Introduction

To many, the idea of American communism seems a paradox. Conventional wisdom tells us that communism is something foreign; one cannot be a Communist and still be a good American. Yet somewhere between five hundred thousand and one million Americans have joined the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) since its formation in 1919, and many more have supported its policies and activities at one time or another. At the height of its influence in the mid-1940s, the CPUSA had a membership of nearly eighty thousand, and many of these people were acknowledged leaders in trade unions, fraternal groups, and political and community organizations. As a personal experience, then, American communism has touched the lives of thousands; as a political influence, it has affected the lives of millions.[1]

Many observers have likened the Party to a revolving door through which members passed quickly in and out. During the 1930s, for example, turnover ran over 50 percent of total membership.[2] Some, however, stayed on to become cadres, lifelong revolutionaries making extreme personal sacrifices to advance the goals of socialism. Steve Nelson was one of these.

Steve Nelson's life is virtually a chronicle of class conflict in the twentieth century. His story takes us from the hard-working farmers of a small Croatian village to the unemployed miners of eastern Pennsylvania's anthracite coalfields; from the battlegrounds of civil war Spain to the jails of cold war Pittsburgh; and from a tiny cell of Communist auto workers meeting in the back of a Detroit cooperative restaurant to the upper reaches of Party leadership in New York City.

It is the typicality of Nelson's experience, however, rather than its exceptional qualities, that makes it most significant. In many respects

his story is that of the Party's rank and file, and particularly of the immigrant workers who represented the majority of Party members throughout the 1920s and early 1930s.[3] For most of his life, Nelson remained a working-class organizer, reluctantly accepting leadership only after being convinced that the interests of the movement were at stake. When he went to work full-time for the Party in the early 1930s, it was as an organizer of the unemployed, facing the difficult task of converting theory and official policy into successful practice. He was in his element on the streets of Chicago and Detroit or in the anthracite mining towns, but decidedly not in the Party's Manhattan headquarters. Nelson came up from the ranks but remained close to them even as he led. His view of the Party is that of a foot soldier rather than that of a general in the revolutionary movement.

One way of understanding the broader context of Nelson's story is to consider simultaneously three parallel processes: Nelson's own development, that of radical immigrant workers as a group, and that of the Party. The dynamic relationship between individual, class, and Party can help clarify the experience of American communism.

Every immigrant, like Steve Nelson in 1920, faced a confusing array of new impressions and strange conditions. People who had lived in European industrial cities or worked in factories may have been less disoriented than those from farming villages, but all of them looked for ways in which to make sense of their new environment. Each immigrant had to undergo "Americanization," a period of adjustment to life in urban-industrial America. For some, revolutionary socialism offered both an explanation of how American society worked and an organizational structure that could help the newcomer in this difficult period of adjustment.

When Nelson struggled to understand his own experiences and what he saw around him—war, racism, poverty—working-class radicals provided him with answers. The world war, they said, had not been a crusade for democracy but a mindless slaughter of fellow workers in the interests of the rich. Racism was one more tool used by the boss to divide workers from one another. Poverty was not a natural condition but the result of the exploitation of one class at the hands of another, something to be abolished, not endured. Nelson's assimilation into American society came through the Communist Party, which during the 1920s and 1930s offered to thousands of immigrant workers its own version of Americanization.

There were also practical problems, such as the English language. Many immigrants enrolled in English and citizenship classes in public evening schools or at the YMCA. Others picked the language up infor-

mally on the job or in the neighborhood or never learned it at all. Still others learned to read and write as Nelson did, through the socialist movement. Their primers were the Marxist texts, Party propaganda, and radical literature handed around by their comrades. Their maiden speeches were delivered not in civics class but on soapboxes on street corners in the slums of America's industrial cities and towns. Their writing exercises were the leaflets and shop papers that they produced to win fellow workers to their views. For those who had never known the opportunity of an education, the Party provided study groups and workers' schools. It encouraged self-confidence, especially among those who, like Nelson, showed potential as working-class leaders. It opened up the world of learning at a time when few others seemed to care.

