Historiographical Trends and the Comintern – The Communist International (Comintern) and How it has been Interpreted

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The Communist International (also known as the Third International, or as the acronym: Comintern) was established in March 1919 in Moscow. The chief architect, Lenin, highlighted the fact that this new International was a “continuity” connecting the new organization with its forerunners, the First and Second Internationals. Concisely, Marxist-Leninist historiography has argued that Lenin’s main motif for erecting the Comintern was to act as the heir of the traditions formulated by the First International, and operate as a progressive political force, something the Second International had lost.\(^1\) Another interpretation on the motives of constructing an international communist organization put a stress on three issues. First, the Comintern was formed in March 1919 in the aftermath and consequences of the Russian revolution 1917 and with the Bolshevik coup in November same year. Secondly, the ultimate goal was the promotion of world revolution. Lastly, the Comintern inspired countries outside of the Soviet Russian border to establish Communist Parties, a spiritual bond at first that later transformed into obligatory participation and in obeying the decisions taken by the central “party” apparatus that the Comintern progressed into over the years. The Comintern was dissolved in 1943.\(^2\)

However, the purpose here is not to describe in a narrative manner the life and decline of the Comintern. Focus is instead on how the life and decline of such an international organization has been interpreted and historicised since its dissolution 1943. First of all, it must be made clear that research conducted on Comintern is immense both in quantity and in diversified results. Therefore, the selection of published works on Comintern included here has been selected on the premises that the work in itself can be regarded as of somewhat groundbreaking. Though, it must be assured that not all referred literature included and used in the text can be regarded as groundbreaking, a standpoint the author is solemnly responsible for in the end.

\(^{1}\) Milorad M. Drachkovitch and Branko Lazitch, “The Communist International”, in *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864-1943*, Milorad M. Drachkovitch, Stanford University Press, 1966, p.159. The First International was founded on principles formulated by Karl Marx and thus inspired by Marxist revolutionary internationalism in 1864 by the International Workingmen’s Association (IWA), the Second came into being 1889 inspired by German social democrats. Drachkovitch emphasizes that “each International had a life of its own, and was to a large extent conditioned by the historical and socio-political environment in which it was born and within which it had to struggle to survive (p.xiv)”.

Once again, the pillar of this text consists of presenting and concisely argument against, or, if possible, agreeing with the dominant views that has portrayed the Comintern over time. Focus rely both on old views that was developed after the ending of the Second World War leading up to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and on views developed almost immediately after 1991 up until current interpretative approaches. While speaking in terms of approach it implies how scholars have chosen to get close to the Comintern as a subject of study, in order to interpret and understand the complexities that surround the Comintern. Two decisive issues brought the Comintern out in to the open by making the archival holdings accessible, one bearing a thematic character, the other came about as a consequence of other circumstances, namely the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

**Bringing the Comintern Out in the Open – After 1991 and its Consequences**

One crucial act made it possible to start the scientific process of evaluating and re-interpreting the international communism movement as the Comintern represented during the inter-war era. With the decree of the President of Russia, signed 24 August 1991, all documents stored in the Central Party Archive of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) were nationalized and became a part of the Archives of Russia (Rosarckhiv). The decree made it possible for every category of foreign scholars, despite political views, religion, or nationality, to gain access to the **Central Party Archive** where for example documents on Comintern are stored. A complementary decree the 12 October, same year, altered the politically connoted name of the archive into **Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniiia dokumentov noveishei istorii** (RTsKhIDNI, in English: Russian Center for Preservation and Study of Records of Modern History). The RTsKhIDNI was in March 1999, due to a reform of the Rosarkhiv, renamed to **Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii** (RGASPI, in English: Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History). The background leading up to opening up the archives in Russia are to be found in the steady road downwards of the Soviet Union during the 1980s, and especially after Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the CPSU on 11th of March 1985. Further, factors bringing the Soviet Union down on its knees were the economic stagnation, combined with increased immobile decision-making.

