Einar Karl Haraldsson, *9. nóvember 1932*, p. 86-87.

¹²⁵ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét Ísland*, p. 179-183, 193.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 181.

hafði orð á sér fyrir að víkja hvergi, þótt við margan væri að etja ... Aldrei varð hann samur maður ...¹²⁷

Whitehead puts much effort in to describing the physical fitness of the police officers. At the same time as they are muscular and strong they are also kind and quiet. They become a symbol of a kind giant or a silent knight.¹²⁸ In contrast, in a previous fight one of the demonstrators got beaten so severely by the police that he lost his speech. His injury is not mentioned as an injury for life, instead it is speculated that he probably had a speedy recovery.¹²⁹ The demonstrators are mainly described as a big crowd. They are described as frantic and boisterous. Individuals active in the fighting are described by their name and then classified as Communists. Whitehead claims that the crowd were incited by Communists to scream, push and threaten the police officers.¹³⁰

Menn stigu upp á stóla, renndu sér fótskriðu á fundarborðum bæjarfulltrúa, öskruðu, veifuðu bareflum sínum, bölvuðu og rögnuðu og hótuðu kjörnum fulltrúum Reykvíkinga öllu illu.¹³¹

However, there are accounts that show that Social Democrats and Communists were fighting side by side that day.¹³² For Whitehead, Gúttóslagurinn had nothing to do with the wage cuts for people already living under harsh conditions. For him it was a planned rebellion by the Communist party to create a revolution in Iceland. This conspiracy was not Icelandic, it was the work of the Comintern. Whitehead again uses the 1931 November letter from Comintern as a sign of a direct order to the Communists to be more violent.¹³³ In 1935, when the trials of the demonstrators were taking place, the prosecutor at the time also tried claim that it was a planned act of violence in attempt of revolution. Such talk was denied from many of the leading Communists at the time. The crowd taking part was not homogeneously Communist. There were Social Democrats and workers that did not adhere to party politics, and they also took part in the fighting. Moreover, the Communists claimed that they could not afford to plan such fighting, due to the fact that there was a clear risk that the Communists would get banned at the time. They also claimed that if an isolated crowd in downtown Reykjavík

¹²⁷ Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland óskalandið*, p. 193.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 194.

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 168 (Footnote*).

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 180-186.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 184.

¹³² Ólafur R Einarsson and Einar Karl Haraldsson, *9. nóvember 1932*, p. 252-255, 286-288.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 209.

would take power at that time it would not be a revolution, but rather a coup d'etat.¹³⁴ Or as Einar Olgeirsson said himself:

J. J. heldur að bylting sje það, að 200 vopnaðir kommúnistar ráðizt á blessaða, saklausa, vopnlausa burgeisana ... og taki svo völdin. Ef við hefðum viljað gera svona "bylting", þá hefðum vi getað gert hana ... T. d. 9. nóv. ... En það er ekki þannig, sem bylting er gerð ... Slíkt væri "kup" - ekki bylting.¹³⁵

For him the chances that a revolution would start in Iceland were very slim. He was a pragmatic radical, who instead propagated an active radical class struggle. A struggle that in his mind a centralised Communist party should either control directly or at least be a part of.¹³⁶

Íslenskir kommúnistar

In 2011, a year after the publication of *Sovét-Ísland*, the political scientist Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson published his book *Íslenskir kommúnistar*. His book was a more wide-ranging account about the Communist movement in Iceland, it stretched from 1918 to 1998. This essay will only deal with the interwar period of his book. Surprisingly, there has been considerably less scholarly debate about Gissurarson's book compared to Whitehead's book. Only one academic journal has reviewed the book. The journal is on political science and called *Stjórnámál & Stjórnsýsla*. The review was written by Gunnlaugur A. Júlíusson and is more of an overview and praise of the book rather than a critical review.¹³⁷ Like Whitehead, Gissurarson conceptualizes Communism as a threat to the state, or more particular, Gissurarson defines Communism through its willingness to use violence. The Icelandic CP wanted violence and got it in Gúttóslagurinn the 9th of November 1932. The author states that he sees this violence as an intrinsic aspect of the ideology and that he wrote the book for the victims of it. Two years prior he had translated the *Black Book of Communism* over to Icelandic and he saw that work as the inspiration to his work on Icelandic Communism. What was supposed to be a short summary on the history of the Icelandic Communist movement quickly grew in to a whole book instead. He wanted to expose those Icelanders who defended

¹³⁴ Ólafur R Einarsson and Einar Karl Haraldsson, *9. Nóvember 1932*, p. 244-245, 251-254.

