The real John Maclean

John Maclean was one of the greatest revolutionaries which the British labour movement has ever produced. His internationalist opposition to the First World War led the Bolsheviks to see him as the British counterpart of Karl Liebknecht. For almost all his life he was a leading figure in the most consistently revolutionary wing of the various Marxist organisations then existing, from the Social Democratic Federation onwards. Yet at the end of his life he refused to join — and indeed denounced — the early Communist Party, then inspired by Lenin, not Stalin. His stance has been taken by some as evidence for the idea that outside intervention from Moscow ruined a British revolutionary movement which would have developed better left on its own, by others as authority for the project of developing a separate Scottish revolutionary movement. In this article — part one of two, abridged from a longer pamphlet (see advertisement below) — Bob Pitt argues against such views.

John Maclean

THE GLASGOW socialist John Maclean (1879-1923) devoted most of his adult life to the overthrow of capitalism. He joined the avowedly Marxist Social Democratic Federation around 1902-3, and remained a member of the SDF and its successor organisations, the Social Democratic Party and the British Socialist Party, up until 1920, the year in which the BSP provided the basis for the launch of the Communist Party of Great Britain. In contrast not only to the jingoism of HM Hyndman and other BSP leaders but also to the equivocal response of the centre grouping around EC Fairchild, Maclean immediately took an uncompromising stand against the First World War, and suffered three terms of imprisonment as a result of his anti-war agitation. Having emerged as the leading figure on the revolutionary wing of the internationalist opposition which ousted the Hyndman clique from the BSP leadership in 1916, Maclean then played a major role in rallying the party to unconditional support for the Bolshevik revolution.

The Bolsheviks, for their part, hailed Maclean as a revolutionary opponent of the war on a par with Karl Liebknecht and the Bolshevik Party itself. He was elected an honorary chairman of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets immediately after the October Revolution and appointed Russian consul in Glasgow in January 1918. When Trotsky wrote the letter of invitation to the Communist International's First Congress, his appeal to the BSP was addressed 'in particular' to 'the group represented by Maclean'. There is no doubt that the Bolsheviks saw Maclean as the central figure around whom the revolutionary party in Britain would be built. Yet, as is well known, Maclean did not participate in the foundation of the Third International's British section. He broke with the BSP on the eve of its transformation into the CPGB and did not join the new party. Why was this?

One explanation, which features prominently in the autobiographical writings of Maclean's former comrade William Gallacher, is that Maclean was mentally disturbed as a result of his wartime experiences in prison. According to Gallacher, Maclean began "seeing spies everywhere, suspecting everybody and anything" and was "suffering from hallucinations". Another Scottish contemporary of Maclean, Tom Bell, agrees that he was "a man who had suffered much, and who was no longer seeing things in their proper perspective, due to the warping of his better judgement". This version of events, which depicts Maclean's refusal to join the CPGB as the action of a sick man, afflicted by delusions, has since been subjected to severe criticism by some historians, who point out that as loyal Communist Party members Gallacher and Bell had a vested interest in discrediting Maclean. According to this view, allegations of psychological disorder were merely a convenient way of evading the real and rational arguments which Maclean brought forward to justify his opposition to the formation of the CPGB.

An early and influential example of the latter thesis appeared in Walter Kendall's *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-21*, published in 1969, which devoted an entire chapter to the question of Maclean and the CPGB. Kendall's book had the merit of rescuing Maclean from the obscurity into which he had fallen — the last serious study had been Tom Bell's biography, published over a quarter of a century earlier — but it did so with the aim of bolstering Kendall's own anti-communist analysis. Quoting liberally from Maclean's writings in order to illustrate the depth of his differences with the Communist Party, Kendall emphasised Maclean's political hostility to the CP leaders and his insistence on a separate Scottish Communist Party as part of the struggle for an independent workers' republic in Scotland. Kendall was particularly keen to recruit Maclean as a supporter of his own view that the transformation of the BSP into the Communist Party was the disastrous outcome of meddling by the Bolshevik regime backed up by the corrupt use of Russian money. "The Communist Party has sold itself to Moscow", read one quotation from Maclean which Kendall used, "with disastrous results both to Russia and to the British revolutionary movement". Kendall claimed that his book had "conclusively demonstrated" that "the rumours of Maclean's alleged mental unbalance were politically motivated, were put about consciously and deliberately by malicious persons unable and unwilling to meet and confront Maclean's ideas head on, persons who sought instead by secret slander to ▸

destroy both his personal and his political reputation".

A notable weakness of Kendall's argument was that almost all the quotations from Maclean that he came up with were written after the foundation of the CPGB at the Communist Unity Convention of July-August 1920. And the one about the CP selling itself to Moscow was taken from an election leaflet issued by Maclean in November 1922 — two and a half years after his split from the BSP and well over two years after the CPGB's founding conference. For the crucial period preceding the Communist Unity Convention, Kendall was unable to find much in the way of evidence for Maclean's thinking, so he just passed off the later material as indicative of Maclean's position throughout. As for his assertion that those who questioned Maclean's mental balance were liars, the only proof Kendall offered was a single quotation to that effect from the memoirs of Scottish Labour MP James Clunie, who had been close to Maclean in the early 1920s but was, for reasons outlined in this article, a far from reliable witness. Faced with other evidence which tended to support the view that Maclean was indeed obsessed by spies, agents and state conspiracies, and that this had a decisive impact on his response to the formation of the Communist Party, Kendall found a simple solution — he ignored it. As an explanation of Maclean's refusal to join the CPGB Kendall's account was, to say the least, seriously flawed.

