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# 13. From Votes for Women to world revolution: British and Irish suffragettes and international communism, 1919–39

*Maurice J. Casey*

## *Introduction*

In a diary entry for 18 August 1930, Charlotte Despard, the veteran suffrage campaigner and one of the founding members of the Women's Freedom League (WFL), recorded that she had met with 'Mrs. Bouvier', whom she described as 'an old friend of the suffrage time'.<sup>1</sup> In the years after the 1918 enactment of partial enfranchisement in Britain and Ireland, former stalwarts of the campaign for the vote regularly crossed paths amid their continued activism. What makes this 1930 reunion of Despard and Mrs Bouvier atypical, however, is where it took place: in Moscow, the crucible of the world revolution. The path that brought these two women together was not only a physical voyage across borders to Soviet Russia but also a shared political journey spanning across decades that began during the suffrage fight. Their involvement in communist networks was shaped by a re-engagement with their ancestral backgrounds, one Irish and the other Russian. In 1921, Eugenie Bouvier, formerly of the Lewisham branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and later the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS), returned to Russia to take part in the construction of socialism in her home country. Meanwhile, Despard, whose family ancestry could be traced to Ireland, moved to Dublin to continue an energetic involvement in Irish republican, feminist and communist circles.

This encounter points to the history which this chapter seeks to narrate: the alternative political pathways outside the Communist Party which shaped how veterans of the suffrage struggle in Britain and Ireland

<sup>1</sup> Diary of a Visit to the USSR, Charlotte Despard, 18 Aug. 1930, Women's Library (hereafter WL), Papers of Charlotte Despard (hereafter CDP), Box FL558.

'From Votes for Women to World Revolution', in *The politics of women's suffrage: local, national and international dimensions*, ed. A. Hughes-Johnson and L. Jenkins (London, 2021), pp. 331–352. License: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

engaged with international communism. Neither Bouvier nor Despard primarily channelled their activism through official Communist Parties.<sup>2</sup> Despard chiefly engaged with the networks of international communism through satellite organizations of Communist Parties that sought to rally sympathizers around causes such as prisoners' rights, famine relief, strike support, opposition to war and defence of the Soviet Union. Her arrival in Moscow was the result of her participation in the Irish section of one such group: the Friends of Soviet Russia. Bouvier's Moscow place of employment reflected her political commitment: the headquarters of the Communist International (Comintern), the organizing body of world Communist Parties. Engagement with Comintern auxiliary organizations and political emigration constituted two important means by which a number of suffrage veterans in Britain and Ireland engaged with international communism. This chapter explores this political activity through women involved in both the Irish and British movement. It examines both well-known figures, such as Despard and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, alongside more obscure activists, such as Eugenie Bouvier and May O'Callaghan, both of whom were immigrant women active in the British movement. This array of activists is chosen to echo and complement Senia Pašeta's call to acknowledge the deep connection between the Irish and British suffrage movements.<sup>3</sup> This chapter also considers why the Comintern lacked an active policy of engaging with British and Irish feminism.

<sup>2</sup> Bouvier was briefly a member of the Soviet Communist Party but was purged in the Autumn of 1921; see E. Bouvier, Biographical Statement, c. 1921, *Rossiiskii Gosudartsvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoj Istorii* (hereafter RGASPI) 405/65a/4042/1. Despard's biographer noted that she joined the CPGB after its foundation; see M. Mulvihill, *Charlotte Despard: A Biography* (London, 1989), p. 30. If this is the case, her membership may not have lasted long. Her obituary in the CPGB paper notes only that she was a 'good friend' of the Irish Party and makes no mention of her having been an official member of a Communist Party; see 'For two generations she was a rebel', *Daily Worker*, 11 Nov. 1939. Despard was present at the 1933 founding congress of the Communist Party of Ireland as an observer; see S. Byers, *Seán Murray: Marxist-Leninist and Irish Socialist Republican* (Sallins, 2015), p. 63. The text of the speech she delivered at the congress suggests she may have taken up membership at this point, but is not conclusive; see 'Pronounce to world we are communists', *Daily Worker*, 15 June 1933. One CPGB member recalling Despard in 1961 was doubtful that Despard had been a Party member; see Minnie Bowles to Teresa Billington-Greig, 3 Aug. 1961, WL, Teresa Billington Greig Papers, Box FL244, 7/TBG1/71. Finally, I found no file on Despard maintained among the Comintern cadre files held in RGASPI. One would expect to find such a file in the case of a prominent figure like Despard.

<sup>3</sup> S. Pašeta, 'Suffrage and citizenship in Ireland, 1912–18', paper presented at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, 15 Nov. 2018 <<https://humanities-digitallibrary.org/index.php/hdl/catalog/view/paseta/76/211-1>> [accessed 31 Oct. 2019], p. 2.

While a growing historiography charts British and Irish women's engagement with liberal internationalism in the interwar period – such as activism through groups including the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) – less has been said about women's involvement with radical, communist-inspired internationalism, particularly in the Irish case.<sup>4</sup> Women within the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) have been examined in studies by Sue Bruley, Karen Hunt and Matthew Worley.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Kiera Wilkins's recent MA thesis charted the long career of Scottish CPGB member Helen Crawford to make the case that historiographical anti-communism and the lack of a transnational framework have obscured Crawford's contributions to the movements she participated in.<sup>6</sup> There is no focused study of women within the Communist Party of Ireland during the same period. This is not surprising. A miniscule number of women joined the small Irish communist groups that arose during this period. Although some prominent suffrage campaigners and feminists took up Communist Party membership after the foundation of the CPGB in 1920, notably Crawford, Dora Montefiore and Sylvia Pankhurst, the existing literature demonstrates that the experience of Communist Party membership was generally unattractive to veteran feminists.<sup>7</sup> This

<sup>4</sup> For Irish examples, see R. Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland, 1870–1970* (Dublin, 2005), pp. 108–54; M. Ward, 'Nationalism, pacifism, internationalism: Louie Bennett, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, and the problems of "defining feminism"', in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, ed. A. Bradley and M. Gialanella Valiulis (Amherst, Mass., 1997), pp. 60–84. Elizabeth McKillen's research on the Irish left and the importance of 'Sinn Féinism' for American radicalism, particularly within the labour and women's movement, explores Irish-American internationalist ties; see E. McKillen, 'The Irish Sinn Féin movement and radical labor and feminist dissent in America, 1916–1921', *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, xvi (2019), 11–37. For a recent account of British women's liberal internationalism with discussion of Ireland, see S. Hellawell, *Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism: The Women's International League, 1915–1935* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Northumbria, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> S. Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1920–1939* (New York and London, 1986); K. Hunt and M. Worley, 'Rethinking British Communist Party women in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, xv (2004), 1–27. See also J. Hannam and K. Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London, 2002), esp. pp. 179–80, 194–5.