¹³⁵ Einar Olgeirsson, *Efling kommúnismans*, p. 89-90.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 89-91.

¹³⁷ Gunnlaugur A. Júlíusson, "Áhugaverðu ljósi varpað á íslenska stjórnmalasögu", p. 1-7.

the perpetrators of international Communism. While doing this he felt he was honouring the victims of Communist violence both internationally and in Iceland.¹³⁸

Talið er, að hátt í hundrað milljón manns hafi týnt lífi af völdum kommúnismans... Saga kommúnismans er ekki aðeins saga rússnesku böðlanna og klappliðs þeirra á Íslandi og annars staðar, heldur líka saga fórnarlambanna¹³⁹

The narrative about the history of Communism in Iceland is one about the supporters and deniers of atrocities of Communist states. The number 100 million victims is repeated throughout the book without taking into the account the problematic nature of this estimate. Like the books of Francois Furet and Tony Judt, Gissurarson's book is a book about bad guys and good guys. Various intellectuals and politicians are portrayed as the bad guys for their support of the Soviet Union. However, unlike his French and British colleagues, Gissurarson does very little to explore the appeal of Communism. The narrative is more of a prosecution. This prosecution is based on two questions; did the Icelandic Communists know about the mass murder and in what way did they see it as necessary?¹⁴⁰ The book is a chronology of events in the history of the Communist movement. It is traditional political history in the sense that it focuses on the leadership and also its correspondence and connections to the Soviet Union. What is new however, is that a big part of the book is spent on outing "fellow travellers". Many intellectuals were for many different reasons sympathetic with the Soviet Union. Those reasons are not explored. Instead he offers a chronology of events such as trips to the Soviet Union and formations of different support groups as well as the monetary assistance that such groups received from the Soviet Union. Nobel award-winning author Halldór Laxness is especially targeted when he wrote sympathetic texts about the Stalin purges.¹⁴¹

The text about Icelandic Communists is filled with pictures of Soviet atrocities. Throughout the text there are descriptions of reports in the media about these atrocities at the time. Reported cases of persecutions and atrocities in the Soviet Union got criticized and questioned in the left wing press. Early on in his book Gissurarson answers his first question, i.e. whether the Communists knew about the atrocities. The many examples of articles about hardship and persecution in the Soviet Union in *Morgunblaðið* prove his point. But this is a

¹³⁸ Hannes Hólmsteinn, "Kolröng gagnrýni", p. 128-134.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 134.

¹⁴⁰ Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, *Íslenskir kommúnistar*, p. 11.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 84-96, 149-151.

rather simplistic narrative about the media at the time. Right-wing media with the newspaper *Morgunblaðið* is seen as the good guys. The Social Democratic newspaper of *Alþýðublaðið* is frequently portrayed as a platform in which Communists and Socialists would deny the accounts of atrocities. The persecution and atrocities in the Soviet Union are compared with the texts of the Socialist press against their opponents.¹⁴²

Þótt Íslenskir kommúnistar ættu barefli og eitthvað af byssum, voru þeir ekki eins vel búnir og Rauði herinn ... Þeir börðu því á andstæðingum sínum með pennanum fremur en blikandi byssusting.¹⁴³

These beatings with pencils are seen as being planned from Moscow and the Comintern. Left wing authors and poets were ordered to commit to a culture struggle in Iceland. Icelandic publishing companies that got monetary support from the Soviet Union are seen as a vital part of this. Gissurarson writes that the political opponents of the authors and poets had to endure punishment of the radical authors, a punishment of harsh reviews and parodies.¹⁴⁴

Labour conflict

When Icelandic workers tried to organize themselves in unions and strive for better working conditions, bargaining rights and recognition as a class, Gissurarson portrays them as forceful and violent. He claims that Communists and Social Democrats took away the individual bargaining rights of individual workers. Gissurarson tells the story of people being forced to join the union, but ignores the reasons why workers had to form unions to begin with.¹⁴⁵

