FOREWORD

by Harvey Klehr

The collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe closes one of the great epochs in modern history. The intellectual and political warfare between democracy and communism has ended with the triumph of the former and the utter rout of the latter. While a few communist regimes cling desperately to power and a handful of communist insurrections take advantage of particular situations, few observers doubt that communism has lost its vision, allure, and confidence. Marxism-Leninism touted itself as a scientific answer to the problems of capitalism. Whatever dilemmas capitalism faces, even its critics can see few answers coming from the sclerotic categories that guided Marxism-Leninism for the past seventy years.

Ever since 1917 the USSR has been the intellectual and moral center for radicals and revolutionaries from around the globe. The world socialist movement was split apart by the Russian Revolution. That part which rejected the Leninist model gradually came to terms with capitalism and democracy and evolved into today's moderate socialist and social-democratic parties. Moscow became the Mecca for those committed to revolution. Even if some revolutionaries were eventually repelled by Stalinism or seduced by other, competing forms of communism, a substantial part of their ideological baggage was made up of assertions and theses about where the Soviet experiment had gone wrong. The New Left that emerged in the 1960s justified itself as radical but not communist, a distinction

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that collapsed as Marxism-Leninism increasingly infected the movement in the late 1960s.

By the end of its seventy-year run, it was hard to remember the caliber of the early recruits to the communist cause. Marxism-Leninism, having failed as a predictor of the future or a guide for the present, survived only as a ponderous justification for the continued hold on power of a parasitic bureaucracy. Its adepts rarely pretended to believe what they were saying. Even Western intellectuals sympathetic to Soviet positions in international affairs avoided talking about a world revolution. In Western Europe and the United States communist parties were everywhere losing whatever influence and significance they once had. Their members and sympathizers were marginalized and rarely people of talent.

The heroic age of communism was in its early years. The most successful period for most communist parties came in the 1930s, particularly in the last half of the decade when, responding to the threat of Adolf Hitler, the Soviet Union inaugurated the Popular Front. But this was clearly a tactical maneuver designed to combat Hitler and required Communists to shelve some of their most cherished principles and to cooperate with capitalists and bourgeois political parties.

It was the first, heady years after the Russian Revolution when the communist dream shined most brightly, before the disappointments and the tragedies of the Russian Revolution were too obvious. In those early years, before millions of people had to be liquidated to create the new society or on the pretext that they were enemies of the revolution, it was still possible to imagine that a new society and a new man were being created. In that first decade it was still plausible to hope that idealism in the service of disciplined intellect could eliminate evil. A band of dedicated, talented, and altogether remarkable people signed up in the ranks of revolution. Adventurous, reckless, arrogant, often brilliant, they stampeded around the globe, intoxicated by the belief that, armed with this wondrous new doctrine of revolution, faith in the working class, and enough determination, they could overthrow decrepit governments and institute the reign of equality.

Most of them died very young. By its very nature, their job was a dangerous one. They were killed by police or troops or vigilantes in

the countries whose governments they were trying to overthrow. Others died fighting in Spain or during World War II. Far more often, they were executed in the cellars of the Lubyanka, by the government whose interests they had tried to serve. Only a lucky few survived in the Soviet Union; to have done so required them to forget or lie shamelessly about their early exploits and, most certainly, to enlist in Stalin's ranks.

Relatively few American Communists were sent on assignments outside the United States in the first years after the Russian Revolution. While Comintern postings became more frequent in the next two decades, surprisingly few American Communists or ex-Communists have written about the experience. Most American Communists eventually became ex-Communists. But a much smaller percentage of the Party's cadres abandoned the cause, and an even smaller percentage of those selected for international work did so.

The man who ended his life as Charles Shipman was not selected for such work; he stumbled into it. And his involvement with the American Communist Party came after he had played an interesting role in two other communist parties. Moreover, his experience in the CPUSA was hardly typical. Never in the top ranks of the Party, he held several key assignments. Although he was a participant in the factional wars that divided the CPUSA in the 1920s, his expulsion was unrelated to the factionalism. Finally, his life as an ex-Communist differed significantly from most—he was never called before a congressional committee and his Party past, while it occasionally caused difficulties or problems, did not dominate or cloud his life.

