European Intellectuals and Communism in the 1930s: 
André Gide's Failed Romance with the Soviet Union

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The collapse of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes has caused disarray and confusion among leftist parties and intellectuals in Western Europe in recent years. In the 1930s, however, it was the West that was threatened with collapse due to extended domestic economic and political crises, and the international problems of the rise of fascism and Nazism and the specter of war. In an attempt to take advantage of these weaknesses, the Soviet Union acting through the Comintern tried to form a cultural popular front by courting the support of sympathetic leftist intellectuals. One of France's most prominent men of letters, André Gide, temporarily joined the ranks of those who rallied to the communist cause. His brief attachment to communism in the 1930s illustrates a basic problem of all idealists—remaining faithful to one's highest ideals while at the same time accepting the compromises that may be necessary to achieve their realization.

Like many others, Gide's commitment to communism grew out of his idealist pursuit of justice, equality, and truth. This type of commitment has been often explained in terms of an attachment to communism as a substitute for religious idealism. This paper will show that Gide's initial attraction to and subsequent disaffection with communism can be understood not only in a manner suggestive of religious faith but also in terms of his identity as a writer who sees his role as a rebel against conformity. First, there will be a brief consideration of the historical context of the 1930s and the motives for the intellectual's commitment to communism. After an explanation of the idea of communism as a religion, the paper will then turn to an examination of Gide's political writings and activities, explaining his rendezvous with communism both in terms of its religious aspects and in terms of his identity as an artist and rebel.

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I

As one study of the relationship between communism and French intellectuals points out, in the 1930s and 1940s the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, P. C. F.) made continuous efforts to gain the support and co-operation of intellectuals. In the turbulent times of the 1930s, the P. C. F. found itself faced with the dilemma of all communist parties in a country not under communist rule: the necessity of adhering to Marxist dogma while practicing a politics that was open to the wider left. In the Soviet Union, the Party could commandeer an army of political writers, while in France it was necessary to renounce abstract slogans and rigid ideological conceptions of art and culture, such as proletarian literature, in order to attract the support of an influential intellectual clientele concerned with political problems.

By virtue of their position in society, French intellectuals were eminently suitable for the communist aim of mobilizing public opinion and support. French men of letters had long been accustomed to speaking with authority on political and social questions, not as experts, but as moralists, with their literature functioning as a kind of "public conscience."

Several undertakings in the early 1930s show an increased involvement of intellectuals in political and social questions. In 1932, a group of intellectuals formed the Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionaires. In the following year Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland took the lead in founding the Amsterdam Congress Against Imperialist War. Shortly afterward, the first European anti-Fascist Congress met at the Salle Plegel. This Amsterdam-Plegel movement against war and fascism was significant because it was able to unite communist and non-communist intellectuals. The year 1933 saw the appearance of the Paris review *Commune* under the leadership of Barbusse and Paul Vaillant-Couturier (editor of the communist daily *L'Humanité*), and two prominent communist sympathizers, Romain Rolland and André Gide. In the same year there was also a meeting of intellectuals to work for the liberation of Dimitrov, a Bulgarian communist charged with complicity in the burning of the German Reichstag in 1933. In June 1935 intellectuals who gathered at the first Congrès International des Ecrivains pour la Défense de la Culture decided to form a permanent Association, with a board of directors including, among others, Barbusse, Rolland and Gide. As Jean Touchard maintains, the gathering of anti-fascist intellectuals
was also very important in creating the climate for the victory of the Popular Front government in 1936.9

Several factors can be adduced to explain this increasing involvement of intellectuals in political problems. Most immediately, the political events—the post World War One peace settlements, the Moroccan war in 1925, the condemnation of the Action Française in 1926, the fraud and corruption charges against the government stemming from the Stavisky Affair and the anti-government riots it spawned in February 1934, the rise of the Popular Front to power in 1936, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, the development of communism and the threat of fascism—all of these contributed largely to the creation of a “climate of general political instability in which intellectuals and writers often and in spite of themselves became deeply involved.”46 Touchard mentions other motives that may also help explain the attraction of intellectuals to communism, especially those who fought as young men in World War I: “the revolt against the scandal of the war of 1914, the enthusiasm inspired by the Russian Revolution, which offered both a model and hope, a sort of revolutionary romanticism, the rejection of a France in which the National Bloc and bourgeois values triumph, the conviction that it belongs to a few men to define the path of the future.”7 Other intellectuals, he continues, may have been attracted to the movement in the 1930s for different reasons. They may have rallied to the cause because they saw more clearly than the politicians the rising danger to democracy and peace. Or perhaps despite the sectarianism of communist party politics, they saw an ideal type of communism, independent of the party and Marxist doctrine, as a potent force and hope for the world.9

Some analyses of the attraction of Western intellectuals to communism, especially those that depend on the confessions of ex-communists of the “God that failed”9 variety stress the moral and psychological factors over the rational. K. A. Jelenski, for example, maintains that “in studying reasons why Western intellectuals were attracted to soviet communism and the reasons which made many of them break with communism, what is striking is that the part played by Marxist theory is practically insignificant.”10

Similarly, in his *Opium of the Intellectuals* Raymond Aron minimizes the rational basis of Marxism to dispel what he calls the “myths” of the Left, the Revolution, and the Proletariat: “These notions cease to be rational and become
mythical in consequence of an intellectual error."[11] Aron also maintains that these errors have a common source in a kind of "visionary optimism combined with a pessimistic view of reality."[12] He further explains this attraction to communism as proceeding from idealistic reasons:

Marxism is in itself a synthesis of all the principal themes of progressive thought. . . Pessimistic in the short run, optimistic in the long run, it disseminates a romantic faith in the fruitfulness of upheavals. Every temperament, every type of mind discovers an aspect of the doctrine which accords with its own preferences.[13]

