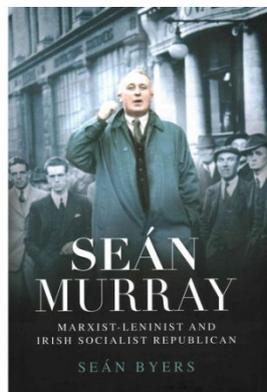


# Review: Sean Byers, *Sean Murray: Marxist-Leninist and Irish Socialist Republican*

Paul O'Brien



Sean Byers, *Sean Murray: Marxist-Leninist and Irish Socialist Republican*, Irish Academic Press 2015 €24.99

After years of neglect, a number of full-length biographies of important figures from the Irish socialist and revolutionary tradition have been published. This extensive biography documents the career of Sean Murray (1898-1961), a northern Catholic who fought in the War of Independence, and with the anti-treaty side in the Civil War. Murray joined the Communist Party and spent a year at the International Lenin School in Moscow, in 1927, along with Jim Larkin junior. Murray was active in the labour movement, the outdoor relief strike in Belfast in 1932, the Republican Congress initiative in 1934, and played a crucial role in organising the Irish contingent who fought against the Fascists in the Spanish Civil war in 1936. He went on to become the general secretary of the Communist Party of Ireland from 1933 to 1941.

This is a welcome biography of a man who dedicated his life to the fight against British imperialism in Ireland and for a socialist republic. Murray's dedication shines through and highlights the personal sacrifices he made to sustain the

Communist Party during the most difficult times for the left in Ireland. Sean Byers also reveals Murray's and the Communist Party's relationship with all the significant figures on the Irish left: Peadar O'Donnell, Frank Ryan, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Betty Sinclair, Jim Larkin junior, etc. He also examines the difficult relationship between the Irish Socialist and left republican movements from the post-Civil War period to the early 1960s. The other area that is relevant to readers of this journal is the CPI's relationship and subservience to the old Soviet Union and the extent that this relationship damaged both their own prospects for building a revolutionary party and their own positions and strategies which could be relevant to the specific conditions in Ireland during those difficult years.

## Stalinism and the CPI

Despite the fact that it was published in 1984 before the Soviet Union archives became available to researchers (which Byers had access to), Mike Milotte's *Communism in Modern Ireland: The Pursuit of the Workers' Republic since 1916* remains the standard by which any book on the CPI must be judged. Milotte, who wrote in the tradition of this journal, examined in detail the way the politics of the CPI were shaped by its loyalty to the Soviet Union, especially in the period dominated by the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin. In the late 1920s, as Stalin consolidated his hold over the Soviet Union the policy of international working-class revolution was discarded. Foreign policy was utilised as a tool for the defence of the

Soviet state and its apparatus and functionaries.

The twists and turns of Soviet policy were disastrous for the international working-class movement. The ultra-left policy of labelling social democratic parties as social fascists isolated them from the mass of workers and helped Hitler to power. The threat from Germany in the mid-1930s led Stalin to abandon this ultra-left policy in favour of popular front movements in an attempt to gain support from the French and British Governments for a pact of mutual defence. As a consequence, the USSR used its influence to limit the Spanish Revolution to a fight for bourgeois democracy, rather than for a socialist state, even if this meant murdering hundreds of Spanish socialists and anarchists who opposed this position.

The Show trials in the late 1930s liquidated the entire surviving leadership from 1917 and left Stalin in control; millions disappeared in the labour camps as any vestige of opposition was rooted out and destroyed.

This is the problem with Byers biography of Murray. How to explain the slavish devotion shown by Murray and the CPI to every policy twist and turn, which undermined the ability of the international working-class movement to defeat Fascism or to overthrow capitalism, and hampered the development of the Communist Party in Ireland? Byers' solution is to understate the CPI's support for Stalin's policies. He suggests that Murray, on a number of occasions, questioned or deviated from directives by the Comintern. This was true of every Communist Party that was affiliated to the Comintern. Moscow was tolerant of debate over the implementation of the directives, but any party that proposed alternative policies felt the full weight of the Moscow

apparatus. Any person or group that did so was expelled, or at worst executed, if they were within the grasp of the NKVD - as happened to three Irish comrades during those dreadful years.

Byers quotes Duncan Hallas who said that 'it was one thing to go to school under the Russians but quite another to come to rely on the teachers to resolve the complex problems facing the German, Polish, British United States or whatever parties'. The failure of the Comintern to spread the revolution westwards, according to Hallas, lay in the pupils' 'excessive dependence on the teacher'. Hallas could have been writing about the Irish situation as well. This is not in any way to underestimate the difficult conditions faced by the comrades in Ireland. Byers spells out the problems they faced, and Murray's brave attempt to stand up to the Church, the red scare, the Blueshirts, and the terrible sectarian divisions in the North of Ireland.

Murray played an honourable part in the movement in Belfast in 1932 against the Outdoor Relief Scheme, when a small group of working class communists led a movement of tens of thousands of Catholic and Protestant unemployed workers, which shook the foundation of the sectarian state to its foundations. Murray also was central to the recruitment and organisation of the Irish section of the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. All of this is to Murray's credit. But we must also confront the mistakes of the past; not to denigrate those who went before us, but to learn from the past in order to change the future. Socialism means the oppressed and the exploited liberating themselves; that's why Stalin's legacy has to be confronted.