<sup>6</sup> K. Wilkins, *Daring and Defiant: Helen Crawford (1877–1954), Scottish Suffragette and International Communist* (unpublished MA thesis, Central European University, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Bruley noted that ten of the women delegates at the first Unity meeting of the CPGB were active in the pre-1918 women's movement; see Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism*, p. 64, fn 13. For Pankhurst, see, for example, K. Connelly, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Suffragette, Socialist and Scourge of Empire* (London, 2013) and B. Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London, 1996). Two recent biographical studies of Ellen Wilkinson have also explored her connections to the CPGB; see L. Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen*

scholarship also indicates that many women whose political apprenticeship came in the form of Communist Party membership rejected the idea of organizing women separately from men, believing it would divert attention from the class struggle and potentially undermine their sense of being, first and foremost, proletarians just like their male comrades. To only explore the experiences of women who maintained membership of Communist Parties precludes us from understanding how international communism shaped the careers of many other suffrage campaign veterans. Exploring how suffrage veterans navigated revolutionary political pathways beyond Communist Party membership offers further insights into how activist careers were transformed in the aftermath of the campaign for women's suffrage, particularly how existing activist skillsets from the old cause could be transferred into new campaigns.<sup>8</sup>

### *Engagement with Comintern front organizations*

British and Irish women played leading roles in a number of transnational initiatives established by the Comintern. Part bureaucratic apparatus and part revolutionary networking opportunity, the Comintern provided funding and theoretical guidance to the communist parties that emerged across the world. Yet it also played a role in establishing and directing transnational organizations that attracted non-party activists. Engagement with these auxiliary organizations of the Comintern proved a dynamic means for women with suffrage backgrounds to continue their activist careers. Importantly, the majority of British and Irish suffrage veterans who became involved in Comintern initiatives throughout the interwar period appear to have experienced early and ebullient enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution.<sup>9</sup> This enthusiasm was then channelled through the Comintern auxiliary organizations into forms of activism familiar to veterans of the

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*Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017) and M. Perry, *'Red Ellen' Wilkinson: Her Ideas, Movements and World* (Manchester, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of the aftermath of the campaign for women's suffrage, particularly how veterans of the campaign attempted to shape emerging historical narratives, see, for example, K. Cowman 'A footnote in history? Mary Gawthorpe, Sylvia Pankhurst, *the Suffragette Movement* and the writing of suffragette history', *Women's History Review*, xiv (2005), 447–66 and L. Jenkins, '“It wasn't like that at all”: memory, identity and legacy in Jessie Kenney's *The Flame and the Flood*', *Women's History Review*, xxix (2020), 1034–53.

<sup>9</sup> Of the former suffragettes surveyed in my research, I have found only one exception to this rule. The Anglo-Irish suffragette Katherine Gillett-Gatty (1870–1952), previously of the WSPU and WFL, developed her communist sympathies in the 1930s through antifascist activism and travel in the Soviet Union.

suffrage struggle, such as famine relief efforts, political tourism and anti-imperialist initiatives.

In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917, socialists across the world, including many with ties to their national suffrage campaigns, became fascinated by developments in Soviet Russia.<sup>10</sup> Despard acts as a useful guide to the world of British and Irish feminist enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution, given that she regularly crossed the Irish Sea during her activist career. She was a vocal supporter of the Russian Revolution with a longstanding interest in the fates and ideals of Russian revolutionaries. When Tsar Nicholas II visited Britain in 1909, Despard recited an account of 'cruel treatment' meted out to Russian comrades fighting Tsarist tyranny to a Finsbury Park crowd.<sup>11</sup> Once the regime was overthrown in 1917, she wrote an open letter addressed to Russian women supporting their liberation.<sup>12</sup> She was also present at the Leeds Conference in June of that year, when British and Irish socialists gathered to welcome the Russian Revolution. Despard was elected at the conference to the 'Council of Workers and Soldiers' Delegates'.<sup>13</sup> In 1921, Despard relocated to Ireland. She later recalled hearing a voice telling her to travel to Ireland during a mass held in Nine Elms that acted as the catalyst for her deeper involvement in Irish politics.<sup>14</sup> She was already enmeshed in these circles through friendships with Irish feminists and a developing attachment to an Irish identity that she fully embraced during the Irish Revolution.<sup>15</sup>

Like Despard, many Irish socialists welcomed the Russian Revolution with enthusiasm during the early years of Soviet power and beyond. The conception that the Irish and Russian Revolutions were part of two distinct but complementary challenges to the international status quo was common within certain Irish radical circles and Irish feminists played a role in promoting this early solidarity with the Soviet cause. An early manifestation of Irish solidarity with the Bolsheviks came in the form of the Dublin-based Russian Revolution and Republic Committee, which included

<sup>10</sup> For American feminist responses, see J. L. Mickenberg, 'Suffragettes and Soviets: American feminists and the spectre of revolutionary Russia', *Journal of American History*, c (2014), 1021–51.

<sup>11</sup> 'The czar's visit', *Justice*, 24 July 1909.

<sup>12</sup> 'To the liberty loving women of Russia', Charlotte Despard, c. 1917, British Library Manuscripts Collection (hereafter BLMC), Samuel Solomonovich Kotliansky Papers, Vol. IX General Correspondence, 57.

<sup>13</sup> Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates, *What Happened at Leeds* (London, 1917), p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> 'How I came to live in Ireland', *An Phoblacht*, 2 July 1932.

<sup>15</sup> Mulvihill, *Despard*, p. 132.

women involved with the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), such as Margaret Connery and Cissie Cahalan.<sup>16</sup> The *Irish Citizen*, the journal of the IWFL, published regular reports on Bolshevik-inspired insurrections across Europe in the years after 1917 and hosted lecturers on revolutionary themes given by figures such as Sylvia Pankhurst and the American suffragist Alice Riggs Hunt.<sup>17</sup> The revolutionary winds from Petrograd also reached Irish activists abroad. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, among the most prominent and resolute Irish feminists of the early twentieth century, was on a lecturing tour of the United States in 1917 and attended a meeting to welcome the Russian Revolution held in Madison Square Gardens.<sup>18</sup> In 1918, she informed an East Harlem audience that 'the Russians, the Jews and the Irish' were the 'three great revolutionary forces that would, in truth, make the world safe for democracy'.<sup>19</sup> Many of the Irish activists listed as supporters of early Irish-Soviet solidarity initiatives would later reappear on membership lists of Comintern auxiliary organizations.