The issue of Maclean's psychological state, both during and after his imprisonment, is clearly central to an evaluation of his political development. Since Kendall's book was written, additional source material has become available and a quite extensive literature on the subject now exists. Yet different writers have drawn entirely conflicting conclusions from the evidence. Brian Ripley and John McHugh argue that although Maclean's mind may have been temporarily affected by his sufferings in prison, "once beyond the immediate post-war period, and certainly from early 1919 onwards, further examples of obvious mental instability on Maclean's part are not forthcoming". James D Young takes an even more intransigent line in defence of Maclean, dismissing all contemporary reports of psychological disorder as the product of a state-sponsored disinformation campaign in which police spies combined with Maclean's Leninist opponents in an attempt to undermine his position in the labour movement. Iain McLean, by complete contrast, states that "there can be no doubt that Maclean's views and behaviour in his last years were distorted by a thoroughly developed persecution mania".

What initially gave rise to doubts about Maclean's mental balance was his insistence that drugs were being added to his and other prisoners' food. It was during his second term of imprisonment in 1916-17 that Maclean first made such allegations — described by Dr James Devon of the Scottish Prison Commission as "insane delusions of persecution" — and he repeated the charge publicly at his trial in May 1918. On arrival at Perth prison following his conviction, Maclean was interviewed by the medical officer, Dr Watson, who wrote that he doubted Maclean's sanity "owing to his ideas of poison being put into prison food". Dr Devon denounced Maclean's court statement about drugging as "simply the ravings of a lunatic" and informed the Scottish Office that "we are dealing with a man who is insane, but not certified". This was an omission which Devon and Watson set out to rectify. With the approval of the Secretary for Scotland, they sought to have Maclean certified insane and removed either to an asylum or to the prison's Criminal Lunatic Department. But the plan fell through when Dr Garrey, the medical officer at Peterhead prison, to which Maclean had been transferred in the meantime, refused to cooperate.

"Maclean's conflicts with the British Socialist Party leaders degenerated into paranoia and wild accusations on Maclean's part... Maclean's mental state was the main cause of the split."

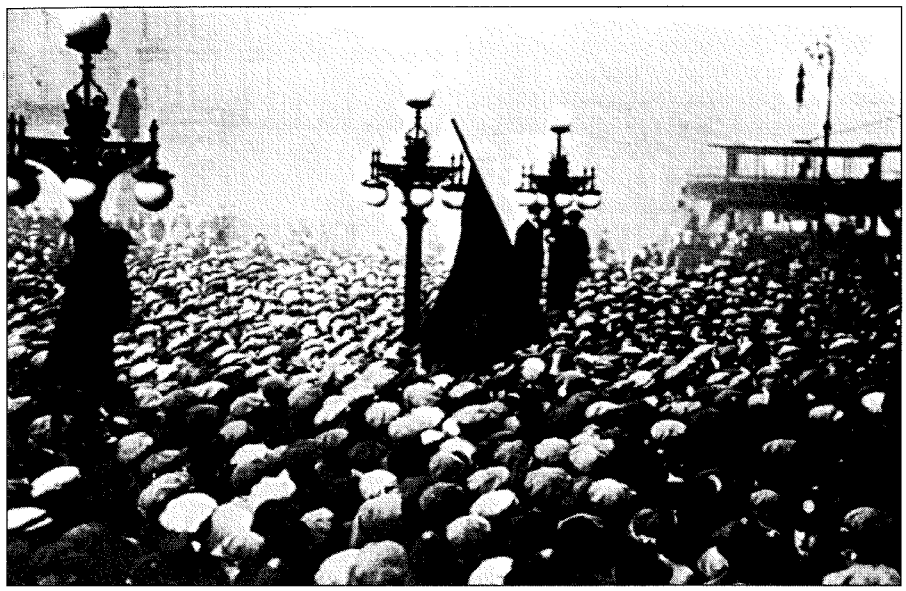
The attempt by Devon and Watson to certify Maclean, solely on the basis of his suspicions about the prison food, seems inexcusable. It is possible that their diagnosis was based as much on political as on medical grounds, for they were hostile to Maclean as a revolutionary and may well have started from the assumption that anyone with his commitment to the destruction of the capitalist system was by definition verging on madness. But Dr Garrey, who consistently rejected suggestions that Maclean was insane, was not exactly a disinterested observer himself. When Maclean refused to eat the prison food, Garrey was responsible for organising his forcible feeding, and he was anxious to deny that Maclean suffered any ill effects from this treatment. Certainly Garrey's repeated assurances about his patient's continued physical and mental well-being during this ordeal are hardly credible. When Maclean's wife Agnes was eventually allowed to visit him in October 1918, she wrote to the Secretary for Scotland protesting at Maclean's condition and complained that Garrey had misled her as to the state of her husband's health.

The evidence contained in the Scottish Office file regarding Maclean's third period of imprisonment is thus inconclusive. Medical opinion was divided between the view that Maclean was already mad when he entered prison in 1918 and the view that he emerged from the experience mentally unscathed, neither of which is very convincing. What the reports do is to underscore the specific delusion he suffered from concerning the adulteration of prisoners' food. And there is no question that it was a delusion. Maclean himself never offered any evidence for these claims of drugging, except his own ill-health. Gallacher recalls that Maclean accused the prison authorities of having "doped his food to make his bowels run and then, after two or three days used other dope to cause constipation". Such symptoms, however, would more easily be explained as a product of the appalling diet to which prisoners were subjected. No historian, even among Maclean's most vigorous defenders, has attempted to argue seriously that his charge of drugging was actually true.