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processes on several levels (in most cases the highest level) that took its expressions in enlarged corruption and nepotism.\(^5\) The theme that came to affect how Soviet citizens perceived themselves, but also how the outside world perceived the Soviet Union was *glasnost*. Not every aspect concerning the sudden decline of the Soviet Union in the 1980s shall be brought up for discussion, but, *glasnost* deserves some space. In short, *glasnost* was a part of the “New Political Thinking” (*Novoe politicheskoe myshlenie*), formulated and introduced by Gorbachev, in co-operation with his personal adviser Aleksandr Yakovlev. Other features were *perestroika* (meaning reconstruction), aiming to speed-up the economy, and a restrictive policy towards alcohol for example. *Glasnost* in itself can be understood as a concept of openness, thus, according to Gorbachev himself being a concept striving to create a more “open” society, and ultimately assist in being a part of the democratization process that was supposed to take place in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s. The prime target for Gorbachev was to find economic stabilisation, and by promoting the use of *glasnost* a sense of dissatisfaction concerning living conditions in the Soviet system was desirable in order to achieve changes. Therefore was the aim of glasnost to join hands with the goals formulated in the vein of *perestroika*. Unfortunately, this aura of dissatisfaction also came to include a critical evaluation concerning the history of the Soviet Union. Not mentioning every event or thought brought forward by different authors and intellectuals, but as attacks were directed against past terrors conducted by the Soviet party against its own people the process of *glasnost*, as Kristian Gerner and Stefan Hedlund put it, “went completely out of control”.\(^6\) With the starting up of the process intending to open up the archives in Russia in the later half of 1991, there was no longer a chance to prevent anyone to critically scrutinize the entire Communist system as it had taken shape in the Soviet Union. Though being a rather generalized picture concerning how to critically evaluate communism, no one can deny the long-lasting effects that *glasnost* had on all kind of levels, and as in this case, the academic profession and with new research opportunities concerning communism, both national (the Russian experience) and international (the Comintern experience). But where to start, and is a periodization of the Comintern a suitable first step to take? The next section shall focus on the periodization of the Comintern, and how it has been adapted by different scholars.

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Dividing the History of the Comintern – The Periodization Question

The Comintern existed between the years 1919-1943, and was in character an international organization. Speaking of method and putting a chronological perspective on the subject of study historians occasionally tend to aim for a periodization. After all, Comintern was only in existence for 24 years, something that can be perceived as a brief period in history, so therefore; is it useful and possible to chop up the history of the Comintern in different periods of time, describing an evolution going from A to B, ending up in C? The main argument to resist in the implementation of a periodization is that it turns out “artificial”. However, turning the argument the other way around it can be argued that history is not a straight “line” without disturbances and evolutionary hick-ups. Further, a periodization can be justified as it is a means of “making crucial changes visible”. The periodization debate regarding the changes and chronology of the Comintern still baffles and stirs up attention. The present discussion at stake here shall deal with two concepts of periodization using a “Moscow perspective”, each of the two carry similar characteristics but differ in some aspects. A third has interpreted the Comintern the other way around, namely, from a “non-communist” external view.

As mentioned above, attempting a periodization on the Comintern has stirred up a debate amongst scholars. But another factor of equal importance is that a periodization is problematic to construct. According to Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew (London, 1996) in their introductory work on the Comintern, using an “overtly historiographical” and chronological approach, Comintern can in a simplistic manner be divided into five periods:

1. 1919-23: period of unsuccessful revolutionary upheavals, formation and consolidation of national communist parties
2. 1924-28: period of “relative” capitalist stabilisation, united front tactics, start of the Bolshevisation process of Comintern
3. 1928-33: the “Third Period” of working-class radicalisation, capitalist crisis, attacks on social democracy and looming Stalinisation
4. 1934-39: the Popular Front era, anti-fascist alliance and minimum defence of “bourgeois democracy”, and the culmination of Stalinist Terror
5. 1939-43: the final transformation of the Comintern turning into an instrument of Soviet foreign policy, and Stalin’s dissolution in May-June 1943

The risk by relying on such a sharp division is that certain local conditions, influencing the national sections of the Comintern are neglected, something McDermott and Agnew also pays

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attention to, but the periodization still affected the authors chronological interpretation of the Comintern as it conveniently has been used as an disposition in the analysis.

Thus, McDermott and Agnew’s periodization can be seen as belonging to a traditional view on the Comintern as it is based on decisions taken within the Comintern in the shape of resolutions from decision-making bodies (Executive Committee of the Communist International, ECCI, and the Enlarged Plenums of the ECCI) of the Comintern, fixing the political course. Jürgen Rojahn’s attempt at a periodization bears similar chronological separations in time as McDermott and Agnew, with the exception that Rojahn added one more period. Thus, according to Rojahn, the Comintern can be perceived as going through six alternations before being dissolved in 1943:

1. 1919-1923: formation; united front policy
2. 1924-1927: Bolshevisation
3. 1928-1934: Third Period: “class against class” policy
4. 1935-1939: Popular Front policy
5. 1939-1941: Anti-Imperialist policy
6. 1941-1943: Anti-fascist war