Eitt helsta baráttumál kommúnista var að taka samningsréttinn af einstökum verkamönnum og fela hann einu verkamannafélagi á hverjum stað, og voru jafnaðarmenn sammála þeim um þetta...¹⁴⁶

Gissurarson describes a number of labour conflicts where workers actually got their demands through, but he is more concerned with the state's inability of incarcerating people connected to these conflicts.¹⁴⁷ Gissurarson claims that Comintern and Profintern were involved in the labour conflicts but admits having no sources to show this.¹⁴⁸ In 1981 Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson published the book *Stétt með stétt*. In it he writes about the the conservative

¹⁴² Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, *Íslenskir kommúnistar*, p. 27-46, 87-88.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 87-88.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 96-100.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 70.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 70.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 71-76.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 76.

party's venture into the labour movement. This book gives us an understanding on his general outlook on the labour movement. Gissurarson claims that the unions were often initiatives of educated men rather than workers. Also he claims that neither the Icelandic Social Democrats nor the Communists had their roots in the working class, rather they were initiatives of educated Icelandic men in Denmark.¹⁴⁹ Extensive wage increases are seen as causing inflation and unemployment, it was in the workers interest that the companies had big profits.¹⁵⁰ Gissurarson writes about the different ideas that defined the conservative venture in the labour movement. Among these was the idea of peace between the classes, renouncing Marxism and the idea that everyone benefited from a pacified labour market. It also defied itself as anti-Communist, it claimed that Communists were fighting for their own gains rather than for the interests of the workers. Nationalism was an important part of the Conservatives. They claimed that Icelanders were first and foremost one people or race, rather than divided in conflicting classes. It was claimed that individualism was a national value that could be traced back to the early settlement. It was indigenous in contrast to Socialism which is seen as a foreign imported ideology that did not fit Icelanders.¹⁵¹ I would argue that a similar narrative can be found in *Íslenskir kommúnistar*. A foreign international Communist movement was forced upon Icelandic workers who neither needed nor wanted it.¹⁵²

Triumphalism and totalitarianism

In his conclusion Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson states that the main difference between Communism and Nazism was that the Nazis lost the war. Not much separates the two ideologies because a kulak child which starved to death is not worth less than a Jewish child starved to death. Gissurarson claims that being a Communist means that one thinks that certain groups in society needs to be exterminated. Just like Nazism. But, says Gissurarson, all things considered Communism killed more people than Nazism. Gissurarson does not accept that people became sympathetic towards the Soviet Union because of their fight against Nazism. He feels that they instead could have become "democrats" and supported Winston Churchill or Charles de Gaulle instead.¹⁵³ In this binary Cold War perspective

¹⁴⁹ Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, *Stétt með stétt*, p. 13 15.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 52-54.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p. 59-60.

¹⁵² Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, *Íslenskir kommúnistar*, p. 13-18, 70.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 526-528, 531.

Gissurarson forgets that Churchill and de Gaulle represented two of the oldest colonial and capitalist powers in the world.

As many of the scholars discussed in chapter 1, historian Skafti Ingimarsson is critical towards this perspective of totalitarianism. He writes that historically the perspective of totalitarianism has delegitimized movements for social change, movements that were inspired by Socialism or Communism. Equating Nazism with Communism tells us nothing of why Communism was so popular in Iceland. If the differences are studied in the Icelandic context it is easy to see that Communism always was an important and big part of the labour movement. Nazism in Iceland never got the same kind of popularity amongst the working class. Its ideology was mostly built on anti-Communism and racist eugenics. Organized Nazism existed from 1933-1938 after that some of its members joined the right-wing party *Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn*.¹⁵⁴

Ingimarsson sees two explanatory models for understanding the popularity of the Icelandic Communists. One is based on Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttirs work on exploring how Communism used the nationalist discourse of the independent movement to shape the class consciousness of the Icelandic working class. Another is basic social history, gaining an understanding of the hardship that existed and the fact that two-thirds of the members in the CP were workers and sailors. The dangers of taking Gissurarson's and Whitehead's history for granted is illustrated by the right-wing journalist Styrmir Gunnarsson's reviews of their work.¹⁵⁵ He believes that: "Þeir sem tapa hafa alltaf rangt fyrir sér"¹⁵⁶. It is his belief that schools should now teach that the Communists made themselves guilty of treason against their nation, violence and arming themselves. He believes that Gissurarson and Whitehead have written such extensive works about Icelandic Communism that they cannot be ignored, they have to be taken into account. Gunnarsson goes so far as to ask for a historical re-evaluation of the Nazi movement in Iceland. He sees them as able anti-Communists at a time of Communist violence.¹⁵⁷

