

The British Writers' Engagement with Politics in the 1930s: The Popular Front and *Left Review*

Maki Masuda

1. Introduction

The topic dealt with in this paper is the involvement of British writers in the Popular Front politics in the 1930s, focusing the literary monthly *Left Review* (*LR*). At that time there was a certain leftward movement in the English literary world. To give examples, writers such as Cecil Day Lewis, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and George Orwell, and younger poets like John Cornford and Julian Bell, took a great interest in left-wing politics. Although they varied in their attitude towards politics—the way they participated in it, the degree and the period of their commitment to it, and the ideal they wished to realise in it—all of them took part in some kind of political activity, specifically in a left-wing mass movement, which, for some, was associated with the formation of the Popular Front (or the People's Front if we precisely translate it into English) in Britain. The impact of the Popular Front on British politics was far less pronounced than it was in France, where there was a Popular Front government in 1936; there was nothing equivalent to this in Britain. Even so, the Popular Front movement existed in the form of periodicals such as *Left Review*, which was first published in October 1934.

The Popular Front and *Left Review* offers an important aspect for the 1930s, even though the former never became powerful, and even as a 'movement,' it was not particularly noticeable in the English literary world in the 1930s, while the latter, of which the period of publication was only three years and eight months, did not greatly influence English literature of the period. Nevertheless, the topic still leaves much room for further discussion. On the one

hand, the Popular Front was argued about and supported by writers at the height of left-wing movement in the 1930s; on the other hand, *Left Review* functioned as one of its organs and covered the most politically active period among left-wing writers. To take up specifically the Popular Front among the writers' political activities indicates another aspect of the leftward syndrome in the 1930s illustrated by the political radicalisation represented by poets such as Auden and Spender, and has a crucial meaning in terms of what writers who gathered around *Left Review* ultimately aimed at. They wished to form a Popular Front in Britain, but at the same time they recognised that it was difficult or impossible to achieve it in the manner of the *Front Populaire* in France, without an alliance of left-wing political parties, represented by the Labour Party, and the co-operation of the trade unions. Their objective for the Popular Front was not to bring about a tangible change in real day-to-day politics such as the establishment of a Popular Front government but to challenge established literary/political concepts and to create a new literary-cum-political movement, which would contribute to their art as well as to promote closer relationship between intellectuals and masses. This objective also implied not only the nature of the British Popular Front but also the identity of the British writers of the 1930s.

2. The Writers' Engagement with the Popular Front

In order to specify the *raison d'être* and importance of *Left Review* as a critical indicator of the times, it will be necessary to clarify how and in what circumstances *Left Review* was founded; who ran it; what their relation to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was; how they conceived *Left Review's* relation to the CPGB. *Left Review* was founded as an organ of the Writers' International (British Section), which was established independently by members of the CPGB. The first issue of *Left Review* carries the statement of Writers International, over which there was a great deal of controversy among its contributors in later issues. In order to understand how the founders of *Left Review* apprehended the situation and

what they wished to achieve through the magazine, at least at the beginning, this statement of Writers' International in the first number is worth consideration.

There is a crisis of ideas in the capitalist world to-day not less considerable than the crisis of economics. . . . Journalism, literature, the theatre, are developing in technique while narrowing in content; they cannot escape their present triviality until they deal with the events and issues that matter; the death of an old world and the birth of a new. The decadence of the past twenty years of English literature and the theatre cannot be understood apart from all that separates 1913 and 1934. It is the collapse of a culture, accompanying the collapse of an economic system. There are already a number of writers who realize this: they desire and are working for the ending of the capitalist order of society. They aim at a new order based not on property and profit, but on co-operative effort. They realize that the working class will be the builders of this new order, and see that the change must be revolutionary in effect. Even those to whom politics are secondary desire to ally themselves more closely with the class that will build socialism. (*LR*, 1, 1: 38)

In contrast to subsequent calls for the defence of culture against Fascism, what is most striking about this statement is that it is keenly aware that with the collapse of an economic system, here, capitalism, a culture including English literature is also in collapse, and expresses a firm resolution to achieve a socialist society led by the working class. It also begins by suggesting that literature becomes enfeebled when separated from the vital political issues of the day. This is, by implication, a formula for producing better writing. Its international perspective, too, deserves our attention. It also maintains, taking examples of the John Reed Club in the United States and the Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires (AEAR) in France, that it is time that writers, together with working-class journalists and writers, should "organize an association of revolutionary writers" and "apply for an affiliation to the International of Revolutionary Writers" (*LR*, 1, 1:38). This implies the political standpoint of

the association which the Writers' International wished to establish. First, considered in relation to the International of Revolutionary Writers, officially known as the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, the association intended to join the world-wide literary organisation under the patronage of the Soviet Union. That is, it sought to have close ties with the Soviet Union. Second, its recognition of the John Reed Club and the AEAR as its models suggests that it was well aware of the literary left in the United States and France and, more significantly, that it did not aim to be an organisation directly controlled by the CPGB. The John Reed Club was inaugurated first in New York soon after the Great Depression in 1929 as a part of the programme of *The New Masses*, a weekly magazine founded in 1926, to encourage proletarian artists (Aaron 213). While it affiliated with the International Union of Revolutionary Writers at the Kharkov Conference in 1930 and came to be more influenced by the Soviet Union (221-22), it was "sometimes stubbornly independent" and difficult for the Communist Party to deal with (229). As to the AEAR, it was set up in 1932 for the purpose of bringing together all anti-Fascist intellectuals. Therefore, its members included non-Communists. Taking the cases of these two associations into consideration, it seems that the Writers' International planned to form a revolutionary organisation, Communist in essence, but with an independent standing and with non-Communist support. It was this readiness to associate literature with politics, to work for the realisation of socialism and to establish an independent organisation of revolutionary writers that *Left Review* had as the underlying motives of its publication.

