

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

THE JOHN REED CLUBS :  
A HISTORICAL RECLAMATION OF THE ROLE OF  
REVOLUTIONARY WRITERS IN THE DEPRESSION.

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

Mass Communications

by

Laurie Ann Alexandre

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This Thesis of Laurie Ann Alexandre is approved:

Prof. Fred Kuretsky . Date

Dr. Sam Feldman Date

Dr. Félix Gutiérrez  
Chairperson Date

California State University, Northridge

Without the love and help of Mom, Dad, Dorothy,  
Gordon, Alex, and Gerardo, this would never have been  
completed.

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Hasta La Victoria Siempre

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California State University, Northridge

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ABSTRACT.

THE JOHN REED CLUBS: A HISTORICAL RECLAMATION

BY

Laurie Ann Alexandre

Master of Arts in Mass Communications

The John Reed Club was a group of politically radical writers, artists, and journalists, who aligned themselves with the struggles of the working-class and militant left during the early Depression years (1929-1935). The Clubs were in the forefront of the American proletarian literature movement, and integrally connected with the international communist front. They were the propaganda arm for many of the political and social battles of the decade. Some of the most important literary figures of the period, like Mike Gold, Joseph Freeman, Josephine Herbst, and Richard Wright, were involved with the organization.

The study not only traces the history of the John Reed Clubs, but also examines the role of revolutionary cultural workers during the Depression. From those experiences, recommendations are made for those people working in radical cultural groups today. Cultural expression is necessary for any progressive movement. The author hopes that the study points to the importance of media and culture in social change.

REVOLUTION

Willam Rose Benet

Anyone can write Revolution - Revolution is written  
By pale young men with the new conventional mind;  
Though it causes, indeed, so much havoc 'mid' humankind  
As Samson's did when the Philistines were smitten.

It is easy to preach Revolution - Revolution in pink  
reviews,

Or flourish a Phygian cap from the top of a steeple:  
But if ever it came to an uprising of the people,  
How many pale poets would stand in the leaders' shoes?<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Certainly, the question of the relationship between art and politics has been vigorously debated for decades, and probably centuries. Much of the discussion has centered around art's role in ideological struggle and of its usefulness to, and for, the forces changing society. The question of degree to which artists and writers align themselves with political movements, or attempt to retain their own autonomy, has varied in commitment according to the intensity of material conditions and historical situations.

Different historical periods have produced different schools of thought on the interrelationship between art and revolution. The Sixties brought with it an

exciting resurgence of activity in the arts, which was integrally related to the Third World and anti-war movements. For those people involved in such movements, not only was a glimpse into the future offered, but many of the lessons of previous decades were reopened for examination.

Today, the radical movement is re-examining past writings on a variety of issues, not least of all, the role of artists and their works in revolutionary change. In looking to periods of massive unemployment, industrial depression, and serious discussion of social reform versus revolution, one is naturally drawn to the 1930's, not with the mystifying nostalgia of Hollywood, but with the intent of analyzing the past to draw lessons for today and the future.

Much of what has been written on the artistic and literary movement of the Thirties has been of a hostile nature. Maxwell Geismar, in acknowledging this historical brand of hostility, writes:

...we are witnesses of a new intellectual trend...to delete the entire decade of the 1930's from the national consciousness as though it were a national trauma - something to be excoriated rather than to be understood. That period of American life, which had its own triumphs of native fortitude and native ingenuity, in the end, has been distorted and systematically falsified. Bewildered by what has happened to us since then, we are engaged in the process of finding scape-

goats rather than solutions: of taking a hopeless revenge upon the irrevocable past. We are punishing individuals on a scale whose magnitude is novel and morbid, for the movement of historical forces which they, no more than we, could hardly have forseen. 2

Definitely, writers grappled with enormous problems of the period, and the strong ideological and political differences can be witnessed in the literature and art they produced. And, this very fact is part of the explanation for the current condemnation. The historical and literary reviews of the 1930's, are by and large, being conducted by critics raised in the 1940's war generation, and the 1950's generation of fear and anti-communism. Their bias and training make them unable, or unwilling, to understand how the writers and artists of the 1930's fused literature and politics. Since that decade, Marxism, as an important premise of the proletarian literature movement, has been systematically discredited. With the assumption that those political tenents were invalid and dangerous, it logically followed, that the ideas and activities influenced by Marxism would also be considered dangerous and/or worthless. The result of this thinking, is a strong condemnation of the battles waged in the 1930's, and a distortion of the literature and art of that decade.

The reconstruction of the literature of the

Thirties suggests that economic questions played a minor role in the significant literature of the period. It continues, that Marxism was not a major influence on the valuable literary works of that generation. To add to this distortion, a number of literary figures who themselves were influenced by leftist theories, and who participated in the political struggle of that decade, have since written vindictive memoirs negating their activities. To name only a few: Granville Hicks, Eugene Lyons, and Max Eastman. Many of these figures believed in a socialist future and felt betrayed by the Soviet Union, by the American Communist Party, by a series of international incidents, or simply by the failing to come true of their socialist dreams. The capitalist United States lived through the Depression, and therefore, many renounced their old political ideals and the literature which those ideals had stimulated. The experience of the Forties and Fifties intensified anti-communist hysteria, and a number of the memoirs attempt to renounce past affiliations and free one from public condemnation and private guilt.

There have been attempts though, to characterize the cultural movement of the 1930's in a more objective light. Daniel Aaron's Writers on the Left, is a history of the North American literary left. Although the book opens many doors into the past, the author fails to

discredit the standard condemnations. The study adequately highlights specific people and events, but ignores an examination of the flow of theories and ideas over periods of time. Walter Rideout's The Radical Novel in the United States, is a more valuable work in the sense that the author traces the development of the radical novel in relationship to both the socialist and communist movements in the country. The book offers a study of the material conditions and historical situations which surrounded the growth of the radical literature movement. But these are only two of a very limited bibliography which have proved to be useful sources for this thesis.

Interestingly enough, the majority of historical reviews and memoirs barely touch upon some of the earliest political and organizational work of the literary left in the early Depression years. One of the outstanding omissions concerns the slighting of the John Reed Clubs from their rightful place in literary and political history.

The John Reed Clubs, named after a man who epitomized the unity of creative art and radical politics, were in the center of the cultural/political movement of the early 1930's. The Clubs were the foundation upon which the proletarian literature movement was built,

and were the nuclei for over half a dozen little proletarian magazines. They were the cultural arm of the militant left, and the nurturing ground for young writers and artists who aligned with the working-class for revolutionary change. They were related to the international communist movement, although not dominated by the American Communist Party (CPUSA). These are some of the major premises incorporated in this thesis, which is basically a historical, and descriptive reclamation of the John Reed Clubs. This study will attempt to portray the Clubs in a light they are rarely seen in: as an important influence on the development of writers, artists, and literature, in the early Depression years.

The study is divided into six chapters. Chapter One, John Reed: A Poet, A Communist, relates the important events of his life to his literary and political development. Reed came to symbolize an organic relationship between art and politics which the writers and cultural workers of the 1930's admired and aspired to. Biographies, such as Granville Hick's John Reed and Rosenstone's Romantic Revolutionary, proved invaluable for researching this chapter. The autobiographical essay "Almost Thirty" was an important source for Reed's own evaluation of his life and writings. Several books, like Adventures of a Young Man and The Education of John

Reed, offered extensive collections of Reed's short stories and poems. Also, excerpts from two of Reed's most powerful works, Insurgent Mexico and Ten Days That Shook the World, have been integrated into this first chapter.

Chapter Two, The Crash and the Role of Intellectuals in the Great Depression, consists of two sections. The first traces the chain of events after October 24, 1929. The second places the intellectual and cultural workers in that historical process. The turn leftward of the middle-class was not an accidental occurrence, but rather, a response to political, economic, and social conditions of the decade. Hopefully, this chapter clarifies what the forces were that pushed the intellectual leftward, and the historical circumstances that surrounded the John Reed Clubs.

The two sections of the second chapter required different types of research. The basic overview of the Depression was organized from a thorough examination of numerous history and labor books, including Richard Boyer's Labor's Untold Story, Irving Bernstein's The Lean Years, and Jeremy Beecher's Strike. William Z. Foster's History of the Communist Party of the United States, provided most of the information concerning the philosophy and strategy of the CPUSA during the Depression. Additional insights were gathered from reading

microfilm copies of the Communist Party newspaper, the Daily Worker, from the years 1929-1935. The second section of this chapter, which deals with the role of the left-wing intellectual in the Depression, was gleaned from various literary histories, including Aaron's Writers on the Left and Rideout's The Radical Novel in the United States. Certain collections of memoirs proved to be invaluable for acquiring a sense of what these writers thought about themselves. As We Saw the Thirties, edited by Rita Simon, and the introduction to Proletarian Literature in the United States, were two of the more important sources used. Above all, magazine articles, especially from the New Masses and Partisan Review, offered numerous discussions on the subject of the intellectual and cultural worker in social change. Particularly interesting was a series in the New Masses (1932), entitled, "Symposium: How I Came To Communism", which consisted of many important literary figures examining their own reasons for joining the communist movement.

Chapter Three, The John Reed Clubs: A Historical Reclamation, is the body of the study. Examined in these pages are: the political perspectives and internal debates of the organization, the nature of factionalism within the Clubs, the composition of the group,

some of the major formative events and conferences, the degree of Communist Party affiliation of Club members, the style and methods the Clubs used to serve the left, and the intentions and aspirations of the Club and its ideology. This chapter was the most complicated to research, being that, to the knowledge of the author, no such previous study exists. There were no precedents to look to. The research took many forms. One way was to search out leads gained from footnotes in some of the previously named texts. Notes were taken from the existing material and organized into one place. A thorough reading of magazines and periodicals from the period was required. The New Masses proved to be one of the most valuable sources. Not only did issues, from 1929-1935, include John Reed Club notes, but Club statements and articles were also published. International Literature, published by the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, in its issues from 1933-1935, gave extensive coverage to the proletarian literature movement in the United States. The available issues of the John Reed Club little magazines also provided the researcher with information about the organization on a regional basis.

Chapter Three demanded searching out John Reed Club documents, leaflets, and pamphlets from private collections and library archives. The Special Archives Col-

lection at the Stanford University Hoover Institute on War, Peace, and Revolution, had in its holding, a number of Club notes and original leaflets. The Tanimente Library in New York was another invaluable source for information, including copies of the John Reed Club Art School Catalogue, 1934-1935. Two copies of the John Reed Club National Bulletin were found in the Special Collections at UCLA's Undergraduate Research Library. Some of the old magazines and periodicals were the property of private collections, stored in backrooms and garages.

There were many obstacles and limitations to the research of Chapter Three. The inability of the author to travel to New York is perhaps the most important. Since that city was the center for the Clubs, it follows that amongst all the ex-members who still reside in New York, there would be a multitude of documents and interviews. Unfortunately, due to lack of funds, the trip could not be made. Also, information concerning the later days of the Clubs, including the Second National Conference, was scarce, as was material concerning the growth of the smaller, local chapters. To obtain a more complete picture of the composition of the Clubs, and on the role of blacks and women in the group, many more interviews and correspondence would need to have been conducted, and that time was simply not within

the limits of this study.

The fourth chapter, The John Reed Clubs and the Proletarian Literature Movement, is divided into two sections. The first part examines the controversy surrounding definitions of proletarian literature, and concludes with a brief look at the characteristics of the American radical novel of the 1930's. Some of the best sources for this section were articles and writings published in magazines like Modern Quarterly, Scribners, Partisan Review, Saturday Review of Literature, New Republic, International Literature, and the New Masses. Certain theoretical questions dealt with in the chapter were researched by reading Lenin's On Literature and Art and On Culture and Cultural Revolution, Marx and Engels' Literature and Art, Georg Lukacs' The Historical Novel, Antonio Gramsci's The Modern Prince, and two collections, Marxism and Art, edited by Maynard Solomon, and Art and Society, edited by Adolfo Vasquez. An examination of the particularities of the American experience were offered by Gilbert's Writers and Partisans, Fay Blake's The Strike in the American Novel, and Rideout's The Radical Novel in the United States. Considerable background was gained from reading anthologies of proletarian literature, such as, New Masses: An Anthology, edited by Joe North, and Proletarian Liter-

ature in the United States, edited by Hicks, Freeman, and Gold.

The second section of Chapter Four examines the numerous little magazines that sprung up throughout the country, under the guidance and direction of the John Reed Clubs. Time is also spent reviewing the history of the largest Club magazine, the Partisan Review. Finding the magazines proved to be the most difficult aspect of researching this chapter. Although some libraries had random samplings, the majority of these little publications have been lost, or perhaps it is more accurate to say, they have not been located by the author as of yet. Few conclusive statements can be drawn from the limited number of publications the author was able to read. Apart from the scarcity of material, it is outside the parameters of this thesis to encompass a detailed analysis of the contents and style of the publications that were available. Certainly that information, in and of itself, would be an informative and exhaustive study. Essentially, the second section of Chapter Four is an overview of the John Reed Club magazines, and does not attempt a profound analysis of the content of either the magazines or special publications and pamphlets produced by the organization.

Chapter Five, The John Reed Clubs and the Popular

Front, discusses how the Clubs, and the literary left in general, were affected by the CPUSA change to the policy of the Popular Front in 1935. Within that discussion, there is a brief look at the League of American Writers which was created out of the dissolution of the Clubs. The chapter closes on an examination of what happened to the literary left movement and to those artists and writers affiliated with it. Information on the politics of the Popular Front was gathered from secondary sources like Foster's The History of the Communist Party in the United States, and Fernando Claudin's The Communist International. Party publications and literature, including the Daily Worker, proved to be useful sources for this chapter also. Little information was available on the actual ending of the Clubs, and there appeared to be hesitancy and confusion amongst the interviewees concerning the organization's demise. It was difficult for the researcher to organize a clear picture of precisely what happened during this period.