Nor did the Party ignore the needs of the heart. During the 1920s foreign-born Communists enjoyed a vigorous social life based on the cultures of the Party's foreign language federations. Croatian-American communism, for example, was not all study groups and picket lines; it was also picnics and dances, cruises and plays. While all these activities were infused with the message of class struggle, young immigrants found in them people with whom they had much in common besides politics.

But communism offered immigrant workers more than literacy, culture, comradeship, and the opportunity to develop as leaders, more even than a key to understanding their own situation. It offered them a way out, a solution to the problems they faced. The Party was one means of fighting back. In a world of chronic unemployment, low wages, dangerous work, and discrimination, the Communist Party provided the vision of a more just society and inspired the determination to make this vision a reality. This above all else is what won the loyalty of Steve Nelson and thousands of other immigrant workers and sustained them in the face of overwhelming odds.

The Communist Party moved through its own kind of Americanization, beginning in the late 1920s and reaching a high point in World War II. It evolved from a tiny underground sect, based almost exclusively on foreign-born revolutionaries, into a large, broad-based political movement that brought its members into the mainstream of American life. This evolution was partly the result of conscious policy decisions. In 1928 the foreign language federations were replaced by a structure based on neighborhood and workplace, and during the mid-1930s the popular front strategy freed Communists to work in mass organizations such as the CIO with activists representing a broad spectrum of political views. In the 1940s strong Party support for the American war effort helped it to overcome, at least temporar-

ily, its image as an alien political group. But the Americanization of the Communist Party was also the product of its own expansion and increasingly diverse membership and the interrelationship between this new membership and Communist theory and practice.

Even during the 1920s, Party membership was in itself a step away from the ethnic segregation of the immigrant ghetto. It was at Party gatherings that Nelson first got to know Italian, Jewish, and both black and white native-born workers. The Party's switch to industrial organizing in the late twenties accelerated the breakdown of ethnic barriers among its members and offered an opportunity to recruit more American-born workers.

The Comintern's so-called Third Period (1928–1935), prior to the adoption of a popular front strategy, is often remembered as the most sectarian stage in the CPUSA's history. The Communists attacked Socialists and other leftists as "social fascists," launched dual "revolutionary" unions to compete with those of the American Federation of Labor, and formulated the goal of an independent Negro state in the southern Black Belt. The disabilities that organizers faced in trying to apply such policies emerge in Nelson's description of the Communists' National Miners Union in the early 1930s. But his experiences also suggest that in this period the Party laid the basis for much of its success over the next fifteen years. Here are the roots of what Communists called "mass organizing" among industrial workers, the unemployed, and blacks in the Deep South. Field organizers stressed wages, welfare, and civil rights, not the establishment of a Soviet America. With the beginning of this mass work in the early thirties, particularly organizing of the unemployed, the Party expanded its membership to include many more blacks and second-generation ethnics. By 1936 the CPUSA had more than forty-five thousand members, and for the first time a majority were native-born.[4] The influx of these members, who focused far more on domestic social and economic grievances than on international and theoretical concerns, strengthened the Party's own shift away from the ethnic and political sectarianism of the twenties to a popular front approach.

During the 1930s this younger generation of Communists constituted much of the leadership for the mass organizations that provided popular pressure for New Deal welfare and labor reforms. After building a national network of unemployed councils based in city neighborhoods and industrial towns, Communists worked with Socialists and other radicals to establish in 1935 the Workers' Alliance, the largest organization of unemployed workers in the country. The Party also provided many of the CIO organizers who built industrial unions

in the steel, electrical, meat-packing, and other mass production industries by the Second World War. Using its connections in the black and immigrant communities, the Party mobilized fraternal groups that provided invaluable support for the CIO in its early years. In Minnesota, Wisconsin, and elsewhere, Communists worked with liberal Democrats to create progressive electoral coalitions.[5]

As a result of this mass work of the thirties, the Party achieved its largest membership in history by the middle of the Second World War. Its success also left the veterans of these movements committed to a broad-based and flexible organizing strategy. For Nelson, the crucial experiences were organizing the unemployed in Chicago and Pennsylvania and serving as a commissar with the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War.