March 1919 marked a watershed moment in the history of twentieth-century internationalism as revolutionaries gathered for the founding congress of the Comintern. From the early years of its existence, the Comintern directed an array of satellite groups, often referred to as 'front organizations' both by Cold War-era commentators and historians, that sought to rally sympathizers around causes including prisoners' rights, unemployment, hunger relief and anti-colonial campaigns.<sup>20</sup> The anti-communist aura of the term 'front' may suggest a misleading and even paranoid notion of these organizations as the terrifying tentacles of a Bolshevik octopus spreading outward from Moscow. Interrogating the

<sup>16</sup> 'Annual report', *Irish Citizen*, 5 Apr. 1919. Margaret Connery (1879–1956), born in Westport, Co. Mayo, and Cissie Cahalan (1876–1948), born in Cork city, were socialists, feminists and stalwart members of the IWFL.

<sup>17</sup> M. J. Casey, "'The future of feminism'? The Irish Women's Franchise League and the world revolution', *History Ireland: The Irish Revolution, 1919–21, A Global History* (Dublin, 2019), pp. 27–30.

<sup>18</sup> 'Emma Goldman obituary', *Distributive Worker*, Aug. 1940, reproduced in *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Féiner, Her Memoirs and Political Writings*, ed. M. Ward (Dublin, 2017), p. 375.

<sup>19</sup> 'Economic base of revolt in Ireland told', *The Call*, 19 Feb. 1918.

<sup>20</sup> K. Braskén, *The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp. 5–6. For a further discussion of this 'intermediate Empire of the Comintern', see B. H. Bayerlein, 'The "cultural international" as the Comintern's intermediate empire: international mass and sympathizing organisations beyond parties', in *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939*, ed. Holger Weiss (Leiden, 2017), pp. 28–81.



concept of the 'front', Kasper Braskén argues that there is an analytical difference between a group that lured people to communism and one which provided 'already sympathising people the opportunity to engage themselves for the cause in cultural events, celebrations and protest campaigns'.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the term retains its usefulness as a shorthand for non-party groups which acknowledges that their alignment with the Comintern shaped these organizations in important ways. While the Comintern was always connected to these groups through functions such as funding and political guidance, individuals within these organizations had scope for manoeuvre independent of Comintern dictates.<sup>22</sup>

The first such group to channel the energies of British and Irish suffrage veterans was the Workers' International Relief (WIR). Patrizia Dogliani noted that the WIR initially mobilized in a way that mirrored the League of Nations' early activities, continuing the wartime tradition of humanitarian aid.<sup>23</sup> Its earliest campaigns focused on organizing relief for the Russian famine of 1921–2 and alleviating hunger among German workers. The International Women's Secretariat (IWS), the organizing committee for women's propaganda in the Comintern's national sections, appears to have recognized the relevance of relief initiatives for mobilizing women comrades. Hertha Sturm, a German Comintern functionary, wrote to Dora Montefiore in 1922, advising her that a campaign for Russian famine relief was 'absolutely necessary' as a campaign which would 'be a practical way to get your female members together and make them active for a revolutionary task'.<sup>24</sup>

The secretary of the British section of the WIR was Helen Crawford, an early member of the CPGB who was appointed to the party's executive committee soon after joining and who had previously been active in the WSPU, the Women's Peace Crusade and the Independent Labour Party.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> K. Braskén, *International Workers' Relief*, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of scholarship on the front groups and the biographical and transnational turns in the historiography, see O. Drachewych, 'The communist transnational? Transnational studies and the history of the Comintern', *History Compass*, xvii (2019), 1–12. Valuable works that reflect this turn include L. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion* (Cambridge, 2015) and B. Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Basingstoke, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> P. Dogliani, 'The fate of socialist internationalism', in *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History*, ed. G. Sluga and P. Clavin (Cambridge, 2017), p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> H. Sturm to D. Montefiore, 8 Jan. 1922, RGASPI 507/3/12/16–17.

<sup>25</sup> H. Corr, 'Crawford [née Jack; other married name Anderson], Helen (1877–1954), suffragette and communist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/40301>> [accessed 10 July 2020].

Alongside Montefiore, she was one of the few suffrage veterans to enter into membership of the CPGB and attain a prominent position within the party in the 1920s. Crawfurd also played a role in assisting Despard, an old comrade from the suffrage struggle, in becoming more closely enmeshed in the networks of international communism. Other names that were listed on the British WIR's executive committee will be familiar to suffrage historians, including those of George Lansbury and Montefiore.<sup>26</sup> Rose Cohen, a young Communist from an East London Jewish background who had once been involved with Pankhurst's East London group, was also involved with the work of the WIR.<sup>27</sup>

The parallels between the WIR's activities and the operational mode of humanitarianism made it a fitting entry-point to the world of international communism for women with backgrounds in organizations such as the WILPF. The Irish section of the WIR, established in 1925, combined the organizational talents and activist histories of Despard and Crawfurd, both of whom were opponents of the war and early members of the WILPF. The Irish committee was tasked with raising funds for the relief of hungry peasants in deprived regions on Ireland's western coastline. Despard, alongside her long-time collaborators Maude Gonne, Sheehy Skeffington and Crawfurd, in addition to the temperamental Irish Labour figure Jim Larkin, helped the effort as prominent and recognizable organizers and supporters.<sup>28</sup> A WIR bulletin described the funds raised for the Irish initiative as poor, citing a 'lack of publicity' as the reason.<sup>29</sup> While the WIR in Ireland was not a resounding success on its own terms, it nonetheless set a precedent; front groups in Ireland with the keen involvement of Despard and her collaborators in Britain would succeed in bringing women activists into a Comintern-inspired initiative.

Both Crawfurd and Despard helped organize another initiative that brought former suffragettes towards open praise of Soviet-style socialism.

<sup>26</sup> The executive committee names are listed on the headed notepaper of the WIR; see, for example, WIR Circular Letter, 27 Feb. 1925, John Johnson Collection, Pollard Box 1, Bodleian Library.

<sup>27</sup> WIR Circular Letter, 27 Feb. 1925, John Johnson Collection, Pollard Box 1, Bodleian Library.

<sup>28</sup> *Workers International Pictorial*, Apr. 1925; 'Russia's gift to Ireland', *Sunday Worker*, 2 Aug. 1925. For further overviews of the WIR and its Irish committee's activities, see A. Grant, 'Workers to the rescue: workers' international relief in Ireland, 1925', *History Ireland*, xix (2011), 38–41 and Wilkins, *Daring and Defiant*, pp. 119–28.

<sup>29</sup> WIR National Conference Report, 19 Apr. 1925, Bodleian Libraries, John Johnson Collection, Pollard Box 4, CPGB Folder.

