

Blinken OSA Visegrad Fellowship report

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Tankies then and now: A taxonomy of continuities and shifts in Western leftist appeasement vocabularies

I am interested in the phenomenon of ‘tankies’ - British slang for Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) members who remained in the Party after the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary. They follow the Kremlin line and prefer to solve political problems with tanks. Nowadays the word has been revived to refer to Putin/Russia apologists on the left, in particular since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. I wanted to find out how the original ‘tankies’ thought and talked about Soviet foreign policy aggressions, and to what extent Cold War-era vocabularies are still in use on the Western left today, promoted by e.g. Noam Chomsky and others. I was also aware of the fact that a handful of ‘tankies’ had been quite vocal during the early 1990s wars in the Former Yugoslavia, and following Russia’s 2015 intervention in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime.

Materials consulted during my stay at Blinken OSA, 1 April – 31 May 2023

Records of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Institute

Analytic Research Department

Records of Kevin Devlin and the Communist Area Analysis Department on Non-Ruling Communist Parties

Series	Boxes	Subject
300-5-90	20-24	Eurocommunism 1967-79, Europe CPs, E/W Relations and NATO
	26-46	CP France (PCF), 1965-89
	47	Front Organisation, 1963-7
	48	CP Federal Republic of Germany, 1965-89
	58-77	CP Italy (PCI), 1964-89
	94	CPSU Foreign Policy, 1967-84
	109-112	CPGB, 1961-89

Records of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Institute

Background Reports

300-8-3	Digital Repository	Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, CPGB, PCF, PCI, Eurocommunism, Comintern/Cominform, Western CP responses to EE dissidence
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Records of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Institute

Soviet Red Archives

300-80-7	134	USSR Bibliographical Files: Zhdanov
300-80-8	3	Non-USSR Bibliographical Files: Boffa

Records of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Institute

Western Press Archives

300-120-1	1-2	Biographical Files
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The main bulk of my research was carried out using the Devlin collection (300-5-90), focussing on British, French, Italian, West German, and Eurocommunist materials. The collection is incredibly valuable, comprising internal reports, press clippings, pamphlets, and analyses. Without this collection, researchers wishing to gain a detailed picture of the Western and Eastern communist parties would otherwise have to visit various different archives across numerous countries. I also cross-referenced with the RFE Soviet Red Archives USSR and Non-USSR Biographical Files, and Western Press Archives Biographical Files.

I also made use of the CEU library access to download a substantial number of articles on the CPs of Britain, France, and Italy, intellectual history, as well as East European dissent and Marxist critiques.

Research process

Within a few days of starting my research, I realised that some of my initial, simplistic assumptions were quite wrong. Having arrived with an open mind, this realisation was key to the course of my research over the following two months. On a number of occasions, I found myself taking unexpected detours that proved very constructive, such as the Western CPs' relations with Eastern European dissidents from the 1970s onwards, and the complex figure of *Unità* correspondent Giuseppe Boffa (who appeared on the RFE CAA departmental radar for his extensive contacts and knowledge, accurate predictions, and eventual clear-sighted criticism of the Soviet system and Soviet-style parties).

The figure of Kevin Devlin himself also loomed large over my research. Devlin's reports and research publications are masterful analyses of vast amounts of material, pin-pointing the shifts in policy, written in an engaging, clear style that is mercifully free of cold warrior hyperbole. His handwritten notes in the internal reports' margins indicate where his own focus lay, and how he made temporal and geographic connections across the international communist movement.

I kept a 60-page 'diary' of my daily findings, supplemented with hundreds of photos and scans. I also wrote four separate documents on the chronology, splits, and evolution of the British, French, West German, and Italian CPs.

Findings

My research to date indicates that the four Western European CPs were indeed strictly regulated organisations which were, contrary to my original assumptions, nevertheless in constant theoretical and organisational flux. They existed within a network of tensions between Moscow, their own members and critical ex-members, potential electorates, political and trade union allies, intellectual fellow travellers, and national political contexts.

The Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 was the first turning point: Western European CPs defended the crushing of what they termed a 'counter-revolutionary' uprising and promptly lost large chunks of their memberships, as well as generating significant amounts of pointed critiques – many of which were also written from a Marxist perspective – from Party members who left in protest. Polemics by such former CP members often represented painful analyses of individual and collective guilt, the admission that members had allowed themselves to be lied to.

The second turning point was the Prague Spring of 1968 and the subsequent Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. By this point, Western CPs had learned just one single lesson: parroting the Kremlin line was a vote loser and poisonous in terms of forming domestic coalitions. Western CP interest in Czechoslovak reformists was relatively new, but still couched in terms of perfecting the Communist project. Theoretical flexibility allowed them to promote a new Party line without any trace of embarrassment: our policy today is diametrically opposed to our policy of yesterday, and we remain correct.

With the emergence of Eurocommunism in the 1970s, the larger CPs of Southern Europe deliberately moved away from the Soviet model and in some cases returned to their own domestic Marxist legacies (e.g. Gramsci), while at the same time nurturing relations with EE parties and intellectuals. This development will require further research on my part, as will the evolution of various propaganda techniques, to include more recent targeted disinformation, troll farms, and so on.

I outlined my preliminary findings at a presentation on 15 May. Using documents from the Devlin collection, I argued that certain articles of faith have been consigned to the past: ideological and organisational discipline (the Leninist principle of democratic centralism); the emphasis on theoretical errors particularly in the early post-Stalin era; and the Iron Curtain as a (mostly) inviolable ideological frontier between two well-defined geographic and conceptual blocs.

What has survived until the present, however, are the following rhetorical canards: only the West is responsible for provocation/escalation; campism (first officially formulated by Andrei Zhdanov); Soviet (i.e. Russian) achievements and – particularly from the Brezhnev era onwards – suffering in WW2 can justify anything and everything; subconscious fear that Nazi Germany has not actually been defeated; and over-identification with the state and denial of agency to the ‘little people,’ be they e.g. Hungarians (then) or Ukrainians (now).

Next steps

I intend to organise my materials and publish my findings in two articles, one academic and one non-academic. I will also apply for further funding to continue my research at OSA, expanding the geographic scope to include other European CPs as well as those of the Global South, and devote more time to the evolution of contacts between Eastern dissidents and Western Communists. A close reading of contemporary ‘tankie’ strategies – also with reference to Bosnia and Syria – in historical context is the final goal.

Experience at OSA

The Visegrad Fellowship allowed me to spend a remarkably productive two months at OSA. While some primary materials relevant to my research are to be found elsewhere, OSA’s holdings proved to be rich in depth and breadth, yielding a number of unexpected insights and new interests which I would very much like to pursue. The organisation of informal meetings for fellows and staff was also very beneficial in integrating fellows into the life of the archive.

I am particularly grateful to Ioana Macrea-Toma (my supervisor), András Mink, Katalin Székely, and Csaba Szilágyi, for their input and suggestions, as well as the Research Room and admin staff. I would also like to thank Adrian Matus, who processed the Devlin collection, for his time and ideas. I must also express my gratitude to the Visegrad Fund board for approving and supporting my research.

Dr Gwen Jones

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