Maclean's courageous stand at his May 1918 trial — "I come here not as the accused, but as the accuser of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot" — firmly established him as a revolutionary socialist of international standing. The savage five-year sentence he received and the force-feeding he underwent in prison provoked outrage throughout the labour movement. The resulting campaign to free Maclean, during which he was selected to stand as Labour candidate for the Gorbals in the 1918 general election, secured his release on 3 December 1918. The dramatic scenes that evening, when Maclean arrived at Glasgow's Buchanan Street station, have been recorded in a number of accounts. He was greeted by a crowd of thousands, who unhitched the horses from his carriage and pulled it through the city centre, while Maclean, who was so weakened by his hunger strike that he had difficulty remaining upright, stood on the seat of the carriage defiantly waving a huge red banner. This remains one of the most powerful and heroic images from the history of the class struggle in Britain.

But there are strong indications that Maclean's experiences in prison had damaged him not only physically but psychologically. Dora Montefiore, a BSP executive member who was one of the comrades to accompany him on his triumphal journey home, recounts that when they arrived at his house in Newlands "I and others recognised that this was quite another John Maclean from the man, the ex-school teacher, whom the authorities some months before had cast into jail, because, as he said at his trial, 'He had squared his actions with his conscience'. His thoughts were now disconnected, his speech was irresponsible, his mind, from solitary confinement, was absolutely self-centred. In a word, prison life had done its work on a delicately-balanced psychology, and our unfortunate comrade was now a mental wreck".

Maclean was was too ill to actively participate in the general election campaign, which was already under way when he was released, and William Gallacher deputised



Maclean's times: the red flag in George's Square, Glasgow

for him. But he did speak at an eve-of-poll rally in St Mungo Halls, where the crowd was so large that meetings had to be held in three separate rooms. Introducing Maclean, the chairman explained that the speaker "suffered from the effects of a nervous breakdown", and the various accounts of Maclean's performance that evening would seem to confirm this. Gallacher recounts that Maclean's contribution was "marred by the sickness that had become firmly embedded in his mind: he kept on introducing the subject of how they had doped his food in prison and how he had got the better of them despite their dirty work. To me it was very painful, though I am sure many of those in the hall accepted the 'doping' story as true". Tom Bell's judgement on Maclean is even harsher: "Persecution obsessions and questions irrelevant to the Election made up the subject-matter of his speeches... The wild enthusiasm with which he was received at each of his meetings evaporated in murmurs of sympathetic concern, many people leaving the meeting while he was speaking, obviously disturbed by the state of their friend and comrade's mind". In the outcome Maclean received 7,436 votes but finished well behind the successful Coalition candidate, the sitting Labour MP George Barnes, who polled 14,347. A local Labour Party member would later complain that "we had Barnes defeated... only for John Maclean's wild outburst the night before the poll".

Though it seems indisputable, given the evidence, that Maclean had suffered a mental breakdown in prison, the question remains as to how far it affected his future political development. Maclean appears to have recovered well enough from the physical effects of his ordeal to make a swift return to political activity, and he spent 1919 in a relentless campaign of revolutionary propaganda and agitation throughout Britain. But psychologically he remained very much on edge. Bell recalls that Maclean's imprisonment had taken "an enormous toll from his nervous system... He was irritable, highly strung, and extremely suspicious of those around him, even his closest and most loyal friends". And Maclean's inclination to explain events in terms of state conspiracies, first revealed in the doping allegations, did not cease after his release from prison but rather seems to have become generalised. Before he launched on his punishing schedule of meetings, he and Agnes had a short holiday in Rothesay with William Gallacher and his wife, during which Maclean became convinced that two students who had rented the flat above their own were police spies.

Judging by intelligence reports compiled for the Cabinet by Basil Thomson, the head of Special Branch, conspiracy theories featured prominently in Maclean's propaganda of the period. A report from January 1919 summarised the contents of a typical speech:

"He... relates his sufferings in prison, and states that his food was drugged and poisoned, and that he would have died if he had eaten it; that conscientious objectors, Sinn Feiners, and even convicts undergo such treatment that many die, others become insane or commit suicide, and that the strongest have their constitutions undermined; that those of the conscientious objectors who died of pneumonia had a particular bacillus injected into them by the prison staff. He goes on to say that in order to keep the War spirit up, the Government was in the habit of sending information to the Germans which would enable them to sink merchant ships, and that the Lusitania was one of those sunk in this way. He then goes on to introduce the subject of Revolution."

"There is no evidence that the rupture between Maclean and the BSP was in any way motivated by objections to Russian interference in the revolutionary movement in Britain."

Another report the following month, which gave details of Maclean's speaking tour of North West England, observed that in response to any hostile question from the audience "he accuses the questioner of being a police spy".

As in the case of Maclean's Scottish Office file, the Cabinet intelligence reports have to be treated with some caution. Thomson and his informants regarded Maclean with intense hostility and, like some of the prison doctors, were predisposed to view a man with such political beliefs as mentally disturbed. At the same time, it must be remembered that these reports were not propaganda designed to destroy Maclean's public reputation; they were for internal use within the state apparatus, and their function was to assist the Lloyd George government in suppressing the revolutionary movement in Britain. Thomson and his spies were therefore hardly motivated to feed the government false information. And it is notable that, of all the British revolutionaries whose activities Special Branch kept a watch on, Maclean was the only one whose sanity was repeatedly called into question in this way. Used critically, and taken in association with evidence from other sources, the Cabinet intelligence reports do help us to form a general estimation of Maclean's psychological condition.