On the other hand, David Caute criticizes these explanations of the intellectual's attraction to communism for failing to take the rational appeal of Marxism seriously enough. Explanation of the attraction to communism as an "aberration" or as an "opium" or substitute for religion, a compensation for some personal or social anxiety, ignores the fact that intellectuals rally to communism because of rational judgments based on certain historical influences such as World War I, the Russian Revolution, the riots of the 6th of February, etc. From his study Caute concludes that "the overwhelming impression is that of cerebral, empirical judgments made within the framework of certain social and moral beliefs. The communist, like others, makes an empirical judgment. If he is wrong, it is an error of judgment."[14] Caute further argues that by explaining away Marxist theory as a myth, one is led to believe that no one could possibly be attracted to communism on rational grounds.[15] Without denying the validity of Caute's warning, this paper will argue that in the relationship of André Gide to communism, it was the moral, psychological and idealistic factors that played the predominant role.

The emphasis on the moral and psychological factors in the explanation of the intellectual's attraction to communism has contributed to the conception of communism as a religion, albeit an unconventional, secularized one. There are, indeed, several religious aspects to communism.[16] First, there is the element of propheticism and messianism, the promise of future fulfillment inherent in the Marxist interpretation of history. For example, Karl Löwith, in his study of the theological implications of the philosophy of history, describes communism as a "pseudo-morphism" of Judaeo-Christian messianism:

Though perverted into secular prognostication, the Communist Manifesto still retains the basic features of a messianic faith: 'the assurance of things
to be hoped for."

It is therefore not by chance... that the whole process of history as outlined in the Communist Manifesto corresponds to the general scheme of the Jewish-Christian interpretation of history as a providential advance towards a final goal which is meaningful. Historical materialism is essentially, though secretly, a history of fulfillment and salvation in terms of social economy. 17

Secondly, as Aron points out, communism provides the true believer with an interpretation of the universe, a world-view. It inspires a group consciousness and collective spirit of co-operation, and it establishes a hierarchy of values and fixes norms of conduct. In short, "it fulfills in the individual and in the collective sense, some of the functions which the sociologist normally ascribes to religion." 18

Finally, communism is susceptible, like all religions, to a rigid dogmatism. Like dogmatic religions, communist ideology attempts to encompass all of man's experience. It pretends to be the only explanation for reality, and determines all that really matters in the life of the believer. According to Aron, the Christian faith, while claiming to inspire all of human existence, becomes totalitarian and dogmatic only when it refuses to acknowledge the autonomy of the realm of profane activities, such as those of the physical sciences. By repudiating its claim to authority in all aspects of man's experience, it could purge itself and come closer to its true essence. However, "the communist faith becomes totalitarian as soon as it aspires to be total, since it cannot create the illusion of totality except by imposing official truths, by subjecting to the orders of the central power activities whose very essence demands autonomy." 19 For this reason, Aron concludes that "communism is thus not so much a religion as a political attempt to find a substitute for a religion in an ideology erected into a State orthodoxy—an orthodoxy which goes on cherishing claims and pretensions abandoned by the Catholic Church." 20

These first and third aspects of communism as a religion are especially significant to understand Gide. His attraction to communism issued partly from the prophetic appeal of communist promises of fulfillment, while his disaffection with it can be understood from the failure of the promises to materialize and from his rejection of the dogmatic orthodoxy that Soviet communism had become.
II

André Gide was not a religious person. Indeed, Georges Brachfeld has based his analysis of Gide's literary life on the rejection of the roots of his bourgeois, Protestant background. A lonely, withdrawn youth with homosexual tendencies, Gide grew up with a latent hostility against authority. One of his early works, Nourritures terrestres, for example, represents his struggle to reject family, home, acquired morals, and his education, in order to enter a state of freedom and innocence. Gide wrote in order to harmonize his inner contradictions and to answer his need for self-justification. He tried to live according to his homosexual nature, but finding himself constrained by his conventional moral upbringing, he resolved to elaborate a new moral code through his works.

In this way Gide's writing can be seen as a rejection of convention and the social oppression that sustains it. Gide the moral reformer inevitably became Gide the social and political radical. In fact, Gide's identity as a writer was based on the conception of the artist as a rebel against the conventional mores and values of society. In a speech given 22 June 1935, at the first Congrès International des Ecrivains pour la Défense de la Culture, Gide described himself as a rebel who writes a "literature of opposition":

As for me, (and I excuse myself for giving a personal example) from a bourgeois family, from a bourgeois education, I have had to feel, since the beginning of my career, that all I have in me that seems to be authentic, the most precious and most valuable, was in immediate and direct protest with the conventions, the customs, the lies of my milieu. It seems to me today nearly impossible in this capitalist society in which we still live, that a literature of any worth be other than a literature of opposition.

One of the important targets of Gide's opposition to social convention was organized religion, especially the Roman Catholic Church, which in his eyes had betrayed the mission of Christ. On 26 January 1935 at a debate sponsored by the Union pour la Verité, a group of Catholic intellectuals, including Jacques Maritain and Gabriel Marcel, Gide emphatically condemned the failure of Christianity:

When we think of the teaching of Christ and when we consider what the modern world has made of it, one is heart-broken.