This change in direction was accentuated by the Party's policies and the experiences of individual Communists during the war. The alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States allowed Party members to temporarily bridge the seemingly insurmountable gap between being an American and being a Communist. Working through the CIO unions and such black and ethnic organizations as the National Negro Congress and the American Slav Congress, both of which they had helped to create, Party activists mobilized working-class community support for the war. They pushed for greater productivity in the shops, urging workers to forgo their right to strike, and many Party members entered the armed forces. As a result Communists gained important recognition for their efforts and cemented a left-liberal partnership that found its counterpart abroad in the projected postwar cooperation of the Allied powers. These experiences culminated in the liquidation of the CPUSA in May 1944 and its reorganization as the Communist Political Association (CPA), which was designed more as a political pressure group within the New Deal coalition than a revolutionary vanguard.

The disintegration of the Soviet-American alliance in the course of 1945, however, undercut the concept behind the CPA and precipitated a reassertion of Soviet influence over the policies of the American Party. The reemergence of a sectarian position in the CPUSA coincided with the cold war at home and abroad. Increasingly isolated from the mass movements in which they had thrived during the thirties and the war years, Communist activists were vulnerable to attack by the government and right-wing forces. By the mid-fifties government prosecution and cold war hysteria had rendered the American Communist Party impotent.[6]

The significance of the communist experience in the era of the

popular front lies both in the ability of the Party to recruit more successfully and in the political impact that the recruits had on the Party. Many who remained as cadres after the thirties led the fight to de-Stalinize the Party and reconstitute it on a more democratic basis following the international crisis of 1956. Khrushchev's disclosure of the Stalinist atrocities in the early part of that year, followed by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in the fall, rocked the international Communist movement. Long repressed doubts about the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Soviet purges of the thirties now burst to the surface. Calling for a break with the tradition of subservience to the Soviet Party and a fundamental reassessment of the concept of democratic centralism, these reformers sought a new road to socialism based on the cultural and political realities of postwar America.[7] Although their efforts failed, similar movements in Europe and elsewhere have produced more democratic and autonomous Communist parties. Many of the ideas now commonly associated with the term *Eurocommunism* appeared in the program supported by a majority of American Communists during the CPUSA's 1956–1957 crisis. The campaign to transform the Party originated in the isolation endured by this generation of mass leaders in the McCarthy era. This fact has never emerged more clearly than in Nelson's description of his own experiences when on trial and imprisoned for sedition in Pittsburgh.

Until recently, most historians of the CPUSA have conformed to either the "totalitarian" school of interpretation or the "pick-and-choose" school. Those adhering to the former, the prevailing view, have generally seen the Party as a Soviet puppet and its cadres as "malleable objects" of the Party leadership. Practitioners of the pick-and-choose approach, usually political radicals, have rifled through the Party's history looking for failures and successes that will support their own analyses.[8] Perhaps the greatest strength of Nelson's story is that it makes the successes and failures of the Party's history understandable as the product of human agency and individual initiative as well as external political factors. It forces the reader to discard simplification and accept the development of the Communist Party as a complex process. While Nelson substantiates the role of the Soviet Union in influencing the American Party, he offers a counterpoint—that much of the politics of the American Communist movement came not from Moscow but from its involvement in the social struggles of the times.

Work on this book began almost four years ago, but our relations with Steve Nelson go back a decade. In 1970, one of us, Rob Ruck,

was living in Pittsburgh awaiting trial on charges growing out of a courtroom melee with police following an antidraft rally. The media, in the convention of the times, had dubbed the defendants the Pittsburgh Five. A friend and fellow activist, Bob Nelson, introduced his father to the defendants as a member of the original Pittsburgh Five, who had been charged with conspiring to overthrow the government under the Smith Act some two decades earlier. The meeting opened a door to the recent past. In the following years, Ruck and Maggie Patterson visited Steve and Margaret Nelson at their home on Cape Cod and on several occasions recorded conversations with Nelson that were edited into radio documentaries.