In this connection, the breakdown of Maclean's marriage later in 1919 should also be considered. The common explanation for Agnes Maclean's estrangement from her husband is that she was "unable to stand the pressures and insecurity of living with a man who lived only for the revolution". In reality, a major contributory factor seems to have been Maclean's mental problems. When Agnes tried to persuade him to cut back on his revolutionary activities in the interests of his health, Maclean became suspicious that she had been "got at". She also had to contend with his irrational fear, which continued even after his release from prison, that his food was being tampered with. Bob Stewart, the CPGB's first Scottish organiser, records that Maclean "became obsessed with the idea that he would be poisoned. He refused to eat in anyone's house and on occasions refused food even from his wife". And after Agnes left him and took their two young daughters to live with relatives, Maclean claimed that the government was behind the break-up of his family. If it would be an exaggeration to describe Maclean as actually insane, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that his mental state was seriously impairing his judgement.

The rupture between Maclean and the BSP cannot be explained exclusively by his

psychological problems; there was also a political background to the deterioration of his relations with the party leadership. Yet, whatever might be made of Maclean's disagreements with the BSP's policies during 1919 and the first part of 1920, it seems clear that they involved the sort of differences which inevitably arise in any revolutionary organisation and which should have been resolved through political discussion. Instead, Maclean's conflicts with the BSP leaders degenerated into paranoia and wild accusations on Maclean's part, leading to his break with the party at its Easter 1920 conference. In this sense, Maclean's mental state was undeniably the main cause of the split.

During 1919-20 the BSP's public activites were concentrated on the Hands Off Russia campaign, which sought to rally labour movement opposition to military intervention against the new workers' state. Although Maclean was one of the main speakers for Hands of Russia, the campaign became the source of mounting friction between Maclean and the party leadership. At the time of the campaign's national launch, in January 1919, he opposed the call for industrial action to force the withdrawal of British troops from Russia, arguing that the majority of the working class could not be persuaded to strike over this issue. He advocated "another line, and that is to save Russia by developing the Revolution in Britain no later than this year". In November 1919 at a Hands Off Russia meeting in Glasgow's St Andrew's Hall celebrating the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution the chairman, Pat Dollan of the ILP, announced a proposal by the Trades Council for a 24-hour general strike against military intervention in Russia. Maclean, however, stuck to his line that "revolution here would help Russia most". Eventually he seems to have concluded that Hands Off Russia had become a substitute for organising a serious fight against capitalism in Britain. Harry McShane, one of a group of Glasgow BSPers who left the party early in 1920, states that like them Maclean objected to the BSP executive's "lack of an industrial and political perspective for Britain: 'hands off Russia' was the only policy they had".

If Maclean's prediction that it would be difficult to mobilise the working class in defence of Russia proved correct in the short term — it wasn't until the Russo-Polish war in 1920 that the campaign managed to organise industrial action or gained any large-scale support — his own alternative perspective of immediate revolutionary conflict proved even more at variance with the actual outcome of the class struggle in Britain. Maclean's conviction that the seizure of power was directly on the agenda seems to have led him to underestimate the potential of basic solidarity work, both in defending the Russian workers' republic and in winning British workers to communism. In the aftermath of the November 1919 meeting at St Andrew's Hall, Maclean did back the proposal for a 24-hour strike, but he argued that it should also adopt the slogan 'Hands Off Ireland, Egypt and India' and that mass meetings should be held during the strike to advocate a full revolutionary industrial and political programme. On the face of it, he would appear to have fallen into the classic leftist error of demanding agreement on programme and ultimate political aims as the precondition for a joint campaign on a concrete issue. The idea of revolutionaries fighting to win a majority of the class through common action with reformists around specific practical objectives was evidently lost on Maclean. This was to prove a fatal flaw in Maclean's political method, with the result that his approach to Russian solidarity work, and to political activity in general, eventually collapsed into complete sectarianism.

It should be clear from what has been said that Hands Off Russia was essentially an exercise in what would later be called united front work. Although the organisation drew initial support from a broad range of liberal opinion, there is little substance to Ripley and McHugh's allegation that the campaign as it actually developed represented "a popular front-type movement". Even a cursory examination of reports in the BSP's paper *The Call* demonstrates that this was a campaign firmly based on and oriented towards the labour movement. At Hands Off Russia meetings the question of industrial action against military intervention was a constant theme, and these events usually ended with the singing of the *Red Flag* and the *Internationale*. The very fact that Maclean himself, scarcely a man to moderate his message in the interests of winning over the 'progressive' bourgeoisie, was a regular speaker on Hands Off Russia platforms underlines the class character of the campaign.

It is true that Hands Off Russia rallies were also addressed by certain individuals who were sympathetic to the labour movement and willing to speak out against military intervention. But there was nothing unprincipled about seeking support from such people, some of whom had visited the Russian workers' republic and could give accurate accounts of what they had seen there. One of these individuals was Lieutenant-Colonel L'Estrange Malone, MP, and it was his presence alongside Maclean on the platform of the November 1919 Hands Off Russia meeting in Glasgow which unleashed the sequence of events that led to the split between Maclean and the BSP.