Chapter Six, Summary and Recommendation for Those Working in Radical Media Today, sums up the major points of the thesis, and concludes with suggestions for those individuals and organizations who are currently concerned with questions of art and politics, culture and revolution. The Clubs were unique in

their attempt to fuse artistic creativity and political activism; to organize artists and writers within a political movement; and, to promote proletarian literature within this country. Since many people are again struggling with this very issue, hopefully this research can reveal valuable historical lessons from which to move forward.

This study is important in that, perhaps for the first time, a concise description and evaluation of the John Reed Clubs has been made. Through historical research, the thesis presents that organization in a positive manner, and sheds light on the role of revolutionary writers in the Depression. The undercurrent of the entire thesis counters past distortions and hostilities with evidence and facts to the contrary.

The purpose of the study is to bring to the consciousness of today's radical cultural workers an understanding of their own predecessors. For that, it is called a historical reclamation. It shows the viability of organizing artists and writers in a political manner, and the necessity for developing an American proletarian culture.

Hopefully, the significance of this thesis covers even greater ground. The impact of this study rests on the assumption that people can, and will, learn from

history. The importance of the John Reed Clubs was that they demonstrated that political movements must realize the necessity of cultural expression. Not an art amorphously associated with political struggle, but as integrally connected to it. The distance between artists and activists is not inevitable.

Certainly, this is not an all inclusive study. Due to concrete factors like time and money, there are limitations. The artists of the John Reed Clubs have been only briefly touched upon, and they deserve much more attention. The composition and make-up of the Clubs leave room for future investigation. The lack of adequate materials and the failings of memory, made the section on the Club's dissolution insufficient. Furthermore, the thesis as a whole, has limitations. In some ways, it is a case study of one political/cultural organization, and generalizations drawn out of the experiences of one group have the possibility of not applying to another.

Also, the Depression of the 1930's was a period of American history, not unique for its economic crisis, but unique in its intensity. Using the experience of writers and artists in that decade, might be misleading for those working in media and culture today.

Yet, for all its shortcomings, the thesis repre-

sents a beginning. Hopefully, others can build from this initial study, and continue the process of discovering and redefining the past.

NOTES

1. taken from May Days, Genevieve Taggard, New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925, p260.
2. John Dos Passos' 1919, pxiv.

## Chapter One

Great writers are generally born in the wombs of great crisis. They reflect all the colorfulness and all the restless dynamics of the crisis, and the main-spring of their work is their anxiety to find some kind of a solution, a consoling answer to the burning questions of life.

Lunacharsky<sup>1</sup>

JOHN REED: A POET, A COMMUNIST.

For all the greatness of the man, and the powerfulness of his works, John Reed has been consciously obscured from his rightful place in both literary and political history. Yet, the mere smattering of information that has seeped through, has allowed us to see his life not as a mystery, but as an example of unity between theory and practice, art and politics. Years after his death in 1920, Reed is still firmly entrenched in the minds and hearts not only of many North Americans, but also in the world progressive movement in general.

What, in our search to rediscover our past, brings us around to John Reed again? What did he mean to

those writers and artists in the Thirties who organized themselves under the banner of his name? Certainly, to understand the John Reed Clubs and the literary left movement of the Depression, one must first look at Reed himself. What were the forces that moved his life, and how did he react to them?

In writing about John Reed, a young communist writer of the 1930's says:

The fact that John Reed wrote Ten Days That Shock the World, the fact that he devoted his writing to the portrayal of the class struggle in many parts of the world, and the fact that all his interests and desires were aligned with the proletarian revolution amply justify the use of the name for an organization of writers and artists. But, what is less commonly known and too frequently submerged in appreciation of ideology, is the enormous literary value of his writing... when writers organize under the name of John Reed, they are not only paying tribute to the proletarian consciousness of a man, but also recognizing some of the finest and most beautiful writing of the 20th century. 2

On October 20, 1887, John Reed was born into one of the wealthiest, most upper-crust families of Portland, Oregon. The comfort and ease of his boyhood allowed him the time to pursue his passion for reading, especially history. At nine years old, while writing the Comic History of the United States, he made up his mind to be a writer.<sup>3</sup> Reed's father was the maverick in the aristocratic clan. With political leanings towards the

new social consciousness nurtured by the muckrakers, and with a sharp wit, Reed Sr., scorned the city's bluebloods. John admired his father's fighting qualities as he antagonized the 'stuffed shirts', and between father and son there was much warmth and affection.<sup>4</sup>

In 1906, John Reed entered Harvard. The aristocrats of the institution felt that the boy was too unconventional and rebellious. Years later, he was remembered by schoolmates as someone who didn't quite fit in, someone who never learned the difference between "cricket and non-cricket."<sup>5</sup> While Reed was repelled by their narrowness and pretentiousness, he was aching for instant recognition. With few social diversions, he threw himself into writing, and the first publication to welcome his contributions, was the Lampoon, a bimonthly humor magazine. It is interesting to note that one of Reed's earliest short stories, and the only one set in a Harvard background, was called "The Red Hand."<sup>6</sup> The story ends when the narrator explodes a bomb in the office of the Dean of Harvard. Such an act of terrorism, beyond the dreams of most campus radicals in the early 20th century, indicated the sense of hostility that Reed felt towards elitism and the institutions that breed it.

Although he never joined the Harvard Socialist Club, led by Walter Lippman, Reed was very much impressed

by their boldness against school authority. He found bonds with the Harvard insurgents, who criticized the faculty, attacked the private fraternities, and charged that the school was not paying campus workers a living wage. His sympathies were beginning to include more than just himself, but to encompass all the victims of snobbery and conventionalism. Just as many college graduates of the 1960's had their lives and perspectives changed by their experiences of campus activism, John Reed left Harvard with a sense of discontent, and with adventurous eyes open to test the world. Graduating in 1910, his creativeness and spirit were matched against the contradiction of wanting the rewards and recognition of the system, while at the same time, being wary of the cost.

After several months of traveling through Europe, living in the Latin Quarter and on the French Left Bank, filled with numerous experiences with sailors, hoboes, prostitutes, peasants, and police, John Reed came back to settle in New York's Greenwich Village. It was the summer of 1911, Reed was 23.

Voicing a strong aversion to the accepted conventionalism, the Village offered the declassed youth of the 1910's and 1920's, what Haight-Asbury gave to the generation of the early Sixties. It was the Beat.

Bohemia was a subculture of avant-garde fads and attitudes, of art and free-form poetry, which was somehow geographically separated from the rest of society. It was a haven where sensitive men and women from all parts of the country, at odds with their environment for one reason or another, tried to live by codes of conduct which they thought would one day prevail. They were an artistic vanguard for sure, and a political vanguard of sorts. Describing the sights and delights of Greenwich Village, John Reed wrote:

Yet we are free who live in Washington Square,  
 We dare to think as Uptown wouldn't dare,  
 Blazing our nights with arguments uproarious;  
 What care we for a dull old world censorious  
 When each is sure he'll fashion something  
 glorious? 7

At home or at work, they might be outcast and insulted, but in the bohemia of Greenwich Village, they were a community of pioneers. Whatever differences the villagers had amongst themselves, their common bond was their dislike of rigid moral standards and their repulsion of social tradition.

John Reed found comfort in the Village. His days were hectic and friends were near. Lincoln Steffens moved into the apartment on the second floor of Reed's building, and at all hours of the day or night, the two could be found talking, laughing, or in serious discus-

7

sions of ideas and theories. Reed experimented with short stories, poetry, and sketches of city life. He was a creative, rebellious writer, and those months in Greenwich Village offered him the opportunity and freedom to explore. Joseph Freeman, in examining the relationship of intellectuals to the cult of Bohemia, writes:

A writer from the middle classes does not, as a rule, go directly to the proletariat. If he is separated from the class of his origin by political differences, he is equally cut off from the class of his choice by cultural differences. Which is perhaps only saying that he cautiously puts one foot into the new class while retaining the other in the old. Chiefly, the young radical intellectual seeks out people like himself, men and women saturated in bourgeois culture, who are crossing from one class to another. Bohemia is the customary residence. 8

John Reed, with the help of Lincoln Steffens, started his first professional job on the American magazine. He worked, and grew, and wrote:

New York was an enchanted city to me. I wandered down the streets, from the soaring towers of downtown, along the East River docks, smelling spices and clipper ships of the past, through the swarming East Side - alien town within towns - where the smoky flare of miles of glamorous pushcarts make a splendor of shabby streets; the big Jewish women bawling their wares under the roaring great bridges...the girls that walked the streets were friends of mine, and the drunken sailors off ships new come from the world's end...In New York I first loved, and I first wrote of the things I saw... 9

New York pushed Reed left. His sketches about the city's night life, snobs, middle-class, and prostitutes, were filled with sensitivity and humor, and tinged with spirit and a sense of defiance. But, the dualism between his daily life as a newspaperman and his creative urge of artistry, were further complicated by his growing separation from bourgeois society, and a developing consciousness of the inequality and injustice around him. Reed began searching out alternative channels where he could publish the expression of his new consciousness.

After having several stories and prose accepted by the Masses, Reed was elected to the board of that magazine, and shared the job of canvassing poetry contributions with Louis Untermeyer. Although the Masses' defiance of the ruling class identified with political struggle and the revolutionary movements, many of its thoughts and attitudes still catered to the traditions of Bohemia. At the time, the integration of the two made sense to Reed, for if Bohemia was a refuge for people seeking to escape the demands of a standardized, bourgeois society, than the Masses should be a definite part of that emotional and political sensibility. The magazine believed that the liberation of the working-class would accompany the downfall of bourgeois morals. Economic exploitation and capitalism were con-

nected to puritanism in art.

John Reed's connection with the Masses placed him in the very center of the Greenwich Village movement. Through its offices swept theories from Marxism, anarchism, industrial unionism, feminism, Freudianism, and all shades of artistic radicalism. Behind the theories was an incredible roster of talented and creative people: Amy Lowell, Carl Sandburg, Susan Glaspell, William Carlos Williams, Robert Minor, Upton Sinclair, James Oppenheimer, and foreign contributors like Bertrand Russell, Maxim Gorki, Romain Rolland, and Pablo Picasso.

Reed's ideas and actions altered greatly during the eighteen months he spent in the Village. The Masses hastened what was perhaps an inevitability. Reed's knowledge of political movements widened and he began to make the first signs of commitment to the struggles of the working-class. After hearing that the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) were in desperate need of outside help to support their strike at the Paterson Textile Mills (1913), John Reed decided to go to the strike and help publicize the worker's cause. His impressions:

There's a war in Paterson, New Jersey.  
But it's a curious kind of war. All the  
violence is the work of one side - the  
mill owners. Their servants, the police,

club unresisting men and women and ride down law-abiding crowds. Their paid mercenaries, the armed detectives, shoot and kill innocent people. Their newspapers, the Paterson Press and the Paterson Call, publish incendiary and crime-inciting appeals to mob violence against the strike leaders. Their tool, Recorder Carroll, deals out heavy sentences to peaceful pickets that the police net gathers up. They control absolutely the police, the press, the courts. 10

The Paterson Textile Mill strike was not only an important event for the I.W.W., but also made a profound mark on John Reed. He marveled at the strength, courage, and commitment of the strikers. During the four days he spent in the Paterson County jail, Reed met Big Bill Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Carlos Tresca, and other leaders. He recalls:

They attracted me. I liked their understanding of the workers, their revolutionary thought, the boldness of their dream, the way the immense crowds took fire and came alive under their leadership. Here was a drama of change, democracy on the march, a war of the people. 11

The Paterson Textile Mills shook Reed's faith in the system. He saw the lives of men and women crushed, and he saw beauty in their unity to fight back. Reed searched for a way that he could make the situation more real to those not at the Paterson Mills, and to make the aid more concrete.

In May, 1913, the concept of the Paterson Pageant was born. The idea was to dramatize the conditions

of the workers at Madison Square Garden and use over one thousand strikers to play themselves. Reed took charge of the script and staging of the production. Even with police harrassment, rehearsals continued every day in large, vacant lots. On June 7, 1913, red electric lights blazed the letters "I.W.W." from the four sides of the Madison Square Tower, and the performance began to an overflow audience of 12,000. It was hailed as a great success and major innovation in theater by the Greenwich Village critics, but the established press claimed that Reed had brought revolution into the heart of the metropolitan area.

Already, the line of demarcation between Reed and the American ruling class was becoming increasingly well-defined. Revolutionary committment, though, are not made overnight. While Paterson shook Reed's faith in the system, it didn't provide a clear alternative, nor establish a long term personal committment. Reed left for Europe on a trip financed by his lover, Mabel Dodge, in mid-1913. Although he claims to have pursued the trip as one more adventure, the couple left on a first-class luxury cruiser.