I consider that Christianity has gone bankrupt because of compromises. I
have written and profoundly believe that if Christianity had been able to impose itself, if one had accepted the teachings of Christ, such as they are, there would be no question today of communism. There would not even be a social question.\textsuperscript{240}

One of the specific failings of Christianity was its dependence on revelations, something that leads to fanaticism and war.\textsuperscript{250} Another failure was the use of the belief in the compensation of an after-life as a tool to justify injustice and oppression in this world.\textsuperscript{260} Gide also criticized what he considered the Church's hypocritical complaint of persecution by advocates of free thought in education: "But they call 'persecution' forbidding priests the right to manipulate the brains of children."\textsuperscript{270} Similarly, he found fault with the Church's rigid dogmatism and orthodoxy. "Whatever one thinks and says that does not go in their direction, that is not in close conformity with what they know in advance, (and by tradition) to be the Truth, will in advance be considered an error."\textsuperscript{278} Furthermore, conversion to Catholicism "implies an abdication of free inquiry, submission to dogma, recognition of orthodoxy."\textsuperscript{280}

As a rebel, Gide attacked the conventions of society in order to resolve the inner conflicts of his own moral life. In Brachfeld's view, once Gide had addressed the internal moral question, he was able to turn his attention to the social question. Gide's personal experience of suffering as a homosexual made him sympathetic towards the socially oppressed. As a result of his anomaly, Gide became a moral and social reformer. His concern with social issues is reflected in the subjects of some of his later works. For example, Corydon dealt with homosexuals, La Sequestre de Poitiers, and L'Affaire Rediviu related the problems of criminals and women, and La Voyage au Congo and Retour de Chad publicized the plight of colonized peoples of Africa.\textsuperscript{290}

Flowing out of his personal experience and identity as a writer of a literature of opposition, Gide's interest in the problem of social equality drew him towards an alignment with communism. While Gide never became an official member of the Communist Party, he did participate in many activities inspired and supported by the Party, and publicly called himself a communist. On a number of occasions Gide spoke or wrote about what led him to communism. What stands out in these statements is the idealist sentiment. In a journal entry for 13 June 1932, for example, Gide explained his attachment to communism as an outgrowth of the whole of his thinking and of all the deepest hopes and desires of his life.
Consequently, he denied that he was a “convert,” asserting instead that he had always been a communist in spirit:

In heart as well as in mind, I have always been a communist... Do not speak of “conversion” in this case; I have not changed direction; I have always walked forward; I am continuing to do so; the great difference is that for a long time I saw nothing in front of me but space and the projection of my own fervor; at present I am going forward while orienting myself toward something; I know that, somewhere my vague desires are being organized and that my dream is on the way to becoming reality.31

A year later, in another journal entry, Gide explained that it was Christianity that led him to communism. We have seen that Gide had no use for the institutional Church which he thought had betrayed the Gospel message. Rather, what he admired was the pure, idealistic teaching of the Gospel itself, its doctrine of self-renunciation and unselfishness:

But, I must admit it, what leads me to Communism is not Marx, it is the Gospel. It is the Gospel that formed me. It is the precepts of the Gospel, according to the best they gave my thought, to the conduct of my whole being, that inculcated in me doubt of my own value and respect of others, of their thought, of their value, and that fortified in me that disdain, that repugnance (which was probably already native) for all individual possession, for all monopolizing.32

That this idealism was basic to Gide’s attraction to communism is quite obvious in another journal entry several years later, 14 July 1941. Here, Gide readily admitted that he had sought in communism an alternative to Christian idealism: “I was obliged to recognize my error and that it was the Christian virtues I hoped to find in Communism.”33

For the fulfillment of his idealistic hopes, Gide looked to the Soviet Union. His first public avowal of the cause of the Soviet Union occurred in June 1932 with the beginning of the serial publication in La nouvelle revue française of pages of his journal for 1929-1932. The journal entry of 13 May 1931 shows his enthusiasm for the Soviet cause:

But above all, I should like to live long enough to see Russia’s plan succeed and the states of Europe obliged to accept what they insist on ignoring... Never have I bent over the future with a more passionate curiosity. My whole heart applauds the gigantic and yet entirely human undertaking.34
What specifically, did Gide find so attractive in the Soviet Union? Another journal entry indicates that the great appeal of the Soviet Union was the alternative it offered to the bourgeois-capitalist society that Gide detested. On 17 July 1931, he wrote:

I should like to cry aloud my affection for Russia, and that my cry should be heard, should have importance. I should like to live long enough to see the success of that tremendous effort, its realization, which I wish with all my soul and for which should like to work. To see what can be produced by a state without religion, a society without the family. Religion and the family are the two worst enemies of progress.35

Besides the more just and egalitarian society lacking in his own world, Gide also hoped to find a new, ideal situation for the artist as well. Gide saw in the Soviet Union a place to work out the solution to the problem of the individual’s relationship to society at large. He felt that if properly understood, the mutually exclusive concepts of individualism and communism could be reconciled. In his journal on 12 August 1933, Gide wrote that “I am unwilling to recognize as essentially irreconcilable a ‘properly understood’ communism and a ‘properly understood’ individualism, because an egalitarian communism implies only equal chances for each person, not a standardization or uniformity of qualities.”36

About a year later Gide took up the same theme in a message he sent to the first Congress of Soviet Writers meeting in Moscow. Here, Gide held the Soviet Union up as an example to the whole world and defined its task as one of establishing “communist individualism” in art and literature. He further argued:

Communism will be able to impose itself only by taking account of the particularization of each individual. A society where each resembles the whole is not desirable. I will even say that it is impossible; and for a literature, even more so. Every artist is necessarily individualist, however strong his communist convictions and attachment to the party might be.37

In Gide’s view, the individual was indispensable to communism because only in particularizing oneself, only in showing oneself most personal, could an artist reveal a common profound humanity. Thus, in his speech at the first Congrès International pour la Défense de la Culture, Gide could argue:

. . . I claim to be able to be profoundly international, while remaining profoundly French, just as I claim to stay profoundly individualistic in full agreement with communism and with its help. For my thesis has always
been this: it is in being the most particular that each being serves the community best. It should be added today this other thesis, as a corollary of the first: it is in a communist society that each individual can blossom most perfectly; or as Malraux said in a very recent and already well-known preface: communism restores to the individual his fertility.\textsuperscript{390}

In the same speech, Gide declared that he looked to the Soviet Union as the source of a new type of literature, a “literature of joy” such as could not be found in the West. Unlike the writer in a bourgeois-capitalist society, the writer in a communist country needed no longer to protest against society, but was able to be its sounding board, reflecting the views of the society itself:

The U. S. S. R. offers us a spectacle without precedent, of immense importance unhoped for, and I dare to add: exemplary. That of a country where the writer can enter in direct communion with his readers. Instead of navigating against the current, as we are constrained to do, he only has to let himself be led. He can find in the reality that surrounds him, at once an inspiration, the dictation, and the immediate echo of his work.\textsuperscript{391}

Gide continued this theme and developed its significance for the revolutionary communist writer in a eulogy he delivered on 20 June 20 1936 at the funeral of Maxim Gorky, who died shortly after Gide arrived in the Soviet Union. After first pointing out that the great writers up to the present had always been revolutionaries, fighters, and fomenters of rebellion and insubordination, he made a statement that he had to qualify later:

Today, in the U. S. S. R., for the first time, the question poses itself in a new manner: in being revolutionary, the writer is no longer a rebel.\textsuperscript{409} On the contrary, he responds to the wishes of the greatest number, to those of the whole people, and that which is most wonderful, to those of the rulers.\textsuperscript{413} Gide came to regret these words, for reasons that will become clear later.

This analysis of Gide's attraction to communism on the basis of his idealistic yearning for social justice and equality is corroborated by the observations of several of his contemporaries. Some of them directly attributed Gide's fascination with communism to a religious sentiment. For example, in the debate at the Union pour la Verite, Jacques Maritain remarked: “Your adherence to communism seems to me as a substitute for you of that evangelical life which you have always been looking for—where it is not to be found.” Maritain adds that “this is why you love justice and cannot endure injustice. . .”\textsuperscript{421} Others saw Gide's
attraction to communism as based on a naive, sentimental idealism. Georges Friedmann, in an account drawn from his own three visits to the Soviet Union, criticized Gide’s book Return from the U. S. S. R. for an attitude “more sentimental than rational,” and an expectation of finding a completely triumphant communism with the Dictatorship abolished, the State withered away, and the collective economy rendering to each according to his needs, not according to his work. According to Friedmann, this attitude produced errors in Gide’s perspective, preventing him from judging the importance of social and economic elements in the Soviet Union correctly.\textsuperscript{43} Similarly, the Trotskyist Claude Naville in 1935 wrote a perceptive study of Gide’s commitment to communism. In addition to anticipating Gide’s eventual disillusionment over the question of individualism, he also maintained that Gide saw the U. S. S. R. as the transformation of yesterday’s utopia into the reality of today and tomorrow.\textsuperscript{44}

There is another, although negative, way to understand Gide’s attraction to communism. One can ascertain what the idealist Gide expected from communism by examining his criticisms of the Soviet Union. For three and a half months, from 17 June until 3 September 1936, Gide travelled throughout the Soviet Union. At the end of 1936 he published an account of his travels in a short booklet, Return from the U. S. S. R. Gide’s idealistic expectations shine forth clearly in the Foreword, where he wrote:

\begin{quote}
Who shall say what the Soviet Union has been to us? More than a chosen land—an example, a guide. What we have dreamt of, what we have hardly dared to hope, but towards which we were straining all our will and all our strength, was coming into being over there. A land existed where Utopia was in process of becoming reality.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Even the reasons Gide gave for criticizing its failures are based on his idealistic devotion to the Soviet Union: “It is precisely because of my admiration for the Soviet Union and for the wonders it has already performed that I am going to criticize, because of what we have expected from it, above all because of what it had allowed us to hope for.”\textsuperscript{46}

While the book begins on a tone generally favorable to the Soviet Union by describing the warm feelings of sympathy and solidarity he experienced in his encounters with the Soviet people, Gide then turned to a criticism of what he saw as shortcomings. His major criticisms were the still widespread poverty, the inequality of social conditions that threatened to lead to the rise of new classes,
depersonalization, a lack of criticism, and conformity. These last two points were especially significant for the idealist Gide's conception of art and the artist.

Gide first described the living conditions that he saw: the long queues in front of shops waiting for poor quality merchandise in insufficient variety and quantity. He lamented the poor state of peasant housing on kolkhozes, and of peasants who lived in hovels near the clean, modern model sovkhozes on which they worked. He was extremely dismayed by the existence of so many poor people: "There are too many of them—far too many. I had hoped not to see any, or to speak more accurately, it was in order not to see any that I had come to the U. S. S. R." In his Afterthoughts on the U. S. S. R., written to answer objections raised against Return from the U. S. S. R., Gide reinforced his criticisms of the poor conditions he found with official Soviet statistics on industrial production and figures on education and illiteracy.

Poverty and inequality of social conditions were serious problems for Gide because he saw them leading to the restoration of bourgeois attitudes and the formation of new classes. For example, he rejoiced that workers at a certain kolkhoz enjoyed a profit-sharing system, ending the exploitation of the many by the few. But he also felt that it would be better if there were plans for the richer kolkhozes to help the poorer. Reflecting on the discrepancy between the luxury hotel and Sochi, where he was lavishly entertained, and the miserable hovels of the workers nearby, he voiced his misgivings:

I do not protest against the inequality of salaries; I grant that it was necessary. But there are means of remedying differences of conditions; now I fear that these differences, instead of getting less, are actually on the increase. I fear that a new sort of workers’ bourgeoisie may soon come into being. Satisfied, (and for that very reason, conservative, of course!) it will come to resemble too closely our own petty bourgeoisie.