Malone was a man with a checkered past, to put it mildly. Not only had he been elected to parliament in 1918 as a Coalition Liberal, but he was a former member of the Reconstruction Society, a right-wing body specialising in anti-communist propaganda. Its 1918 pamphlet *Bolshevist Plot to Seize Power in Britain* had in fact attacked Maclean by name, describing him as "a wild-looking schoolmaster". However, in the course of 1919-20 Malone's political views changed radically. In September 1919 he visited Russia, where he had talks with leading Bolsheviks and even joined Trotsky in a review of Red Army troops. On the basis of these experiences, Malone became a sympathiser of the Bolshevik government. After returning to Britain at the end of October he continued to move to the left, joining the BSP in July 1920 and becoming the first Communist MP. Given the suddenness of his conversion, though, the depth of Malone's intellectual understanding of Communism was certainly questionable. James Klugmann, in his official history of the CPGB, states that Malone had joined the party "on an emotional rather than a reasoning basis; he was never a Marxist, and had little or no contact with the working-class movement".

Willie Gallacher

Maclean, however, did not merely question Malone's credentials as a Communist but accused him of being an active counter-revolutionary who had been sent into the workers' movement to disrupt it. "Since I spoke with him in St Andrew's Hall, Glasgow", Maclean wrote, "I have denounced him as an agent of the Government soothing the Socialists whilst the Government was preparing for a Spring offensive against Russia". Maclean never published anything to substantiate this accusation, other than references to Malone's past political record, and it is quite clear that the state itself took an unequivocally hostile attitude towards Malone. Basil Thomson's report to the Cabinet on the meeting where Maclean became convinced that Malone was a spy expresses forthright condemnation of a man "who is apparently so enamoured of Bolshevism that he is not ashamed as an ex-officer and a Member of Parliament to share a platform with a declared revolutionary".

Maclean's accusations against Malone did not immediately lead to a break with the BSP. When he addressed a meeting of the Glasgow BSP in December 1919, a week after the St Andrew's Hall meeting, Maclean still spoke as a party loyalist. Even the decision by the London leadership to send a full-time organiser, Ernest Cant, to Glasgow — with its implicit criticism of Maclean's own organising abilities — had failed to shake his allegiance. In his speech, Maclean readily conceded that "during the war he and others had worked on BSP lines, but had not stressed the matter of Party", with the result that it was the ILP rather than the BSP which had recruited from the the

wartime radicalisation of the Glasgow working class. He therefore "urged all to keep to the Party, to work hard for it, and to make its numerical strength commensurate with its undoubted influence".

Maclean's differences with the BSP leadership came to a head early in 1920 at a meeting with Theodore Rothstein, who had emerged as the dominant figure in the BSP. Rothstein by this time had substantial funds from Russia at his disposal, and he offered Maclean a paid job as a speaker for the Hands Off Russia campaign. Maclean rejected this attempt to 'buy' him, as he later described it, partly because he would have been required to abandon his Marxist education classes in Scotland, but also no doubt because it would have meant working with Malone, who was one of the campaign's star speakers. When Maclean was billed along with Malone to address a big Hands Off Russia rally at London's Albert Hall in February 1920, he refused to share a platform with this 'agent'. The discussions with Rothstein only served to convince Maclean that he, too, was in the pay of the state. According to Gallacher's account, Rothstein revealed to Maclean that he was the Bolsheviks' official representative in Britain and emphasised that the comrades in Moscow were relying on Maclean to play a leading role in the formation of the Communist Party. On his return to Glasgow, Maclean "openly told of this meeting and said that the cunning agent Rothstein had tried to fool him with a lot of talk about representing the Bolsheviks when he, Maclean, knew full well that he was working for the British government".

Far from being a smear against Maclean, thought up years after the event in order to discredit a political opponent of the Communist Party, Gallacher's account is borne out by a Special Branch report of March 1920. "The British Communists have at last become convinced that John Maclean is insane", the report states. "... A few days ago Maclean announced on a public platform that all the leading Communists in the country, mentioning them by name and including that of Theodore Rothstein, were police spies. He refused to be silenced and a deputation came from Glasgow to consult the Party in London, with the result that they were sent back to try every means for keeping Maclean from making speeches in public. It will take them all their time, for Maclean will regard this as a fresh conspiracy".

As was the case with Malone, there was nothing to justify Maclean's accusation against Theodore Rothstein. Rothstein did enjoy a relatively comfortable existence working as a journalist for papers like the *Manchester Guardian*, which obviously contrasted sharply with the persecution Maclean himself had endured, and he had even spent two years working as a translator for the War Office, until being sacked in May 1919 after HM Hyndman had denounced him as a German spy. The debate between historians over the political role of Theodore Rothstein has generated quite a substantial literature of its own. Kendall and, in particular, Raymond Challinor present Rothstein in a poor light, Ripley and McHugh offer a more balanced but nonetheless critical view, while John Saville mounts a vigorous defence of Rothstein. All of these writers agree, however, that there is no truth to Maclean's allegation that Rothstein was a spy. Indeed, it is quite clear from Special Branch reports that the British state regarded Rothstein quite straightforwardly as an agent of the Bolshevik government.