En jafnframt þótti mér forvitnilegt að sjá, að hópur ungra manna, sem kölluðu sig þjóðernissinna, virðist hafa skapað meira mótvægi í þessum átökum á götum Reykjavík en hingað til hefur verið viðurkennt ... Hingað til hafa þessir

¹⁵⁴ Skafti Ingimarsson, "Saga sigurvegaranna", p. 8-12, 3-5.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 8-12, 3-5.

¹⁵⁶ Styrmir Gunnarsson, "Þeir voru erindrekar erlends valds", *Sunnudags Mogginn* 13 November 2011, p. 35.

¹⁵⁷ Skafti Ingimarsson, "Saga sigurvegaranna", p. 8-12, 3-5.

Styrmir Gunnarsson, "Þeir voru erindrekar erlends valds", *Sunnudags Mogginn* 13 November 2011, p. 34-35.

ungu men ekki skipað merkilegan sess í stjórnálasögu 20. aldarinnar! En af bók Þórs Whitehead má ráða að það mótvægi, sem þeir sköpuðu um skeið gegn götuofbeldi kommúnista hafi skipt máli. Kannski er komin tími til að skoða betur þessarar stjórnálahreyfingar?¹⁵⁸

Gunnarsson does not call them Nazis and says that the ones he knew always complained that Winston Churchill had not allowed Adolf Hitler to fight against Joseph Stalin.¹⁵⁹ He also points out that fewer people died under Nazism than under Communism.¹⁶⁰

Both Hannes Hólmsteinn and Þór Whitehead are sparse with their descriptions of the Spanish Civil War. There are accounts of the Red Terror but nothing about the White Terror. Spain is seen as the international training ground for Communists and the Spanish Civil War is seen as a fight between the Right-wing and Left-wing. Volunteers are seen as fighting for the Comintern rather than fighting for the republic. Finally Gissurarson shares Whitehead's conclusion that the Comintern ordered the formation of the Sósíalístaflokkur.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Styrmir Gunnarsson, “Verk sem marker þáttaskil”, p. 85-86.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 86.

¹⁶⁰ Styrmir Gunnarsson, “Þeir voru erindrekar erlends valds”, *Sunnudags Mogginn* 13 November 2011, p. 35.

¹⁶¹ Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, *Íslenskir kommúnistar*, p. 137-142.

Þór Whitehead, *Sóvet-Ísland*, p. 340-342, 146.

Conclusion

Anti-Communism has its origins in the interwar period. One of the first examples of organized anti-Communism was the political repression in the US during the first Red Scare of 1919 to 1921. Often portrayed as a justified fear of Soviet Communism, the roots of anti-Communism in the interwar period are more complex. It sprung out of a Conservative institutional ideology whose proponents saw its interests as being threatened. The threat came from a growing variety of movements for social change that questioned the injustices and inequality of the current socio-political order. A discourse developed that saw these forces as something foreign and conspiratorial. This discourse was the discourse of anti-Communism. The demands of the social movements were delegitimized when they were portrayed as bloodthirsty Bolsheviks, traitorous and untrustworthy. This nationalist and xenophobic discourse became a vital part of right-wing ideologies of Nazism and Fascism in Europe. It can be argued that it was a similar anti-Communism to that of the American, as a repression of social movements, and won the support of the industrialists and bankers in Hitler's coming to power. The conspiratorial elements of Communism grew in these ideologies. Anti-Semitism became a vital part in describing the infiltrating characteristics of Communism. Adolf Ehrt became an important ideologue of the anti-Communism of Nazism, describing every activity of the Communists as an uninterrupted betrayal to the nation and a preparation of the armed rebellion. Fascism and Nazism were regularly portrayed worldwide as the only forces that could deal with Communism. This changed when the geopolitical interests of the western powers were threatened by Nazi and Fascist expansionist policies. A new nationalist fervour in these countries portrayed these ideologies as hostile as Communism and the *feindbild* changed. All extremism was the same and the horrible image of the totalitarian state became popular. With the exception of the years 1941-1945, this was to become the dominating form of anti-Communism and still is today. Totalitarianism connected previous elements of anti-Communism with an analogy between Nazism and Communism.