In 1930, the Irish section of the Friends of Soviet Russia was established, the national branch of an organization that already existed in Britain with Crawford as a member.<sup>30</sup> Despard was involved in directing the Irish section.<sup>31</sup> This section attracted a respectable number of prominent women from Irish feminist and republican circles, including Sheehy Skeffington, Gonne, Margaret Connery, Kathleen Lynn, Sidney Gifford and Rosamond Jacob. In a recent article on Harry Kernoff, a Jewish Dubliner and artist who was a member of the society, Elaine Sisson also situated the group within a lively Irish intelligentsia interested in cultural modernism and international artistic currents.<sup>32</sup> From the late 1920s through to the late 1930s, there was a broader publishing phenomenon of Soviet travelogues authored by well-known figures, including accounts by the American writer Theodore Dreiser, the Irish novelist Liam O'Flaherty and the suffragist and journalist Cicely Hamilton.<sup>33</sup> Membership of the 'Friendship' organizations provided an exciting opportunity to undertake the journey made popular in these accounts. Sheehy Skeffington informed her son ahead of her trip that she was 'up to my eyes in Russia, reading up stuff', citing 'women and children, prisons, art, literature, theatre and education' as aspects of Soviet civilization which interested her.<sup>34</sup>

In 1930 and 1931, two delegations departed from Ireland on their way to the Soviet Union. These delegations included veterans of the IWFL such as Connery, who travelled in 1931, and Sheehy Skeffington, who, along with Despard and her old comrade Crawford, travelled with the 1930 delegation. Angela Kershaw has noted that, for French feminists, travel to the USSR fulfilled a similar function as travel to international feminist congresses, providing opportunities to conduct feminist research into the condition of women in other countries and provide a means of making important

<sup>30</sup> M. David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy & Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford, 2012), p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Circular Letter to Friendship Society Members, Charlotte Despard, 4 Apr. 1931, National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI), Sheehy Skeffington Papers (hereafter SSP), MS 41,178/71.

<sup>32</sup> E. Sisson, 'Designing modernism: Harry Kernoff, Russia, and postindependence Ireland', *Éire-Ireland*, lii (2017), 31–56.

<sup>33</sup> T. Dreiser, *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (New York, 1928); L. O'Flaherty, *I Went to Russia* (London, 1931); C. Hamilton, *Modern Russia as Seen by an Englishwoman* (London, 1934). These are just a few examples of a much wider publishing phenomenon of interwar Soviet travelogues.

<sup>34</sup> Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington to Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, 24 July 1930, NLI, SSP, MS 40,484/5.

contacts.<sup>35</sup> Much the same can be said of the Irish feminist delegates. Despard, for example, spoke with many other foreign delegates during her journey and even addressed a meeting at which Nadezhda Krupskaya, a leading Bolshevik and the widow of Lenin, also spoke.<sup>36</sup> Sheehy Skeffington, meanwhile, conducted research that formed the basis of lectures upon her return.<sup>37</sup> Importantly for those seeking to refute hostile press reports of Bolshevik iniquity, journeys to the USSR converted experience into political propaganda, providing returned delegates with the capability to refute anti-communist reports with the supposedly superior evidence of lived experience.

In addition to political tourism and famine relief, the broad political banners of anti-imperialism and antifascism provided further impetus for the development of groups backed by the Comintern. The League Against Imperialism, a vibrant Comintern-backed organization that attracted a wide swath of progressives, intellectuals and anti-colonial activists, had sections in Britain and Ireland. The Irish section was supported by the likes of Despard and Sheehy Skeffington.<sup>38</sup> British and Irish feminist supporters also joined the Women's World Committee Against War and Fascism, which developed from an August 1934 anti-war conference in Paris. Despard was one of the organization's sponsors and Sylvia Pankhurst was treasurer of its British section.<sup>39</sup> Unable to attend the Paris conference, Despard attended a parallel Sheffield gathering organized by the CPGB, later reporting her experience to a meeting held in Dublin.<sup>40</sup>

Why did these Comintern-linked groups attract certain women activists, particularly women in Ireland? The answer can partly be found by looking to the political space open to them. In the aftermath of enfranchisement and the Irish revolution, the IWFL, which had provided many Irish

<sup>35</sup> A. Kershaw, 'The new Soviet woman and the French debate on gender in the 1920s', in *French Political Travel Writing in the Inter-war Years: Radical Departures*, ed. M. Cornick, M. Hurcombe and A. Kershaw (New York, 2017), p. 126.

<sup>36</sup> Diary of a Visit to the USSR, Charlotte Despard, 1 Sept. 1930, WL, CDP, Box FL558.

<sup>37</sup> For Sheehy Skeffington's lectures on Russia, see Lecture Notes by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington on her Visit to the Soviet Union, c. 1930, NLI, SSP, MS 24,163 (ii).

<sup>38</sup> K. O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919–1964* (Manchester, 2008), esp. pp. 32–41; M. Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: A Life* (Cork, 1997), p. 295.

<sup>39</sup> J. Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common: Feminism and Anti-militarism in Britain Since 1820* (New York, 1989), p. 157; Sylvia Pankhurst to the Chairman of the Women's Committee Against War & Fascism, 17 Dec. 1935, BLMC, Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst Papers, Add MS 88925/9/2.

<sup>40</sup> 'War against war and fascism', Report, 17 Sept. 1934, RGASPI 495/89/92/6.

feminists with not only a political cause that transcended national borders but also a social space that welcomed itinerant radicals, fell into abeyance. Groups such as the Irishwomen's International League, the Irish branch of the WILPF, provided some lines of continuity with this transnational mode of feminist activism, but for those like Despard who wanted to explicitly link national and feminist campaigns to an international socialist struggle the Comintern-backed groups often proved more ideologically suitable to their political ideals than organizations such as the WILPF. The Irish branch of the WILPF was continuously fraught by divisions, particularly surrounding the issue of the Irish national question, which republican members considered unresolved.<sup>41</sup> Membership of front groups also required less subordination to a political line than party membership, thus proving attractive to those of a more idiosyncratic radical outlook than orthodox Marxism-Leninism. 'Communist Party member' was an earned identity, one which consumed significant amounts of activist energies through its mandated commitment to study and political discipline. Open party membership could incite persecution, certainly in the Irish Free State, where a continuous red scare ebbed and flowed throughout much of the twentieth century. Sheehy Skeffington suggested in a letter to her son following her 1930 tour through the USSR that it could even be seen as the preserve of a younger activist generation: 'I am not a communist and not likely to be. If I were 21 I might!'<sup>42</sup>

### *Emigration to Soviet Russia and employment in Comintern institutions*

The women who sailed from the London docks towards Leningrad from the late 1920s and into the 1930s to see the great Soviet experiment for themselves were not the first veterans of the suffrage campaign to arrive in the country. Besides those like Montefiore, Crawford and Pankhurst who had travelled to Soviet Russia in the early years of the revolutionary state, there were a small number of women with a background in British and Irish suffrage campaigns who travelled to Moscow to work for Comintern institutions. This small wave of women emigrants to the Soviet Union were enticed by a mixture of idealism and employment opportunity. In the case of American women, Julia L. Mickenberg stated that what drew them to the Soviet Union was its embodied promise of 'the good life' and

<sup>41</sup> For an overview of the activities of the Irishwomen's International League, see R. Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland*, pp. 108–54.