Although some of the founders of the Writers' International became the editors of *Left Review*, it is important to differentiate the British Section of the Writers' International and the editorial board of *Left Review*, not only because it was the editors who ran the magazine but also because the editors of *Left Review*, at least in the early stage of its publication, would seek to make the magazine responsive to the opinions of its contributors who were not always Communists, for instance, by holding a conference of its contributors in April 1935. Despite overlapping personnel between the two, it is evident that the Writers' International and the

editorial board of *Left Review* had differences of opinion. Montagu Slater, for example, one of the editors of the magazine, criticises the understanding of the history of English literature expressed in the statement of the Writers' International. As to its reference to "[t]he decadence of the past twenty years of English literature and the theatre," Slater points out: "Your period of twenty years narrows the questions. The truth is that capitalism never found literature a comfortable ally A sense of crisis and decadence has been reflected in literature as a permanent symptom of capitalism, for 150 years" (*LR*, 1. 4: 125). T. H. Wintringham and Amabel Williams-Ellis took part in the joint editorship with Slater in October 1934. This editorial board was soon strengthened by Alick West in June 1935 and continued unchanged until December 1935. This period covers almost a year of the publication of *Left Review*, and could be regarded as its first stage, when it struggled to find a direction, partly due to joint editorship, which depends upon the exchange of the editors' opinion rather than upon the consensus of their opinion. What is more, they are willing to exchange opinions with its contributors, too. This might have delayed or prevented the magazine from finding a specific direction at least at the early stage, but at the same time it provided an opportunity to widen its scope. And it was this scope that allowed the diversity of opinions and variety of works of art published in *Left Review*. In January 1936, Edgell Rickword became the editor of *Left Review*. By this time the base of the magazine had been established. Rickword, like the previous editors, belonged to the Communist Party. As well as Randall Swingler, his successor, he contributed to the magazine from its beginning. Although *Left Review* already began to mention the Popular Front before he became editor, it was during his eighteen months' editorship that the British Popular Front was most successful and *Left Review* functioned as an instrument of the movement. Swingler was the last editor of *Left Review*. During his editorship between July 1937 and May 1938, the magazine virtually withdrew from the Popular Front movement while its leaning towards Communism grew stronger. Reviewing Spender's *Forward from Liberalism*, not only Swingler judges Spender to be "not progressed far from Liberal solipsism," but also he displays his strenuous rigidly dogmatic view on the

question of freedom, against what he calls “static” in Spender’s sense of freedom.

Freedom as a static idea is meaningless. Freedom is liberation, and liberation is a transitive word. Freedom of the individual does not mean placing him in an imaginary inane, free from all barriers, and, in fact, ultimately from all material circumstances which gave him shape and reality; it means, in fact, the liberation of energy in him. And energy can only be liberated by becoming organised.

Liberty means organisation. (*LR*, 3, 2: 111)

He also mentions: “There can be no such thing as individual freedom without social freedom. Freedom is unification” (112). Swingler’s ideological treatment of the question of freedom rejects the individual freedom inherent in bourgeois liberalism and demands that the writer live strictly according to a specific political ideology, namely Communism. We may see that his political rigidity made it difficult for *Left Review* to make a further development of the Popular Front in its pages.

As mentioned above, the successive editors of *Left Review* were Communists. They showed devotion to the Soviet Union, attempted to make literature a weapon for social struggle and wished it to become effective propaganda for the CPGB. However, they did not seem to be controlled by the Party even if they were loyal to it. They did not want to publish articles solely for the purpose of Party propaganda, nor did they expect the magazine’s contributors to write publicity articles without any literary merit. It is noteworthy in terms of the editors’ relation to the CPGB that it published an article written by Harry Pollitt, secretary and leader of the CPGB in December 1936. Pollitt’s article was not to appeal directly to the reader to support the Party but basically to call for united action and to encourage people to join Labour organisations in order to establish a Popular Front in Britain, because “in Britain a popular Government means a Labour Government” and so Britain had to develop its own People’s Front, not the same ones as in France and Spain (*LR*, 2, 15: 797-803). However, it is important because it shows *Left Review* giving the Party’s official endorsement of its own line supporting the Popular Front. The current of *Left Review* reflected the policies of the

Communist Party by making clear its commitment, first to the United Front, then to the Popular Front as an 'extension' of the United Front idea, and by publishing the speech of Georgi Dimitrov, central figure in the promotion of the Popular Front line in the Communist International (Comintern). With reference to the history of the tactical development of the Comintern, it gradually abandoned the 1928 policy of 'Class against Class' and began to change over to the United Front line in 1933 after Hitler came to power. The adoption of the Popular Front strategy by the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in Moscow, July/August 1935, which greatly influenced the editors of *Left Review*, made a huge impact upon international politics. In terms of international politics, it was a Communist tactical development that the Soviet Union would conciliate the Western countries and isolate Nazi Germany; in terms of national politics, it meant that the Communists should seek not only a United Front with other socialist and working-class organisations but also coordination with anti-Fascists including Liberals, pacifists, and the middle strata of society.