Gide likewise criticized certain recent official decisions that indirectly encouraged "degraded, greedy, self-centered bourgeois interests." The restoration of inheritance, legacies, the love of money, private ownership, and the family in its function as a social cell, was beginning to take precedence over the need for comradeship, for sharing and for life in common:

And we see the reappearance, not of classes, no doubt, but of social strata, of a kind of aristocracy; I am not referring here to the aristocracy of merit and of personal worth, but only to the aristocracy of respectability, of

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conformism, which in the next generation will become that of money.53

Another disappointment Gide experienced was a pervasive sense of deper-
sonalization and social conformity. On a visit to a kolkhoz, the peasant homes
gave Gide the “impression of complete depersonalization.” As he observed,
In each, the same ugly furniture, the same portrait of Stalin, and absolutely
nothing else. Not the smallest object, not the smallest souvenir. Every
building is interchangeable with every other; so much so that the kolk-
hozians (who seem to be interchangeable in themselves) might take up their
abode in each other’s houses without even noticing it.54

At the heart of this process of depersonalization was conformity. For “the
happiness of all can only be obtained by disindividualizing each. The happiness
of all can only be obtained at the expense of each. In order to be happy,
conform.”55 Conformity was not limited to the external activities of one’s life,
however. Gide lamented the fact that on every subject there can be only one
opinion. This conformity of opinion was formed by the authoritative pages of
Pravda, which “teaches them just what they should know and think and believe.
. . So that every time you talk to one Russian you feel as if you were talking to
them all. . . Everything is so arranged that nobody differs from anybody else.”56
To illustrate the point, Gide related an incident at a banquet where one of his
companions proposed a toast to cheer the Spanish Republic and received only a
lukewarm response, while a toast to the support of political prisoners in Germany,
Hungary, and Yugoslavia elicited warm and effusive applause. No one knew how
to respond to the first toast because Pravda had not yet published the official
policy.57

Even more serious than this stiff conformity of thought was the stifling of
protest. This was especially offensive to Gide as an artist, creative writer, and
rebel. For him criticism was an integral, indispensable part of culture. In the
Soviet Union, he pointed out, “culture is entirely directed along a single track.
There is nothing disinterested in it; it merely accumulates, and (in spite of
Marxism) almost entirely lacks the critical faculty.”58 The heart of the problem
was rigid conformity to an established standard. In the Soviet Union there was
no room for genuine criticism:

. . .criticism merely consists in asking oneself if this, that or the other is “in
the right line.” The line itself is never discussed. What is discussed is
whether such and such a work, or gesture, or theory conforms to this
sacrosanct line. And woe to him who seeks to cross it.59)

Since criticism and protest are punished by severe penalties and are stifled immediately, Gide was led to the extreme conclusion: “I doubt whether in any other country in the world, even Hitler's Germany, thought be less free, more bowed down, more fearful (terrorized), more vassalized.”60)

On the other hand, Gide did recognize the attractiveness of conformity. It would be convenient for the rulers if all the citizens had the same views. “But in the presence of such an impoverishment,” he asks, “Who could still speak of culture?”61) For Gide humanity was not uniform and any attempt to enforce uniformity was disastrous.

Besides its detrimental effect on culture in general, this conformity was a grave threat to art and to the artist. Gide condemned the conformity in art imposed by the communist strictures against “formalism” and its insistence on “socialist realism” as the guiding principle and standard of art. As Gide observed with regret

In the Soviet Union, however fine a work may be, if it is not in line, it scandalizes. Beauty is considered a bourgeois value. However great a genius an artist may be, if he does not work in line, attention will turn away—will be turned away—from him. What is demanded of the artist, of the writer, is that he shall conform; and all the rest will be added to him.62)

Similarly, in a speech Gide intended to deliver before a group of writers and students in Leningrad, but was rejected because it was not written in the “right tone,” he warned of the dangers of conformity in art: “Art that submits to orthodoxy, to even the soundest doctrines, is lost—wrecked upon the shoals of conformism.”63)

It was clear that the state of culture and art in the U. S. S. R. had greatly disappointed Gide. Along with the existence of poverty and social inequality, depersonalization and conformity in thought had disabused Gide of the possibility of finding in the Soviet Union a solution to the problems of social justice, of the defects of bourgeois-capitalist society, and the problem of the relationship of the individual and society. Yet Gide was not completely disillusioned with communism. After his return from the U. S. S. R., Gide hesitated over how to give an account of his travels. He finally decided that to give a false approval would harm both the Soviet Union and the cause it stood for. “The gravest error, “he concluded,” would be to link too closely the one and the other and make the cause
responsible for what we deplored in the U. S. S. R." Indeed, communism had not failed the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union had failed communism!

In two letters, Gide spoke of the Soviet Union having abandoned the Revolution. In one letter, addressed to "X" and dated 10 December 1936, Gide complained that the U. S. S. R. had abandoned all the advantages of the Revolution and "in the course which the U. S. S. R. is now following, all that which we find the most blameworthy in the capitalist régime is soon going to be restored. The differences in salaries are increasing, the social classes are re-forming, and the bureaucracy triumphs." Similarly, in a letter of 28 December 1936 to A. Gulminelli, the adjunct secretary general of the Amis de l'Union Soviétique of Nice, Gide justifies his criticisms of the U. S. S. R. by charging that the Soviet Union had abandoned the Revolution.