While Shipman's story is not typical, it does provide a fascinating picture of one journey of commitment and disillusion. This autobiography brings back to life those heroic years before the revolution devoured its children. It wonderfully evokes that period when the Russian Revolution seemed to signal a liberation from the staid conventions of the past and promised a model for the liberation of mankind. All kinds of rebels and activists found themselves in its emotional grip. Few had any idea of what enlisting in the revolutionary army might portend. It was still a grand adventure. Charles Phillips was one of those rebels who found himself caught up in the

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whirlwind. Without much political experience or thought for the consequences, he became for a brief period of time a professional revolutionary, one of those who committed "the whole of their lives" to overthrowing the capitalist system.

It was an unlikely course for a young man from a middle-class, conservative family who was destined to live several very different lives under a variety of names. Like many of the young people attracted to Bolshevism in its early days, Charles Phillips was born Jewish. Unlike them, he knew virtually nothing about his heritage. His father had changed the family name, pretended to be of German descent, and made sure that his children had little to do with Jewish life, culture, or religion. And, as Shipman's comments on a trip to Israel late in his life attest, he felt no ties to either religious or ethnic values.

The elder Phillips was a successful clothing manufacturer. A confrontation with some of his father's striking employees at the family home first convinced Charles of the justice of workers' struggles. A poor student, he dropped out of school and displayed little talent for business. A meeting with Walter Lippmann changed his life. Impressed by his intelligence, Lippmann persuaded Charles's father to send him to college. At Columbia Journalism School, Morrie Ryskind, later a conservative Hollywood screenwriter, got Charles to join the Socialist Club.

Phillips became an active participant in the Bohemian left wing centered in Greenwich Village. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he pressed activism well beyond revolutionary rhetoric. He traveled to Europe on Henry Ford's Peace Ship and was prominently involved in antiwar activity after returning to New York. Arrested for conspiracy to obstruct conscription, he was convicted and given a minimal sentence after his own father testified against him, leading to a break in relations with his family.

Conscription drove Phillips into exile. He refused to report for induction into the army and was seized and deposited in an army camp. Refusing to cooperate, he was eventually given a dishonorable discharge. About to face reinduction, he decided to flee to Mexico. After a long and difficult journey, including an illegal flight across the border, he arrived in Mexico City and began his second and most adventurous life, that of international communist agent.

In Mexico City Phillips made contact with a handful of people active in the labor movement. Along with Mike Gold, the future communist literary critic, he wrote for a Mexican newspaper. He played a major role in converting M. N. Roy, the young Indian nationalist, into a socialist. Using the name Frank Seaman, Phillips was one of the founders of the Mexican Communist Party, which elected him and Roy delegates to the Second Comintern Congress scheduled for 1920 in Moscow. Nothing could better illustrate the internationalism and the weaknesses of the early communist movement than the choice of an Indian Brahmin and an assimilated American Jew as the representatives of the newly formed Mexican Communist Party.

In Mexico, Phillips and Roy came under the influence of one of the Comintern's legendary agents, Michael Borodin. Borodin quickly enlisted Phillips into Comintern activities, sending him on a mission to search for a missing suitcase with blueprints and diamonds intended to finance revolutionary activities. More important, Borodin tutored Phillips in Marxism-Leninism, impressing on him the duties of a revolutionary.

En route to Moscow late in 1919, Phillips (now using the pseudonym Jesús Ramírez) and Borodin stopped in Spain, where they convinced a small group of dissident socialists to affiliate to the Third International, forming the basis of the Spanish Communist Party. To reach the Soviet Union, Ramírez had to evade Estonian border police. Like many young foreign Communists, he was deeply moved by the sense of mission and purpose he found among a people bearing up under severe economic shortages. Phillips met with Lenin and was even more convinced that the corrupt old world was doomed.

It is striking how informal and haphazard the early Comintern agents were about their activities. Ramírez had to scrounge train fares, depend on luck to find key people, and accept confusing or no directions about personnel, policies, or tactics. As the organization became more bureaucratized, the grand sense of adventure that this autobiography captures so well gave way to stricter controls and factional maneuvering.

The Comintern decided to send Ramírez back to Mexico with Sen Katayama, a legendary Japanese revolutionary who had spent years

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in the United States, and Louis Fraina, John Reed's rival for the leadership of the American communist movement. Their task was to set up a Latin American Bureau of the Profintern, or Red International of Trade Unions. Ramírez, however, was the only one of these erstwhile revolutionaries who spoke Spanish. Fraina, disillusioned, vanished one day with thousands of dollars of Comintern money. He reappeared, years later, in the United States as Lewis Corey and carved out a distinguished career as an economist and founder of the anticommunist Americans for Democratic Action.