<sup>42</sup> Hanna Sheehy Skeffington to Owen Sheehy Skeffington, 10 Sept. 1930, NLI, SSP, MS, 40,484/5.

its inclusion of women's emancipation in that promise.<sup>43</sup> There was also a chance to find meaningful employment in the workers' state. Kevin Morgan and Gidon Cohen have suggested that a number of talented, well-educated women from the male-dominated CPGB may have viewed the new institutions of international communism in Moscow as a less-restrictive world where they could carry out work for the cause.<sup>44</sup> After its foundation, the Comintern required linguistically talented and secretarially trained workers to staff its bureaucratic apparatus. Women activists whose cosmopolitan careers and educations had provided them with a wide roster of languages and whose skills had been applied to the administrative ends of their movement were particularly useful employees for a vast revolutionary organization. Employment as a technical worker in the Comintern thus provided an opportunity for exciting and politically committed work in the revolutionary atmosphere of an experimental society.

Almost all of the suffrage veterans in the Comintern's headquarters were employed in the same section, the Press Bureau, and passed through the same central Moscow office building. An important part of the Comintern apparatus, the Press Bureau was formed shortly after the founding congress of the Comintern in 1919 and tasked with organizing propaganda and publishing documents relating to the Comintern and the Soviet Communist Party in different languages.<sup>45</sup> Each of the suffrage veterans employed in this bureau shared another commonality; they were all past members of Sylvia Pankhurst's ELFS. The socialist and anti-imperialist outlook which characterized this organization doubtlessly shaped these women's ideological development, but it is perhaps just as illuminating to explore how the small number of women who passed from East London through to Moscow maintained similar organizational roles as they transitioned from the suffrage movement to the Comintern.

Among the early women workers employed by the Comintern was the aforementioned Eugenie Bouvier, otherwise known as 'Jeannie' and often referenced in the suffrage press as 'J. A. Bouvier'. Bouvier was born into a wealthy St Petersburg family in 1865 and in 1888 married Paul Emile Bouvier, an Italian-born language teacher, with whom she emigrated to

<sup>43</sup> J. L. Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (Chicago, Ill., 2017), p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> K. Morgan and G. Cohen, 'Rose Cohen', in *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. XI, ed. K. Gildard, D. Howell and N. Kirk (London, 2003), p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> G. M. Adibekov, E. N. Shkhnazarova and K. P. Shirinya, *Organizatsionnaia Struktura Komintern, 1919–1943* (Moscow, 1997), pp. 9–10.

England.<sup>46</sup> Remembered in Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement* as 'that brave, persistent Russian', Bouvier was among the first militants to take part in window-breaking at Westminster in 1909.<sup>47</sup> Bouvier was also involved with the Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement and was listed as its acting secretary in a 1913 issue of *The Suffragette*.<sup>48</sup> She joined Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation in the early years of its operation, following its split from the broader WSPU in 1913. By 1916, she was listed as a committee member of Pankhurst's group, then operating as the Workers' Suffrage Federation (WSF).<sup>49</sup>

As an anti-war socialist, Bouvier welcomed the Russian Revolution of 1917 and addressed public meetings on the Revolution under WSPU auspices.<sup>50</sup> Her support for the emancipatory promise of the Bolsheviks did not falter even when her own social class entered the Revolution's crosshairs. The Christian Socialist Conrad Noel recalled Bouvier stating that the Russian authorities ought to have taken away her family's wealth 'years ago, and from all of us who lived on the backs of the people'.<sup>51</sup> When Pankhurst established a pro-Soviet propaganda outfit, the People's Russian Information Bureau, Bouvier joined its team while also helping Bolshevik representatives in Britain with translation work.<sup>52</sup> In 1921, Bouvier travelled from London to continue work as a translator for the Comintern in Soviet Russia.<sup>53</sup> That Bouvier, widowed and approaching retirement age, would swap a comfortable life in Lewisham for impoverished post-Revolutionary Moscow, suggested the importance of political belief in encouraging her return to Russia.

Like many other arrivals at the Comintern, Bouvier was required to submit a biographical statement and questionnaire that charted her social and political background. Interestingly, of all the Comintern personnel files

<sup>46</sup> 'From Russia to Rushey Green and back – Eugenia Bouvier, a Lewisham suffragette', *Running Past* <<https://runners500.wordpress.com/2018/02/07/eugenia-bouvier-a-lewisham-suffragette/>> [accessed 6 Jan. 2020].

<sup>47</sup> E. S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (1931, rpt. London, 1977), p. 523; A. Rosen, *Rise Up Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903–1914* (1974, rpt. Abingdon, 2013), p. 120.

<sup>48</sup> 'Men's Political Union', *The Suffragette*, 23 May 1913.

<sup>49</sup> 'Join the Workers' Suffrage Federation!', *Woman's Dreadnought*, 18 Mar. 1916. The group became known as the Workers' Socialist Federation in 1917.

<sup>50</sup> 'What's on? W.S.F. fixtures outdoor', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 5 May 1917; 'Federation notes', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 28 July 1917.

<sup>51</sup> C. Noel, *Conrad Noel: An Autobiography* (London, 1945), p. 108.

<sup>52</sup> Evgeniia Bouvier, biographical statement, c. 1921, RGASPI 495/65a/4042/1.

<sup>53</sup> 'Moscow at last', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 25 June 1921.

of suffrage veterans examined for this study, Bouvier's provides the only statement that explicitly threads a feminist background through a personal history of socialist activism. Although she referred to herself as an active suffragist socialist in the statement, Bouvier clarified certain moments in her activist history, perhaps to underline her revolutionary credentials to her employer. For example, describing her arrests during the war years, she declared that she had demonstrated against the war 'not from a pacifist, but from a socialist point of view' (*'ne v pasifistskoi a s sotsialisticheskoi tochki zreniia'*).<sup>54</sup> An ideology committed to class war was not one which countenanced absolutist pacifism.