In 1975 the two of us met while doing graduate work at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1977 Nelson returned to the city for a visit, and we were in the audience when he spoke to a group of graduate students in labor history. His willingness to rethink his own experiences convinced us that Nelson's stories should have a wider audience. We decided to approach him about working with him on his memoirs. Putting his story down on tape and in print was not a new idea to Nelson. Many people had urged him to do so for years, and he had already recorded a good deal about his experiences in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania during the Depression. He agreed to work with us.

That summer we spent a week with him, taping for six hours a day in a little work shed he had built in his backyard. After Jenni Barrett transcribed these sessions, we corresponded with Nelson and asked dozens of follow-up questions that he answered on tape or in letters. During the next year we met twice and continued the taping.

The following summer we wrote the first drafts of nine chapters. Nelson read and criticized these chapters, and at the end of the summer the three of us met to develop another draft. This process continued through three years and involved five drafts, several more sessions, and a great deal of correspondence with Nelson and outside readers.

More than one hundred hours of transcribed interviews along with Nelson's earlier writings and recordings about his experiences in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania, Spain, and Pittsburgh were the main sources used to write this book.[9] In many of our taping sessions, Nelson had given a great deal of thought to what he wanted to say, and we were able to sit and listen, asking an occasional question. Yet there were many times when our questions forced him to think about something or someone he had not considered in years. That is not an easy task, and we were constantly surprised at how well he was able

to dig deep and come up with answers to our questions. It is his remembering and rethinking that shape this book. The two of us simply helped put it down in words.

At times we questioned Nelson insistently, often posing alternative interpretations of events. He usually answered thoughtfully and plausibly. We did not always agree with him, and on certain issues we still do not. These divergent interpretations sometimes pertain to national policies, such as the Communists' strong support for the New Deal Democratic Party or their decision to liquidate Party caucuses and cease publication of shop papers during the early CIO era. We differed in our assessment of the potential that the labor party movement and an independent voice within the CIO might have offered American Communists. Two examples on the international scene are the development of Stalinism in the 1920s and the 1956 rebellion in Hungary and the subsequent invasion by the Soviet Union. In our view Nelson's understanding of the roots of Stalinism does not fully acknowledge the impact of seven years of war and revolution in which the Soviet proletariat was virtually destroyed, allowing the Party to substitute itself for the working class as the historic agent of social change. In this context, whoever led the Party led the revolution.[10] Nelson's description of the social basis of the Hungarian revolt also seems oversimplified. He describes it as overwhelmingly reactionary; we believe this underestimates the popular support for the uprising and leaves him with an equivocal position on the Soviet invasion. This contrasts sharply with his adamant opposition to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Some readers will want a fuller treatment of certain problems Nelson raises. Recruitment of blacks, for example, has been a top priority for the Party since the Depression, and in fact the proportion of blacks in the Party rose during the thirties. Nelson was always committed to racial unity, but his direct involvement in organizing blacks was limited, and a reader wishing to pursue the subject would best look elsewhere.[11] This also applies to the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the World War II no-strike pledge. While there was significant opposition to both, Nelson's view is mostly confined to his experiences in the Bay Area, and it may suggest more Party unity on these policies than actually existed.[12] Other issues have spawned even more bitter controversy. Some will question why it took American Communists like Nelson so long to come to grips with Stalinism. Others will examine his discussion of the Spanish Civil War for insights into divisions of the Left. Nelson addresses these questions, but his answers will not satisfy everyone.

A major strength of Nelson's viewpoint is that it reflects the experience of a rank and file organizer; his concern is with the practical problems of mobilizing people to fight around specific issues. But this is a shortcoming in analyzing some questions of national and international policy. Nelson's concern with international struggles, demonstrated most clearly in his discussions of the significance of the Spanish Civil War, is obvious, but his view of the movement itself is primarily one of the local Party in action on a daily basis.