Back in Mexico, Ramírez's activities in the Mexican labor movement led to his deportation to Guatemala, where he assumed the new identity of Manuel Gómez and soon slipped back into Mexico. Living underground and evading the police proved impossible. Gómez and his Russian wife (they had married in Moscow even though he was still legally married to an American woman) moved to Chicago, where he joined the American Communist Party and began still another phase of his revolutionary career.

As Manuel Gómez, he quickly worked his way up the Party ladder, beginning as an ordinary recruit, taking on local responsibilities, and rising to direct anti-imperialist work for the World Congress against Imperialism and the 6th Comintern Congress.

The inner life of the American party in the 1920s was fractious. From his Chicago base, Gómez was a natural ally of the midwesterners who looked to William Foster for leadership and scorned the allegedly intellectual and middle-class adherents of Jay Lovestone. Although Gómez was an active participant in these battles, he managed to hold on to his Party positions even when his faction lost its hold on the Party.

While his picture of Party life is fascinating, it also has gaps. His comrades knew him as Manuel Gómez and assumed he was Mexican. Did he ever talk about his Comintern past? Some comrades, notably Mike Gold, had known him in Mexico as Phillips and Seaman. Was the Party leadership aware of this background? Did the Lovestone faction assume that he still was a Comintern agent, sent to America on some special assignment? When he went to Europe and Russia in the late 1920s, did anyone make the connection between Gómez and Ramírez? The autobiography is silent about these issues, and the numerous identities—Phillips, Seaman,

Ramírez, and Gómez—may have convinced anyone who had an inkling that they were one and the same that this was a very important comrade.

By the end of the 1920s Gómez was beginning to have doubts about the cause to which he had devoted his life. After breaking up a Trotskyist meeting, he felt ashamed of this behavior. The adulation of Stalin was distasteful; but, like many Communists, he found it difficult to make a clean break with the Party. In 1929 he adopted a new name, Charles Shipman, in order to take a job on a Wall Street newspaper, beginning a double life that was to last almost a decade. Gómez within the Party, Shipman on Wall Street, he juggled two contradictory identities and styles. Still a good Marxist-Leninist, convinced that capitalism was on its way to destruction, he advised investors in one of his columns to sell their stock. When the market crashed shortly afterward, he gained a reputation as an astute analyst, and when his paper was absorbed by the *Wall Street Journal*, Charles Shipman was a daily columnist.

Even when he was formally expelled from the CPUSA in 1932 for “petty-bourgeois” tendencies, Gómez continued to think of himself as part of the movement and retained many of his friends. He began to devote himself to cultural work on behalf of the Party. His new companion, Sylvia Fenington, was one of the original members of the Group Theatre. When she and a number of left-wing intellectuals formed the Theater Union, they asked Gómez to sit on the board because of his communist connections. In this capacity, he was responsible for bringing Bertolt Brecht on his first trip to America. Not until 1937 did Shipman break with the CPUSA. Disturbed by the purges in the USSR, he tried to recruit some friends in the Party to oppose Stalin. Fervently denounced by the *Daily Worker* and repudiated by old friends, he abandoned his revolutionary illusions and his Manuel Gómez identity for good.

The final portion of Shipman’s life was far more prosaic. Although he fled from New Jersey to Kansas City in 1941, convinced that the FBI was on to him, it proved a false alarm. His communist past rarely intruded into his successful business career. He did balk at applying for a passport during the McCarthy era, concerned that an investigation might turn up Charles Phillips. When Robert Young, his boss and a noted railroad tycoon, learned about his

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revolutionary past, he eased Shipman out of the Allegheny Corporation but helped find him another challenging job. Shipman never testified before congressional committees, and the one or two times the FBI did visit him, he was unable to identify anyone they asked him about. It was as if the tumultuous first forty years of his life had simply vanished.

Autobiography is not, of course, history. An individual who is telling his own life is often prone to error or wishful thinking or distortion. Historians of the American communist movement will not agree with all of Shipman's observations about the Party or the individuals with whom he came in contact. And, there is the possibility that he is not telling us everything he could. It is possible that the opening of the files of the Communist International will add more details about his life or activities, particularly in Mexico and Spain. For the present, however, this lively memoir will enrich our understanding of the world of international communism and the people who participated in it.