On several other occasions Gide related this betrayal of the Revolution to a statement of Lenin. For example, in a letter to Pierre Alessandri, federal secretary of Amis de l'Union Soviétique, who had come to Gide's point of view after reading Afterthoughts on the U. S. S. R., Gide cited a passage of Lenin's The State and the Revolution, inexactiy, but not inaccurately: "Until now, he [Lenin] says, there has not been a revolution which has not, in the final analysis, ended in the reinforcement of the administrative mechanism." Lenin of course meant to say that the Russian Revolution of 1917 was different from previous revolutions, but Gide concluded that the Revolution had gone the way of all the others, ending up in reinforcing the bureaucratic administrative machinery.

For Gide, the Soviet Union had betrayed the Russian Revolution. In another letter to Alessandri, dated 3 September 1937, Gide compared the betrayal of the Revolution by the U. S. S. R. to the betrayal of Christianity by the Church: "We see today an all-embracing communism suffocating the spirit of the Revolution; just as the Church monopolized the spirit of the Gospel, suffocating it."

III

In Gide's eyes, the Soviet Union had indeed betrayed the promise of fulfillment his idealism had sought in vain in communism. But it was not merely a betrayal of his idealism that troubled Gide. Another factor in his disaffection was the dogmatic orthodoxy with which the Soviet Union had solidified its betrayal. This rigid dogmatism prevented any criticism and correction of its betrayal of Gide's
idealistic communism.

That is the reason why Gide could support the anti-Stalinists as the true revolutionaries:

The spirit which is today held to be counter-revolutionary is that same revolutionary spirit, that ferment which first broke through the half-rotten dam of the Old Tsarist World... those that the revolutionary ferment still animates and who consider all these successive concessions to be compromises become troublesome, are repudiated and suppressed.49

In a letter to Jean Guéhenno, editor of the leftist review Vendredi, Gide even defended Trotsky as the true champion of communism:

For having denounced these compromises, Trotsky is treated as a public enemy (whereas he is an enemy only of Stalin's compromises), and by the same stroke made to look like a fascist, which is really far too simple. He is much more an enemy of fascism than Stalin himself, and it is as a revolutionary and anti-fascist that he denounces the compromises of the latter.79

For Gide, much of the blame for the betrayal of the Revolution could be put on Stalin. But this was not for ideological reasons such as those that divided the Stalinists and Trotskyists. Rather, it was because Stalin's rule and policies had betrayed Gide's idealistic communism. In the first place, Gide was suspicious of the personality cult that had grown up around Stalin: “Stalin's effigy is met with everywhere; his name is on every tongue; his praises are invariably sung in every speech... Is it adoration, love or fear? I do not know; always and everywhere he is present.”71 While passing through Stalin's birthplace, Gide attempted to send a congratulatory telegram to Stalin. He was dismayed, however, when his translator told him that he must add something like “You, leader of the workers,” or “You, master of the peoples,” since the bare pronoun Gide had written would be insulting. After protesting in vain, Gide submitted, “reflecting with sadness that all this sort of thing helps to widen between Stalin and the people an unbridgeable gulf.”72 The cult of Stalin was perverting the communist ideal of equality. Furthermore, Gide questioned the entire Stalinist regime, pointing out that unless one is willing to admit that the goals, the desires, the struggles of the years since the Revolution were actually beyond the efforts of human beings to achieve, then one must blame Stalin for what has gone wrong: “If not Stalin, then it is man, humanity itself that has disappointed us.”73
Although Gide was sympathetic to Trotsky’s cause and had read and met such Trotskyites as Victor Serge and Pierre Naville,*, there is no evidence to conclude that Gide was in actual collaboration with Trotsky or Trotskyists.** In fact, in the same letter in which he defended Trotsky, Gide also wrote: “I maintain that one can disapprove of Stalin without thereby becoming a Trotskyist.”***

In December 1937 Gide’s support of the anti-Stalinists involved him in a dispute with Guéhenno. *Vendredi* had refused to publish an open letter of Gide responding to an attack on him by *Izvestia* for his defense of leftist intellectuals and partisans who were being purged as counter-revolutionaries. In his “Lettre Ouverte à André Gide” published in *Vendredi* 17 December 17 1937 Guéhenno justifies the refusal on grounds that Gide was writing only out of personal rancor and an error that confused sincerity with truth:

> We do not prefer our own glory to the liberty of others, we do not even prefer our truth.

> And I really mean our truth... Because you are a sincere man, you believe yourself to be a true man! For us, we know well that our truth is not the truth. The truth is not apparent to each of us. It is necessary to consider with good sense the reflexions of all."****

Gide was also attacked from other quarters, with the argument that the cause, and the dogmatic party line demanded that Gide keep silent over the problems and doubts he had experienced. In a letter to P. Alessandri on 27 August 1937 Gide quotes a letter he had received from Jean Cassou: “But if you were right a hundred times over, the practical (and Spanish!) interest must direct our conduct and hold us back from doing or saying anything which could risk weakening the cause we serve. You have preferred, egoistically, to put yourself at peace with your conscience.”***** This is the same reason why Romain Rolland criticized Gide’s *Return from the U. S. S. R.*. In a letter that appeared on the front page of *1’Humanité* 18 January 1937 Rolland condemned the book for the use which anti-Soviet interests were able to make of it.

Gide came to reject this subservient faith and confident trust in toeing the party line. Ultimately Gide could not compromise with the truth. As mentioned above, Gide later regretted the words of his speech at Gorky’s funeral about a new revolutionary writer who had no need to rebel, but only to follow the rulers. Gide realized that the Soviet Union had failed to give the solution to his problem of “communist individualism.” These two terms are in the end mutually exclusive.
Gide's impulses were actually contradictory, for he desired both the triumph of communism in the U. S. S. R. and the victory of artistic truth. He was initially prepared to sacrifice his art for the cause, but ultimately, his identity as an artist prevailed over his attraction to communism.