In comparison with McDermott and Agnew offers Rojahn a strict and concise periodization on the chronological development of the Comintern, using a Moscow perspective in how to determine the overlapping periods. Namely, all periods bear characteristics of policies and tactics that were designed and implemented from Moscow onto the national sections. Still, on the one hand, Rojahn distinctly offers a periodization which actually mirrors the changes that occurred within the Comintern headquarters as it illustrates what kind of attitude the national sections had officially to keep in tune with. On the other hand, the periodization in itself must be seen as extremely generalising in its character. Taking a step away from the single minded Moscow perspective, and instead attempting to chronologically illustrate Moscow’s relation to the international sections, Rojahn has constructed a second periodization:

1. 1917-1923: the Comintern is formed as a Bolshevik governed international organization, aiming at world revolution
2. 1924-1934: Bolshevization/Stalinization
3. 1935-1943: the Comintern transformed as an instrument of Soviet foreign policy, dissolution in 1943

The most apparent changes of the periodization is that Rojahn has stretched the chronological display to begin already in 1917, thereby including the period of the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik coup in October 1917. Another vital change is merging of the years 1924-1934,

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9 Rojahn 1996, p.36
10 Rojahn 1996, p.40
ten years of dramatic changes, into one period in comparison with the first periodization. The era of Bolshevization/Stalinization, according to Rojahn, must also be understood as the most decisive period in the development of the Comintern as an organization, speaking both of administrative and political conditions. Bolshevization/Stalinization must be seen as a process where the communists put an effort into separating and sever the communist parties’ ties from their “social-democratic roots”. Is it not then viable to rely on Rojahn’s generalisation as he interprets a ten year period of being somewhat solid in its nature? An advantage is that it leaves space for interpretation, which is not constrained by chronological lines of determination. For example, the era of Bolshevization/Stalinization saw the emergence of the “class against class” policy in 1928, which aimed aggressive rhetorical attacks against social democracy and its leaders from the communists on an international scale. This has also been understood as the era of the “Third Period”, which ended in 1935 in conjunction with the Seventh International Comintern Congress in Moscow. In short, this era has been interpreted by some scholars as a period of “sectarianism” imposed from Comintern headquarters, “wishful thinking”, and of crippling the international communist movement. Though these descriptions are of a very wide-ranging spirit, they also set the tone of what went on inside of the Comintern apparatus, and, it shows that a generalised periodization allows some degree of interpretative freedom.

Russian historian Aleksandr Vatlin’s perception of the Comintern offers a totally different platform to stand on. Instead of constructing a periodization, using a “Moscow perspective” that concentrates on its internal sources and documentary heritage, Vatlin has attempted to distinguish how the Comintern was “perceived by contemporaries … [and] of the European perception of these [Comintern’s] activities in the 1920s and 1930s”. According to Vatlin aims such a periodization at incorporating the legacy of Comintern into the mainstream of twentieth-century ideological and political history, which ultimately shall reveal the impression international communism, both in theory and practice, did leave on the contemporary world. Vatlin offers a periodization that illuminates three different phases of “non-communist perceptions” in Europe:

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11 Rojahn 1996, p.44
1. 1919-1923: the Comintern appears as a radical ideological and military-political movement, consisting of an immense international base.

2. 1923-1933: the Comintern is seen as a closed and politically dysfunctional organization that only paid attention on propagating the theme of “world Bolshevism”. Therefore, Comintern no longer represented the role of being “enemy number one” by the dominant forces in Europe.

3. 1933-1943: views in Europe on the Comintern and the communist parties becomes diversified, namely, communist parties are perceived as being separate from the Comintern, thus of being “internalised”. While the Comintern is seen as an external factor, being only a tool for Soviet foreign policy.  

Vatlin puts several factors such as “Germanocentrism” as a dominating force that affected the international communist movement, the dominating role of Lenin and the effect his demise had on the Comintern in 1924, the political situation inside of Russia in conjunction with how Comintern developed itself and was transformed over time, the isolation of communist ideology in Europe during the Inter-war era, and the Nazi attainment to power in Germany 1933 as being decisive in determining the outlook of his periodization.  

Turning back to the discussion of the traditional view concerning periodization of the Comintern, something which both Rojahn’s first periodization can be considered to be and something McDermott and Agnew’s chronological display obviously is, the proposition from Rojahn argues that “it does not seem very likely that a new division of CI [Comintern] history will prevail over the traditional one”. The reason given by Rojahn is that it is “not easy to get rid of a division into periods once it has managed to fix itself in people’s minds”. However, that is not the point here I must argue, whether or not scholars hang onto a traditional view or a developed, modern periodization concerning the Comintern, instead, by dividing the Comintern into different periods in time it also assists in creating methodological reflections concerning how to make the interpretative process more stringent and conscious. By adding Vatlin’s attempt to look from a “non-communist perception” point of view, it also adds to the idea that a periodization can be used in order to observe the subject of study from different angles, and therefore add a thorough insight into the complexities surrounding the Comintern. In conclusion, a periodization should therefore be treated as a tool, guiding the analysis forward. The purpose is not to reveal a ground-breaking periodization, it should instead in fact be seen a generalising factor, to support the historian in his work. What is of importance is how you treat the contexts that exist within the boundaries that are determined