David Blaazer points out that the United Front and Popular Front contradicted each other in their theoretical assumptions. On the one hand, the United Front aimed at socialism as the only solution to Fascism, which "inevitably" began to form when modern capitalism was on the verge of a crisis, when those who supported capitalism, such as Liberals and Conservatives, would "inevitably" resort to Fascist means to preserve capitalism and therefore never be friends with socialists. On the other hand, in the Popular Front tactics, Fascism, represented by Germany, was considered to be not a system which had "inevitably" emerged from decaying capitalism but an option made by a certain faction of capitalists with reactionary ideas. That is, capitalists did not invariably support Fascism when capitalism came to a crisis. The transition from United Front to Popular Front was "a fundamental change in strategy and a correspondingly fundamental change in the left's understanding of the nature of the evil they faced" (9). Nevertheless, in practice, not only *Left Review* but also some left-wing organisations did not make a clear distinction between the United Front and the Popular Front; we find such an expression as "a United People's Front" used in a letter from

Arthur L. Horner, president of the South Wales Miners' Federation to *Left Review* (LR, 2, 13: 670). In a phrase quoted later, Margot Heinemann, too, refers to "the united people's front". Rather, *Left Review* understood both within the same framework whereby it recognised both capitalism at home and Fascism abroad as evils to be removed. This interpretation of the United and Popular Fronts was in accord with the guideline proposed by Dimitrov, who also mentioned "the united People's Front" (210-14), by which he might indicate that the proletarian united front and the anti-Fascist People's Front were "interwoven" with each other (101).

Communists of the 1930s, although some of them might have found it difficult to adjust themselves to new strategies, first, United Front, and then, Popular Front, did not seem to think that these two lines were contradictory. As to *Left Review*, its editors, in particular, were ready enough to accept the tactical shift of the CPGB via the Comintern. The magazine already displayed tendencies leading to the formation of the Popular Front from the beginning, although it was not until September 1935 that it made clear its commitment to the Popular Front. This is evident in the issue of November 1934, which published an appeal for the support of the "Erich Mühsam Fund," which was set up to rescue anti-Fascist writers and intellectuals from jail and concentration camp in Germany. Mühsam was a German poet who had been imprisoned and murdered. He opposed Communism but had faith in the masses. This appeal was made by the British Section of the Writers' International, but it shows *Left Review's* willingness to take part in anti-Fascist action which was not exclusively Communist, as well as its sense of mission to mobilise anti-Fascists against Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, *Left Review* was not the only group that was approaching the Popular Front line. E. H. Carr indicates that the left was already making progress in the direction of common action for peace and against Nazism before the Seventh Congress of Comintern in 1935. It held a peace congress and a mass meeting in London in June 1935,¹ attracting left-wing intellectuals, and such demonstrations were to serve to provide the basis of the Popular Front campaign in the future (237-38). According to Heinemann, many intellectuals, artists and professionals had

already shown their readiness to be involved in anti-Fascist and anti-war action long before the Seventh Congress, under the initiative of Communists, and with “the change in Communist attitudes which was signalled, though not begun, by the Seventh Congress and the strategy of the united people’s front” (157). Taking these facts into consideration, *Left Review* had almost everything in place for its commitment to the tactics of the Popular Front, apart from a final decision made by the CPGB. The fact that it was not until the Comintern officially adopted the Popular Front strategy that *Left Review* made known their support for it signifies that the magazine was faithful to the party line, although the question as to whether the party line influenced the course of *Left Review* has been the issue of argument in the existing studies of the magazine. On the one hand, there are some who have a negative view of *Left Review* that: the magazine could not produce good writing because of “its conscious party line” (Symons 74); that the magazine agreed with “the ideological censorship” imposed upon writers of the Soviet Union (Hynes 164); that it represented “a simplistic, sentimental Russophilia” in Britain at that time (Bergonzi 135); that its Communist editors did not play a part in 1930s literature commensurable with that of “the Auden Generation” (Cunningham 17). On the other hand, there are others who consider that the party line was not adhered to in the magazine and that it could bring about a diversity of writing. David Margolies maintains that there was no line in *Left Review* both in his essay “*Left Review* and Left Literary Theory” (68) and in the Introduction to *Writing the Revolution* (7-8), because its political aim to stop Fascism was so comprehensive in itself that it could not be fixed in the form of line (8), although he admits that “[t]he problem of political line” emerged as late as March 1937 (15). Adrian Caesar endorses Margolies’ view but recognises that the magazine was increasingly controlled by the CPGB and its line when Swingler was in the editorship (209). It would be misleading to judge *Left Review* only by the appearance of the party line in it and to consider that it could not achieve anything substantial in terms of literature. It is also inaccurate to deem that the magazine did not reflect the party line at all. The manner in which *Left Review* addressed the United and Popular Fronts and developed their ideas was not decided by the

party line, but in the process in which *Left Review* manifested its identification first with the United Front and then with the Popular Front, the party line was certainly reflected. However, it is significant to bear in mind that what they expected from the Popular Front was by no means Communists' seizure of power. It could be inferred that the editors were neither ignoring the official Party line nor that they were bound by it. Then how did they conceive of *Left Review's* relation to the CPGB? Certainly they did not want *Left Review* to work as the Party publicity machine. It is important to note that they could identify the advancement of their literature with that of Communism. What they aimed to generate through *Left Review* was the creation of a new culture which was based on the close correlation between literature and politics, beyond the political framework of the CPGB. Therefore, when *Left Review* declared its support for a Popular Front in Britain, it was not simply because the CPGB adopted the Popular Front line against Fascism responding to the Comintern's strategic change, but also because they believed that the Popular Front would offer a perspective for the future cultural development.