After his return to New York, John Reed was asked to cover the Mexican Revolution for Metropolitan. It was late in 1913, and Reed, at 26, considered this to be

his big opportunity. His fears about a new country, different language, and unfamiliar customs, soon evaporated into love for the spirit of Villa's troops. If nothing else, their desire to rid themselves of the oppressors who assassinated Francisco Madero, was reason enough for Reed to defend them. During his months with the Division of the North, he was not only a witness and chronicler, but a participant in many of the incidents he was later to record in Insurgent Mexico.<sup>12</sup> The book, first published in 1914, was out of print for many years, and is almost entirely unknown to contemporary readers. In an Argentine edition of Insurgent Mexico, Alfredo Varela starts the preface with these words:

Some books seem to be strangely unlucky. For reasons which have nothing to do with public acceptance, they are taken out of circulation and unjustly relegated to oblivion. Some, propelled by their own great value, finally leave the shelves to receive the acclaim and popularity they have always deserved. That is exactly what happened to Insurgent Mexico. They tried to silence it in vain. John Reed's incorruptable voice is raised now over the deliberately imposed confusion and oblivion. 13

Reed's numerous articles from Mexico established him as a top journalist of the day, and gave him some of his earliest training in 'political' journalism.

In the heat of these liberation battles was forged the noble revolutionary spirit of John Reed, master among guerilla journalists, a breed which has produced a Burchett,

a Debray, and a Gerda Taro, the courageous  
newsgirl who fell in the Spanish Civil  
War...14

And the book itself, is a testament to the artistry  
and perceptiveness of its author. Insurgent Mexico,  
apart from simply its journalistic detail, captures  
the flavor and spirit of the Mexican Revolution, and  
tells the story of an American radical's reaction to  
that struggle. The writing was not only a means of  
self-expression, but also a manner in which Reed could  
educate and influence the North American public.

On his return to the United States, in April 1914,  
John Reed spoke out fiercely against American interven-  
tion in Mexico, and defended the Revolution and its  
leaders. Reed now recognized his responsibility to  
political and social change to be a lasting commitment.  
He returned as somewhat of a celebrity. And, he  
returned with a vision of a "new, great day," and the  
possibility of merging oneself with the "majestic  
sweep of the masses."<sup>15</sup>

In that same month, April 1914, John Reed and Max  
Eastman, went to Ludlow, Colorado, to investigate the  
miner's strike which the Rockefeller interests drowned  
in the blood of workers. Women, men, and children,  
were burned and murdered as their tent colony was  
leveled to the ground. Reed painstakingly traced the

interconnecting web between the mines, the company officials, the owners, the governor, and Big Business. His reporting left no doubt about the relationship, nor about his own commitment. It was the Ludlow experience that Michael Gold wrote about several years later, when he said:

In the IWW the fellowworkers would tar and feather any intellectual who appeared among them. The word intellectual became synonymous with bastard...this tradition is dying in the American revolutionary movement and Jack Reed helped destroy this prejudice. He identified so completely with the working-class; he forgot his Harvard education, his genius, his popularity, his gifted body and mind so completely that no one else remembered them anymore; there was no gap between Jack Reed and the workers. 16

He had gone one step too far for his old Harvard buddies. "His sympathies were now with the great unwashed, and moreover, he represented a forfeiture of his social rank." <sup>17</sup> It might be permissible for an artist or intellectual to maintain leftist beliefs, but to act on them, and to incite other people to act, made Reed more than a mere public nuisance. Joseph Freeman summed up the attitude as:

It was pardonable for an artist to work for the proletarian revolution as an artist; it was silly for him to become an active fighter in the Communist vanguard; to transform himself into a politician. 18

Reed was sent by Metropolitan in the summer of

1914, to report on the Western Front in Europe. He detected early signs of partisanship among the ruling class circles of the United States. Reed knew, and said, that it was a 'trader's war,' and his analysis was confirmed whenever he went to England, France, or Germany.

Reed described the horrors of war; he showed us what military obedience and discipline did to human beings. The curse of mankind was militarism. Now, no force stood up against it. Christianity was bankrupt. Anarchism and international socialism were equally futile as incentives to peace. Anarchists and socialists in Europe were all trained soldiers. Americans also faced the danger of militarism. At this moment they were talking about building a standing army... John Reed, for one, refused to join. He had no illusions about the war. 19

John Reed believed there was no way the war could be justified. He was depressed and brooding as he prepared to return to the States. Drinking and smoking too much, he realized painfully that the carefree atmosphere of social experimentation that he had grown-up in, had failed to teach him what the Western Front demonstrated about his own limitations, and about the unpretty dynamics of social change. His health was poor. His family and friends were sending him stinging letters about his anti-war position. His mother wrote:

It gives me a shock when your father's son can say that he cares nothing for his country and his flag...As things are now, anyone...against his country is fighting for its enemy...I do not want you to fight - Heaven knows - for us, but I do not want you to fight against us - by word or by pen - and I can't help saying that if you do...I shall be deeply ashamed...I think you will find that most of your friends and sympathizers are of foreign birth; very few are real Americans. 20

Reed's anti-war position was also causing a considerable amount of conflict within his own mind. He felt that the workers had not asserted themselves strongly enough against the hysteria of which they were becoming victims. He searched for answers to understand this inertia, and concluded that it was the political bankruptcy of their leadership, both domestically and internationally. Reed was not alone in his questioning of the worker's movement.

While his attitudes opposing militarism and the war of the System were clearly socialistic, and Reed was a member of the American Socialist Party, discord among its members created splits within the ranks of the international organization. The orthodox position of the Seventh International Socialist Congress (1907), resolved that the struggle against militarism could not be separated from the class struggle; that wars between capitalist states were the outcome of their economic competition in general; and, that wars would not, and

could not, cease without the abolition of capitalism. The Stuttgart Resolution was reiterated as the Socialist Party line in 1912, yet in 1913, a majority of Socialist Deputies in the Reichstag voted war credits to the Kaiser. This betrayal of socialist principles sent reverberations throughout Party organizations in every country.

As the war continued, everywhere within the ranks of socialism there were splits. Leaders of a number of Socialist Parties supported the preparedness campaigns and the war effort. The American Socialist Party recalled their presidential candidate in 1916, and formally put forth a pro-war position.

Reed, along with other advocates of peace, like the Women's Peace Party, the American Union Against Militarism, and the Committee for Democratic Control, tried to stage rallies, circulate petitions, and write editorials. Yet, there was a nagging feeling that it was all in vain. When, on April 2, 1916, President Wilson declared America's entry into the war, Reed publically announced: "This is not my war, and I will not support it. This is not my war, and I will have nothing to do with it."<sup>21</sup>

He writes about this period in his autobiographical sketch "Almost Thirty," the following:

I wish with all my heart that the proletariat would rise and take their rights - I don't see how else they will get them. Political relief is slow to come and year to year the opportunities of peaceful protest and lawful action are curtailed. But, I am not sure anymore that the working-class is capable of revolution, peaceful or otherwise; the workers are so bitterly hostile to each other, so badly led and so blind to their own class interests. The war has been a terrible shatterer of faith in economic and political idealism. And yet, I cannot give up the idea that out of democracy will be born the new world - richer, braver, freer, and more beautiful. 22

Having seen friends, radicals, and intellectuals, turn to the call of patriotism and war, Reed might have slipped into cynicism, but the above excerpt shows that he still carried with him the hope of a new and better world. At about the same time as his depression was being manifested, a major change was taking place on the international scene which would refortify his hopes.

A revolution had begun in Russia. By the summer of 1917, Reed felt that he must see developments there for himself, and in September of that year, he arrived in Petrograd. Sent to Russia with credentials as a reporter for the New York Call, and other socialist publications, Reed was filled with vigor and excitement. When Lenin spoke at the Second Congress of the Soviets (Nov. 8, 1917), "We shall now proceed to con-

struct the socialist order," Reed leaped up with the rest and suddenly, "...by common impulse, we found ourselves on our feet, mumbling together into the smooth lifting unison of the 'Internationale'..."<sup>23</sup> No longer did questions exist in his mind about the revolutionary potential of the working class. Reed saw that the masses of people were not only capable of great dreams, but had the power to make them come true.

From his first moment in Russia, til his departure in February, 1918, Reed wrote down his observations, opinions, and ideas. And for the next three years, the events of those days would fill his time. He wrote thousands of words about Russia, about the land and people, about worker's control of factories, about Bolshevism, about Lenin, Trotsky, Lunacharsky, about the theory and practice of revolution, and about the complexity of international affairs.

Paterson, Ludlow, Mexico, and World War I, had all prepared him for the Russian Revolution. He arrived as a qualified reporter and a seasoned revolutionary. He knew what to look for, and how to look at it. Out of his artistry and his committment came Ten Days That Shook the World.<sup>24</sup> Acclaimed as a masterpiece of reportage, the book was the first major account of the Russian Revolution in the United States. In the intro-

duction Reed writes:

In the struggle my sympathies were not neutral. But in telling the story of those great days, I have tried to see events with the eye of a conscientious reporter, interested in setting down the truth. 25

The book not only broke the cordon of censorship thrown around Russia by a bitterly hostile, capitalist world, but it also became a force for rousing others in the same way that Reed had been stirred.

John Reed came back to the United States in April, 1918, to face trial with the other editors of the Masses, on charges of conspiracy to interfere with the induction of military personnel and to promote insubordination. The earliest anti-war position of the magazine was now considered to be treasonous. While the majority of charges were eventually dropped, the episode is indicative of the tremendous patriotic hysteria which had gripped the country. The State's repression was rampant. Radicals and the foreign-born were rounded up and deported. Illegal search and seizures were common. John Reed's papers from Russia were confiscated. The big dailies and magazines shut him out. Whereas, Reed had been a celebrated journalist and writer not more than two years earlier, he could now not find an inch of space that would print his work. A witness to

one of the greatest events of our time was made an out-cast. Perhaps Reed's own words, in a letter to Lincoln Steffens, in June, 1918, best describes the period:

My dear Steff-

Your letter just reached me. I have been on the point of writing you many times, but did not know where to reach you...I have heard stray accounts of your adventures. I think you must have been suffering a good deal - perhaps more than anybody. Wish I could have a good talk with you.

...I have been making many speeches about Russia, and tomorrow go to Chicago and Detroit to address meetings there. I started a big newspaper syndicate series, like Louise's (Louise Bryant, Reed's wife), but the newspapers were afraid to touch them: some of them sent the stuff back after it was in type. Then Collier's took a story, put it in type, and sent it back. Oswald Villard told me he would be suppressed if he published John Reed!

I have a contract with MacMillian to publish a book, but the State Department took away all my papers when I came home, and up to date has absolutely refused to return any of them...

I am therefore unable to write a word of the greatest story of my life, and one of the greatest in the world. I am blocked. Do you know any way to have my papers sent to me? If they don't come pretty soon it will be too late for my book - MacMillian won't take it.

I was arrested the other day in Philadelphia, trying to speak on the street, and am held for court in September on the charges of 'inciting to riot, inciting to assault and battery, and inciting to seditious remarks'...

I feel sort of flat and stale. My kidney isn't well -- I suppose that is why. Mother writes daily threatening suicide if I continue to besmirch the family name. My brother is going to France next week...

Excuse the depression. I don't see why I chose this low, grey moment in which to write you. I felt pretty good this morning and probably will tomorrow morning...25

Reed persisted in his course of voicing the truth about Russia. He lectured, toured, wrote, and organized. Threats and arrests couldn't stop him. With indefatigable energy, Reed became one of the best known and most dynamic young leaders of the left movement in the United States.

It is particularly important at this point, to briefly sketch what was taking place within the left, for it was to set the background not only for Reed and his political position, but also for the American Communist Party, which was to be founded during these years.

Powerful political positions were bringing about a split in the American Socialist Party by 1919,<sup>27</sup> and they were fundamentally products of World War I and the Russian Revolution. Since the beginning of the War, there had been expressed acute discontent within the Party of the pro-war leadership, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. Also, there was a lot of resentment amongst the Party's more left-wing membership for the

compromising manner in which Morris Hillquit and his followers (the more rightist membership of the Party) had handled the question of the Russian Revolution. The leftists felt that the Party leadership, the moderates and rightists, had given only conditional and hedged support to the struggle of the Russian working-class. The leftists demanded a much more forthright and direct position.

Apart from these two issues of the Russian Revolution and World War I, there were internal splits on the question of the international affiliation and political tendencies of the American Socialist Party. The leftists urged that the Party unite with Lenin's Third, or Communist, International, as opposed to the Second, which was considered by many treasonous for its war position. Hillquit, and the rightists, took an active initiative in trying to put the shattered and split Second International back on its feet. So, one faction was fighting to stay within the existing organization, while the other demanded joining with the new force of the Third International. Included within this split, was a debate on the question of tactics to use in the current domestic situation, where there existed a need to develop a strong, vibrant, movement to counter the intense post-war offensive of the American ruling class.

The leftwing of the socialist Party was in a strong position in this growing internal split. It clearly had a majority of the rank-and-file members. Most of the young leaders, including John Reed, sided with the leftist tendency.

In New York, the leftwing made rapid headway in winning numerous locals of the Party. When, in February, 1919, the New York Socialist Party refused to censure a local alderman for supporting the war, representatives of 20 locals came together, organized a conference, published a manifesto, and with Reed as editor, issued the New York Communist. The New York split was indicative of what was happening across the country. In the coming national elections of the Party, the leftists won sweeping victories. It is interesting to note, that one of these victories was the election of John Reed as representative to the Second International.

On June 21, 1919, the national council of the leftwing formulated a declaration of principles. Yet, even within themselves, their position was not harmonious. Some felt that a new Communist Party must be formed immediately. Others, including Reed, felt that the correct tactic was to secure control of the Socialist Party. According to William Z. Foster, in The History of the Communist Party in the United States, it was the

second position which was more flexible and correct, and designed to secure the greatest body of supporters for the new party. The ultimate split with the Socialist Party in 1919 gave birth to both the Communist Party, and the Communist Labor Party, of which Reed was one of the most influential leaders. These two groups eventually united in 1921, and formed the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA).