The widening breach between Maclean and the BSP became an unbridgeable gulf at the party's Easter conference of 4-5 April 1920. Maclean's name does not appear in the report of the conference published in *The Call*, and this seems to have convinced some historians that he didn't attend. But Maclean was present at the conference, and took the opportunity to repeat his slanderous accusations against Rothstein and other leading members of the party. Details of Maclean's intervention can be found in a Cabinet intelligence report, evidently based on information supplied by a genuine spy on the BSP executive. Given the obscurity which has surrounded Maclean's break with the BSP — Nan Milton describes it as "the only mysterious part of John Maclean's life" — it is worth quoting the report at length:

"There was a curious incident during the Conference. John Maclean rose and made charges against the leaders of being police spies; he further cited the money spent on young [Andrew] Rothstein's education at Balliol and hinted that he was an agent provocateur of the Government. It was decided to hold a secret meeting of the Executive to investigate the charges. At this meeting Maclean argued quite temperately and with some superficial logic that the money received by Theodore Rothstein and Albert Inkpin was Government money; he cited incidents that could only be explained on this hypothesis, and he challenged them to produce evidence of the source of the money. In reply, Inkpin assured his hearers that every penny came directly or indirectly from the Soviet Government; that it came by secret couriers to him and that he handed it on to Theodore Rothstein.

"The Communists have been slow to realise, what was patent to everyone else, that John Maclean is the victim of the monomania of the 'hidden hand', and they are now reaping a harvest of suspicion from their loyalty to him. Maclean's obsession is quite likely to break up the Communist movement, for he has a large following in Glasgow and in season and out of season he gives vent to these denunciations. The Executive of the British Socialist Party has warned Lenin of John Maclean's mental state and in future the Soviet Government will not have relations with him, though he is still their official representative in Glasgow. He is of that temper which will become more uncompromising if any attempt is made to silence him."

It is at this point, not surprisingly, that references to and contributions by Maclean in *The Call* come to an abrupt end. Although the BSP did not publicly announce that he had been expelled, Maclean later stated that "Rothstein's... approaches to me created a situation that compelled the BSP to gently slip me out" and referred to his "secret expulsion" from the party. At the May Day demonstration in Glasgow, Harry McShane was astonished to meet Maclean selling not *The Call* but a new issue of *The Vanguard*, the title of a paper earlier published by the anti-Hyndmanite Glasgow district council of the BSP and suppressed by the state in 1916. It contained an article by Maclean explaining that "the Government... has paralysed the BSP" and that this was why it had been necessary to resume publication of the paper. "Bribe and destroy whom it may within the ranks of Labour", Maclean wrote, the British government could not prevent the revolution. The split between Maclean and the party he had been a member of for some seventeen years seemed to be complete.

It is odd, therefore, that Maclean apparently got himself delegated to the July-August 1920 Communist Unity Convention from the BSP's Tradeston branch, to which he claimed he had transferred after the collapse of his own branch. His credentials, however, were not accepted by the conference organisers. According to Maclean, he was "automatically excluded from this London show by the trickery of ▸

Maclean's times: poverty in Glasgow

the Cockney, Cant, who refused to recognise the Tradeston branch". Whatever the formal justification for Maclean's exclusion from the founding conference of the CPGB, the real explanation is surely clear. Given that he could have no interest in joining a party whose leadership was, according to him, in the pay of and directly controlled by the capitalist state, it was presumably anticipated that he would attack the proceedings on the same basis as he had done at the BSP conference a few months earlier. It is not difficult to imagine the scandal that would have resulted if the former Russian consul in Glasgow, the man described in the capitalist press as the 'Scottish Lenin', had turned up at the inaugural conference of the Communist International's British section and denounced its leaders as spies and state agents!

Contrary to repeated claims by various authors, there is no indication that the rupture between Maclean and the BSP was in any way motivated by his objections to Russian interference in the revolutionary movement in Britain. Still less is there any evidence that he "did not want to make himself dependent on Russian money — and did not like the situation developing in the BSP, which was becoming more and more dependent on Russian subsidies", as Nan Milton argues. Although Maclean did condemn the BSP as "a party that has been corrupted by money, no one clearly cares to say whence its origin", as we have seen he himself was convinced that the source of the money was the British government. Nor is there anything in the period preceding the Communist Unity Convention to back up Harry McShane's claim that Maclean was opposed to the foundation of the CPGB "because he wanted a separate Scottish party". The demand for a distinct Scottish party, organisationally independent of a revolutionary party in the rest of Britain, certainly played no part in Maclean's mounting differences with the BSP during 1919-20. The very fact that he was a member of the British Socialist Party indicates that he favoured the political organisation of the struggle against capitalism on an all-British basis. Indeed, as Ripley and McHugh have pointed out, most of Maclean's furious agitational and propaganda work in 1919 was carried out in England rather than Scotland. The idea of a separate Scottish organisation never seems to have entered Maclean's mind at this time.

This is not to deny that Maclean was developing an interest in the Scottish national question during this earlier period. In January 1919, when he turned down a request by the Scottish nationalist Erskine of Marr to sign an appeal soliciting support from US president Woodrow Wilson for Scottish Home Rule, Maclean stated that he favoured "a Parliament or Soviet of workers for Scotland, with headquarters in Glasgow" to be achieved through "the establishment of the Socialist Republic, in which alone we can have real Home Rule". In other words, Scottish self-determination was dependent on the success of the British revolution. It was only after his break with the BSP/CPGB that the demand for national independence, in advance of the socialist revolution in the rest of Britain, and the associated demand for a separate Scottish party made an appearance in Maclean's political perspectives. In August 1920 he devoted a leaflet entitled "All Hail, the Scottish Communist Republic!" to the call for an independent soviet republic in Scotland, and in the September issue of *The Vanguard* Maclean for the first time declared himself in favour of "a clear and clean Scottish Communist Party". Similarly, it was only in the latter part of 1920 that he began to argue that the higher level of class struggle and political consciousness justified an independent bid for power in Scotland. He now proposed to "make Glasgow a Petrograd, a Revolutionary storm centre second to none".

