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Review by **Tom Brooking, University of Otago, New Zealand**

New Zealand is the most remote and last settled major landmass on earth, literally farther from anywhere than anywhere. It is, therefore, an ideal case study on the reach and control of the Comintern. Given the extreme distance it would seem likely that Moscow might have been less able to exercise control over the local Communist Party. By using sources at either end of the story, some of which have only recently become available, Alexander Trapeznik is able to show that distance did not lessen tight, Stalinist type control of New Zealand’s very small Communist Party—never having more than 2,000 members in the period under study, 1920-1945, even in 1945 when ‘Uncle’ Joe Stalin had some respectability in New Zealand and one could buy postcards extolling the virtues of the Soviet leader. This finding reinforces the ‘traditional’ and more recent ‘post-revisionist’ view that indigenous Communist parties “ultimately were useful tools of Soviet foreign policy and Stalinist ideology”. (125) The same pattern emerged in New Zealand, therefore, as Theodore Draper showed for the United States in his work published in the late 1950s, or as Henry Pelling revealed for Britain in his studies published at the same time. Some revisionists such as Maurice Issermann countered in the early 1980s that local Communist parties were ‘essentially autonomous’, but Trapeznik’s work, like that of other post-revisionist or ‘neo-orthodox’ scholars such as Harvey Klehr, exposes such a view as naïve and overtly optimistic. Remarkably, New Zealand Communist Party members periodically made the long and difficult journey to Moscow for training (paid for by the Comintern) just as Comintern agents made the journey to New Zealand to check out the work of the local party. New Zealand’s close affiliation with the British Empire meant that the London based British Communist Party and the Australian Communist parties also exercised some influence, but according to Trapeznik’s findings that influence paled besides the Comintern’s. Ultimate proof of that dominance was provided by the New Zealand Communists acceptance of Stalin’s very

awkward non-aggression pact with the Nazi Regime despite the enormous unpopularity of this apparent 'betrayal' with all sectors of the New Zealand political spectrum.

Trapeznik's finding runs counter to New Zealand historians' propensity to deliver a variant of American exceptionalism; far too often readers are fed lines about 'unique' aspects of New Zealand's development, or rash claims are made about innovations being 'first' in the world. In fact, what has unfolded in New Zealand's relatively short history (about 800 years for Maori and 200 for European-largely British- settlers) is a variation on the history of white settler societies everywhere. I certainly know this as an environmental historian where the very themes discussed by European and North American environmental historians have played out, if in rather accelerated form.¹ Part of the tendency towards exceptionalism in one of the world's oldest and smallest democracies relates to a desire for New Zealanders to differentiate themselves from Australians. Immediately this tendency suggests that Trapeznik could follow up by carrying out a similar study on the history of the Australian Communist Party before large numbers of southern European settlers arrived after the Second World War. Australia had a rather different labor history from New Zealand with a much larger and more militant labor movement, but one suspects that the Comintern exercised tight control over the island continent's communists just as they did for even more remote New Zealand.

The New Zealand Communist Party was not only peripheral to Moscow, but it also held a peripheral position within the New Zealand scene. Apart from brief moments such as the years immediately before the First World War when Anarcho-Syndiclaist doctrines attracted significant numbers of adherents, most extremist political ideologies have tended to wither and die.² Communism had its chance in the dark, grim days of 1932, when riots broke out in several cities against escalating unemployment, but the more moderate Labour Party (condemned as 'bourgeois' by the local Communists) soon weaned the unemployed off Marxism by offering the comforts of state welfarism.³ By the mid 1930s Trapeznik shows that the Communist Party of New Zealand was virtually penniless and only survived because of financial aid provided by the Comintern. Trapeznik's detailed evidence of Moscow's narrow vision helps to explain why that opportunity to expand its popularity was lost. His evidence also explains why intellectuals such as the short story writer Frank Sargeson soon gave up on the Communist Party. Sargeson's negative and rather nationalist response was typical of the great majority of intelligentsia and, as a result, New Zealand's literary flowering of the 1930s had a much less

¹ Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking (eds.), *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Erik Olssen, *The Red Feds: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908-1913*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1988.

³ Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash*, (Auckland: Auckland University Press/ Oxford University Press, 1977) and Michael Bassett and Michael King, *Tomorrow Comes the Song: A Life of Peter Fraser* (Auckland: Penguin, 2000).

of a Marxist flavor than its Australian equivalent.⁴ Trapeznik's research also reveals that concerns held by both Labor and more conservative governments in New Zealand involved more than paranoia. Both the Comintern and the Communist Party of New Zealand hoped to destabilize either right of center or left of center governments, even if tiny membership and lack of popularity meant they had little chance of achieving much beyond rather ineffectual attempts at 'spying'.

Trapeznik's transnational approach illustrates very well the reach of clandestine (or even more official) organizations, but he could not have employed such an illuminating methodology without access to archives at either end of the investigation. Nor could he have carried it out without being fluent in at least the two languages immediately involved. So Trapeznik must be congratulated for undertaking the long journey to Soviet archives and for reading records in the original. As a result both diplomatic and New Zealand history are enriched. His approach also shows how New Zealand case studies can be placed into broader, international conversations. Any scholar working on New Zealand topics usually has difficulty placing his or her findings in an international journal. Trapeznik has shown one way in which this difficulty might be addressed. Hopefully this perceptive article will, therefore, prove to be of considerable interest to both Cold War and New Zealand historians.

Tom Brooking is professor of history at the University of Otago. He is author of eight books and numerous chapters and articles on various aspects of New Zealand history including political biography (*And Captain of their Souls: an interpretative essay upon the life and times of William Cargill, 1784-1860* (Dunedin, NZ: Otago Heritage Books, 1984) and *Lands for the People? The Highland Clearances and the Colonisation of New Zealand. A Biography of John McKenzie* (Dunedin, NZ: University of Otago press, Dunedin, 1996) and environmental history. Currently he is completing a book with Eric Pawson, Professor of Geography at the University of Canterbury, and others, entitled *Seeds of Empire: The environmental transformation of New Zealand* for I.B.Tauris of London, due out in early 2010. He is also writing a biography of New Zealand's longest serving Prime Minister-Richard John Seddon, Premier from 1893-1906, which will be published by Penguin in late 2010.

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⁴ Stuart Murray, *Never a soul at home: New Zealand literary nationalism and the 1930's* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1998).