It was as early as March 1935 that *Left Review* began to urge the necessity of a United Front with "those who are not revolutionaries," which was to refer to what was emerged as the Popular Front with the inclusion of non-revolutionaries, by extending the meaning of the existing term "United Front" which was concerned mainly with the revolutionary working-class. In an article concerning the continuing controversy over the statement of aim of the Writers' International, Wintringham puts an end to the controversy and states:

[O]ur main work, as revolutionaries, is to get a "united front" for common action among all those who are not revolutionaries, but feel the need to defend culture and literature against the effects of modern capitalism, against Fascism, war from the air, the throttling of free discussion. Here is the key to our future work. (*LR*, 1, 6: 225)

Since March 1933 when the CPGB was instructed by the Comintern to form a United Front in Britain, the party had been searching for efficacious United Front action. It held its thirteenth

Congress in February 1935 and Pollitt recognised the setting up of the United Front as the chief assignment of the congress (Carr 234-35). Thus, Wintringham's appeal for a United Front quoted above can be interpreted in the context of Pollitt's endorsement of it, and reflected the eagerness for the United Front which occupied the CPGB at that time and, at the same time, indicated the party's future course to broaden the range of groups with which it might make common cause.

Wintringham's call for the formation of the United Front with non-revolutionaries soon got the support of West. In his criticism of Dimitri Mirsky's *The Intelligentsia in Great Britain*, West maintains that "in the intellectuals the two sets of forces are operative at the same time, though their relative strength varies enormously." One is the forces which reflect the Communist influence upon them in their relation to society in "revolutionary crisis," and these are interpreted as proletarian forces. The other is the forces which show the ingrained bourgeois influence upon them, hence the capitalist forces (*LR*, 1, 8: 325-26). West recognises it as important to lead intellectuals in the direction that enables them to fortify the proletarian forces against the capitalist forces working in themselves.

However necessary the emphasis on Fascism in ideology, it is doubtful whether Mirsky's book is the right one to help us to build the United Front against Fascism. . . . Mirsky misleads us by representing the intellectuals as only Fascist, and by concealing our great possibility, which lies in the fact that in ever growing numbers of people proletarian forces are fighting against the capitalist. . . . Further, if we want a United Front with the intellectuals in it, we must have an intellectual activity. . . . [W]e have to show the past in the richest light, for we need the past to fight the present and the past. If we follow that line, we have an intellectual life to offer, the realization of which will mean an immediate strengthening of the proletarian forces fighting in every intellectual to-day. To intensify to the fullest extent the sense of value of the past, but to use it to overcome the past—that is a life we can ask people to live. (*LR*, 1, 8: 327)

West indicates the importance of bringing the intellectuals to the United Front. This reveals that *Left Review*, on the one hand, tried to create working-class literature and accelerate the working-class movement; on the other hand, it recognised the significance of the role played by the intellectuals in the movement and sought for their support, which, West claims, was to be obtained by utilising the past. As Wintringham suggests, the United Front to be formed in *Left Review* was concerned not merely with politics but with the defence of culture and literature, which was closely connected with the intellectuals whether they were “revolutionaries” or not. It is significant to note that Wintringham mentions “the need to defend culture and literature” while West insists upon the importance of studies of the past, because both views are given on the premise that historical cannon of literature in the existing capitalist society is not necessarily unacceptable; rather, it is to be defended because it can be of great use. It is useful because understanding the value and thought of capitalist society depicted in bourgeois literature of the past enables the intellectuals to realise more keenly that their bourgeois values and thought are no longer able to cope with the present crisis and that a new sense of values is needed, that is of the growing proletariat. This attitude towards the literature of the past shows that *Left Review* did not persist only in creating “revolutionary” literature, because it understood that bourgeois literature of the past could also bring about “revolutionary” changes in the minds of intellectuals, which eventually could result in a “revolutionary” effect on the present-day literature. Therefore, even when the magazine defended the culture and literature of the past, it was still fighting for the revolutionary cause. *Left Review*’s flexible understanding of them reflected its already apparent inclination to the Popular Front; and yet at the same time it facilitated its adoption of the Popular Front which would admit even those who formed a part of the capitalist structure to join its camp.

In June 1935 the term “the People’s Front” appeared in *Left Review* for the first time. It was on the occasion that it published Dimitrov’s speech at the Soviet Writers’ Association. It is evident that the magazine had paid attention to Dimitrov, because it had already carried Slater’s article on his trial in Leipzig in September 1933, in the March 1935 issue. In his

speech Dimitrov takes the example of his trial and indicates that its victory was due to “a united front agreement which, although unofficial and unwritten, lined up the Communist, Social Democrat and other parties of the working-class, against German Fascism” and that there was “a number of facts showing the development of the popular front against Fascism in Germany.” The implication of this event to which Dimitrov refers is that practice, especially if it is successful practice, directs theory. What is equally important in his speech is that he recognises the role of literature in the service of politics:

Literature plays an enormous rôle in the education of the revolutionary generation. Help us, help the Party of the working class, help the Communist International, give us verse, novels, stories, as sharp weapons in the fight; help us by your literary production, to mould the young revolutionary leaders. . . . To be a revolutionary writer it is essential to contribute to the radicalization of the working class, to mobilize them against the enemy We must place literature more resolutely at the service of the proletarian revolution, in the struggle of Fascism, against capitalism, for the mobilization and education of the masses.
(*LR*, 1, 9: 344)

The literature which Dimitrov demands here is a political literature to serve the radicalisation of the proletariat, but as he also states that even “a little Cervantes” can contribute to the class struggle, he does not necessarily call only for direct, political writing. Nevertheless, there is still a difference between Dimitrov’s interpretation of revolutionary literature and that of Wintringham and West in terms of how such literature is to be produced. Whereas Dimitrov directly connects the role of a revolutionary writer with the proletarian revolution, Wintringham and West, taking the fact into consideration that most of British writers belong to the middle class and still possess bourgeois values, understand that British writers can bring revolutionary literature into being when they overcome the values and thought of bourgeois society by examining the literature of the past. In reference to *Left Review*’s plan to increase its editorial context from abroad, such as Dimitrov’s speech, Slater mentions: “The result

should be—*will* be, if the Dimitrov speech printed in this issue is an index—that the standard of the REVIEW goes up, goes up, I hope, with a jerk” (360).