It was in the midst of these domestic political struggles that Reed returned to Russia, in late 1919. When he attempted to return back to the States, he was arrested in Finland over a bureaucratic technicality, and held in solitary confinement for many long weeks. The imprisonment took a tremendous toll on his health. When he returned to Russia to assist in preparations for the Communist International Congress, to open July, 1920, his physical state was extremely worn down. In Moscow, he took several days off from his busy schedule to be with his visiting wife. Reed fell ill. At first it seemed like the flu, but was later diagnosed as typhus. In the blockaded country there was not the medicine or available skills to care for him. On October 17, 1920, John Reed died.

Written some years later, by a John Reed Club member, was the following tribute:

O John Reed =  
 He had youth and beauty  
 And now he is dead.  
 I shook his hand once,  
 I saw him smile,  
 And I heard him speak  
 With the voice of a big boy.  
 I introduced him once from the platform  
 Calling him Jack Reed.  
 And now, he is dead.

He brought his great heart to suffering Russia,  
 He wanted to heal the wounds,  
 And it was the blockade which brought a plague  
 And struck down Jack Reed.  
 His name is not taught in the schools,  
 For he was a rebel.  
 The bourgeoisie have not raised a monument to him;  
 This they reserve  
 For the politicians, the generals, the philan-  
 thropists.  
 But in Soviet Russia  
 Soldiers of the Red Army  
 Stood over his body.  
 The crowds followed his coffin,  
 And a woman's heart was bleeding,  
 And a woman's eyes were weeping.  
 Soldiers of the Red Army -

Tall as he was tall,  
 Strong as he was strong,  
 Brave as he was brave,  
 Marched in his wake.  
 And they fired the salute over his grave  
 Beside the Kremlin in Moscow.  
 His death was a birth. 28

\* \* \*

Perhaps such a brief overview of John Reed's life cannot do justice to the man or his works, but if it succeeded in giving even the slightest insights into Reed as a writer and as a revolutionary, it has served a function. Yet, any attempt to look back on his life, is only useful when lessons can be drawn from it, and

when it shed light on the development of other revolutionary writers in other decades.

It was not accidental that revolutionary writers of the early Depression years took John Reed's name as their banner. He was significant to them, and perhaps now we are more equipped to understand what the importance was. John Reed's life, actions, and beliefs, symbolized to future writers, that combination of art and politics which bourgeois ideology claims cannot exist. That ideology which says that if one is a politician one cannot be an artist, and if one is an artist, his/her creativity will suffer with political direction. John Reed proved that the two could be united, and the John Reed Clubs of the 1930's reaffirmed that spirit.

John Reed believed in class struggle. He also believed in beauty in art and sensitivity in writing. Reed felt that art rose with socialism, and that the revolutionary battle of the working-class needed cultural expression. His style was filled with compassion and humor. Even Reed's most ardent critics admit to the mastery of Ten Days That Shook the World. But Reed wasn't satisfied with simply writing about revolution. He was an outspoken activist and assumed leadership positions with great responsibility.

John Reed exemplified the path of a middle-class intellectual, through the alienation of Bohemia into a proletarianized revolutionary. Perhaps he represented to the writers of the Thirties a glimpse of hope, a possible road out of their own vacillation. It was certainly not an easy road for Reed, nor for anyone who chooses it. Many of the Depression writers never did reach the goal. Many turned back frightened and saddened. Yet, it was under the banner of John Reed's name that they strived for that goal.

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21. Ibid., p267.
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23. Reed. Education of John Reed. p 34.
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25. Ibid., p xxxviii.
26. Rosenstone. Romantic Revolutionary. pp 219-320.
27. much of the material relating to the split between the American Socialist Party and its leftwing, and the birth of the Communist Party, was taken from William Z. Foster. The History of the American Communist Party. New York. 1952.
28. poem by Simon Felshin and found in American Testament. p 261.

## Chapter Two

We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of our land. The poorhouse is vanishing from among us.

1  
Herbert Hoover

THE CRASH AND THE ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS  
IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

With those words of Herbert Hoover, the Golden Era of the Twenties fell into the Great Depression. On Black Thursday - October 24, 1929 - the bottom fell out of the stock market. Five days later, while the disaster became worse, J.P. Morgan and Company assured the public that the economy was sound. But the gigantic losses suffered that day, and for the days and years to come, spoke differently.

Fear and anxiety replaced the prosperous, speculative climate of the Twenties. The United States had experienced other economic depressions in the past, and would enter many more in the future, but the Great Crash of 1929 was like no other. "Before it had run its course,

farm prices were 40% of previous levels, value of exports devalued 1/3, industrial production was halved, and the balance sheet of corporate enterprises revealed a deficit of more than 15 billion dollars."<sup>2</sup>

By 1932, the physical output of manufacturing had fallen to 54% of what it had been in 1929; a shade less than the production of 1913.<sup>3</sup> Farmers, who had seen little of the prosperity of the previous decade, were devastated by the Depression. The heavy industries, like auto, were practically idled. Steel ran, at times, less than 20% of its capacity. The Great Depression shattered the business structure. It exposed some of the underlying weaknesses of the overexpansion of industry, the maldistribution of income, the overdependence on consumer goods, and an unsound banking structure.

A year after the Crash, 6 million people walked the streets looking for work. By 1932, there were 11 million jobless in New York, in Cleveland 50% were jobless, in Akron the unemployed reached 60%, and in Toledo, Ohio, 80%. In the three years following the Crash, 100,000 workers, on the average, were fired every week. By 1933, 17,000,000 Americans were unemployed,<sup>4</sup> and the savings of hundreds of thousands of average men and women were totally destroyed. The statistical picture

of the 1930's is familiar to all, but it is perhaps these numerical abstractions which can least tell the story.

The Depression touched every area of American life, from the darkening of off Broadway lights, to the endless lines of men and women waiting for soup and bread, to the hundreds of bankrupt businessmen jumping from skyscraper windows, to the poverty stricken Hoovervilles that lined the garbage dumps on the outskirts of every major American city. Not only was the economic structure thrown into profound chaos, but the entire social fabric was ripping at the seams. Families were uprooted. Transiency, in search of jobs or just endless wandering, became a national epidemic. Homes and family heirlooms were lost. The number of marriages decreased, and the birthrate slipped. Hundreds of thousands of working women returned to their homes. Others turned to prostitution. <sup>5</sup> An earthquake had hit Olympus, and the people were shaken.

To all of this, President Hoover spoke of local government initiative and private charity. National committees of volunteer were organized to solicit funds, but he was set firmly against any proposals for federal relief. Within a few months, it became obvious that the flimsy policies of Hoover were woefully

inadequate. Private charity could not deal with the situation, and municipal governments soon exhausted their treasuries. Although various senators proposed different types of federal programs, the President steadfastly refused to seek a new course. Even his one piece of 'progressive' legislation, the Norris-La Guardia Act, outlawing yellow-dog contracts and permitting freedom of association without employer's interference, proved to be too narrow and unenforceable to meet the coming tide.

In the summer of 1932, the beginning of the Presidential campaign got under way, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt held out the opportunity to protest against the failure of the Hoover administration to meet the economic crisis. On March 4, 1933, FDR became President of the United States. The country had seen three years of depression with 17 million unemployed. The New Deal program of FDR was an attempt to reconstruct the pieces: to assist the shattered financial banking system; to rescue business with loans and subsidies; to stimulate private capital; to protect farm and home owners from foreclosures; to create employment; to stimulate mass buying power; and to provide a minimum of relief for the masses. The general purpose of this often contradictory reform program was to give a shot in the arm

to the sick economy. Whereas some historians imply that it was Roosevelt who gave the left, and especially the unions, their impetus in the 1930's, it was more the tremendous needs and pressures of millions of Americans that pushed FDR to the policies of the New Deal.

Possibly the most important piece of legislation of the New Deal was the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), in the spring of 1933. The bill contained a number of anti-labor provisions, like giving employers in each industry the authority to raise prices in concert. It was therefore sugarcoated with Section 7(a), which gave federal sanction for employees to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing. Section 7(a) touched off a massive organizing drive; in 1933, close to one million workers went on strike for union recognition. The strike wave intensified in 1934, when picket lines increased to 1,500,000 workers. In 1935, some 18,000 workers were dragged from picketlines, arrested and jailed. From 1934-1936, 88 workers lost their lives on strikeduty.<sup>8</sup>

In the initial days of Section 7(a), the bill lacked the necessary enforcement provisions, and in order to strengthen it, FDR established the National Labor Board, chaired by Senator Wagner. This Board also

lacked the necessary enforcement provisions. Large industries, like auto, steel, and basic metals, simply refused to abide by its dictates, and were strong enough to defend their insubordination.<sup>8</sup> Monopoly capital was not about to be subdued with piecemeal legislation. It was this type of business attitude which prompted labor to react, although not immediately.

Never had there been a period of depression in this country so free from labor strife, as the early years of the 1930's. Strike activity and union membership fell drastically. The total number of organized workers declined by 1932 to less than three million, the approximate level in 1917.<sup>9</sup> Much of the lack of militant labor protest in the early Depression years was due to the lack of leadership, outmoded policies, and corruption of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Historically, the AFL had tended to remain aloof from reform movements. It had refused to join the anti-monopoly crusade in the early 1900's, and in the face of massive unemployment in the 1930's, it opposed the concept of unemployment insurance.<sup>10</sup>

It was the left, the militant trade unionists, and the American Communist Party, which filled the void left by the bankruptcy of the established labor organization; which spoke of non-collaboration with

Capital; and which focused its insurgency on the self-determination of the rank-and-file.

The crisis of capitalism found the left movement to be a most divided camp. The Socialist Party, while still influential, had not had an outstanding leader since the death of Eugene Debs, and membership had drastically fallen since the 1920's. The Communist Party, as the other major leftwing group, entered the 1930's with a past history of six years of intensive internal strife, with tattered remnants of 7,000 embittered members, with an unfavorable public image, and with an untried leadership. Other leftist groups were to make modest gains in the first years of the Depression, but none could compare with either the size<sup>11</sup> or the impact of the American Communist Party.

It was in the very earliest months of 1930 that the Communist Party (CP) made its voice heard. On March 6, 1930, over one million unemployed people demonstrated in a dozen cities for unemployment relief and insurance, against wage cuts, against fascism, and against Jim Crowism(America's brand of apartheid). "Work or Wages!" "Don't Starve - Fight!" In New York City, where over 100,000 protested:

women were struck in the face with blackjacks, boys beaten by gangs of seven and eight policemen, and old

men were backed into doorways and knocked down time after time, only to be dragged to their feet and struck by another policeclub...12

Hundreds were arrested at the demonstration, including William Z. Foster and other leaders of the CP. Overnight, unemployment hit the headlines of every major newspaper throughout the nation, and the issue became the backbone of social protest during the first part of the 1930's.

On May Day, two months later, the Communists called another national protest against wage cuts and for unemployment insurance. Following these initial rallies, the CPUSA organized the National Unemployed Councils.

According to one labor expert:

The unemployed council is a democratic organ of the unemployed to secure by very practical means, a control over their means of subsistence. I find it no secret that Communists organize themselves in Unemployed Councils in most cities, and usually lead them, but the councils are organized democratically and the majority rules...In Chicago, there are 45 branches of the Unemployed Council - total of 22,000...The Councils' weapon is democratic force of numbers and their functions are: to prevent evictions of the destitute, or if evicted, to bring pressure to bear on the Relief Commission to find a new home for the evicted family; if an unemployed worker has had his gas or water turned off because he can't pay for it, to investigate the case and demand their return from the proper authorities; to see that they who are shoeless and clothesless get

both; to eliminate through publicity and pressure discrimination between Negroes and white persons, or against the foreign born, in matters of relief; for individuals or families and children of the unemployed who have no relief as a penalty for political views or have been denied it through neglect, lack of funds, or any other reasons whatever, to march them down to the relief headquarters and demand that they be fed and clothed. Finally, to provide legal defense for all unemployed arrested for joining parades, hunger marches, or attending union meetings. 13

Hungry men and women demonstrated in front of relief stations, and federal offices; they sat inside buildings until they were arrested, demanding coal, food, and medicine. Hungry people, organized by the CPUSA, in both 1931 and 1932, marched across the country, demanding unemployment insurance and relief, food and supplies, and an end to Jim Crowism. An article in the New Masses (Jan. 1932),<sup>14</sup> perhaps best sums up who these marchers were:

Who are the hunger marchers?

They are "A typical Communist gathering" shouted Congressman Fish over the radio on December 5, "composed of revolutionary agitators, both black and white, who care nothing about affording actual relief to the unemployed, but seek to exploit the suffering and misery among our needy unemployed citizens for Communistic and revolutionary purposes."

But the hundreds of thousands throughout the country who saw and heard the

marchers will hurl the lie back into the face of the Fascist Fish. These 1,600 marchers were a cross section of America, 1931-1932, of that America which the Fishes, the Wolls, the Hoovers, and the Norman Thomases try to insult and ignore. They were:

elected delegates, all of them, chosen by thousands of other workers in Unemployed Councils, speaking in the name of 12,000,000 unemployed;

native-born workers overwhelmingly - two Indians among them;

Negroes, 25 percent of them;

new elements for the most part, only yesterday backward workers, today they are the vanguard of a great mass movement;

ex-servicemen, fully half or more;

young workers;

women workers;

They were American proletarians, fighters, those who will not stand outside the halls of Congress forever.

It was at the peak of the pre-New Deal days, when perhaps the most dramatic demonstration took place.

Assembled by the Communist led Worker's Ex-Servicemen's League, 25,000 World War One veterans marched on Washington, demanding immediate payment of their bonuses promised to them under a 1923 Congressional Act, but not due until 1945.