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14 Vatlin 1999, p.246. It should be noted that Vatlin himself regards the chronological limits to be ”strictly relative”.
15 Vatlin 1999, pp.247-249
16 Rojahn 1996, p.45
by the periodization. The common understanding seems to be that the traditional view will prevail, but should not be perceived as dogmatic. Whether or not a periodization is needed or not, is of secondary relevance, the argument is that it helps to shed light on one of the more complex international organizations ever to have exist, both ideologically and organisation wise.

Interpreting the Comintern – From Cold War Heritage to Post-revisionism, and After

Frequent interpreters on the Comintern after the Second World War ended 1945 ascribed to the view that Comintern was an organization filled with problems such as “rigid dogmatism” causing “continual failure” during its first five years in existence (1919-1924). At the end of the 1920s Comintern suffered the consequences of factional struggles within the Communist Party of Soviet Union (Bolshevik) (CPSU [B]), aiming to consolidate Stalin’s power of the state apparatus. After its demise in 1943, concluded for example Denis Healey in *International Affairs*, July 1948, that:

> By 1943, Comintern policy had undergone eight major revolutions – each one a ponderous swing from one extreme to the other like a steam-roller loose in the hold of a storm-tossed ship, and each of these revolutions had been mechanically enforced on every party in the International. Resistance to changes in policy was met always by expulsion.\(^\text{17}\)

Only five years after Comintern’s dissolution on the international arena depicted Healey from a “high” political point of view an organization characterised by its confusion and inability to act. The question is, from what point of view was Healey, and many with him, looking? The historiography on the Comintern has gone through several changes since the second half of the 1940s up until these days. By outlining the opinions given by different “schools” of Comintern historiography, a progression from the hostile view to a neutral one in how to perceive the organization as such has been developed.

*The Cold War School and its Varieties:* As suggested above by using Healey’s point of view as an example of Cold War historiography, it is quite obvious that this type of view was developed relatively soon after Comintern’s demise. Others following Healey’s line

What were the basic motives behind the Cold War historiography on the Comintern? First, it was to decipher and interpret the relationship between Comintern headquarters in Moscow and the national sections (the Communist parties), arguing that in the beginning national sections had some degree of “semi-independence” with the possibility to express their own views in relation to Moscow. This situation later rapidly deteriorated and disappeared, making the national sections virtually “slaves of Moscow”. This view, according to historian Andrew Thorpe, was formulated and expressed by political opponents to the Communists both during the 1920s and 1930s, something that later appealed to Western writers antagonistic to the Soviet Union as the international Cold War socio-political environment was created.19

Another view developed in the vein of Cold War school was shaped by Trotskyite and far-left opponents of Stalinism, claiming that the ideals creating the Bolshevik Revolution and the Comintern had been “perverted and subverted” by Lenin’s successors.20 Nonetheless, these views and differentiations in the Cold War school dominated the historiography on the Comintern up until the beginning of the 1970s. It goes without saying that several works produced during this time still today can be seen as useful in their intellectual insight and interpretation on the Comintern. For example, Witold S. Sworakowski’s pioneer work on the Comintern and its front organizations (Stanford, 1965) showed on the one hand an understanding into the complex study of the international activities pursued by Comintern. On the other hand Sworakowski could, quantitatively speaking, account for the diversified construction of different front organization.21

Works by historians Milorad M. Drachkovich and Branko Lazitch in *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864-1943* (Stanford, 1966), *The Comintern: Historical Highlights* (Stanford, 1966), and finally *Biographical Dictionary of the Comintern* (first edition 1973, second and revised edition 1986), showed an understanding on the complexities connected with the study of Comintern, but still, the views expressed belonged to the category expressing the opinion that Comintern “failed in its central mission – to revolutionize the world – and in the process became the sorry tool of Stalin’s foreign policy. Lenin’s most trusted revolutionary offspring died strangled at the hands of Lenin’s

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20 See Fernando Claudin’s *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform*, Harmondsworth, 1975, for discussion on ideals and the inheritance of Lenin; Thorpe 1998, p.638
This view can be seen as romanticizing the initial goals and intentions which the Comintern was pursuing.