"The demand for a distinct Scottish party played no part in Maclean's differences... his hostility to the BSP and CP leaders, rather than any consistent national ideology, was decisive."

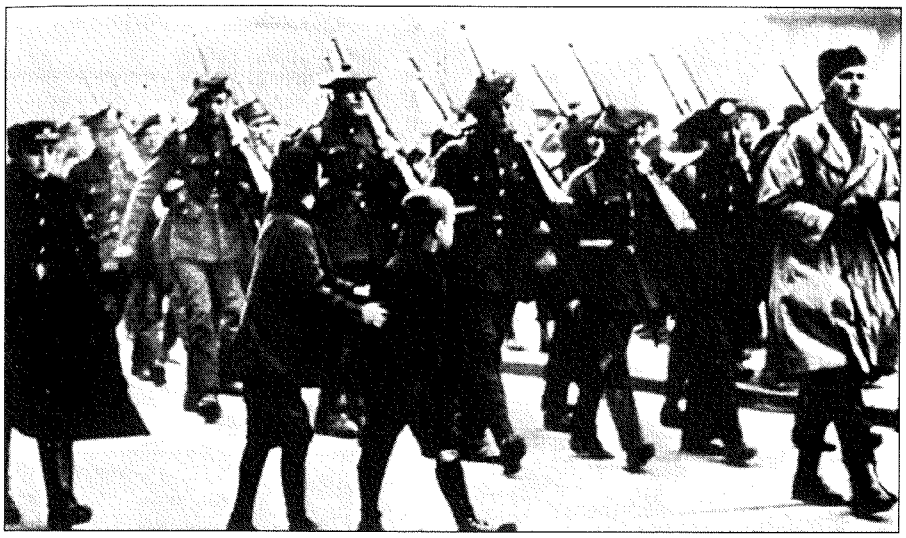
Maclean put forward a number of other justifications for his new separatist line. The prospect of armed conflict between Britain and the USA, which in his 1919 pamphlet *The Coming War with America* had led him to urge the establishment of workers' power in Britain as a whole, was now employed to argue for an independent Scotland which would "would refuse to let her lads fight the battles of the maniac English". The war preparations, which Maclean believed were already under way, necessitated "the policy of complete political separation from England. Hence a Scottish Communist Party". Maclean also justified the fight for national independence by drawing a parallel with the Irish liberation struggle, to which he had given principled support. Yet, in urging Scottish revolutionaries to follow the example of the Irish nationalists, Maclean made no serious attempt to argue that Scotland was an oppressed nation like Ireland, but simply asserted that the break-up of the British Empire along national lines would assist in the defeat of the ruling class.

Maclean's further argument that revolutionaries an area of such advanced militancy "must not allow ourselves to play second fiddle to any organisation with headquarters in London" was not even a distinctly nationalist argument. It would have been supported by many of the South Wales syndicalists, who were generally hostile to nationalism. Opposition to domination by a London-based leadership of course carried particular weight with Maclean. "If England is to be led by Malone", he wrote, "then let us Marxians in Scotland forge ahead on entirely independent lines". All the indications are that it was this latter factor — his hostility to the BSP/CPGB leaders — rather than any consistent nationalist ideology which was decisive in the development of Maclean's new line.

The sudden appearance of such a variety of arguments in support of Scottish separatism, none of which had been aired until Maclean's split with the BSP/CPGB, does reinforce the view, cogently argued by Ripley and McHugh, that his attempt to fuse Marxism with an incoherent version Scottish nationalism had a predominantly pragmatic element to it. McShane's statement that Maclean refused to join the CPGB because he wanted an independent Communist Party for Scotland, therefore, doesn't really hold water. If anything the situation was exactly the reverse: essentially, Maclean favoured a separate Scottish Communist Party because he was opposed to joining the CPGB. And he was opposed to joining the CPGB because he had deluded himself that it was headed by state agents.

It was not Maclean in fact who initiated the campaign for a Scottish revolutionary party. The author of this proposal was Alec Geddes of the Scottish Workers Committee, which represented the remnants of the wartime shop stewards' movement. As a delegate to the Communist Unity Convention, Geddes had voted against the decision to apply for affiliation to the Labour Party, and an editorial in the SWC's organ The Worker condemned the decision as "an unpardonable mistake" which would finish the CPGB in Scotland, where communists were "nine-tenths anti-Labour Party". In a subsequent article Geddes proposed the formation of a Scottish Communist Party, not on nationalist grounds but on the basis of this ultra-left rejection of Labour affiliation. At a meeting in the *Worker* offices later in August it was decided to issue a manifesto calling for a conference to establish a Scots Communist Party adhering to the following principles: the dictatorship of the proletariat, the soviet system, the Third International and non-affiliation to the Labour Party.

These moves coincided with the political crisis that arose over the threat of military intervention by Britain and France in reaction to the Red Army's advance into Poland. This provoked such opposition in the ranks of the British workers' movement that the Labour Party and TUC were compelled to organise a national Council of Action which agreed to call a political strike in the event of war. The newly-formed CPGB not only played an important role in initiating this campaign, but also intervened energetically in the more than 350 local Councils of Action which were formed across Britain. As Lenin explained to the Russian Communist Party congress in September 1920: "the



Maclean's times: troops intimidate strikers in Glasgow 1919

progress of the working class movement requires that we split with the Mensheviks ideologically, and yet at the same time act together with them in the Council of Action".