According to Margolies, *Left Review* did not take Dimitrov’s approach to literature so seriously, judging from the fact that his biography, *Dimitrov* by Stella D. Blagoyeva, was hardly mentioned when Wintringham reviewed it together with various other four books.² He points out that if the magazine shared Dimitrov’s view on literature, his biography would have been given more space (*Writing Revolution* 8). However, if *Left Review* had an objection to Dimitrov’s call to subordinate literature to politics, and would not accept it, there should have been an article to criticise it, even though he was leader of the Comintern. And if the magazine esteemed him less highly as literary leader than as political one, it is still more likely that it would complain of his understanding of literature. It was not unusual for *Left Review* to print an attack on an article which it had previously printed; indeed, it carried articles to oppose each other in the same issue. Apart from the question whether *Left Review* placed literature at the service of politics in practice, if it did not publish any objection to Dimitrov’s speech which referred to such a vital matter as the relationship between literature and politics or if it gave the speech tacit consent, it could be deduced that he was so important that it was not permissible to criticise him; otherwise it agreed more or less with Dimitrov. In either case, it implied that the party line in *Left Review* prevailed, although the magazine might judge that it was not the right time to oppose Dimitrov because it was moving towards the Popular Front when it published this speech and Dimitrov was one of its leading promoters. Moreover, that *Left Review* published Dimitrov’s *The People’s Front against Fascism and War* as a pamphlet in March 1937 would be another piece of evidence to demonstrate his influence on *Left Review*.

In the same month that *Left Review* published Dimitrov’s speech, an event which was to have a crucial importance to the evolution of the British Popular Front took place in Paris. In June 1935 when the *Front Populaire* was reaching its culmination, the First International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture met. It had been called by French writers such

as André Gide, Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland and André Malraux who belonged to the AEAR. While many unaligned English writers, including Auden, Ralph Bates, James Hanley, Storm Jameson, Herbert Read, Siegfried Sassoon, Spender, Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf, supported its statement of principles, the English delegation to the Congress consisted of E. M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, John Strachey, Williams-Ellis and Ralph Fox: the line-up included Liberals and pacifists but was principally made up of Communists and indicative of the course of the proceedings of the Congress. Three of the delegates, Strachey, Fox and Williams-Ellis, were contributors to *Left Review*, and one was also an editor, so the magazine was deeply involved in this congress. The August 1935 issue of *Left Review* featured a report on it. Since the chief objective of the Congress was to show international solidarity among writers who shared the same view against Fascism but varied in their attitude towards politics from Communism to Liberalism to pacifism, reflecting the trend of the *Front Populaire*, even if some recognised the advancement of revolutionary literature to be the basis of their fight against Fascism, the issues of writers being revolutionary or not did not become a dominant feature of the Congress.

The Congress had a crucial meaning in terms of the development of the *Front Populaire*, for it set up the International Association of Writers for the Defence of Culture, which virtually replaced the International Union of Revolutionary Writers. The implication of the change from the “revolutionary” to “the defence of culture” was that writers’ interest in international politics extended from the Soviet Union to Germany and that although the Soviet Union still attracted the attention of many writers, now the menace of Fascism in Germany became their primary concern (Yamaguchi 92). And this change seemed to be accepted by the Soviet Union because most Russian delegates to the Congress were members of *International Literature*, an organ of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (86) and also because a central committee of a permanent International Bureau of the Association included Maxim Gorki as well as Gide, Barbusse, Rolland, Heinrich Mann, Forster and Huxley. The declaration of this new Association does not refer to any “revolutionary” kind of commitment

such as “class struggle” and “proletarian literature” but to international solidarity among writers through the encouragement of translations between countries and of the publication of works of quality. In terms of the *Front Populaire*, one of the most important articles of the declaration is this:

This bureau, made up of writers of diverse philosophic, literary, and political tendencies, will ready to fight on its own ground, which is culture, against war, fascism, and generally speaking, against everything that menaces civilization. (*LR*, 1, 11: 463)

This International Association, the nature of which clearly reflected the *Front Populaire*, became an organisation with which *Left Review* identified itself, which meant that the Writers’ International’s original plan to affiliate itself with the International Union of Revolutionary Writers was now abandoned and *Left Review*’s ties with the Popular Front grew stronger. Accordingly, *Left Review*’s aims altered, if they did not completely change, and the name of the Writers’ International disappeared from its cover after *Left Review* manifested its commitment to the Popular Front in September 1935.

3. The Development of the Popular Front Idea

As such writers as Slater, West and Douglas Garman insisted in *Left Review*, it was necessary for their objective to break the mould of English literature that they utilise the literature of the past, whether it was bourgeois or revolutionary, and put a new interpretation on it from the view of Marxism. By doing so, new aspects of the literature would be revealed while the scope of their understanding of English literature would be extended; Marxism would be more widely recognised by intellectuals as valuable thought that could explore different approaches not only to politics but also to literature. The idea of the Popular Front facilitated and accelerated such activity, because it represented all those who opposed Fascism, from Communists to Liberals and to pacifists, beyond the framework of socialism, and

