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*ABC Plays A Communist Party Trick*

The Communist Party of Australia is dead. But many of the myths which sustained it for seven decades live on - especially on the ABC.

From its formation in 1920 up until (but not including) the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the CPA and its members openly supported every act of the totalitarian dictators in Moscow. It is an appalling record.

The CPA was in there barracking for Lenin when in the early years after the revolution he established the core structure of Soviet totalitarianism including the secret police and early gulags.

After Lenin's death, communists the world over became unqualified adherents of Josef Stalin. They cheered such barbarities as land collectivisation, the forced famine in the Ukraine, the subjugation of the nationalities (including forced deportations), the purges of the 1930s, the Nazi Soviet Pact of 1939-41 (which was the spark which commenced World War II) and Stalin's anti-semitism which manifested itself in his handling of the so-called Doctors Plot in the early 1950s.

There were a few defections from the CPA over the Nazi Soviet Pact and some again in 1956 by those who could not stomach Moscow's brutal suppression of the Hungarian democratic uprising. Yet it was not until 1968 (almost five decades after its formation) that the CPA leadership finally said that enough was enough. By then the total number of victims of Soviet totalitarianism was somewhere between 30 and 50 million.

You would think that a political party which had so much blood on its hands would depart quietly - perhaps after a private burial service. But the CPA decided to go out in a blaze of publicity - some of which was remarkable for its naivety.

In her *Hindsight* program entitled "The Party's Over" (which was produced and directed by Jonathan Holmes), the ABC's Geraldine Doogue presented a broadly sympathetic account of the Communist Party of Australia.

Ms Doogue interviewed on camera a total of 11 former Party members - 9 of whom belonged to the CPA when it supported the Nazi Soviet Pact and opposed the allied war effort. Only three of the total are on record as making a public protest at Moscow's invasion of Hungary and another one drifted out of the CPA in the early 1960s in protest at the on-going Sino Soviet dispute.

For the rest it was Party business as usual until the late 1960s - except for one who joined the break away Maoists because he believed that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was too soft.

Geraldine Doogue's treatment of the one-time CPA operatives was remarkably kind. She described them as part of an "extraordinary tribe" and commented that they comprised "some of the most impressive people" she had ever met. While welcoming the fact that they did not achieve positions of power in their own society, she attributed their support for the excesses of Stalinism to "ignorance".

In "The Party's Over" Ms Doogue presented a picture of rather naive types who, after the release of Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech on Stalin's crimes, were suddenly "confronted with the truth".

In commenting on the *Hindsight* program the ABC's Andrew Olle ran a similar line. Olle spoke of "the exposé of

Stalinism by Nikita Khrushchev" and went on to claim that it was then that "for the first time the terrible details of the vicious rule of Josef Stalin" were "made known to the Party faithful".

Now this simply will not do - not even for the ABC.

The crimes of Soviet totalitarianism were well known in the West by the 1930s - for anyone, that is, who wanted to know.

Malcolm Muggeridge's critical (but accurate) accounts of Stalin's USSR were published in the 1930s as was George Orwell's critique of the Stalinists in the Spanish Civil War. In the late 1930s John Dewey revealed the fraud of Stalin's purges and show trials. Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* was published in 1940 and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* followed five years later.

Then, of course, there was the testimony of the first hand accounts of the refugees from Stalin's Soviet Union. They turned out to be remarkably accurate - as fair minded analysts knew and conceded at the time.

The problem with the analysis presented by Doogue and Olle is that it tends to let the one-time Stalinists off the hook. Rather than being confronted with their past deeds, they are partly excused on the basis of so-called ignorance.

It is impossible to imagine that the ABC would let one-time Nazis off the hook on the basis of alleged ignorance of Hitler's crimes. These days we are unremittingly tough (and rightly so) on followers of Nazi totalitarianism and on those in the West who, for whatever reason, were in the appeasement camp in the 1930s. But there seems to be quite a different judgment on one-time Stalinists and their fellow travellers. It is an unpleasant double standard.

During his discussion of "The Party's Over" on his ABC radio program, Andrew Olle played excerpts of one time communist Jack McPhillips and renowned anti communist Laurie Short attacking one another. He concluded that, forty years after the event, there was "no love lost" between the two and went on to praise the "high idealism" of communists like McPhillips who joined the Communist Party in their youth.

This is moral equivalence of the worst kind. Laurie Short was a courageous democratic union leader who opposed communist totalitarianism on the shop floor and was bashed by Stalinist thugs. Jack McPhillips, on the other hand, was an unrepentant Stalinist who finally quit the CPA because it was not sufficiently pro Soviet. As late as December 1989 McPhillips told *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Ben Hills that he still supported Brezhnev's 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.

It is simplistic in the extreme for Olle to describe the battle for control of the Ironworkers' Union between the communists (led by McPhillips) and the anti communists (led by Short) as a "turbulent brawl" in which personal "bitterness" played an important role. It was far deeper than that.

The battle which took place in the Australian trade union movement in the late 1940s and early 1950s was but a microcosm of the larger battle which was taking place elsewhere between the supporters and opponents of Stalinism. In the event the Stalinists lost - in spite of the fervent wish of the CPA members of the day that they should prevail.

These days there is an attempt to forget or whitewash the extent to which Australian communists supported the crimes of Soviet totalitarianism. This convenient amnesia even disturbs some ex communists.

Yesterday on Radio 2BL Andrew Olle commented favourably on Dorothy Hewett's honesty as a writer. He was politely rebuked by Ms Hewett who admitted that during her period in the Communist Party she had "failed deeply the test of honesty". Regrettably not all former Party members are as honest as this.

I have invariably found that those who have been active on the left of politics - including former Trotskyists and Communists - have a much more realistic idea of the totalitarian mind than the likes of Geraldine Doogue.

In an article published recently in *The Bulletin*, former ALP parliamentarian Barry Cohen recalled that in some "circles anyone who suggested that life was less than perfect in communist regimes was labelled a red-baiting fanatic" and the expression "the free world" became a term of derision.

The problem with so much of what passes for serious analysis on the ABC these days is that it is essentially sentimental and lightweight.

Take the treatment of long-time communist Jack Blake, for example. Andrew Olle has called him a "marvellous old man" and to Geraldine Doogue he is most appropriately depicted walking through the streets of Lithgow with his wife of 50 years.

Yet history records that this is the same Jack Blake who, in December 1939, published a particularly nasty piece in the *Communist Review* in which he supported the Nazi Soviet Pact and effectively branded Prime Minister Robert Menzies and Labor leader John Curtin as war mongers.

It's a pity that when it comes to historical hindsight the ABC is too often beholden to superficial perceptions.

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