Gide had long felt a constraint in his writing. He once tried to explain why he had not written anything of artistic significance in recent years. At the debate at the Union pour la Verite in January 1935 Gide responded to Paul Mauriac, who asked him why he had not been writing. Gide said that "what keeps me from writing is fear of the Index; understand me, not an exterior Index; no, it is the fear of not being in the norm." Elsewhere, however, Gide linked his reluctance to write to an external cause: "If I now need to have the approbation of a party in order to write... I prefer not to write, even if the party should approve." A reply to G. Guy-Garand at the same meeting indicates that it was a serious, deeply felt problem for Gide: "Don't say that I don't want to write. Simply, I cannot maintain the sincerity of thought in face of certain exigencies."

Initially, Gide attempted to resolve the problem with the explanation that this constraint was only temporary, until the communist state had been able to establish itself firmly. In other words, he was willing to make a concession for the time being:

I have always declared myself the enemy of all orthodoxies. That of Marxism appears to me today just as dangerous as another; dangerous at least for the work of art. And if it is proved to me that Marxist orthodoxy is useful, indispensable, at least provisionally, to assure the formation, the establishment of a new social state, I think that it is worth the pains; yes, in order to obtain this, it is worth the pains of consenting to the sacrifice of some works of art.

Yet even while making this concession, Gide also stated quite explicitly in the conclusion to the above statement, that there can be no ultimate compromising between art and the official, dogmatic party line: "And perhaps it is good that there should be today a mot d'ordre (I mean in the communist party); but the work of art cannot respond to a mot d'ordre."

Thus Gide was prepared to make a sacrifice of his art, compromising his idealism at least temporarily. The problem was still of concern to him when he visited the Soviet Union. He expressed this well in a speech intended for writers and students during a visit to Leningrad. Rejected at the time because it was not
in the “right tone,” the speech is recounted in Return from the U. S. S. R., where Gide cited his original text:

When the revolution is triumphant, installed, and established, art runs a terrible danger, a danger almost as great as under the worst fascist oppression—the danger of orthodoxy. Art that submits to orthodoxy, to even the soundest doctrines, is lost—wrecked on the shoals of conformism. What the triumphant revolution can and should offer the artist is above all else, liberty. Without liberty, art loses its meaning and its value.84)

Gide the idealist, committed to the truth above all as his highest ideal, was unable to make an act of faith in the dogmatic creed of the communist party or the Soviet Union as such, but could justify compromise only as a temporary expedient. Ultimately, however, he could not make any compromise that would endanger the ideal. In Afterthoughts on the U. S. S. R. Gide attacked the party faithful for their dialectical maneuvering with the ideal:

... you learnedly explain that this evil is necessary, that you, the intellectual versed in all arguments (and arts) of dialectics, you consent to it as being temporary and as leading to better things. You, intelligent communist, you agree to recognize the evil, but you consider it better to hide it from others less intelligent than yourself, others who might be made indignant by it.85)

For ultimately, there is no compromise with the truth for André Gide. Idealist that he was, Gide remained faithful to “truth” in spite of all: “No party in the world will ever prevent me from preferring Truth to the Party. As soon as falsehood comes in, I am ill at ease. My role is to denounce it. It is to Truth that I am attached. If the Party abandons it, I abandon the Party.”86)

Rejecting the Christian justification of present evils in exchange for a future fulfillment, Gide was just as reluctant to accept the same argument from communists. A person like Gide, who saw his task as a writer to attack lies, injustice, and inequality wherever he found it, is above all else a rebel and an enemy of all orthodoxy. A remark Gide made at the conclusion of Afterthoughts on the U. S. S. R. clearly indicates that he saw this problem as a part of the nature of an intellectual which makes him unsuitable as a member of the communist party: “Somewhere or other I have read that the intellectuals who come to communism should always be looked upon by the Party as ‘unstable elements’ which may be made use of but which must always be watched with suspicion. How true this!”87)
IV

We have seen how Gide’s attachment to and subsequent disaffection with communism and the Soviet Union can be explained by the appeal of certain aspects of communism analogous to religion, and by Gide’s conception of the writer as rebel. For it was the prophetic promise of a new world with equality and justice and without bourgeois-capitalist conventions that Gide had hoped to find in the Soviet Union. He also looked for a new type of literature and a new role for the writer made possible by the resolution of the tension between the individual and society. When the Soviet Union betrayed his idealistic hopes, Gide became disillusioned. But he was disillusioned not with his ideal, but with the Soviet reality he had identified with his ideal.

André Gide’s fascination with communism and the U. S. S. R. thus illustrates the problem of an idealist who must live in a real world. Faced with the failure to realize his ideals, he must choose either to reject his ideals through compromise, or else he must reject the failed attempts at realization and remain true to his ideals. For André Gide it could only be a question of the latter. As he wrote in Afterthoughts on the U. S. S. R.:

It is essential to see things as they are and not as we should have liked them to be.

The U. S. S. R. is not what we had hoped it would be, what it promised to be, what it still strives to appear. It has betrayed all our hopes. If we cannot resign ourselves to losing them altogether, we must place them elsewhere.88

NOTES


European Studies 8 (1978), which argues that towards the end of the nineteenth century intellectuals became more and more directly involved in political and social issues. In spite of attempts by some to restore the intellectual to the traditional attitude of impartiality, intellectuals in general became increasingly and willingly involved in social and political problems. They were prompted by a similar analysis of contemporary society, criticizing the general decadence after 1914 and the conventional bourgeois values and ideas such as economic security, self-righteousness, and complacency.