Another activist who followed a path from the ELFS suffrage campaign to employment in the Comintern was May O'Callaghan. Born to a middle-class Catholic family in the Irish coastal town of Wexford in 1881, O'Callaghan was the cultured, well-educated and linguistically talented sub-editor of Pankhurst's journal the *Woman's* (later *Workers' Dreadnought*) during the war.<sup>55</sup> O'Callaghan was hired by the Comintern in 1924 and employed in the Press Department, eventually becoming head of its English translation section.<sup>56</sup> In the memoir of Joseph Freeman, a leading figure of the interwar American literary left, O'Callaghan appears as 'O.B.', the author's boss in the Comintern who had 'spent a number of years in the suffrage fight under the Pankhursts' before taking up the important and skilled work of Comintern translation.<sup>57</sup> She remained resident in Moscow from 1924 until 1928, after which she returned to London to assist Nellie Cohen, a comrade who had served as Pankhurst's wartime secretary, with her pregnancy. O'Callaghan was never a card-carrying Communist Party member – a fact which allowed her to remain in Moscow for an extended period and immerse herself in emigrant communist life, rather than being recalled home to assist a national Communist Party.

Other women with ties to Pankhurst's ELFS also found employment in Moscow. Rose Cohen and Violet Lansbury, both of whom can be found featured in a photograph of a 1916 pageant organized by the ELFS, found secretarial-style work in Moscow during the 1920s.<sup>58</sup> Both Cohen and Lansbury remained in Soviet Russia for many years. Lansbury returned to

<sup>54</sup> Evgeniia Bouvier, biographical statement, c. 1921, RGASPI 495/65a/4042/1.

<sup>55</sup> Maurice J. Casey, 'O'Callaghan, May', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. J. McGuire and J. Quinn (Cambridge, 2019) <<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a10133>> [accessed 10 Jan. 2020].

<sup>56</sup> *Anketa*, May O'Callaghan, 9 July 1924, RGASPI 495/218/31/1.

<sup>57</sup> J. Freeman, *An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics* (London, 1938), p. 433.

<sup>58</sup> The photograph also features two other young East Londoners who would become CPGB members: Rose's sister Nellie and Joan Beauchamp; see R. Taylor, *In Letters of*



London in the late 1930s while in 1937 Cohen was among the many political emigrants in the USSR who lost their lives in the Stalinist Terror.

Ethel 'Molly' Murphy (*née* Morris), once an organizer for the Sheffield branch of the WSPU, provides another example of a suffrage veteran who emigrated to Moscow. However, Murphy's path is atypical in that the catalyst for her emigration was marital commitment rather than employment prospects. In 1920, Murphy was working as a nurse when she received a visit from J. T. Murphy, a past admirer who had once frequented the WSPU shop where she worked. He outlined the revolutionary activities he had undertaken since they last spoke, then asked her to marry him before he was due to return to Russia.<sup>59</sup> In a memoir first drafted in the early 1960s and published in 1998, Molly stated that she knew little about revolutionary socialism before her reunion with J. T., but believed that 'the same statesmen who had denounced us suffragettes before the war had turned on the Russian Revolution possibly as stupidly as they had turned on our movement and might be just as wrong about the Russian Revolution as they had been about me'.<sup>60</sup> Moved by the stories of famine in the newly established state, Molly agreed to J. T.'s proposal and joined the path towards political emigration through marriage rather than ancestral return or employment opportunity evident in the cases of Bouvier and O'Callaghan.<sup>61</sup> After several weeks on Soviet territory, Molly returned to Britain in 1921 to give birth to a son, Gordon. Molly, along with husband and child, returned to Moscow once more in 1926, remaining in Russia while J. T. worked as the CPGB representative on the Comintern executive.<sup>62</sup> Upon her return from Moscow in 1928, she became involved in CPGB activities in Hackney.<sup>63</sup>

The administrative and linguistic skills that made women such as O'Callaghan and Bouvier valuable to the suffrage movement were the same qualities that made them useful employees in the Comintern apparatus. June Hannam and Karen Hunt have noted that in the early days of British Communism women were likely to attend Comintern congresses as

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*Gold: The Story of Sylvia Pankhurst and the East London Federation of the Suffragettes in Bow* (London, 1993), p. 20.

<sup>59</sup> M. Murphy, *Suffragette and Socialist: An Autobiography* (Salford, 1998), pp. 64–7.

<sup>60</sup> Murphy, *Suffragette and Socialist*, p. 65. Darlington noted that this autobiography was ghost-written by J. T. Murphy; see R. Darlington, *The Political Trajectory of J. T. Murphy* (Liverpool, 1998), p. xxiii.

<sup>61</sup> Murphy, *Suffragette and Socialist*, p. 66.

<sup>62</sup> Darlington, *J. T. Murphy*, pp. 87–8, 142, 151–2.

<sup>63</sup> Hunt and Worley, 'Rethinking British Communist Party women', p. 7.

technical workers and translators, rather than as fully accredited delegates.<sup>64</sup> While it may have been more prestigious in contemporary terms to arrive as a delegate, technical workers and translators were enormously important for the everyday functioning of the Comintern. They were administrators tasked with the crucial work of guiding the bureaucratic management of worldwide social revolution. The suffrage movement, as Susan Pedersen recently noted, 'needed the fanatics, but it needed editors and accountants and printers and public speakers as well'.<sup>65</sup> This was similarly the case with the international communist movement – and, indeed, all large-scale projects for social transformation.

Tracing how those involved in the technical management of the suffrage struggle transferred their skillset to another movement is a further means by which we can understand post-enfranchisement activist trajectories. Yet, as Mickenberg's work on American women who travelled to Soviet Russia has suggested, a focused biographical case study of women who arrived in Soviet Russia as political emigrants often uncovers certain peculiarities and complexities of their experience.<sup>66</sup> While finding commonalities between women such as Bouvier, O'Callaghan, Cohen, Lansbury and Murphy is useful, it is perhaps just as valuable to consider them as discrete biographical case studies whose motivations for emigration and lives in the Soviet Union were determined by factors such as family attachments, degrees of ideological commitment and linguistic capabilities. In drawing out such specificities, we can write further histories of women's involvement in international communism beyond the relationship between Party women and the Party structure.

### *The view from the Comintern*

Retaining our vantage point from the Comintern headquarters in Moscow, we can ask: did the women's section of the Comintern, headed by Clara Zetkin and tasked with promoting agitation among women in national communist parties, actively engage with feminist movements in Britain and Ireland? The simple answer is no. This should not surprise us. Revolutionaries such as Alexandra Kollontai, often regarded as the leading Bolshevik theorist of women's liberation, consistently warned that a 'bourgeois feminist' programme would mislead the working class into believing that society was divided along lines of gender rather than class. Feminist conscripts into the world of communism were therefore judged

<sup>64</sup> Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist Women*, p. 179.