**Revisionism:** The second school of interpretation bore a revisionist character, and had been sprung out of 1960s radicalism. Contrary to the Cold War tradition and its focal point on the high top machinations of the Comintern focused revisionists’ on displaying the activities of the Communists on the “ground”. For example, which campaigns they organised, what kind of literature they read, the relationships inside of the communist community. This approach so to speak broadened the interpretative scope on the Comintern. Thus, while paying attention to the low dimension, the revisionist set aside the spectra of “high politics” of the Comintern and the sections.  

**Post-revisionism:** In reaction to the rather pragmatic views pondered by two schools emerged a third view, which can be perceived as “post-revisionist”. In short, the post-revisionists rejected the idea that Communists on the one hand were “marionettes being manipulated by a Kremlin puppet-master”, but on the other hand the Communists were not acting independently within their own context, that is for example within their own movement (labour, parties, organizations). By seeking a road in the middle, in contrast to the other two scholarly roads, the post-revisionists were not able to properly distinguish the character of the methods that Comintern implemented while influencing its sections. The reason for the post-revisionists not being able to set down the patterns of Comintern methods is explained by the fact that scholars did not have access to archival sources. Instead, scholars had to rely on sources such as printed sources (Communist press, official published Comintern records from the international congresses, memoirs and biographies).

One prime example is the analysis on the Comintern conducted by historian E. H. Carr in his *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935* (London, 1982). Carr’s analysis was based on a massive empirical material in the form of official Soviet and Comintern sources, which in turn led to that Carr only depicted a “history from above”, and therefore ignored the rank-and-file communists struggling inside of the apparatus. Attempts to distinguish the propaganda methods used by the Soviet government were still made though. In *Dezinformatsia* (Washington, 1984) Richard H. Shultz and Godson Roy discussed and attempted an analysis on the techniques of Soviet overt and covert propaganda directed against the “free world”. Clearly tainted by a negative tendency,

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23 Thorpe 1998, p.638
24 Thorpe 1998, p.639
25 Sources of this kind had been used by scholars from the very beginning.
26 McDermott & Agnew 1996, p.xxiii
following the vein of the Cold War tradition, the authors still paid a great deal of attention on the importance which the Comintern had had for the Soviet Union. Another example in this category is Clive Rose’s *The Soviet Propaganda Network – A Directory of Organisations Serving Soviet Foreign Policy*, (New York, 1988). Both Rose and Shultz and Roy’s interpretations were intended to serve as manuals in the “professional training of anyone engaged in the communications industry at any political level, particularly in foreign affairs”.  

What does this concise excursion in the history of historiography and their varieties on how to approach and interpret the Comintern lead up to? First, it is apparent that after the Comintern was dissolved in 1943 it became a subject of critical investigations, which in itself is not a sensation. But the critical investigations often, in the beginning, were only able to portray a stale, rigid body, bearing either a hostile suit, or being cast in the role of a victim. Second, scholars attempted to understand the logic behind the Comintern apparatus without being able to obtain the material needed to pursue such an operational investigation. The archives thus set the agenda on what was possible, and what was not. Lastly, and in someway connected to the previous point, the effort to jointly connect the organisational dimension of the Comintern apparatus with the individuals’ active inside of the apparatus proved to be more difficult than imagined. Further, it has been argued, for example by historian Eric D. Weitz in 1997 that even though the archives in Russia had been opened, the majority of research results mostly consisted of “great outpouring of rich empirical studies, but few new questions or approaches to the history of communism”. Weitz remark is important to have in mind while discussing the character of the current historiography on Comintern as it hints that by only relying on the sensation that documents became available for critical scrutiny in 1991, it is still essential to try to develop the interpretative process and not just settle with narrative approaches. Can the development of different schools that has interpreted the Comintern both as a political phenomenon and organization as such be explained if we return to the changes which the year 1991 brought about on the scholarly field? And, can research conducted after 1991 be considered as streamlined? Which leads to the suitability of posing the question; should research and interpretations on international communism and the Comintern after 1991 be considered as belonging to a “new” (or at least

reborn) science? Suggestions and results on the Comintern after 1991 surely point the finger in such a direction.

“The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents” – New and Revised Approaches

With the collapse of the three pre-1991 schools, at least this is how the author sees it; new schools entered the Comintern scholastic arena post-1991. Borrowing the subtitle of the book *Centre and Periphery* (Amsterdam, 1996), containing an insightful collection of views given by several scholars on the Comintern, it can be suggested that the Comintern can be more deeply understood in the “light of new documents”. From a strict empiricist view it easy to disregard research results produced before the gates to the archives in Russia were opened. Why? One suggestion is that the tool, the empirical material, needed to understand the complexity of the Comintern apparatus, the organizational dimension, and the individual composition *en masse* had been hidden away and kept behind locked doors in Moscow. Another suggestion is that Comintern historiography had limited itself, thus demanding that new ideas had to be infused in order to be able to re-formulate old problems.29