stimulated the interrelationship of different views on culture as well as on politics. The promotion of working-class literature was still of primary importance to the editors of *Left Review*, Williams-Ellis and Rickword in particular, but it was still in embryo at least in Britain. Even if they considered that those who would shoulder the future of society were the working class, they could not but attach importance to the role played by middle-class bourgeois writers, in view of the composition of the existing literary world, in order to break down the status quo. The Popular Front, which would mobilise every support against Fascism, was understood by *Left Review* to broaden the field of intellectual activity both of the writer and of the reader and also to provide Marxists with more opportunities of demonstrating the validity of their approach to literature and non-Marxists with the means of appreciating it. As long as Marxist writers discussed their literary experiment only in their own circle, it was difficult to consolidate its social and cultural position; otherwise they would fall into self-complacency. *Left Review* encouraged them to place their position in the forefront of discussion. Although Marxism began to attract more attention in Britain in the 1930s, it was yet to establish itself as a philosophy and hence an almost unexplored field. Marxists needed to labour to demonstrate their own approach to literature, history, philosophy and science on their own (Klugmann 34).³ Moreover, there was a possibility that those who had been hostile to each other, for example, Communists, Labour and Liberals, could join hands, if not reach mutual understanding, in the Popular Front, working together for a common purpose to fight against Fascism. That is, the Popular Front seemed to have the potential for developing into a mass movement, which could comprehend the broad range of cultural activities, not limited to the sphere of literature; and on this ground *Left Review* advocated the Popular Front. Editorial of the November 1936 issue indicates the need to look at the Popular Front from a variety of angles:

For the People's Front is to be regarded not simply as a project for political alliance, but as a social movement with wide implications. . . . If it is developed with a nation-wide enthusiasm, it will affect not merely governmental policy but

our whole culture—just as a hundred years ago the continuous struggle to achieve democratic rights was reflected and encouraged by vigorous movements in religion, literature, and science. (*LR*, 2, 14: 729-30)

Wintringham as well as Fox had been members of the Communist Party since the 1920s, so we may presume that they witnessed the changes of policy of the Comintern, which were reflected by those of the CPGB. Realpolitik may have demanded them to be 'flexible' as long as they identified themselves with the Communist Party, but for them, Marxism, which was in the root of their political conviction, itself was 'flexible.' After Wintringham made clear *Left Review's* support for the formation of the United Front in March 1935, while emphasising the importance not to neglect bourgeois literature, he claimed the flexibility of Marxism in its next issue:

Marxism . . . stands out as embodying the whole human knowledge and science as its material and employing on this material not fixed formulae and theories but flexible methods of thought—flexible, yet not in the least vague. And the vision which these methods of thought generate is so powerful that the earth seems to hang under it "as to an eagle's eye." (*LR*, 1, 7: 279)

The fact that Wintringham and Fox took a flexible attitude towards cultural politics does not necessarily mean "the intellectual retreat from their earlier position," as John Coombes points out by taking up the example of Fox's "cultural transition," which he sees of as "a manifestation of middle-class cultural exclusivism" supplanting his "proletarian exclusiveness of 1932" (75). Coombes makes most perceptive comment on what he calls "British Popular Frontism" and indicates intellectual contradictions inherent in its ideology:

As far as cultural politics in general, and the relationship of art to social practice, of writers and intellectuals to the political movement, and to political commitment in particular, are concerned, however, a comparison of Communist texts from the 'Third Period' and the Popular Front era reveals that the abandonment of sectarianism (certainly a political gain) was accompanied by a

loss of intellectual direction and cohesion which amounted in many instances to full-scale capitulation to the values and norms of bourgeois liberalism. . . . (74)

He is quite right in saying that the tactical change of the Comintern greatly influenced the British writers and intellectuals of the 1930s in their process of assimilating the Popular Front idea and that British left-wing intellectuals, specifically members of the Communist Party, were 'flexible' in terms of their cultural politics, but it is not the case that they succumbed to the bourgeois cultural standard, so far as *Left Review* is concerned. The magazine found its direction, hitherto lacking, in the Popular Front. Even when the magazine rallied supporters for the Popular Front, it consistently opposed and criticised bourgeois liberalism, although this attitude would repel those who had enjoyed it and regarded it as an essential part of their life and made it more and more difficult for the magazine to attain its goal of Popular Front inclusiveness.

As mentioned above, just after the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International adopted the Popular Front line in July/August 1935, it was in September 1935 that *Left Review* first got involved in the Popular Front saying: "We have gathered many of the writers who will help in the special way that writers can, to make the People's Front in Britain, against Fascism and war" (*LR*, 1, 12: 481). However, from the time *Left Review* made clear its commitment to the Popular Front it took a year for the magazine to reaffirm it. This fact suggests that *Left Review* seemed to be still searching for how to implement and develop the Popular Front idea. The magazine's Popular Front idea began to take shape and be pushed forward having been inspired by major events in international politics, namely the formation of the Popular Front government in France in June and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936. While the French Popular Front government would inspire the magazine to promote the Popular Front in Britain, the Spanish Popular Front Government's fight against Fascism reinforced this tendency. Although the victory of the *Frente Popular* in the general election in Spain in February 1936 was hardly mentioned in the magazine, probably because Communists did not play such an important part in it as they did in the *Front Populaire* in

France, now the question whether the Spanish Republican government could survive the Civil War presented a major issue and provided the magazine with a concrete vision of how it should face a political reality. The editorial of the issue of August 1936 emphasises the importance of associating itself with political issues even as a literary magazine and reads:

We urge our readers to popularise the building of a People's Front in this country, based on the alliance of all those political groups and individuals who support a programme of immediate reforms—for improved conditions for workers of every sort; for the maintenance of peace through collective security; for the extension of civil liberties at home and the granting of equal rights to the colonial peoples. Of the first importance in the realisation of this step forward is the unification of the working class movement. (*LR*, 2, 11: 537-38)

It also warned that such “emotional advocacy of communism” as to exclude all those other than Communists would make it difficult to gain more public support for the Popular Front, losing the opportunity to make the middle class understand the fact that “it is only through the organisational unity of the working-class, the Labour Party, the Trade Unions, the Co-operatives and the Communist Party, that we can make our way forward out of the present material and cultural depression” (538).⁴ Under the editorship of Rickword, the recognition that “LEFT REVIEW . . . stands for the widest unity of democratic forces” was clearly shown with specific proposals and direction.