4) André Gide, Littérature engagée, textes réunis et présentés par Yvonne Davet (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 83. Other prominent directors were Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann, Maxim Gorky, Forster, Aldous Huxley, Bernard Shaw, and Sinclair Lewis.

5) Jean Touchard, “Le parti communiste français et les intellectuels (1920-1939),” Revue française de science politique, XVII (Juin, 1967), 480. Caute, Communist and the French Intellectuals, also recognizes the influence of intellectuals who “proceeded to play an important role in clearing the path toward left-wing unity of action of formidable obstacles, doctrinal, historical, and temperamental.” (p. 113).


8) Ibid., 480.


12) Ibid., 96.

13) Ibid., 106.


15) Ibid., 263.


18) Aron, Optim of the Intellectuals, 265.

19) Ibid., 288.
20) Ibid.
22) Ibid., 34-35.
23) Gide, Littérature engagée, 93.
24) Ibid., 69.
25) Ibid., 70-71.
26) Ibid., 69.
28) Ibid., 275.
29) Ibid., 276.
30) Brachfeld, André Gide and the Communist Temptation, 67-68.
32) Ibid., 3: 276.
33) Ibid., 4: 74.
34) Ibid., 3: 160. This passage appeared in La nouvelle revue française 31 (Juillet 1932), 42.
36) Ibid., 3: 279.
37) Gide, Littérature engagée, 55.
38) Ibid., 85.
39) Ibid., 93.
40) When the speech was published later, Gide added the following footnote to the statement: “This is where I fooled myself. I was obliged to, alas, soon admit it.”
41) Ibid., 134.
42) Ibid., 68. Fernand Vial, “French Intellectuals and the Collapse of Communism,” Thought, 15 (September 1940), 433-434, sees the adherence of Gide to communism as the outcome of Gide’s search for a true spiritual discipline, a discipline reflected in some of his works: La Porte étroite (Protestantism); La symphonie pastorale (Evangelicalism); Numquid et tu (Catholicism); communism was the latest new faith and new church. Ramon Fernandez, “Notes sur l’évolution d’André Gide,” La nouvelle revue française 41 (Juillet, 1933), 132, believed that Gide saw in the Soviet Union an ally in his struggle against the “Roman monopolization of Christianity,” and speculated that in a Protestant country where non-conformity had the force of law, Gide would have evolved differently.
Samuel Putnam, “André Gide and Communism,” Partisan Review 1 (November-December, 1934), 31, categorized Gide’s approach to art and life as affective or emotional, as opposed to Proust’s intellectualistic attitudes to art, concluding that “it is undoubtedly Gide’s affections, rather than his intellect, which have led him to communism.” Klaus Mann, André Gide and the Crisis of Modern Thought (New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1942), 249, characterized
Gide as “blind and bold, a lovable and slightly ridiculous Don Quixote,” who, with naïveté and innocence tried in vain to combine his idealistic dreams with an unscrupulous political policy. Frederick Harris, André Gide and Romain Rolland: Two Men Divided (Rutgers University Press, 1973), 131, cites the private journal of Rolland, who judged Gide quite ignorant in political and economic matters and thought the main motive in Gide’s adherence to communism was psychological. Rolland considered Gide the product of “nervous irritations” against social entities that burdened him, such as the family and religion. Jean Cassou, “De la Sainte Russie à l’U. R. S. S.,” Europe (September 15, 1938), 82, depicted Gide as a person for whom reality could take only a religious form, and who refused to see the historical reality of fascism, Spain and the Soviet Union. He described Gide’s attraction and subsequent disaffection thus: “Like every religious man who wants to believe and be converted, he figured on being received into the warmth of a contemplative community. Instead he was shown factories.”

46) Ibid., xiv.
47) Ibid., 17-18.
48) Ibid., 25, 37.
49) Ibid., 40.
52) Ibid., 38.
53) Ibid., 39.
54) Ibid., 25.
55) Ibid. Gide’s dislike of the enforced conformity is also illustrated in his comment on the law against homosexuals in ibid., 38, footnote 1: “This law which assimilates them to counter-revolutionaries (for non-conformism is hunted down even in sexual matters), condemns them to a sentence of five years’ deportation which can be renewed if they are not reformed by exile.”
56) Ibid., 27.
57) Ibid.
58) Ibid., 29, 11.
59) Ibid.
60) Ibid., 48.
61) Ibid., 50.
62) Ibid., 55.
63) Ibid., 59.
64) Ibid., 62.
65) Gide, Littérature engagée, 142.
66) Ibid., 143.
67) Ibid., 185-187. See also p. 162; and Journals, 3: 375.
68) Gide, Littérature engagée, 180.
69) Gide, Return from the U. S. S. R., 41.
70) Gide, Littérature engagée, 155-156.
71) Gide, Return from the U. S. S. R., 45-46.
72) Ibid., 46.
73) Ibid., 47.
74) In his Preface to C. Naville, André Gide et le communisme, Pierre Naville remarks about one of the meetings with Gide: "We thus opened in front of him the dossier of anti-Marxist, anti-proletarian repression in the U. S. S. R. which he was about to visit."
75) Frederick Harris, André Gide and Romain Rolland, 151-153.
76) Gide, Littérature engagée, 155.
77) Ibid., 206
78) Ibid., 177.
79) Ibid., 73-74.
80) Ibid., 75.
81) Ibid.
82) Ibid., 74.
83) Ibid.
86) Ibid., 70.
87) Ibid.
88) Ibid., 71.