Outlooks that dominate current Comintern research ranges from organisational interpretations to individual accounts, or attempts seeking to merge a political explanation with the organisational dimension. More explicit, what is at stake here is views such as the centre and periphery perspective, the totalitarian paradigm, the comparative approach, or the suggestion of a new biographical approach going under name of “prosopography”. Contradicting with Weitz argument this simply show that Comintern historiography ought to be considered as vital just by looking at these different perspectives. But is there a risk, having Weitz in mind here, that interpretations on Comintern chooses the “easy way out” by only relying on the empirical material from the Comintern archive to tell it all by themselves without setting them in a proper and authoritative context? Research after 1991 shows that such is not the case here; instead, it is how the subject is approached.

The *centre and periphery* perspective paints the picture that all Comintern activity emanated from Moscow and outward to its sections in the world. This suggestion offers though a very simplified picture on the complexities of the centre and periphery perspective and needs to be further explained here. The centrist model originates from the

understanding that one of the dominant features of the Comintern was “centralism”. On the one hand Comintern was a union of parties, but on the other hand it was at the same time a single world party, thus, the tendency to perceive Comintern as the “headquarters of the world revolution” has been hard to come by, both by its contemporaries and in the scholarly world.

Adding to this centrist model one must include the composition and hierarchical structure of the communist parties themselves, namely, the restrictive policy affecting any signs of independence, self-organization, and independent action. Adding to this centrist model one must include the composition and hierarchical structure of the communist parties themselves, namely, the restrictive policy affecting any signs of independence, self-organization, and independent action.30 Laying out the pattern even further it can be claimed that it is a matter of how one chooses to interpret the Comintern as an actor striving for world revolution. Or as McDermott and Agnew once put it:

…our focus is on the “centre” … writing a history of the headquarters of the revolution, not of individual communist parties in all their diversity and complexity – but also because the Comintern and foreign communists did succumb to the dictates of the Stalinists, and did loyally trumpet the glories of the USSR. Any history of the Comintern cannot but fail to take this fully into account.31

However, the authors argue that they are not acting as slaves in the service of a centre and periphery perspective, instead, an attempt has been made to integrate the research in order to encapsulate the interaction concerning national and international communist activity.32

The use and purpose of peripheral organizations for communist was analysed by sociologist Philip Selznick as early as in 1952 in The Organizational Weapon (Berkeley, 1952, second edition 1960). Though not offering a interpretation on the centre and periphery perspective as has been developed in scholarly research in later years, Selznick argued that peripheral organizations served the purpose to “be a source of funds for party causes and for the party itself [either the national communist party or the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; CPSU]”, and that it was “instructive to review the development of communist tactics in the creation and manipulation of these peripheral organizations”.33 Mixing up Selznick’s interpretation on peripheral with the centre and periphery perspective is not what at stake here; instead, what is at stake here is to illustrate the way scholars has interpreted Comintern’s line of communications with its sections. There are simply different ways of approaching the subject, but one can not disregard the fact that the Comintern originated from Lenin and the

31 McDermott & Agnew 1996, p.xxi
32 McDermott & Agnew 1996, p.xxi
Bolsheviks in Russia. Something which Kirill Shirinia points out, stating that the “Comintern was inseparably linked with the RCP (B) [Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)] in respect of ideology, policy, organization and material support”. Thus, by applying a centre and periphery perspective the researcher limits the scope of the subject as a focus on the centre (Moscow, the headquarter paradigm) becomes of primary importance.

The comparative approach: In direct response to the centre and periphery perspective historian Matthew Worley claimed that a “Moscow-centric view” should be seen as the most adequate method while explaining the limits, achievements, appeals and failures of a movement, in this case the Comintern. What are the limits by applying a centrist perspective then according to Worley? Well, first of all it does not take into account the hopes and fears the movement in itself provoked amongst people all over the world. Secondly, it fails to demonstrate how “different people in different countries” interpreted and adjusted themselves to any form of directives sent out from Moscow. How can this be solved then by following Worley’s advice? It is not by following a “new” methodological matrix that questions, as the ones illustrated above, can be solved. Worley argues instead that the “challenge” for historians on international communism is to “construct” more explicitly comparative studies in order to sum up and understand the “dynamics of communist politics within varied social, political, cultural and economic conditions”. Indeed a daunting task for any historian on any form of subject of interest. But it is not to break away from the centre and periphery perspective that seems to be of primary concern for Worley here, instead, it is to finally put an end to the tired problems of the cold war debates that still hinders a constructive insight into a movement/organization that assisted in defining the twentieth century.