"Heroes in 1917 - Bums in 1932." Under this banner, they came from all parts of the country, by any means

necessary. When the "Bonus Expeditionary Force" arrived in Washington, the government placatingly put up some of the veterans in unused federal buildings, while at the same time, President Hoover was putting the national troops on emergency alert. On July 21, the government issued an ultimatum; that the veterans and their families must clear out by August 4. When many refused to evacuate, Hoover called on General MacArthur to drive the vets from their encampment at Anacostia Flats. The "Battle of Washington" ensued: the camp was burned to the ground, two veterans were killed, and scores more were wounded. President Hoover remarked after it was all over. "Thank God we still have a government that knows how to deal with a mob." <sup>15</sup>

While the CPUSA focused on unemployment as their primary struggle, activity spread not only to veterans, but to blacks, women, unionists, professionals, students, and intellectuals. Their broad-based fights involved the Trade Union Unity League, the Women's Trade Union, the National Negro Congress, the American Youth Congress, and the Congress Against War and Fascism. The CP influenced organizations from the Committee to Support Foster and Ford, to the League of American Writers, to the John Reed Clubs. The numerous activities of the Communists of the early 1930's were not only directed

towards clarifying the current crisis of capitalism, but also, to support and defend the Soviet Union, and to fight the fascism so increasingly evident after Hitler's assumption to power in 1933.

The Communists were concerned with national issues involving anything from unemployment to civil rights. One of the main issues in the early 1930's was the Scottsboro case, where nine black teenagers were convicted of raping two white girls in Paint Rock, Alabama. Even after the girls' repudiation of their original claims, the nine were sentenced to the electric chair, all except the youngest, who had thirteen years. The incident received little national attention until the Daily Worker published the story. The Socialist Party, the ACLU, and other organizations, basically ignored the case until 1934, while the Communist Party, through its International Labor Defense (ILD), provided lawyers and necessary defense funds for the boys. As the execution date drew near, protest meetings were held throughout the United States and Europe. Under pressure by persistent agitation, the case against four was dropped in 1936, three more were released on parole in 1944, one escaped in 1948, and the ninth was granted a pardon in 1976.

Another important national issue was the presiden-

tial campaign of 1932, with the Communist Party ticket of William Z. Foster and James Ford. The platform included unemployment and social security insurance, opposition to Hoover's wage cuts, emergency relief for farmers from taxes, equal rights for black people, opposition to capitalist terror, opposition to all forms of suppression of worker's political rights, opposition to all imperialist wars, and a strong defense of the Soviet Union. After the election of FDR, the Communist Party, although supporting many of his reforms, was clear to point out that the New Deal was not a program of steps towards socialism. The capitalists were left in complete control of the banks, factories, and means of transportation. The CP was not interested in patching up a decaying corpse, nor in helping capitalism get back on its feet. In July, of 1935, the Communist International held its Seventh Congress, and Communists in all countries were urged to unite in broad-based popular fronts with liberals, socialists, and democrats. The implementation of this popular front line in the United States, was taken to be a softer approach towards FDR and the New Deal, but this period of the Communist Party will be discussed in a future chapter of the thesis.

The CPUSA proved to be one of the most vital and

moving forces of the early 1930's. Its activities were on all fronts, and its influence during those years cannot be underestimated. While this chapter has discussed the CP's work on struggles from unemployment to civil rights, it would be a serious omission to ignore the work that American communists did in the field of revolutionary culture during this period. Art and literature were important parts of the left in the 1930's, from the earliest groups like the Film and Photo Leagues, and the John Reed Clubs, to the later League of American Writers and the WPA Projects.

Just as the workers who turned strikers, the veterans who fought the Battle of Washington, the hungry who marched in the streets of America, the writers and artists who turned leftward in the 1930's, are all an integral part of that decade's history. Whereas it can be said that the American Communists didn't take writers and artists as seriously as the revolutionary parties of European countries, the works of the left-wing cultural workers can be seen as a major contribution to the militant movements of that period.

Along with the rest of the country, intellectuals and cultural workers were profoundly affected by the Crash. Perhaps Edmund Wilson best describes the impact in the following passage from Shores of Light:

One couldn't help get exhilarated at the unexpected crash of the stupid giant. To the writers and artists of my generation, who had grown up in the Big Business era, and had always represented its barbarism, its crowding out of everything they cared about, these years were not depressing but stimulating. It gave us a new sense of freedom; and it gave us a sense of power to find ourselves carrying on while bankers for a change, were taking a beating. 16

But not all was quite so optimistic. Industrial workers, faced with frequent layoffs and discharges, had always been aware of a precarious life controlled by capitalist society. Writers and artists, who had assumed their distance from the traumatic cycles of the economy, were taken by surprise and hit square in the face with the reality of their dependency on business prosperity. The Depression changed their status, their security, their livelihood. Circulation of magazines dropped, payment of articles was smaller, and younger writers weren't getting any available space. Conditions for bookwriters and publishing were even worse. "The book trade, severest sufferer in the publishing field, saw its total production of new titles fall from 1/4 million copies in 1929, to slightly more than 100 million in 1933."<sup>17</sup>

Personal economic insecurity and a collapsing economic world was enough to shake everybody's faith, from banker to proletarian, to cultural worker. The

Great Depression, with its hunger and poverty, evictions and Hoovervilles, could not be lightly perceived as romantic adventures in a prosperous land. Perhaps it was personal reasons, to aid their careers, provide audiences, or learn skills. Or, maybe it was political reasons, to describe candidly and truthfully what they saw. Whatever the reason, many writers and artists saw a new urgency in their work, and a necessity to portray reality in order to change it.

The pervasiveness of a decaying capitalism was coupled with the startling example of the transformation of the Soviet Union, where 1/6 of the world's population was living in remarkable coherency. As one writer said:

The contrast between the downward trend of capitalism and the simultaneous steep rise of planned Soviet economy was so obvious that it led to the equally obvious conclusion: that they are the future and we are the past. 18

Because of this general attention paid to the Soviet Union and to communism in general, labels like 'dupes', 'Moscow agents', and 'artists in uniform',<sup>19</sup> have been hurled at the literary left of the Thirties. Whereas some writers did have a solidarity of purpose and a unity of political perspective, the absurdity of these anti-communist labels can be discredited with only the briefest look at American literary history prior to, and including, the 1930's.

Rebellion and social change are not new themes in American literature. They are not themes created by the Soviet Union or any other foreign source. American writers, in various epochs, have written of rebellion and revolution, and have made the decay of American life the focal point of their creations. To name just a few of these authors: Stephan Crane, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Ida Tarbell, John Reed. But never before had an entire literary generation documented the degeneration with such clarity. Never before was an entire literary generation so critical of the economic system which breed such decay.

The economic crisis of the 1930's had shattered the writers comforting illusion of an ivory tower from which so many had previously observed the country's ups and downs. Rather abruptly, the cultural worker was forced to see a society not as prosperous, or carefree, or Bohemian, as before. Greenwich Village could not survive Hooverville.

As the Depression declassed the comfortable intellectuals, many were, out of frustration, disgust, or rage, driven to take sides. For John Dos Passos, it was the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1928 which marked the turning point. Granville Hicks also lost his faith in bourgeois democracy with the murder of the two Italian

anarchists. Lincoln Steffens visited the USSR and told his friends he had seen the future and it worked. Malcolm Cowley and Theodore Dreiser witnessed a brutal and bloody strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, and pledged their support and allegiance to the worker's struggle.

And so, they came out. Out of the tradition of the Muckrakers, and out of the tradition of John Reed. They were to become the literary arm of the militant communist movement of the 1930's. As a crisis generation, they could simply have lived and died as such, but as part of a revolutionary literary tradition, they were to become the proletarian writers.

Probably every period produces art and literature which identifies with the lives and struggles of the working-class. "Proletarian art" was not created by Mike Gold and the 1930's generation. Yet, what made that period unique was that an entire group took that identification as the basis for their literature. As the workers' and peoples' struggles became more militant, the radical artists and writers used their skills and energies to join the fight, either as independents or in organized groups like the John Reed Clubs.

Writers, as they pushed leftward, joined forces with other progressive groups, like the Communist Party.

Considerable material has been written about the relationship between the cultural worker and the CPUSA in the 1930's. Most of it is unfavorable, as typified by the following excerpt from Granville Hicks:

What was the effect of the Communist Party on the writers and other artists who were either members or fellow-travelers. There is no doubt in my mind that the influence was harmful. I do not believe that artists can accept the direction of a political organization, and the direction of the Communist Party was particularly dangerous because of its dogmatic and dictatorial character. 20

Although part of this thesis does deal with this relationship, it might now be the time to briefly sketch the origins of the Communist organizational activity among American writers. Much of the specific political developments within the Soviet Union after Lenin's death, clarify the CPUSA's position concerning culture and literature in the 1930's.

By 1928, J. Stalin was beginning to consolidate and strengthen the Russian state by setting into motion the first Five-Year Plan. Due to the crucial importance of propaganda and literature in educating and raising the consciousness of the Soviet people, the craft became an integral part of the general program of the first  
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Plan, to be coordinated by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP). One particular conference

organized by this association was to have a major impact on the American scene. An extensive discussion of this Kharkov Conference (Nov.6-15) is presented in a later chapter, but what is significant to mention at this point, is that the Conference drew up a ten point "Program of Action" for the United States. The ten points include a direct critique of the American literary left and offers suggestions for the further development of the New Masses and John Reed Club.

Adherence to this program certainly does not substantiate the anti-communist claims that American writers were simply Moscow dupes. If writers did become members or fellow-travelers of the CPUSA it is perhaps best explained by the fact that the CP offered one of the few voices which expressed not only their despair, but also their hopes for a new world. It is quite possible that some writers assumed that their dislike for injustice and poverty meant that they were communists, and this is certainly a gross oversimplification. Criticisms can be laid with both the writers and the CP for their participation in this simplification. This though, does not negate the fact that the CP was a catalyst and stimulant in the development of proletarian literature and art in the 1930's.

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In their desire to expose the system's weaknesses, and fight alongside the working-class, writers and artists united together in political/cultural groups.

Joseph Freeman comments on this process:

At first, the middle-class writer that went left was a divided being. As a citizen, he supported Foster and Ford in 1932, he went to the aid of striking miners in Kentucky and was beaten by police; he called for the liberation of Tom Mooney and the Scottsboro boys. As a writer, he remained where he was. He continued to hope that the old themes of middle-class personal existence would serve as well as in the old days. But the crisis became deeper; it forced him further towards the viewpoint of the workers...One more thing was needed to complete the transformation; direct contact with the proletarian audiences. At the beginning of the crisis, the writers and artists who had grown up in the working-class movement and had kept the tradition alive, founded literary groups like the John Reed Clubs, dramatic groups like the Theater Union, music and dance organizations. The growth of the workers' movement was accompanied by a growth and flowering of proletarian culture. 22

Whether as independents or members of political/cultural organizations of the period, radical intellectuals and cultural workers made commitments to political struggle, which by today's standards, would be considered quite out of line for their professional standing. The League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford. The Committee for Southern Political Prisoners. The John

Reed Clubs. The League of American Writers. Prolecult. Writers Against War and Fascism. The National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. The Film and Photo League. The Harlan County Contingents.

And the questions that these groups debated amongst themselves are being asked again. What is the role of intellectuals in revolutionary struggle? To what degree must artists and writers consider political organization and party discipline? How can the expression of revolution and social change be creative, educational, artistically pleasing, and politically sound? These were only some of the questions that the John Reed Clubs and literary left spoke to with a vigor and earnestness hard to find today.

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NOTES

1. quoting Herbert Hoover in Sidney Lens' Radicalism in America. New York. p 297.
2. Foster Rhea Dulles. Labor in America. New York. p 260.
3. William Leuchtenburg. Perils of Prosperity. Chicago. p 248.
4. Irving Bernstein. The Lean Years. Boston. p 317.
5. Ibid., p 328.
6. A yellow-dog contract is an agreement that employers imposed upon employees, which was written into the terms of their employment. It states that while they are working at the stated establishment, the employee is forbidden from participating, organizing, or joining with any union. If he/she does, they will be subject to immediate dismissal.
7. Richard Boyer. Labor's Untold Story. New York. p 276.
8. Sidney Lens. Labor Wars. New York. p 288.
9. Foster Rhea Dulles. Labor in America. p 261.
10. Jerome Wolf. Ferment in Labor. Beverly Hills. p 82.
11. The background for the history of the Communist Party USA during the 1930's was based on information from William Z. Foster's History of the Communist Party of the United States.
12. Lens. Radicalism in America. p 306.
13. Jeremy Beecher. Strike. San Francisco. p 145.
14. A.E. Magil "On to Washington" New Masses. January 1932. p 15. Excerpt is part of a longer article written by Magil as he marched.

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15. quoting Herbert Hoover in A Pictorial Social History. M.B. Schrappner. p 460.
16. Edmund Wilson. Shores of Light. New York. pp 498-499.
17. Walter Rideout. The Radical Novel in the United States. New York. p 137.
18. quoting Arthur Koestler in Daniel Aaron Writers on the Left. New York. p 169.
19. Reader is referred to Eugene Lyons' Red Decade and Max Eastman's Artists in Uniform.
20. Granville Hicks "Writers in the Thirties" As We Saw the Thirties, edited by Rita Simon. p 94.
21. Thomas Wolfe. The League of American Writers. Ph.D. Dissertation. p 15.
22. Joseph Freeman. Proletarian Literature in the United States. New York. pp 26-27.