Maclean's response, by contrast, was simply to boycott the official movement. "The Labour Councils of Action will not fill the bill", he wrote. "There are plenty of honest men acting as leaders of Labour, but proved traitors are at the helm — the Hendersons, the Thomases and the Clynes. We Communists are the only ones that can lead society to Communism. Therefore we must form a Communist Council of Action to assume the real power when the proper moment arrives". Maclean held a meeting of his Communist Council of Action in Glasgow on 28 August, which attracted 75 people, among them representatives of the Scottish Workers Committee, the Socialist Labour Party, the Lanarkshire Miners' Communist Group and the International Union of Ex-Servicemen. But the reformist ILP, which was the largest and most influential political tendency in the Glasgow labour movement, was necessarily excluded from this select gathering of revolutionaries. Maclean failed to understand the role of a Council of Action as a broad-based working class organisation in which communists had to fight to win the majority to their programme. Instead he sought to leap over the task of building a relationship between the vanguard and the class by setting up a narrow sectarian body whose purpose was evidently to serve as a substitute for a revolutionary party.

By then Maclean had formed his own group, comprising a handful of travelling propagandists — Maclean himself, James MacDougall, Peter Marshall, Sandy Ross and Harry McShane — whom Maclean had dubbed the Tramp Trust Unlimited. They responded positively to the proposal for a Scots Communist Party, and a committee elected at Maclean's Communist Council of Action meeting was empowered to enter into discussions with the signatories to the *Worker* group's manifesto. As a result of these negotiations, in September MacDougall of the Tramp Trust and one John McLean of Bridgeton, a leading member of the Scottish Workers Committee, co-signed as acting joint secretaries an appeal to revolutionaries to attend a preliminary conference to launch a Communist Party for Scotland. This conference took place on 11 September 1920 and was attended by about 100 people, including delegates representing 21 organisations. The title Scottish Communist Party was rejected in favour of Communist Labour Party, on the proposal of James MacDougall, and the inaugural conference of the new revolutionary organisation was set for October 2.

This plan came unstuck as the result of Gallacher's return on 27 September from Moscow, where he had participated in the Second Congress of the Communist International. After discussions with Lenin, Gallacher had been convinced of the need for all revolutionary forces in Britain to unify in the CPGB. Although he arrived home too late to be delegated to the October conference, which attracted some 400 people, Gallacher attended as a visitor and prevailed on the chair to allow him to address the meeting. He emphasised the crucial importance which the Comintern attached to the unity of all British communists in a single party, and argued that those who opposed parliamentary action or Labour Party affiliation should enter the unified Communist Party and fight for their positions inside it. Though Maclean was not present at the conference, the Tramp Trust was represented by MacDougall, who argued vigorously against Gallacher, even voting against allowing him speaking rights. Gallacher's intervention proved decisive, however. While he could not prevent the actual formation of the Communist Labour Party, Gallacher persuaded the conference that the new organisation should remain a "provisional body" whose purpose was to bring together the various Communist groups in Scotland with a view to negotiating a merger with the CPGB.

Gallacher thus succeeded in breaking the Maclean-Worker alliance and hijacked the enterprise of a building a separate party in Scotland, transforming it instead into a bridge to take Scottish revolutionaries into the CPGB. The forces with which Maclean had hoped to build his Scottish Communist Party had been snatched away from him. Apart from his own tiny group, the only significant force that remained outside the communist unity movement in Scotland was the Socialist Labour Party, adherents of the US socialist Daniel De Leon. When Maclean wrote an article summoning Scottish revolutionaries to a conference in December 1920 "to form a Scottish Communist Party to represent the Marxian communism in Scotland", he was reduced to offering participants the alternative choice of joining the SLP, "which fortunately has its headquarters in Glasgow".

Understandably, Maclean was extremely resentful of the way he had been outmanoeuvred over the CLP. He condemned this 'party', which was in reality a recruiting arm of the CPGB, as "a shameful bewilderment" of Scottish socialists. He also objected to the election of John McLean of Bridgeton as CLP secretary, denouncing this as an attempt to deceive the workers' movement that he himself was involved with the CLP. Although this has gone down in Macleanite mythology as an example of the Communists' double-dealing, the accusation was really just another example of Maclean's paranoia destroying his capacity for political reasoning. As a member of the Scottish Workers Committee, the Bridgeton McLean had in fact been prominently involved with the CLP project from the beginning — as we have seen, he and James MacDougall of the Tramp Trust had co-signed the original appeal to set up a Scottish Communist Party. McLean also wrote to *The Worker* in November 1920 emphasising that his famous namesake had nothing to do with the CLP and stating that some potential recruits had been put off joining the organisation in the mistaken belief that it supported *The Vanguard*'s line on Scottish independence.

Maclean's relations with the CLP were further embittered by his conflict with Gallacher's protege JR Campbell, who established an unemployed committee in rivalry with one Maclean had already set up. An attempt to overcome this division was made in October with a joint meeting on Glasgow Green addressed by Campbell and Sandy Ross of the Tramp Trust, which was attended by 1200 people. But it ended disastrously when Ross launched into a defence of Maclean's obsession with state agents and repeated the accusation that Theodore Rothstein was a spy, drawing the reply from Campbell that "he had Gallacher's word for the fact that Lenin placed absolute trust in Rothstein". After a subsequent clash at an unemployed meeting, Maclean became convinced that "Campbell and his abettors were working for the Government".

● Part 2 of this article, in the next issue of *Workers' Liberty*, deals with the last three years of Maclean's life, in which he joined and then left the "De Leonite" Socialist Labour Party, was jailed for a further period, and then set up his own tiny "Scottish Workers' Republican Party".