The Totalitarian Paradigm: A paradigm with its origin in the cold war tradition of interpreting the Comintern, which has been used primarily by Western scholars from the 1950s and onward, and resulting in several sensational studies on the Comintern, with an emphasis on sensationalism and not scholarly importance it can be argued. In short, the totalitarian paradigm pays attention to the agency of power within any sort of structure or situation, in this case the Soviet Union and the struggle for complete power, which Stalin as an individual has come to represent in academic works. It goes not without saying and

34 Shirina 1996, p.169
36 Worley 2004, p.15
37 Worley 2004, p.15
admitting to the fact that Stalin indeed possessed vast amount of power, especially after the factional struggles during the 1920s, first with Leon Trotsky and then with Nikolai Bukharin. The totalitarian paradigm is indeed saturated by the degree of importance that can be attributed to Stalinism and how it came to affect Comintern. One of the main questions causing debate, and which the totalitarian interpreters has held high is to which extent Stalin and the Soviet leadership were able to manipulate the Comintern central bodies and determine the political line of the communist parties, a process that began 1928 and culminating a bit into the 1930s. Further, any interpretation discussing any degree of independent action pursued by actors involved in the Comintern apparatus are mostly left out in a totalitarian analysis. Thus, what is of interest is the focus on the high level of authoritarian rule and decision-making processes of the Soviet leadership, and therefore becomes the Comintern an object that leaves room for rather vivid interpretations where much attention focuses on the role of espionage, sabotage, and propaganda. It must also be added that the Comintern in such a totalitarian interpretation often is depicted as an organization, representing the body of an international conspiracy, where actors engaged merely are treated as pawns in a bigger game, all being under the strictest control of the Soviet authorities, the leadership, and ultimately, Stalin himself. So to speak, the totalitarian paradigm projects a de-personified interpretation of the Comintern in the end.

Another view, that offers a complete different approach and focus and which can be considered as the combatant against the totalitarian paradigm is the eclectic nature of “prosopography”.

Prosopography: A distinct reaction, though not explicitly expressed by the “inventors” of prosopography, to the totalitarian paradigm was to once again try to go “behind” the facades of party elites or functionaries. Clearly in the vein of the revisionist school that was formed during the 1970s, which also can be seen as drawing inspiration from the Annales school of historical interpretation, the aims of adapting a prosopographical view

39 McDermott & Agnew 1996, p.82
was to mix “oral, literary and documentary sources and both qualitative and quantitative forms of analysis”. What is the background to this approach then? Three explanations are suggested by Kevin Morgan et al. in order to clarify this upcoming interpretation on the Comintern.

First, with an inspirational background taken from the comparative study of international communism as suggested by Worley (2004), and through several conferences in Dijon, Exeter, Moscow, and Helsinki during the 1990s stimulated dialogue and “cross-fertilisation” between historians from different scholastic backgrounds, showing that even though the comparative study of communist history must be considered being in its infancy, copious research has come into existence thus facilitating an in-depth understanding regarding one of the most important international movement’s of the twentieth century. Examples derived from this process are the fruitful interpretations given in Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rojahn’s (eds.) Centre and Periphery (Amsterdam, 1996), Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe’s International communism and the Communist International, 1919-1943 (Manchester, 1998). Other examples are academic network associations focusing on Comintern and international communism in the form of newsletters, for example the International Newsletter of Historical Studies on Comintern, Communism and Stalinism, and the Communist History Network Newsletter.

Secondly, the study of international communism and the Comintern has during the 1990s, and up until current times, been subjected to different methodological approaches, drawing inspiration from social history, social anthropology, social movements’ theory, the study of communist mentalities, a variety of models derived from political science, and the concept of “total institution” by sociologist Erving Goffman’s. The main purpose by deploying such different approaches has mainly been to fill in the “blank spots” of communist history. Thus, making the analytical process more fruitful, and in the end, to offer insightful interpretations.

Lastly, and speaking both of previous historiography on the topic and how it has been “historicised”, Morgan (et al.) claims that where previous research results (before the

42 Morgan et al. 2005, p.13
43 Morgan et al. 2005, p.14. Access to the archives in Russia has contributed a great deal to making research more fruitful, and creating a new and improved research field.
1990s) did fail, recent literature has achieved to create a “genuine historicisation of the subject” (much of which can be explained by looking at the two previous arguments). What does this “historicisation” represent? In short, research has managed to concern itself with “agency, specificity, relativisation and the critical use of a variety of sources help to inform and temper more generalised lines of analysis”.