After the Cold War, triumphalism strengthened the analogy with gruesome accounts of how murderous both ideologies were. In turn, totalitarianism contributed nothing to an understanding of structural oppression such as racism, sexism and classism. An uncritical usage of totalitarianism brings about a simplistic comparing of the body counts of two different ideologies, without understanding the vital differences between the ideologies themselves. It also contributed to a degree of triumphalism where all previous atrocities

committed under Capitalism and Colonialism were forgotten or ignored. From this perspective, the violence from movements of liberation in the Third World seemed totally unprovoked and unnecessary. As shown in this essay, anti-Communism does not necessarily target Communists specifically, but rather targets all orientation of political thought that strives for radical social change. Therefore political struggles for equality and justice can easily be delegitimised through images of totalitarianism and the Soviet Union. Such was the goal of the *Black Book of Communism* and it became the goal of the Swedish state programme of *Forum för levande historia*. In light of this, I would argue that there is a greater need for a critique of the state in general, as it functions as a locale for using and shaping ideology for the perpetuation of its interests.

I firmly believe that it is of utmost importance to acknowledge the difference between ideas having their root in social movements, with the struggle for equality and justice, and that of ideologies that want to strengthen structural oppression and the position of those already privileged. The process of excluding the agency of social movements and denying their political legitimacy is a dangerous path. It brings about an apolitical climate where people are not invested in their society. It brings about a political climate where these two totally separate ideologies with their discourse becomes equally accepted and tolerated. It brings about acceptance to a perpetuation of nationalism and racism on the account that Communism was more murderous.

Anti-Communism is rooted in many different ideologies. However, no matter how anti-Communism expresses itself there are commonalities in the discourse. Communists and followers of it are pictured as traitors to the nation, loyal only to the Soviet Union. Its members act in conspiracy and secrecy to undermine the national institutions and interests.

This discourse of anti-Communism had a massive influence when the first scholarly works of Communism were written. Traditionalism became a narrative that frequently claimed that all Communist movements were the lackeys of the Soviet Union. It traced Communism to a foreign idea that led to millions of deaths. Revisionist history writers of Communism were deeply critical towards this perspective. Its roots in idealism excluded all social perspectives. Ideas were seen as being created in a vacuum rather than shaped by the environment. Soviet subjugation of national CPs did not explain the strong popularity of Communism amongst the working masses in many countries. It did not explain its success in organising workers and claiming many victories in the labour movement. A large part of the

revisionists were still willing to admit to the leaderships subservience to the Soviet Union but wanted to differentiate between the experiences of the leadership and the rank-file members. Their tradition stemmed from that of social history that saw the need for rewriting history with the voices that had not been heard before, the voices of the working and toiling masses amongst others. This description gives us an understanding of the political nature of the writing of Communist history, and the age old political fault lines of class that still shapes this discourse.

The Icelandic historiography has followed a similar development but in reverse order. In Iceland, the perspective of social history were the first accounts of Communist history. Communism was seen as a conflicting ideology and at times contradictory. Its base was traced back to the Icelandic working-class. This narrative was first challenged by the traditionalism of Þór Whitehead in 1979. It again became topical during the early 2000s when a national debate over surveillance of leftist elements during the Cold War questioned the states intrusion into people's personal lives. Here a discourse of anti-Communism was used to defend the actions of the state. Communists were always a threat because of the treacherous nature of their ideology. This discourse of anti-Communism would become pivotal in writing the history of the Icelandic Communist movement. The discourse of Icelandic nationalism was incited when it was suggested that the independence of the nation was being threatened by the Communists.

