

Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933-1943. By Fridrikh I. Firsov, Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014. Pp. 320. \$40.00. ISBN: 9780300198225.

Fridrikh Firsov, Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes' new book, *Secret Cables of the Comintern*, is a shortened, English-language edition of a book originally published in Russian by Firsov, a former archivist at what was once the Soviet Communist Party's archive. It is now a state archive called The Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Contemporary History (RTsKhIDNI). As it did in Soviet times, this archive contains not only the records of the Soviet Communist Party but those of the Communist International (Comintern) as well.

The Comintern was the organization which directed the international Communist movement on behalf of the Soviet regime. It existed from 1919 to 1943, when it was abolished at Stalin's command. One of the most secret parts of its archive was the enciphered cable traffic between its governing body, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), and the Communist parties around the world. The book is based on one collection in the archive, Opis 184, which holds the enciphered cables transmitted between 1933 and 1943. Earlier cables, of which the authors believe there to be many, are not held in any particular collection and have not been used in writing the book. *Secret Cables of the Comintern* therefore analyses the significance of the ECCI's cable traffic for understanding key events in the years from 1933 to 1943, such as the Spanish Civil War, Stalin's Terror, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, and Poland under German occupation. Other researchers have already drawn on this traffic to some extent, but Firsov, Klehr and Haynes' new book, together with the Russian-language edition on which it is based, are the leading works on the subject. All three authors are outstanding authorities on the Comintern and its involvement with the Soviet Union's intelligence services and have already collaborated on another fine book, *The Secret World of American Communism*, published by Yale University Press in 1995.

Secret Cables of the Comintern does not examine the Comintern's cable traffic in this period comprehensively; it analyses only certain key parts of the ECCI's communications with the principal national Communist parties. It focuses on the ECCI's communications with Communist parties in Europe, because this was the region of the world of greatest strategic interest to the Soviet Union at the time, as well as where the main Communist parties were to be found. Some consideration is also given to relations with the Chinese Communist Party. The book does not radically change our understanding of the Comintern's activities or its role in Soviet policy, but it does add further important evidence to that already available (for example, on the channelling of Soviet funds to Communist parties, particularly in Europe, or on the fact that the Comintern worked hand in glove with the USSR's intelligence agencies).

The main point the book makes is that the Comintern followed every twist and turn in Stalin's increasingly confused and misjudged policy in the 1930s and that it acted as the key vehicle by which he directed the international Communist movement. It shows clearly that the ECCI's directives to Communist parties abroad were either approved by Stalin, at the request of the ECCI's general secretary, Georgi Dimitrov, or made by him. Thus Dimitrov was just as much a puppet of Stalin as were Molotov and Kaganovich. As a rule, the national Communist parties complied with their instructions from Moscow (with the French Communist Party being particularly obedient, as has already been well documented); only very occasionally was there resistance or disobedience.

The Comintern therefore acted as an important branch of the Soviet government, enabling it to intervene in events throughout Europe and the world. The Communist parties under its direction were heavily involved in efforts to recruit volunteers for the International Brigades which fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. The Comintern assisted Stalin's efforts, during the Great Terror, to murder Communists he mistrusted. It led the international Communist campaign in support of the Moscow show trials. It even instructed the leaders of the Polish Communist Party to come to Moscow, where they were arrested and killed. Among the most interesting cables in the collection are those between the ECCI and the German and Czechoslovakian Communist parties in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, in which the ECCI told the Germans and Czechoslovaks that the greatest enemy the Communist movement faced was not the Nazi regime (which had destroyed the German labour movement and enslaved Czechoslovakia) but the imperialist bloc of Britain and France. It also condemned the Communist Party of Great Britain for daring to support Britain's war with Hitler.

In places, the authors' research is rather thin; in particular, the book seems overly economical in setting the primary records analysed in their proper historical context. This affects both big points and small. On the smaller points, it is disappointing, for example, to find a reference to 'Artur Illner' when Illner was, in fact, a leading German Communist and clandestine Soviet operative who had by this time long since discarded his original name for the pseudonym by which he is better known: Richard Stahlmann. As for the bigger points, the key problem is that the authors do not always develop the arguments they start. They rightly argue that the communications that they analyse raise important issues in the history of the Stalin regime. However, they do not bring out the cables' full significance in the wider research context. For instance, they point out that Stalin dissolved the Comintern in great haste and that the reasons he gave its leaders – men who had loyally implemented his murderous and disastrous decisions – for this were lies. But they do not examine whether the ECCI's members believed these lies; nor do they show how typical Stalin's conduct was of the utter lack of respect he demonstrated for all who served him.

One of their most stimulating arguments in the book is that the Comintern cables indicate that Stalin did not regard the Nazi-Soviet Pact as merely a tactic to gain time while the Soviet Union prepared for war; in the words of the authors, this was part of his 'strategic vision' of long-term cooperation with Nazi Germany. However, they do not examine how this evidence affects the large academic literature on Stalin's foreign policy in the late 1930s. Another important claim made in the book is that reports on Polish attitudes towards the USSR during the German wartime occupation, prepared and sent to the ECCI by Polish Communists, influenced Soviet policy on Polish politics and Poland's government in exile. However, the authors do not show how exactly they did so. Ultimately, the book underlines that it was one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century that a political movement as aggressive as the Communist one fell into the grip of a man as deluded and disturbed as Stalin.