In the October 1936 issue, *Left Review* had a special feature on the Popular Front. In the editorial, the magazine emphatically identified “the movement with which LEFT REVIEW is identified—A People's Front in Britain” (*LR*, 2, 13: 665-67). Moreover, it announced that Day Lewis and Spender would become regular contributors to the magazine. Their contribution was to be made on specific themes: a *Topic of the Month* for Day Lewis, *Poetry and Literary Criticism* for Spender. Both Day Lewis and Spender had written articles for *Left Review* since the early days of its publication and their articles as well as their works of art usually met severe criticism from its other contributors. That the magazine did not completely agree with

these two writers in their politics as well as in their literature, in their understanding of the relationship between politics and literature, but made them regular contributors exemplifies another aspect of its further commitment to the Popular Front. In order to represent a variety of support for the Popular Front in Britain, this issue of *Left Review* carried articles by Lieut.-Col. J. V. Delahaye, secretary to People's Front Propaganda Committee and also to the Labour Party Parliamentary Committee for the Defence Services; Hamilton Fyfe, ex-editor of the *Daily Herald*; Day Lewis; the Alpha Group; F. Le Gros Clark; and a message from Arthur L. Horner. For *Left Review*, to publish various articles on the Popular Front written by a politician, a journalist, a writer, artists, and a scientist, was to embody its Popular Front idea in action. While Delahaye claims that it is "imperative" that the Labour Party, with the massive support of the working class, should take the lead in the People's Front even from the perspective of mobilising support outside the socialist camp, Fyfe denounces the Labour Party and understands a People's Front as "the only hope of escape from Capitalist dictatorship" and as an alternative to overthrow the National government from the viewpoint of a Socialist (669). Both the Alpha Group and Le Gros Clark express their optimistic views on the progress being made towards the Popular Front at the moment: the former, in reference to the recent organisational activities of artists, mentions that "the advantages of co-operation and united action among artists have become apparent, and the old fear that organisation is the death of the individual ability is disappearing" (676) while the latter, from the standpoint of a scientist interprets political development and states: "Fortunately we have at this moment a moving spirit of rationalism that is trying to incarnate itself in a 'Popular Front'" (679). In contrast to these views, Day Lewis is more cautious. His contribution, entitled "English Writer & a People's Front," is also the longest, and is chiefly concerned with the question of how to draw indifferent or neutral English writers into a People's Front, by showing respect for their values. He starts his discussion referring to "the tradition of individualism and political indifference which the English writer inherits," which makes it difficult for him to engage with organisational activities. According to Day Lewis, "the English writer is bound by a strong

belief in 'artistic detachment' and personal liberty," and this belief is reinforced by regarding himself "as a sort of inspired amateur," who opposes the idea of writers being organised professionally. Therefore, it is hardly possible that such a writer who is reluctant to involve himself even in literary organisation should willingly take part in organised political activities, including taking action in support of the Popular Front. Day Lewis recognises that the People's Front and the writer are mutually beneficial. Nonetheless, even though he tries to persuade "indifferent" writers to join a People's Front, stressing the social function of art, he does not seem to be fully confident of his opinion; he seems to be in a dilemma. He pays too much respect to those "indifferent" writers and cannot take a firm attitude towards them, probably because he shares their view to some degree that the freedom of writing threatens to be affected by politics (671-74). This article of Day Lewis seems to reveal a conflict between being Communist and yet still being bourgeois.

In the editorial of the issue of November 1936, *Left Review* suggested that the advance of a People's Front was urgent for "the overthrow of the National Government and its pro-Fascist foreign policy," but what is important here in terms of *Left Review's* commitment to the Popular Front is that it states:

It is not the business of this Review to analyse the technical problems which surround the question of a political alliance between, Liberal, Labour and Communist forces. . . . No one denies that when a political coalition has been achieved, a differentiation of interests and of perspectives within the coalition remains—but the existence of a coalition nevertheless gives a tremendous power to draw to the full the emotions and enthusiasm of the people. We know too well the effectiveness of a coalition for War. It is our business to make a coalition for Peace, in which not the disunity of democratic forces but their unity is emphasised. (*LR*, 2, 14: 730)

This makes clear where the magazine stood on the Popular Front. Although *Left Review* was deeply concerned with the political issues of the day, from which literature could not be

separated if it would sustain and increase its vitality, the magazine understood that there was a crucial role for it to play as a literary magazine in the Popular Front. It was to motivate the reader and inspire him with enthusiasm through writing. *Left Review* espoused the Popular Front not merely because the Communist Party adopted it as a new tactic but, more importantly, because it reflected a variety of cultural as well as political aspects and offered wide range of possibilities for improving the magazine's literary productions. As to the intricacies of the Popular Front in real politics, *Left Review* must have been aware of them, but it limited itself to touching upon them in its editorial pages; otherwise it left the matter to writers' discretion while allowing them a certain latitude in handling it. In doing so the various political stances of writers were revealed, which itself was to substantiate the Popular Front idea assimilated by *Left Review*.