### Chapter Three

The John Reed Clubs were the foundation  
on which the proletarian literature  
movement was to be built.

THE JOHN REED CLUBS: A HISTORICAL RECLAMATION

The John Reed Club (1929-1935) was a politically radical organization of writers, artists, and other cultural workers, that served not only as the cultural and propaganda arm of the militant left of the early 1930's, but was also the nurturing ground for the growth of young artists who were aligning with the struggles of the working-class in developing a proletarian culture. Named for a man who symbolized the unity of theory and practice, art and politics, the Clubs sought to organize cultural workers to:

...abandon decisively the treacherous illusion that art can exist for art's sake, or that the artist can remain remote from the historical conflicts in which

all men must take sides. We call upon them to break with bourgeois ideas which seek to conceal the violence and fraud, the corruption and decay of the capitalist society. We call upon them to align themselves with the working-class in its struggle against capitalist oppression and exploitation, against unemployment and terror, and fascism and war. We urge them to join with the literary and artistic movement of the working-class in forging a new art that shall be a weapon for a new and superior world. 2

Even with the sense of unity and fellowship that this quote offers, one literary historian writes of the Clubs:

...an instrument of self-deception, ultimately dangerous to a fledgling writer. The peripheral cultural activity of the association could easily be taken for creative activity. The time the writer devoted to demonstrations, picketing, electioneering, and producing manifestos and strike bulletins was the time he took away from creative writing, and possibly more important, time he took away from his craft. The bustling activity of the Clubs also helped delude those without talent into prolonged self-deception about his creative talent. 3

It was exactly this type of artistic elitism that the John Reed Clubs (JRC) tried to fight. They felt that art is not outside society, and if social life is moulded by political and economic variants, then too, the artists and his/her work, also must speak and respond to those determinants. The idea that art suffers when time is spent in political work is the

the antithesis of the JRC philosophy, for it was through political struggle that art was to rise in a new and creative spirit.

It would be inaccurate to call the John Reed Club a Marxist organization. Its charter simply stated that any member who recognized class struggle and wished to give it support would be welcomed. It cannot be said that the JRC was committed beyond that general point. Many of its members were not Marxists, and the Clubs spent little time educating its members in the theoretical underpinnings of Engels, Marx, or Lenin. According to one member, at least 90% of the membership did not grasp the totality of Marxist theory. In spirit, yes. Pro-labor. Pro-Soviet. Pro-equal rights. Pro-realism in literature and art. But, says this member, with the exception of a handful, the majority of JRC members were strangers in the Marxist theoretical field.

If members did think of themselves as Marxists, it was for the majority, as fellow-travelers, sympathizers to the cause, without this being a real expression of organized affiliation. <sup>4</sup> Whereas a minority of Club members were simultaneously CPUSA members, the greater majority simply saw themselves serving the cause of peace and freedom. If they spoke of support for the Soviet Union at that time, it was because it would

necessitate a certain degree of emotional or ideological blindness to ignore the rather tremendous transformation of life for over 1/6 of the world's population. If they spoke of stopping fascism, it was because only a deaf ear could not hear the genocidal voices rising in Germany. And, to speak of ending poverty, or equal rights for national minorities, or jobs for all, certainly does not mark one as a card-carrying Communist.

It was early August, 1929, when eight men gathered in the New York office of the New Masses, on a Tuesday night. Present at that meeting were Mike Gold, Walt Carmon, William Gropper, Keene Wallis, Hugo Gellert, and Morris and Joseph Pass. <sup>6</sup> J. Pass suggested the name John Reed, and the small group of writers and artists formed an organization designed to "clarify the principles and purposes of revolutionary art and literature, and to propagate them, to practice them."<sup>7</sup>

New York seems to have been the logical geographical area from which the impetus for such a group should have arisen. The most significant concentration of professional writers and artists was in the two main metropolitan areas of Los Angeles and New York City. Most of the industries requiring their skills, like publishing, radio, and magazines, were located in NYC. Between 1920 and 1930, 52% of all writers lived in New York or

California: 36-38% within New York City and Los Angeles: and 1/3 of all writers lived in New York City (18-25% in Manhattan).<sup>8</sup>

The first announcement about the JRC came in the New Masses, November, 1929:

The radical artists and writers of New York have organized the John Reed Club. The group includes all creative workers in art, literature, sculpture, music, theater, and the movies.

About 50 have joined. Temporary offices have been chosen and the committees are now functioning. Clubrooms have been secured.

The purpose of the Club is to bring closer all creative workers; to maintain contact with the American revolutionary labor movement.

In cooperation with workers' groups and cultural organizations, discussion, literary evenings, and exhibits, will be organized. Hopefully, the organization will be national in scope, other sections will be organized throughout the country.

For the first time, a group of socially conscious creative workers has been organized in America to compare with existing groups in Europe. Steps have been taken to make immediate contact with writers, artists, and all creative workers in France, Germany, Russia, and Japan.' 9

Two months later, M. Gold, an editor of the New Masses, and one of the major political/literary figures of the 1930's, made the following suggestions to the embryonic Club: 1) that each writer should attach himself to a single industry, study it closely for several years, and make himself an expert in it so that he could write as an "insider and not like a bourgeois

intellectual observer; 2) to write publicity for strikes and demonstrations so that he "will have his roots in something real"; and, 3) if this is done, a "national corps of writers" can become in effect a "staff of industrial correspondents who will report on the cultural front from all over industrial America." 10

The issue of attaching oneself to a specific industry was to be a continuing point of contention among various members of the JRC. Many, who did not want to give up their soft professional life and learn about factory life by first-hand experience, disguised their resistance in the form of rebuttals against the necessity of learning through actual experience the 'ins and outs.' Typical of this type of sentiment was a letter to Gold written by JRC member, Ralph Cheyney, in which he says:

Dear Gold,

To paint a significant picture, or to write a strong poem, he (the writer) does not need to know much about any specific industry. 11

Although, in the long run, Gold's position held the minority of support, the particular push for honesty in the portrayal of industrial processes and proletarian life, gave to the writing of the 1930's a sense of reality that has been lacking in much of American literature in other periods. Just as Upton Sinclair's The

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Jungle (1906), brought to the public's attention the horrors of the meat-packing industry, the literature of the JRC members tried to bring attention to the terrible conditions of the unemployed and dispossessed in America, 1930.

The early problems of the John Reed Club were of a very practical nature: raising rent and obtaining furniture for their office on West 14th St. During the first few months, writers and artists would get together to build tables, paint walls, and generally change the atmosphere from "an Ellis Island flophouse to a club-room."<sup>12</sup> One member recounts that one of the most heated discussions (no pun intended) was whether the clubroom "should have a pot-bellied, or different type of stove in the headquarters."<sup>13</sup>

Even with such practical considerations taking up much of the Clubs' time, activities had already begun. The artists group had arranged an exhibit at the Workers Cooperative House in the Bronx, where about 35 pictures were shown for four consecutive weeks to several hundred workers.<sup>14</sup> One Club member, Harold Hickerson, had organized a music class with a hundred pupils; Bill Gropper was teaching graphic art to thirty students; and EmJo Basshe was directing the Jewish Workers Theater. Out of these early attempts came the

John Reed Club Art School, which by 1934, offered a full-time schedule of day and evening classes. The School itself, will be discussed further on in the thesis.

By July 1930, one of the founders of the JRC, Harry Allan Potamkin, reported to the editors of the New Masses, the following account of the Clubs progress and activities:

The John Reed Club has continued active work on the cultural front. The splendid May First parade included not only posters designed and made by the artists of the John Reed Club, but there was also a JRC division. The press committee of the Club has done excellent work in support of the International Labor Defense campaign for class-war prisoners.

Interest in the Club's work is evidenced by letters from revolutionary groups in China, in the Soviet Union, and even from remote and esoteric Hollywood.

Club members continue speaking at worker's clubs. Walt Carmon spoke on Literature and Revolution in America, Joshua Kunitz on Russian literature, both at the Hungarian Worker's Club.

The cultural work will be furthered in a worker's film movement being organized, which will carry to the USA a force now active in England, Denmark, and Germany. Beginnings are being made by members writing films - especially for the New Masses and the Daily Worker; in member's activities in the making and editing of worker's films; in talking to worker's Clubs; in cooperation with the International Labor Defense. The work will be coordinated and integrated in the

coming fall, and a film group will mobilize for the study of the technique of picture-making and the education of workers in the cinema.

Publishers are adding to their lists the works of Club members. Charles Yale Harrison's Generals Die in Bed has appeared in England, Canada, and is issued by William Morrow in New York. Michael Gold's children's story, Charlie Chaplin's Parade, with illustrations by Otto Soglow, is on Harcourt Brace's list for the fall. William Gropper's Circus Story, told in drawings, film-style, comes out this fall with McCann. 15

One of the first organized projects of the John Reed Club was the circulation of the "Red Scare" protest. Holding that a reign of terror was sweeping the country, and citing numerous examples of red-baiting, illegal arrests and seizures, imprisonment for distributing Communist Party literature, and the many hundreds of class-war prisoners, the protest said:

"Not a newspaper reader in one thousand is even remotely aware of the seriousness of the situation. With the hope, therefore, of informing a wider public of the facts of the matter, the John Reed Club, in conjunction with the International Labor Defense, is circulating amongst the liberal writers, educators, artists, and professionals, a protest, "...to make a voice heard, "against a hysteria which promises to equal, if not excell, the ugliest days of the Palmer Red Scare."

The petition was published in the New York Times, May 19, 1930,<sup>17</sup> and included the signatures of many JRC members like: EmJo Basshe, Jacob Burck, Walt Carmon, Ralph Cheyney, Mike Gold, Fred Ellis, Hugh Gellert, Charles Yale Harrison, Josephine Herbst, A.B. Magil, Joseph North, and the Pass brothers.

Several months later, one of the most important, formative events of the proletarian literature movement of the 1930's took place in the Soviet Union. The Kharkov Conference, sponsored by the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW), was held in the Ukraine, November 6-15, 1930. Invited to the conference was a John Reed Club and New Masses delegation, which included M. Gold, A.B. Magil, Fred Ellis, Bill Gropper, Harry Alan Potamkin, Josephine Herbst, and her husband, John Herrman. Gold, probably the most well-known of the delegates, was impressed by the solidarity and unity of the delegates from over 20 countries. He wrote:

Each of us has not come here with a personal world in his head; we have come here as a unit in a common world. We have a common theory of history, we have shared common experiences. There is now a new feeling in life and it has captured us as its medium. 18

The fundamental program adopted by the international conference included six points upon which all leftwing intellectuals could unite in struggle. The first was

to fight against the imperialist war and defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression. The second was to fight against fascism, whether it was open or concealed. Thirdly, to fight for the developing and strengthening of the revolutionary labor movement. Number four was to fight against white chauvinism and against the persecution of the foreign-born. The fifth point was to struggle against the influence of middle-class ideas in the work of revolutionary artists and writers. Finally, number six was to fight against the imprisonment of revolutionary artists and writers, as well as all class-war prisoners.

Specifically for the United States, the Kharkov Conference drew up a ten-point "Program of Action," which was both criticisms and directives, aimed at the New Masses and John Reed Clubs. This concrete program can be outlined as follows:

1. Widen the activities of the JRC and New Masses in two major directions: a) to extend the proletarian base of their movement, and b) to win over to the movement radical intellectuals and professionals.
2. Pay special attention to the development of black writers and artists, which the program says, the JRC had entirely ignored.
3. Take initiative in organizing, on a national scale, a federation of all cultural groups in all languages. All members of this federation were to be of equal standing, neither JRC or New Masses exercising hegemony.

4. Strengthen the theoretical work of the JRC, which according to the program, had been almost entirely neglected. This could be done, it was suggested, by holding study groups and by taking steps to secure the Marxist classics and literary criticisms in English.

5. Establish closer contacts with workers by arranging discussions, forums, and by drawing workers into discussions of the groups problems.

6. Strengthen contacts of the John Reed Clubs with its members outside of New York City, and organize branches wherever possible.

7. Establish closer contacts with revolutionary cultural organizations in other countries.

8. Further the publication and distribution of mass pamphlets.

9. Organize agit-prop troupes to perform at clubs, demonstrations, and strikes.

10. Strengthen the New Masses by the election of a cooperative board, and by making its contents more organically connected with the working-class. 19

The suggestions and directives of the Kharkov Conference were taken seriously at home, and steps were taken to implement actions within the Clubs to satisfy the ten points. As the Daily Worker (Jan. 21, 1931) commented:

It (the JRC) should broaden and enlarge its present work along the lines of the program of the Kharkov Conference of Revolutionary Writers. It should keep closer contact with the life and every-day struggle of the working-class, giving more attention to the development of new worker writers and artists, as well as to winning over the radicalized intellectuals. It should become a real force in the struggle for racial equality, especially for the Negro

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masses, and give greater effort to exposing social fascism and petty-bourgeois tendencies in the fight against imperialist war and the defense of the Soviet Union. 21

The John Reed Clubs, while always having had encouraged the development of young proletarian writers, began actively enlarging its program to include integrating the left and liberal intellectuals. It is this type of approach that would eventually emerge in the forefront as the philosophy of the Popular Front. But in the early days of 1931 after the Kharkov Conference, it was the dual function of developing writers and incorporating radical intellectuals which was the policy of action for the John Reed Clubs. Mike Gold, in the New Masses (July, 1931), said:

Every door must be opened wide for the fellow-traveler. We need them. We must not fear that they will corrupt us with bourgeois ideas. This is a form of immaturity. 21

While this openness does not coincide with the claims of leftist sectarianism that have been hurled at the JRC, it should be mentioned that the position was not unanimously accepted with the Clubs. While the Clubs were supposedly open to anyone subscribing to the basic manifesto, not a single member of the Socialist Party was ever admitted into the JRC. 22

In response to the Kharkov Conference directives,

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the New York JRC developed contacts with those working outside of New York. A rash of new chapters spread from one coast to the other.