<sup>65</sup> S. Pedersen, 'A knife to the heart', *London Review of Books*, xl (2018), 10.

<sup>66</sup> Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia*.

more on the basis of what they had done for the workers rather than what they had achieved for women. Likewise, their activism was to proceed on the basis that women would be rallied around the concerns of their class, rather than the specific difficulties they encountered as women confronting a patriarchal society. Communist women's sections could even adopt an oppositional position towards the wider women's movement. A 1928 CPGB women's section report listed tasks such as 'fight against feminism' and 'fight against pacifism'.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, a 1930 meeting of the same section regarding articles for the party press included the suggestion of an article on the role of 'Women's Pacifist Organisation and the necessity for fighting same'.<sup>68</sup> There is little in these files to suggest a conscious campaign to recruit feminists or, indeed, coordinated efforts to make use of those that did come into its grasp.

Yet there was an attempt made by leading women within the international communist movement – such as Kollontai and Clara Zetkin – to establish methods and propaganda that could appeal specifically to women, an attempt which took the institutional form of the IWS. Founded in 1920 on the eve of the Third Comintern Congress, the IWS attempted to organize its work in its early years through a network of women 'correspondents' with two sections, one in Moscow and the other in Berlin.<sup>69</sup> The first woman delegated from Britain to attend an International Communist Women's Conference was Norah Smyth, a close ally of Sylvia Pankhurst and previously a member of the WSPU then later the ELFS, who travelled to Soviet Russia in 1921.<sup>70</sup> Following Pankhurst's expulsion from the CPGB, contact between Britain and the IWS was conducted largely through Montefiore and Crawford. From the early liaisons between the IWS and these two veteran feminist correspondents onwards, the tensions and ambiguities of a women's section operating within a movement that denied the relevance of separate women's concerns can be seen. In 1921, a German communist working for the IWS, likely Hertha Sturm, argued in response to Crawford and Montefiore's plans for women's circles within the CPGB that it 'contradicts our principles to organize women separately from men'.<sup>71</sup> How could the IWS, an adjunct

<sup>67</sup> 'Statement for Comrade Moirova, made by Phillis Neal', 30 Oct. 1928, RGASPI 507/3/18/204.

<sup>68</sup> 'Minutes of Women's Department Meeting', 20 May 1930, RGASPI 507/3/22/38.

<sup>69</sup> J. J. Marie, 'The women's section of the Comintern, from Lenin to Stalin', in *The Political and Historical Encyclopaedia of Women*, ed. C. Fauré (London, 2003), p. 432.

<sup>70</sup> Letter from 'TW', 31 June 1921, RGASPI 495/198/841/2.

<sup>71</sup> Unnamed German communist to Dora Montefiore and Helen Crawford, 8 Jan. 1922, RGASPI 507/3/12/14. Emphasis in original.

organization of the Comintern dedicated to work among women, justify its existence in a movement that refuted sex-based organizing in favour of class unity? This was a tension the IWS proved incapable of resolving. In 1926, the quasi-independent Secretariat was abolished and replaced with a Women's Department directly under the control of the Comintern Executive.

Despite early members of the CPGB recruited from the suffrage movement, particularly its militant strands and the revolutionary confines of East London, the Party largely failed to attract prominent feminist campaigners into its membership. Documents from the 1920s regularly feature Dora Montefiore and Helen Crawfurd, yet also evidence the tensions that impeded their work within the women's section of the CPGB. Montefiore divided working women in Britain into two tendencies, one being those 'who cannot be got at through a pamphlet' and the other being women who 'are quite advanced in their thinking because they have been for years organized inside the Labour Party, the Cooperative of the Railway Women's Guilds or in some of the old Suffrage societies'.<sup>72</sup> Continuing, Montefiore contrasted herself with Crawfurd. She noted that because she had spent more time on the Executive Committee of the CPGB than Crawfurd, she had realized that while most members found women useful at election time and took their subscriptions, 'when it is a question of giving them any control – that is another matter'.<sup>73</sup> Given that Montefiore reported such an atmosphere, it is unsurprising that the front groups could prove better capable of attracting veteran feminist members than the party itself.

Interestingly, the folders reveal that Crawfurd did attempt to create a link between Communist women and feminist activists. In December 1929, Crawfurd wrote a letter asking that her comrades help to fulfil a request made to her by the prominent Scottish feminist Chrystal Macmillan. A month earlier, Macmillan had written to Crawfurd requesting a Russian attendee for a League of Nations conference, noting that: 'You, I know, are in touch with the present regime, and a keen feminist, and one who understands the importance of working on non-party lines where women's questions are concerned.'<sup>74</sup> Forwarding this letter, Crawfurd wrote a request that she wished to be passed on to the Comintern: 'It may seem possibly to some of you a small matter and of little importance to associate with these middle-class women ... Personally I think it would be very valuable

<sup>72</sup> Dora Montefiore to IWS, 30 Apr. 1922, RGASPI 507/3/12/47.

<sup>73</sup> Dora Montefiore to IWS, 30 Apr. 1922, RGASPI 507/3/12/48.

<sup>74</sup> Chrystal Macmillan to Helen Crawfurd, 27 Nov. 1929, RGASPI 507/3/19/264.

and a means of getting information to them' denied by the ordinary press.<sup>75</sup> Crawford's suggestion was to arrange for Kollontai, by then a prominent member of the Soviet diplomatic corps, to attend the conference.<sup>76</sup> Suffrage veterans who took up Communist Party membership could retain their connections to the 'diversionary' feminism which they were encouraged to jettison. While Harry Pollitt, a leading figure in the CPGB, recognized Macmillan as a possible 'useful contact', Crawford's tone in sending the request – immediately doubtful that her comrades would see the value in the meeting – also reflected the wider failure of either the Comintern or the CPGB to fully exploit its veteran feminist campaigners through encouraging them to engage women beyond the revolutionary fold.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, Macmillan's decision to extend an invitation to Kollontai is itself suggestive, reflecting how a non-radical like Macmillan was nonetheless interested in the perspectives and participation of a revolutionary such as Kollontai.

The names associated with the pre-1918 British women's movements gradually disappear from the letters, branch reports and pamphlets held in the diminishing Comintern Women's Department folders on Britain from the early 1920s to 1939.<sup>78</sup> While this may in part be due to activist exhaustion, an unwillingness to commit to a new cause after decades of struggle or the simple factor of advanced age, there appears to have been a wider failure to attract into the party a younger generation of activists with backgrounds in feminist organizations. One interesting exception to this rule can be found in the Comintern personnel file of the Irish activist Claire Madden. She wrote a biographical statement in 1936 when she was a librarian at Marx House associated with the Holborn branch of the CPGB and the Women's World Committee Against War and Fascism. In the statement, Madden described rebelling against her Unionist father during her childhood and listed her education at Manchester University and associations with the Six Point Group and St Joan's Social and Political Alliances.<sup>79</sup> Her path towards radical politics developed from a determination to join 'some

<sup>75</sup> Helen Crawford, likely writing to CPGB Executive or Comintern Women's Department, 29 Dec. 1929, RGASPI 507/3/19/258.