It is possible, of course, that Nelson is correct about these matters. What complicates their discussion is that one can never be entirely objective about such questions. Nelson devoted more than three decades of his life to the Communist Party, and he has a natural tendency to justify the key decisions and actions of those years. His critical reappraisal of his life was a difficult and often painful task, but his basic objectivity is impressive.

For Nelson and many young immigrant workers like him, the Communist Party was the primary means by which they made sense of American society and its host of highly complex economic and political phenomena. It was the prism through which reality passed into ideology. With time, this way of perceiving the world can also act as blinders, hiding from sight things that do not square up with Party policy. We felt that this was more of a problem for Nelson with foreign events than with domestic issues. His judgment of the rise of Stalinism in the twenties, the purge trials of the thirties, and the Hungarian rebellion inevitably depends on outside sources of information.

Anyone using these memoirs as historical documentation should also consider that they were based primarily on oral history. No man's memory is infallible, especially when it covers some seven-odd decades. Wherever possible, we have checked and double-checked Nelson's recollections through follow-up interviews, research in newspapers, HUAC proceedings, court transcripts, Communist Party publications, and secondary literature, and in his voluminous files obtained somewhat grudgingly from the FBI under the Freedom of Information Act. (The FBI material, however, was largely worthless as it was composed of pages ravaged by excision.)[13] A number of people with extensive movement backgrounds, many of them mentioned in the manuscript, were asked to verify the accuracy of Nelson's memoirs. What follows is how one man recalled the history he experienced. For the reader uninitiated in the names and events of twentieth-century radicalism, there are brief explanatory notes located at the end of the book.

Many people helped us on this book. David Montgomery's initial encouragement was compounded by his usual careful reading and

penetrating questions of an earlier draft. His tenure at the University of Pittsburgh attracted a number of young labor and social historians who formed our reference group and created a particularly supportive and stimulating environment.

Financing this project has always been a problem: transcriptions of interviews alone ran into thousands of dollars. We were aided in the beginning by a small sum from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission when John Bodnar hired us to conduct several interviews with Nelson regarding immigration and the Party's activities in Pennsylvania. Robert Colodny, a constant source of intellectual sustenance, then procured a small grant for us from the Provost's Office of Research and Development at the University of Pittsburgh. Later we received a Youthgrant from the National Endowment for the Humanities that allowed us to spend an entire summer working on the book.

Max Gordon, Dorothy Healey, Peggy Renner, David Goldway, Nat Cohen, Stella Petrosky, Robert Colodny, Ben Dobbs, Josie Nelson, Milton Ost, Bob Nelson, Jeremy Brecher, Steve Sapolsky, Pete Rachleff, John McDermott, John Muldowney, Dave Smith, Bill Susman, Morry Calow, Tom Lloyd, and Charley Flato read all or parts of the book and offered their thoughts. Their contributions were innumerable and our thanks deep. Al Richmond was especially sensitive in his suggestions and editorial help. Al Amery, a veteran of the fight in Spain, helped us at a particularly difficult time and typed a large section of an earlier draft for us. Frank Zabrosky of Pitt's Archives of Industrial Society advised us on the NEH grant. Faye Schneider, Marge Yeager, Millie Baer, and Gerri Katz helped us subvert bureaucratic procedures and cut countless corners.

Jenni Barrett, whose historical expertise was particularly important to chapter 5, and Maggie Patterson, who co-produced the early radio documentaries on Nelson, were a part of the project from the beginning and have helped make the book more readable and interesting. Margaret Nelson, Steve Nelson's partner and comrade for over five decades, was the source of much material, and she helped us all maintain perspective and a sense of humor. Finally, Abby Levine, our editor at the University of Pittsburgh Press, found inconsistencies, ambiguities, and problems in the manuscript and then worked with us on clearing them up.

Steve Nelson retains a deep commitment to radicalism, and this is one of the strengths of his memoirs. But even those who disagree with him must consider the links his experiences illustrate between that radical activity and reforms that have changed the character of daily

life in this country. For those who share his vision of a changing society and will try to make their own way over some of the paths he has taken, we hope this book makes the going a bit easier.

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