New Masses (July 1931)

The Detroit JRC, after the third meeting, has 49 members, divided into work groups representing drama, music, dance, and writing. The office is at 91 Kirky St. 23

New Masses (Aug. 1931)

The Chicago JRC now has 50 members and we are making plans for a Chicago Workers' League.

The Miluawkee JRC did all the cartoon posters and a drama presentation on the Scottsboro boys. 24

New Masses (Oct. 1931)

The Philadelphia JRC has 49 members. We meet the first and third Fridays of the month for business and the second and fourth Sundays we have programs. Meetings are at the Little Chop House, 1206 Walnut St., in the basement. 25

In attempting to connect more with working-class struggles, a number of John Reed Club members joined Theodore Dreiser on an artists' and writers' contingent to Harlan County, Kentucky. The group investigated the conditions of striking miners, and publicized their findings in a report to the public, Terror in the Mines, <sup>26</sup> Harlan County Miners Speak. The book documents the living and working conditions, the destruction of life and dignity, and the fight back, all in the same spirit

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as the Paterson Pageant of John Reed more than two decades earlier.

As the Clubs began to identify with an international movement of revolutionary writers, its activities began to incorporate other countries. One example of this internationalism was a challenge sent out by the JRC to the revolutionary artists of Germany. The proposal was to join in a competition around the themes of: 1) the fight against imperialist war preparation, 2) against fascism, 3) against white terror in China, Poland, and throughout Latin America, 4) against lynching and national oppression, and 5) against unemployment. The challenge was accepted and numerous JRC artists participated.

According to directive three of the ten point program of Kharkov, the John Reed Clubs were to "take initiative in organizing on a national scale, a federation of all revolutionary cultural groups". On June 14, 1931, 265 delegates representing over 100 cultural organizations in the New York area, held a conference. The elected presidium included JRC members Gropper, Potamkin, Gold, and Magil. The honorary presidium included Gorki, Krupskaya (Lenin's wife), Dreiser, John Dos Passos, William Z. Foster, Upton Sinclair, and Henri Barbusse. This Workers Cultural Federation (WCF)

sent greetings to the striking miners in Harlan County, in Pennsylvania, and in Ohio. It also adopted resolutions on behalf of the Scottsboro boys and the Soviet Union. It was a federation which represented cultural workers unity with ALL workers, and below the banner which hung behind the podium of the conference, "Workers of the World Unite!", the federation went about its business. The following extensive quote is the statement of the Workers Cultural Federation:

In this critical period it must be clear, more than ever before, to all workers, to all honest intellectuals, that the capitalist class is using the instruments of culture at its disposal for propaganda purposes, sometimes crudely, sometimes openly, sometimes well concealed. This campaign of capitalist propaganda is carried on through the Church, the schools, the newspapers, the magazines, the radio... this is to be expected. In all class societies, the dominating class ruled by controlling the instruments of culture along with economic and political power, it rules by disarming the exploited class culturally, as well as politically and economically.

From the point of view of reaching the widest masses of population, the most important cultural instruments are the movies and the radio. Here we have two 'arts' monopolized by a handful of capitalists.

In performing its historic mission of creating the material basis for the socialist society, capitalism also creates the basis for socialist culture. The development of the press, the spread of literacy, the establishment

of libraries, the movies, radio, in short, the entire cultural apparatus of capitalism becomes the foundation for the mass proletarian culture, and the arsenal from which the workers take their cultural weapons, even before overthrowing the bourgeoisie.

The possibilities for the development of proletarian culture in the United States have been widened immensely by the economic crisis. It has roused many intellectuals out of their indifference to social questions and has brought them closer to workers. Tens of thousands of engineers, writers, musicians, newspapermen, artists, are on the streets, unable to find jobs...

The Fifth Congress of the Labor Union and the Kharkov Conference of Revolutionary Writers and Artists held last year, gave the immediate impetus for the establishment of this federation. 27

It is a statement which clearly defines the relation of the ruling-class to culture and cultural production. It attempts to identify the role that the press, radio, and magazines, have within the campaign of capitalist propaganda. And finally, the statement of the Federation explains the creation of a socialist culture out of the material base created by capitalism. The WCF saw its historic mission within the development of a mass proletarian culture, and wrote that the entire cultural apparatus of the present system was to be the foundations of culture for the new age. The John Reed Clubs, as one of the co-signers to this document,

accepted the analysis and identified with that historic mission.

By 1931, "imperialist war preparation" was an important issue, and in the last two months of that year, the JRC issued two statements. The first, related to the need for cultural workers to fight the war tide. The second, denounced the persecutions against workers who were doing just that.

#### To All Writers of All Countries

The IURW has issued an appeal calling for all writers and artists of the entire world to protest the new series of persecutions of proletarian writers. The appeal declares that "today it is necessary to mobilize public opinion not against some isolated persecution of writers, but rather, against the whole system of persecution of revolutionary writers in capitalist and colonial countries.

The John Reed Club, wholeheartedly endorses this appeal...the hand of American imperialism, which reaches into every part of the globe, is helping to jail and torture thousands of intellectuals...the shooting death of Bruce Crawford and Boris Israel in Harlan County, shows that American capitalism, too, uses violence against writers who attempt to report instances of class terror.

Send your protest to John Reed Club:  
63 West 15th Street, New York. 28

cultural apparatus of the present system...

#### A Call to Action

...Only the organized protest of all those who oppose attacks on the USSR can turn back the war tide that rushes on...The

John Reed Clubs throughout the country, call upon artists, writers, scientists, musicians, etc., to refuse to participate in the ideological preparation of this criminal war. We call upon them to turn the weapons of culture against the imperialist war makers. Demand hands off the Soviet Union. Demand the withdrawal of American troops and warships from China. Defend the world of tomorrow against the imperialist brigands of today.

John Reed Clubs: New York, Chapel Hill, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia. 29

The John Reed Clubs were beginning to mature as a confederation of loosely knit chapters. They had developed a strategy for growth as outlined by the Kharkov Conference. And they experimented with a method which would lend the skills of the JRC to the needs of the revolutionary movement for art and propaganda. The Club, in a letter to all workers groups, outlined the steps of this method. Firstly, any group or organization was to send a request for a program at least two weeks in advance of the desired date. Secondly, the group was to mail the information to Walter Quirt at JRC headquarters (63 West 15th St. NY). Thirdly, materials, such as paper and supplies, were to be furnished by the organization. In the fourth place, the type and focus of the affair was to be clearly stated, whether it was anti-war, memorial, unemployment march, or a strike. Fifth, the group was not to advertise

that the JRC was part of the affair, until and not unless it had received definite word of acceptance by the Club. With these simple steps, the John Reed Club hoped to be able to offer its 'services to the radical movement and assure that fullest use could be made out of the skills and services of the artists and writers. Since one of the primary functions of the JRC was to act much like an 'artistic and publicity service' for the left, it is important to note, that by 1932, only two years after the first small meeting of eight men, a method had been arrived at which offered art as a practical weapon in the political and economic struggle.

INTELLECTUALS

WAR IS HERE

Demonstrate in the streets against imperialist war on May Day.

March with the John Reed Club. 31

Due to the rapid growth of the JRC during the period between 1929-1932, and due to the directives of the Kharkov Conference, the John Reed Clubs called a national conference, May 29-30, 1932. At the Lincoln Center Auditorium in Chicago, 38 delegates representing 11 John Reed Club chapters with a total membership of 800 assembled. The chapters represented were: New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, San Francisco,

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Seattle, Hollywood, Portland, Boston, Carmel, and Newark.

The National Conference of the John Reed Club was officially opened on Sunday, May 29, by Jan Wittenber of Chicago. The following were elected members of the presidium: Joseph Freeman, New York; Jan Wittenber, Chicago; Maurice Sugar, Detroit; Conrad Kmorowski, Philadelphia; Kenneth Rexroth, San Francisco; Charles Natterstad, Seattle; Harry Carlisle, Hollywood; George Gay, Portland; Carl Carlson, Boston; and Jack Walters, Newark. Honorary members of the presidium were also elected, and they included Gorki, Romain Rolland, Dos Passos, Fujimori, Lo Hsun, Johannes Becher, Vallant-Couturier, and Langston Hughes. Maurice Sugar of Detroit, was chosen as permanent chairman of the conference, and Oakley Johnson, of New York, as its' secretary.

After the nominations, there were chapter reports from various delegates, ranging from enthusiastic and encouraging, to very critical reports concerning the failures in organizing, exhibits, agit-prop troupes, distributing literature, participating in demonstrations, and expansion of the Clubs.

The JRC of New York was criticized for its failure to provide effective and responsible leadership to

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local chapters. Absorbed in local activities, the New York JRC had not seen the necessity of assuming the work of national leadership. The New York group had failed to cement relationships with other Clubs through correspondence or organizational assistance. After the Philadelphia JRC urged New York to begin formation of a national organization action was finally taken. On the other hand, over a dozen chapters had sprung up in two years, and it would have been difficult for any group to have kept pace with such rapid growth.

Much of the spirit of criticism of the New York Club appears to be contradictory. If there is any one theme, heard time and time again, about the literary generation of the 1930's, it is that political heavies used innocents to further their own ends, or more specifically, the ends of the Communist Party.<sup>32</sup> In terms of the John Reed Clubs, the dynamic was supposed to be that these heavies, the Golds, the Freemans, the Groppers, predetermined the growth of the JRC with their own brand of sectarianism, and unbridled power. If this were totally the case, one would find the New York Club (home of the heavies) totally dominating the organization. Yet, according to Oakley Johnson's report on the conference, there was considerable criticism of the New York chapter for its lack of leadership.<sup>33</sup>

The separate clubs were largely autonomous. If there was a centralization in New York, it was due to the fact that New York JRC was the oldest and largest, and was the home of most of the politically advanced and experienced members. The interaction between the various ideological blocs of the JRC will become clearer during the discussion of the Manifesto. At this point though, it is important to note, that there were many level of political thought within the Clubs, and the New York chapter appears to have been where many of the more politically developed members lived.

By the end of the Sunday session, four commissions had been organized and had begun their respective work. All 38 members served on one of the commissions, and the chairpeople were as follows: Commission on the Manifesto, Joseph Freeman; Commission on Constitution and Organization, Jan Wittenber; Commission on Program of Activities, Conrad Komorowski; and Commission on the Declaration Against Imperialist War and other resolutions, Harry Carlisle.

After intensive work during much of the night and most of Monday morning, the second general session, Monday afternoon, May 30, was opened with the reading of greetings from the International Union of Revolutionary Writers:

International Union of Revolutionary Writers greets National Conference of John Reed Clubs and great development of American proletarian literature. International situation demand we sharpen struggle against imperialist war menace, against pacifist and returning prosperity illusions, and against increasing danger of intervention of Soviet Union. We urge you to support heroic struggle of Japanese revolutionary writers against Japanese imperialism. In all your work, prime duty is to show that only way out of present crisis lies with proletarian revolution. We with help of all our sections pledge to build up work of our international union to fulfill tasks facing us. 34

A wire to the Conference from the Progressive Arts Club and Masses of Toronto, Canada, sent proletarian greetings to the Conference, and pledged the solidarity of Canadian writers and artists in the struggle of the working-class against imperialist war and exploitation. The Conference sent replies to all organizations that sent greetings, and also messages of solidarity and comradeship to Gorki, Rolland, and to the organized Latin American, German, Japanese, and Chinese writers and artists.

A resolution endorsing the New Masses was passed by the meeting. John Reed Club members were urged to contribute to the magazine, and satisfaction was expressed over the establishment of JRC periodicals such as New Force (Detroit) and the John Reed Club National Bulletin (Washington D.C.).

All the delegates at the second session were prepared with suggestions for the future of the organization, but the most complete were those offered by the New York JRC. They included a draft manifesto, proposed constitution, and an anti-war resolution. It should be noted that all chapters had the opportunity to design and draft such work in preparation for the conference, and New York did not secretly conspire to manipulate the conference. Since an intense discussion pursued after the presentation of the Manifesto, it is important to quote at length from the document:

Mankind is passing through the most profound crisis in its history. An old world is dying; a new one is being born. Capitalist civilization, which has dominated the economic, political, and cultural life of continents, is in the process of decay.

The general crisis of capitalism is reflected in its culture. The economic and political machinery of the bourgeoisie is in decay, and its philosophy, its literature, and its art, are bankrupt.

In America, bourgeois culture writhes in a blind alley. Since the imperialist war, the best talents in bourgeois art and literature, philosophy and science, those who have the finest imagination and the richest craftsmanship, have revealed the sterility, the utter impotence of bourgeois culture to advance mankind to higher levels...

In the past two years however, a marked change has come over the American intelligentsia. The class struggle in culture has assumed sharp forms. Recently we

witnessed two major movements among American intellectuals: the Humanist movement, frankly reactionary in its ideas; and a movement to the left among certain types of liberal intellectuals.

The reasons for the swing to the left are not hard to find. The best of the younger generation of writers have come, by and large, from the middle-classes. During the boom which followed the war these classes increased their income. They played the stockmarket with profit. They were beneficiaries of the New Era...The Crash in autumn of 1929, fell on their heads like a thunderbolt. They found themselves victims of the greatest expropriation in the history of the country. The articulate members of the middle-classes lost their faith in capitalism which during the Twenties trapped them into dreaming on the decadent shores of post-war European culture. These intellectuals suddenly awoke to the fact that they must take sides.