It was the April 1937 number that *Left Review* made clear, in the form of an open letter, its commitment to the Popular Front for the last time. The fact that this was also the last issue under Rickword's editorship may have suggested the magazine's future course. The letter reads as follows:

'Left Review' stands for the People's Front of all those on the side of social progress: a People's Front firmly based on the resources of the united working-class, for the defence of democracy and culture against war and Fascism. It stands not only for the defence of all that is alive in the culture of the past, but for the creation of the new culture that will grow from the building of a free co-operative society. (*LR*, 3, 5: i)

Although Swingler's name was included among those who represented the Editorial Board in this letter, *Left Review*'s hitherto growing involvement in the Popular Front seemed to lose momentum when he became editor. During his eleven-month editorship, *Left Review* published only a few articles that referred to the British Popular Front, and even these did not maintain the previous level of enthusiasm and support. By April 1938, the international political climate had worsened. The Popular Front Governments in both Spain and France

were in difficulties. In Spain, Franco formed his first government on 30 January 1938, although it was not until March 1939 that the Republican Government finally collapsed (Payne 180). In France the Third Popular Front Government resigned, and was replaced in April 1938 by one led by Edouard Daladier, leader of the Parti radical-socialiste. These events, specifically the retreat of the Republicans in Spain, seem to have affected *Left Review's* advocacy of the Popular Front, because the magazine's already increased interest in international affairs became more intensified when the Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936 and its support for the Spanish Republicans gave more substance to its Popular Front idea, making it more cosmopolitan outlook. *Left Review* reacted to the war promptly and published the pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War*, which showed the majority of British writers were for the Spanish Republican Government. *Left Review's* founders such as Wintringham and Fox went to Spain to serve the International Brigade, while the magazine published a wide range of articles, poems and stories related to the war. It was as early as September 1936 that *Left Review* was ready to publish first-hand information about events in Spain from Ralph Bates. In the editorial of the September 1936 number, the magazine maintained:

[I]f this example [of those who are fighting against Fascists in Spain] is to mean all it should to us who are 'behind the lines,' it must be to refresh our sense of the tasks and power of art and literature in the present struggle. It means that we must summon up all the 'means at our disposal' for stirring the energies of men upon the side of liberty. Whatever the outcome of the tragedy, it has served to bring many 'intellectuals' a closer sense of their duties as social beings. (*LR*, 2, 16: 857)

The campaign for the British Popular Front flourished under the banner of Spanish democracy, arousing public attention and uniting many intellectuals and the masses in respect of the support of the Spanish Republican Government. However, when the Spanish Republican Government collapsed, the Spanish aid movement lost its momentum and not a few supporters of the Republicans felt the helplessness of their political activities. The decline of

the Popular Front during the last phase of *Left Review* could be found partly in its treatment of the fact that the French Popular Front Government collapsed while the Spanish one was confronted with a damaging split in the Republican camp and was struggling to sustain its political validity in the Civil War. The magazine referred to the resignation of the French Popular Front government only a few times, and mentioned “the victorious advance of the democratic forces in Spain” even when the Republicans were retreating, although this remark was made to explain what Pollitt and Strachey had said at the Left Book rally (*LR*, 3, 13: 766). Even taking a possibility that this was a misunderstanding into consideration, its negative attitude not to face difficulties inherent in the Popular Front was to imply the magazine’s withdrawal from its original plan to establish the British Popular Front. During the Spanish Civil War, *Left Review*’s attachment to the Soviet Union became stronger, maybe because the Soviet Union, which appeared to be the only country in Europe that materially supported the Spanish Republican Government, was recognised more strongly than ever as the only country in which the magazine could have confidence. Its cosmopolitan outlook remained and *Left Review* enlarged the field of international writings specifically from those countries under political oppression, such as Germany, Austria, Italy, India and China; however, political flexibility which characterised the magazine in its Popular Front days weakened by degrees.

4. Conclusion

If we answer to the question whether *Left Review* could make much contribution to the Popular Front in Britain, the answer is no. There seem to be basically two factors to explain this. The first factor is that neither bourgeois middle-class writer such as Day Lewis and Spender nor Marxist contributors of the magazine succeeded in obtaining working-class support. *Left Review* sought the advancement of working-class literature, but its original purpose of training and discovering working-class writers through a writing competition diminished as time went by. The promotion of working-class writing waned while the

development of a Marxist literary criticism by professional writers displaced it. The other factor is that Marxist contributors remained sceptical of the extent of the political commitment of bourgeois middle-class writers such as Day Lewis and Spender, and continued to criticise them on the grounds that they had not understood Marxism. On the other hand, Day Lewis and Spender could not meet the demands of Marxist writers, for fundamentally their priority was given to creating literature in terms of the freedom of the individual writer rather than developing literature in accordance with Marxist thought. As Caesar points out, only a small number of their poems were published in *Left Review* (206-07). As to Spender, he never wrote a poem for the magazine. This fact is significant to any understanding of their relation to it; because it seems that *Left Review* functioned only as an arena for them to express their opinion about politics and its relation to literature, not as one in which to publish their poems, the core of their activity. Therefore, we might see that their involvement in *Left Review* was a matter of secondary importance for them, even though they were serious in their attempts to grapple with the question of how they should relate their political ideas to their literature, as did Marxist writers. *Left Review* was for both groups a place where they could discuss and try to solve the question together, even if they failed to agree. The disparity between the two groups made it difficult for the magazine to form an effective Popular Front even in its own pages, and eventually it could not contribute much to building the British Popular Front. However, *Left Review* continues to be significant, because it represented the challenge to 1930s writers to tackle the question of how politics could be compatible with the art of the writer, and was a manifestation of their intellectual development.

Note

1 See the *Daily Worker*, 29 June, 1935, qtd. in Carr 237.

2 Four other books under review were *The Correspondence of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Anti-Düring* by Friedrich Engels, *Socialism Victorious* by Leaders of the Soviet Union and *Chapayev* by Dimitri Furmanov.

3 See also Margolies, "Left Review and Left Literary Theory" 67-68, and "Introduction," *Writing the Revolution*

4.

4 Editorial refers to and criticises Geoffrey Gorer's book, *Nobody Talks Politics*.

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