Another rich investigation following the methodological and empirical path formulated by Morgan et al. is the biographical exposé on German communists conducted by Hermann Weber and Andreas Herbst (Berlin, 2004). Using a multitude of different archives and sources Weber and Herbst compiled a thorough catalogue on German communists active both in the Comintern and the German Communist Party (KPD) during the Inter-war era. The authors themselves claim that current research no longer focus entirely on interpreting structures of political and ideological systems. What is of interest has been the positive outcome that biographical research on actors active within the national socialist movement (the Nazi regime) in Germany brought to the scholarly arena.

Can a dominant motive be distinguished by looking at the argumentation put forward by Morgan et al.? The main motive has been to contradict the dichotomised situation that occasionally use to occur between revisionism and counter-revisionism, a situation that only facilitated opposing views among scholars that perceived the Comintern only as a political object, coloured by biased intentions. Thus, to break out from previous formulated research norms and statues concerning the study of international communism and the Comintern, in order to go beyond the prospect of establishing one “single truth”, and, instead offering the possibility of scholars to move around in a milieu of methodological pluralism making it possible to reflect upon different levels of the communist experience, whether international or national. So to speak, the establishment of a neo-biographical tradition applied on the study of the individuals engaged in the Comintern.

What do all of these interpretative approaches tell us? First, research has shown that Comintern can be categorised, in which the categories reflect a development over time in how historiography has interpreted, described, and ascribed the importance that the Comintern had on an international scale during its existence. Exemplified by Russian scholar on the Comintern’s activity in Africa, Apollon Davidson, argument that:

44 Morgan et al. 2005, p.14
The Comintern was without doubt one of the most important global organisations ever to have existed. Its influence proved even greater than it seemed at the time, and the ideals and methods that it so vigorously spread around the world have already outlived several generations.\footnote{Apollon Davidson, \textit{South Africa and the Communist International: a Documentary History. Volume I, Socialist Pilgrims to Bolshevik Footsoldiers, 1919-1930}, London, 2003, p.1}

Disregarding the historical legacy of such an institution as the Comintern has come to represent among scholars devoted to the study of it, it also reveals that it has become possible to approach the Comintern from different angles and interpretative perspectives.

\section*{The Value and Impact of Comintern Historiography – The International Perspective}

Can the Comintern and the impact the international organization had on the international political and social arena during the inter-war era be fully understood by just relying on the empirical holdings, stored at RGASPI in Moscow? Several suggestions by different scholars such as Kevin Morgan and Aleksander Watlin for example, conclude that the historiography compiled after 1991 would have been impossible to complete if the RGASPI not had been open. The conclusion is in itself not sensational, on the contrary, it is rather logical since it dwells on the fact that if access is not available, no new interpretations are possible to make. The phrase, “The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents”, indicate the relevance of having access to archives in Moscow, as it reveals to great extent what went on in Moscow and at Comintern headquarters, but also in the national sections and the front organizations. After all, the Comintern was from the beginning not a national organization, facilitating the aims and needs of the newly born Soviet state after its appearance 1917. The Comintern was concerned with broad central questions such anti-colonial activities and the struggle against imperialism, cultural activities (literature, sport, theatre), international trade unionism, gender issues. All of these factors are a part of the international perspective one has to have in mind. And as Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe points out; “The Comintern, after all, was concerned to create not just a Communist world, but also a world of communism”.\footnote{Tim Rees & Andrew Thorpe, “Introduction”, in \textit{International communism and the Communist International 1919-1943}, Tim Rees & Andrew Thorpe (eds.), Manchester, 1998, p.10} With this international perspective has the Comintern to be approached in order to measure and analyse its doings and effects. As mentioned previously, regarding the usage of a multitude of archives and sources in order to fully come to grips with Comintern, there are a couple of aspects that have increased a proliferated historiography during the 1990s leading up to
current times. Speaking of the international perspective, the tools needed to understand Comintern are of course partly stored at RGASPI, partly in other places and by using different interpretative approaches. Historian Kevin McDermott further emphasises the need to include a wider empirical and archival approach, stating that:

The Comintern Archive is thus an indispensable source, but in the final analysis it is one among many. It must be supplemented by other sources, including the voluminous secondary literature, much of which does not rely on Russian archival material. 48

Taking McDermott’s statement into account, and at the same time have the argumentation made by Morgan et al. in mind, the historiography on the Comintern clearly indicates that the research field has been both enriched and enlightened. Why, and how? First, the emphasis on having an international perspective only strengthens the analysis on how the Comintern was perceived both among the actors involved in the apparatus, and among actors being hostile towards the Comintern. Secondly, the different approach (centre and periphery, comparative, prosopography) that was developed or refined during the 1990s indicates that no single “truth” exists. Instead, a multitude of different “truths” and interpretations put forward add to the current understanding in how to approach the Comintern, thereby assisting in creating not one historiography, but several historiographical approaches.