The two most influential authors in this new crusade against Communism have been Þór Whitehead and Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarsson. They both have a traditionalist perspective of the Icelandic Communists. Their works are both speculative and tendentious. Often sources are interpreted into a certain unclear subtext to fit the general narrative. When a claim cannot be substantiated by sources, then the claim's validity is explained with the lack of sources. In the case of Whitehead, the style borders on the counter-factual, the book builds its thesis on the risk of an uprising that never happened. The Icelandic scholarly community has been critical to what they see as Whitehead's inadequate source work. At the same time, however, the scholarly community has ignored Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarsson's work altogether.

There are a couple of differences between the two author's works. Whitehead's narrative is about an Icelandic Communist movement that does all in its power to undermine the Icelandic state. It threatens its very existence, even when it participates in its institutions.

In this sense the similarities with the anti-Communist discourse of the interwar period are very similar. Just like Ehrt, Whitehead sees all the activities of the Icelandic Communists as some kind of preparation for the coming revolution. The Soviet management of the Icelandic Communists is portrayed as being meticulous. Iceland was barely saved from the Communists by developing a security cooperation with the western powers that eventually lead to a membership of NATO. State executive powers are described as being weak and because of it Iceland almost lost its independence to the Communists. The style draws its inspiration from many different discourses. A conservative institutional ideology is used in excluding all social explanations for social unrest, with it the agency of the working class is also excluded. This becomes especially clear in his accounts of *Gúttóslagurinn*. The police force is described as a group of romantic heroes while the demonstrators are shown as taking orders from the Comintern. The police are victimized to a degree that dehumanizes the demonstrators to end up looking like bloodthirsty monsters. This can be compared to how the police institution of the FBI shaped the political perception of Communists during the interwar period in the USA. Calls for social change are discredited as agents of a foreign nation. Whitehead thinks the authorities were not strong enough but seems to forget that no one died as a result of these instances of social unrest. This is a stark contrast to the other western nations he wishes to compare the status of the Icelandic state to. Be it the killing of workers in Ådalen, Sweden in 1931. Or in the case of America, the Ludlow massacre of 1914 or the Columbine mine massacre of 1927. At this time workers in western countries were murdered in labour conflicts and social unrest/for exercising their democratic rights. Nationalism and anti-Communism are very important to this narrative, the idea that the nation state is above all and a perseverance of it is a priority and Communism stand in opposition to the nation state. In the Icelandic case this is best illustrated with the reoccurring historic analogy of *Sturlungaöld*. In this nationalistic discourse interwar Iceland is compared to that of medieval Iceland. In both times there were people whose true loyalty was with a foreign power.

Gissurarson concentrates his narrative on showing the moral complicity of the Icelandic Communists in the atrocities of the different Communist states. His book spans a longer period of time. The historical understanding of Icelandic Communism in the labour movement is interpreted as a force that undermined the liberal notions of free enterprise and individual rights. Victories in labour conflicts are seen as the forcing of other workers to cooperate with the Communists. The fundamentals of a labour movement are denied and their

efforts at improving working conditions are depicted as acts of violence. Totalitarianism is an important part of the book. Nazism and Communism are equated and Communism is deemed the worse of the two. In that sense his book draws more on contemporary anti-Communist discourse than that of Whitehead. His book is a triumphalist 'settling of the scores' where Icelandic Communists and leftists in general are exposed for their perceived crimes. All their political grievances are nullified when they are given the moral complicity for the kulak child that was starved to death. The traditional narrative of Communism broad-brushes all leftist intellectuals and cultural workers as lackeys of the Soviet Union. Their intellectual and cultural work is seen as being ordered by the Soviet Union in a great culture struggle.

The implications of uncritically accepting the narrative of Whitehead and Gissurarson is best illustrated by the right wing journalist Styrmir Gunnarson. The degree of anti-Communism presented in these works contributes to a historical understanding so polarised to the right of the political spectrum that Gunnarson wants to see an academic reevaluation of the historic role of Nazism in Iceland. Whether it was their intention or not, Whitehead and Gissurarson opened up for apologetics. Gunnarson's historical understanding fits with the anti-Communist discourse of Nazis themselves. Nazism and Fascism were able anti-Communists facing the violence. Uncritically accepting and not contesting the historical works of Whitehead and Gissurarson leads to a closing of the narrative. It becomes the final narrative of Communism, all others are beside the point. The open-ended process of producing and reproducing history is now closed. We are to be content with the version of the victors, because might makes right.

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