<sup>76</sup> Helen Crawford, likely writing to CPGB Executive or Comintern Women's Department, 29 Dec. 1929, RGASPI 507/3/19/259.

<sup>77</sup> Harry Pollitt to Lily Webb, 1 Jan. 1929, RGASPI 507/3/19/266.

<sup>78</sup> The Comintern Women's Department maintained fifteen folders on Britain, ranging in size from roughly fifty pages to several hundred and covering a period from the foundation of the CPGB to the late 1930s; see RGASPI 507/3/11-26. There are two brief folders on Ireland held among the files of the same department; see RGASPI 507/3/83-84.

<sup>79</sup> Kathleen May Claire de la Cherois Madden, biographical statement, 11 July 1936, RGASPI 495/198/424/1-2.

anti-Fascist organisation' after reading about Nazi violence while on holiday in September 1933.<sup>80</sup> Madden noted that she 'thought of [the] Communist Party because [I] believed Mrs. Despard (for whom [I] had great admiration) to be communist'.<sup>81</sup> Madden retained ties to her background in feminist organizations, editing, for example, a 1946 pamphlet titled 'Dorothy Evans and the Six Point Group'.<sup>82</sup> Yet even this political biography of a post-1918 feminist and communist seemingly owed a debt of influence to Despard's own earlier defence of the communist cause.

The CPGB's limited success in drawing prominent women activists into the party such as Crawford and Montefiore can be traced to their pre-1918 ties to socialist movements, rather than the Comintern's commitment to developing propaganda aimed at women. This commitment was never viewed as a priority by the Comintern. Indeed, it was rapidly marginalized as a priority over the course of the 1920s and 1930s. As Geoff Eley noted, the CPGB let a valuable chance to build on this relationship between the prewar women's movement and its early membership pass, reflecting both 'the gender blindness of the socialist tradition and the limiting effects of the tightened discipline the Comintern was imposing on national Communisms'.<sup>83</sup> Comintern files hold few surprises for scholars of the British women's movement and its relation to socialism and communism, although they will contain documents of interest to those working on the careers of women such as Montefiore and Crawford and insights into the backgrounds of more obscure activists, such as Claire Madden. The files of the Comintern's women's section ultimately provide further evidence for the conclusion that the Communist Parties themselves largely proved a cold house for suffrage veterans.

### **Conclusion**

By the outbreak of the Second World War, international communism no longer channelled the energies of the veterans of the earlier struggle for women's suffrage in Britain and Ireland. This was partly due to the death of Despard at the age of ninety-five in November 1939. Despite her advanced

<sup>80</sup> Kathleen May Claire de la Cherois Madden, biographical statement, 11 July 1936, RGASPI 495/198/424/1-2.

<sup>81</sup> Kathleen May Claire de la Cherois Madden, biographical statement, 11 July 1936, RGASPI 495/198/424/1-2.

<sup>82</sup> *Dorothy Evans and the Six Point Group*, ed. Claire Madden (London, 1946).

<sup>83</sup> G. Eley, 'From welfare politics to welfare states: women and the socialist question', in *Women and Socialism, Socialism and Women: Europe Between the Two World Wars*, ed. H. Gruber and P. M. Graves (Oxford, 1998), p. 524.

age, she had remained an energetic promoter of a politics that crossed the Irish Sea and stood at the intersection of feminism, communism and Irish republicanism. Yet there was also the factor of the Soviet Union's damaged international reputation as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which fundamentally undermined the antifascist credentials that had strengthened and extended international communism's appeal during the 1930s. The show trials of leading Old Bolsheviks also constituted a macabre spectacle and a public component of the Stalinist terror that consumed hundreds of thousands of lives during the late 1930s, including the life of one ELFS veteran, Rose Cohen.<sup>84</sup> Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War and the collapse of the Spanish Republican government was also a demoralizing experience for the international left. The Comintern had surrendered much of its world revolutionary ambitions by this point while its Women's Department had ceased to operate in any meaningful sense years before. Those who transitioned from suffrage to enfranchisement lived to see one of their political ideals enacted: votes for women. But none would live to see the creation of a worldwide revolutionary socialist society.

Exploring how international communism influenced women who operated beyond the party fold can offer new perspectives on the post-suffrage careers of feminists. Applying this lens in other historiographical contexts may further enhance an argument made here: that front organizations could prove better capable of harnessing the skills and channelling the political principles of veteran feminists than the Communist Parties themselves. Similarly, the Comintern's employment needs could be ably met by women political emigrants with prior experience of a transnational cause that relied on the printed word to spread its message. Moreover, the growing literature on women's internationalism in Britain and Ireland is enriched by a consideration of communism's influence on women campaigners in the interwar period beyond those commonly associated with the political left. Even those activists who were avowedly committed to a non-revolutionary conceptualization of feminism and internationalism operated in a world wherein the Soviet state claimed to have enacted women's liberation and designed tours seeking to prove this assertion. Feminists could reject or accept this claim, but they nonetheless often had to evaluate their strategies in response to it.

Many of the women central to this chapter emerged from two specific militant suffrage organizations: the Dublin membership of the IWFL and Pankhurst's ELFS. This suggests the central importance of a common

<sup>84</sup> For more on Cohen and her fate during the Stalinist terror, see F. Beckett, *Stalin's British Victims* (London, 2004).

social-political world and a shared experience of early enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution in encouraging later engagement with the Soviet experiment, either through involvement with front groups or political emigration. The anti-colonial undercurrent common to the IWFL and the ELFS appears to have been an important shared force channelling women into involvement with the resolutely anti-imperialist Comintern. The women considered herein, whether British women, Irish women or migrant women, often shared a past, ideals and transnational comradeships. The transnational turn in the historiography of interwar radical internationalism has shown that placing activists within such neat categories as 'British' and 'Irish' historical contexts can occlude the ties between activists and the wider networks of radicalism surrounding them. Whether at a public meeting for Irish hunger relief, on a boat bound for Leningrad or sitting in a Moscow office, many of these women could look around and recognize their suffrage comrades alongside them, gathered beneath the broad banner of a new revolutionary cause. Ultimately, the history of feminism and international communism is not just a story of Communist women and Communist Parties. It is a history of two vast movements, the women's movement and the communist movement, and the complex ways in which these two movements influenced, combatted, rejected and accepted one another.