Some of the intellectuals who have thought seriously about the world crisis, the coming war, and the achievements of the Soviet Union, have taken the next logical step. They have begun to realize that in every capitalist country the revolutionary working-class struggles for the abolition of the outworn and barbarous system of capitalism.

Such allies from the middle-class intelligensia are to be welcomed. But of primary importance at this stage is the development of the revolutionary culture of the working-class itself... In the past two decades there have developed writers, artists, and critics who have approached the American scene from the viewpoint of the revolutionary workers.

To give this movement in the arts and letters greater scope and force, to bring closer to the daily struggle of the workers, the John Reed Club was formed in the fall of

1929. In the past two and a half years, the influence of this organization has spread to many cities. Today there are 13 John Reed Clubs throughout the country. These organizations are open to writers and artists, whatever their social origin, who subscribe to the fundamental program adopted by the International Conference of Revolutionary Writers and Artists which met at Kharkov in November, 1930.

On the basis of this minimum program, we call upon all honest intellectuals, all honest writers and artists, to abandon the treacherous illusion of art for art's sake, of that artists can remain remote from the historical conflict in which all men must take sides. We call upon them to break with bourgeois ideas which seek to conceal the violence and fraud, the corruption and decay of capitalist society. We call upon them to align themselves with the working-class in its struggle against capitalist oppression and exploitation, against unemployment and terror, against fascism and war. We urge them to join with the literary and artistic movement of the working-class in forging a new art that shall be a weapon in the battle for a new and superior world. 35

The discussion which pursued after the presentation of this manifesto was twofold. On the one hand, some delegates felt that New York was trying to run the show, because Gold, Gropper, and Freeman, along with other New York delegates, had drafted the proposed document prior to the meeting. It is not unusual for members of political organizations to develop proposals or drafts independent of the larger body. It is neither sinister nor conspiratorial. There were tensions and

conflicts behind this dynamic which appear to be rooted in the distrust of political direction within a broad-based, multi-leveled organization.

The other aspect of the discussion, which is not unrelated to the first, was the issue of the correct attitude towards fellow-travelers - middle class artists and writers who were sympathetic to the revolutionary cause, but not totally won over. Joseph Freeman, while conceding that the draft proposal was written hurriedly defended its position in regards to the fellow-traveler. Mike Gold, too, said:

Since the first day of the organization of the John Reed Clubs, I have been in the minority in saying that this club should be organized of the broad middle-class intellectual worker. It should be the feeder, the contact organization between these and the communist movement. It should be the place where radical teachers can first form the germs of a teachers union...We can't, by taking thought, produce great writers and artists. We can only take concerted action.

Also, we can have a very clear political line. At Kharkov, the platform was simple and clear. Any writers who subscribed to the political platform was admitted. It should be clear that no one is asking him to change his mental habits. Nothing will be dictated to him. You are here believe in proletarian or journalistic writing - and some middle class liberals believe in Proustian writing - but I say bring him into the movement if he is a writer of influence and talent. We cannot afford to have aesthetic quarrels. 36

Harry Carlisle, of the Hollywood John Reed Club,

disagreed with this position. In the New Masses of July, 1932, he comments:

We must not cringe in our approach to these intellectuals. We must teach them the first thing is to approach an organization on an organizational basis. Upton Sinclair is on the board of Literature of the World Revolution, and at the same time, a perennial candidate ticket of the California Socialist Party and he debates with Aimee McPherson...Is our need of Sinclair so great that we can afford to fall down on principles? 37

Carlisle suggested that the National Conference not lose sight of the fact that not all intellectuals are middle-class. That there is a certain proportion of artists and writers of distinctly working-class origin, who can be approached on the basis of working-class principles. Kenneth Rexroth, also of the California delegation, sided with Carlisle in the debate, saying, "We are not an organization to bring in big names."<sup>38</sup>

These two positions are not necessarily conflicting. Creating a proletarian literature while winning over progressive elements of the middle-class can be viewed as the dual function of the same organization. It comes to the question of not what is important, but which is more important at a particular time. It is a question of emphasis.

While many younger members pushed for an emphasis on developing a corps of young, proletarian writers,

older members, like Gold and Freeman, felt that it was a necessity for the growth of the JRC to accept the fellow-traveler. It is the author's opinion that the extreme emphasis on 'big names' was not only damaging to the John Reed Clubs, but to the entire proletarian literature movement in the United States. Yet, as one aspect of a dual policy, the attempt to attract and integrate the middle-class intellectual probably was a positive perspective for the Clubs.

The debate following the presentation of the manifesto was even more complex. Freeman, Gold, and others, wanted to attract the sympathizers and assure them that they were wanted as artists and writers, not as politicians for the Party. But the directives of the IURW were demanding a complete eradication of the bourgeois individualism that it saw evident in the New Masses and JRC. Obviously, the position of the IURW was conflicting with the open-door policy that the members of the Clubs were debating.

Some members felt that there was interference from people who were neither proletarian nor intellectual, and who really had nothing to do with the debate. While the JRC was not trying to compete with the Communist Party, nor fill itself with non-literary professionals, 'political heavies' were denying the

need of writers to enter the radical left through the portals of art and literature. Artists and writers therefore, felt resentment of this political pressure. In this situation, creative intellectuals of the Party, like Freeman, were forced to fight back and then be regarded, "not as writers but as politicians seeking to force a particular party line."<sup>39</sup>

There is always a degree of discipline which is necessary in any organization. At times, this need conflicts with the more independent style of writers and artists. The conflict within the JRC around this question should certainly not be unexpected. Even if the overall outcome was not absolute unity, it is highly commendable that the Clubs tried to mesh between these two paths and find a way to organize creative workers along political lines.

The final document adopted by the National Conference outlined two kinds of activity for the future work of the JRC. The first, was to make the JRC a functioning center of proletarian culture: to clarify and elaborate the point of view of the proletarian as opposed to bourgeois culture, and to extend the influence of the JRC in the revolutionary movement. The second was to create and publish art and literature of a proletarian character. It directed the JRC to make this country

familiar with the culture of the world proletariat; to develop a critique of bourgeois culture; to develop organizational techniques for establishing contacts with potentially sympathetic elements; to assist in developing worker-writers and worker-artists; to engage in and give widest publicity to working-class struggles; and to render technical assistance to the organized revolutionary movements.

The means designed to accomplish these ends included a variety of forms. To articulate but a few: sponsoring national contests for proletarian stories, plays, songs and drawings; distributing literature and pamphlets; exhibiting revolutionary art; holding lectures and public debates; establishing artists and writers schools; participating in strikes and demonstrations; performing skits and other entertainment at workers clubs; and, offering active assistance in campaigns like the Scottsboro case.

The preamble to the Constitution accepted at the meeting stated, that the Clubs were named, "in honor of the great revolutionist and writer John Reed." The Clubs recognized, "the irreconcilable struggle between workers and capitalists as two contending classes, and believes that the interests of all writers and artists should identify with the interests of the working class"

Membership in the JRC would be open to any writer or artists who could subscribe to this analysis.

Before the meeting ended, national officers were elected: Oakley Johnson (New York) as National Executive Secretary and Louis Lozowick (New York) as International Secretary. The nine other members of the board were Joseph Freeman, William Gropper, Whittaker Chambers, Eugene Gordon, Conrad Komorowski, Duva Mendleson, Jan Wittenber, Charles Natterstad, and Harry Carlisle. The United States was divided into four regional areas, East, West, South, and mid-West, for organizational work.

Finally, an anti-war resolution was passed, and eventually published in the New Masses:

The John Reed Clubs of the United States, in their first public act as a national organization, call upon all American artists and writers, upon all intellectual and professional workers, to join the JRC campaign of active struggle against the imminent imperialist war. We cannot blind ourselves to the immediate danger of another worldwide slaughter. We cannot ignore the fact that the Japanese imperialist attack now being prepared against the Soviet Union will involve the entire world. It would be criminal for us who are active in the arts and the professions not to realize that the coming imperialist war will destroy all cultural achievements. It would be cowardice for us to allow the industrial workers and poor farmers to carry on alone the fight against the war. We must join the workers, or lose even the nominal right to be called intellectuals.

By this, we do not mean pacifism or conscientious

objection or non-combatant service in time of war. Active and determined opposition to the war planned by imperialist governments, including the United States, is the only course we can adopt. We must energetically combat war propaganda and rally to the support of those workers who refuse to transport munitions.

The Soviet Union has repeatedly demonstrated that it stands for peace. Maxim Litvinoff, its delegate has time and time again presented to the League of Nations the Soviet proposal for full and complete disarmament. The League's refusal to consider even partial disarmament exposes the hypocrisy of the imperialist powers.

The achievements of the Five Year Plan are not only technical, but cultural. In the rising Soviet state lies the hope of the intellectuals of the world.

Writers! Artists! Professionals! Organize with us against imperialist destruction, stand with us in defense of the first workers' republic, the Soviet Socialist Republic, which is the first republic, too, of artists and writers working for a higher culture. 41

In accordance with the program of activities outlined at the national meeting, the John Reed Club of New York, announced the opening of the John Reed Club School of Art, at 450 6th Ave. Classes were to start on Friday, November 14, 1932. Lectures were given under the direction of JRC members such as Gellert, Gropper, Siegel, and Lozowich. The announcement in the New Masses said:

Bonus Marches!! Strikes!! Evictions!!

Learn to depict these stirring events of American life today!! Study under the guidance of great revolutionary artists!! 42

Classes were held Monday evenings and Saturday after-  
noons, and attendance was not limited to only John Reed  
Club members.<sup>43</sup>

The year 1932 was not only the year of the JRC  
National Conference, but also the year of the presiden-  
tial election. The Committee of Professional Groups for  
Foster and Ford, pledged their support for the two  
Communist Party candidates. "We believe that the only  
effective way to protest against the chaos, the  
appalling wastefulness, and the indescribable misery  
inherent in the present economic system, is to vote  
for the Communist candidates."<sup>44</sup> Of the 53 undersigned  
writers, artists, and professionals, many were John  
Reed Club members. To name but a few: EmJo Basshe,  
Robert Cantwell, Orrik Johns, Grace Lumpkin, Langston  
Hughes, Mike Gold, Louis Lozowick. The group of signers  
were symbolic of a concerted effort to unite theory  
with practical application, and even though Foster and  
Ford didn't win the election, the united bloc of groups  
from unions to professional writers, certainly must  
have had some impact on the direction of FDR's reform  
legislation.

The Committee of Professional Groups for Foster  
and Ford is notable for other reasons. Firstly, was  
the awareness by these men and women, that political

battles had an impact on their lives and art. Secondly, the unhesitancy of these professionals to identify with Communism is something we would be hard-put to find today. Thirdly, the allegiance of 53 intellectuals to the struggles of the working-class is a loyalty which deserves notice.

Encouraged by the success of the first National Conference, the JRC grew rapidly, particularly in the mid-West. By 1934, there were nearly 30 chapters. Their cultural activities varied as much as the program of action proposed at the national meeting. Everything from lectures, schools, agit-prop troupes, pamphlets, and local regional conferences, colored the country from Indianapolis, to St. Louis, to Grand Rapids, to Hartford and Santa Fe. Writers courses were begun with such talented instructors as Kenneth Burke, Edward Dahlberg, Joshua Kunitz, and Horace Gregory. Several clubs began their own publications: New Force (Detroit); Leftward (Boston); Partisan (Los Angeles); Red Pen (Philadelphia); and the Partisan Review (New York). The rebirth of the little proletarian magazine was integrally connected with the John Reed Club, and is extensively discussed in Chapter Four.

By late-1932, JRC members were beginning to make a mark for themselves as authors. Not only were the

members publishing in little magazines, but they were also adding proletarian novels to publishers' lists. Some of the JRC authors with published novels were: J.S. Balch, Tillie Lerner, Mike Gold, Joseph Freeman, Grace Lumpkin, Hugo Gellert, Edward Newhouse, Richard Wright, John Howard Lawson, Eugene Clay, Josephine Herbst, and Langston Hughes.

Perhaps this is the most opportune time to examine just who were the writers and artists of the John Reed Clubs. Where did these men and women who spoke so eloquently about art and revolution come from? Although data is scarce, and peoples' memories failing, some assumptions are indisputable. In the first place, the majority of JRC members were young, in their 20's and 30's. The membership was predominately male, although a large minority of proletarian artists and writers were women. A few of the more notable women members were Jan Wittenber, Grace Lumpkin, Tillie Lerner, Meridel Le Sueur, Josephine Herbst, and Clara Weatherwax. It is interesting to note that the proletarian literature movement drew into its ranks numerous women, even though the emphasis as stated by the Kharkov Conference, was to attract black membership. And in terms of black membership, some of the most reknown JRC members were black. Men like Eugene Gordon, Langston Hughes,

Richard Wright, and Joe Jones. Most of the members of the JRC were from white-collar roots, although a sizable minority had working-class origins. A good number were unemployed at the time of their work with the Clubs. A large percent of the writers and artists were first generation Americans, many having families arriving from Russia during the great immigration waves of the early 1900's. Although this is only the briefest summary of the proletarian writers themselves, it does offer some sense of the composition of the JRC and the literary movement in general.

While the separate members were active, the Club itself was stabilizing and developing a character as a loose federation of chapters with a basically homogeneous purpose. The structure on the local level was very elementary. Most of the chapters had an executive committee and were divided into two groups, the artists and writers sections, each section having its own secretary. The New York Club, for example, had 380 members by 1933, with 200 artists, and the rest writers.<sup>45</sup> The one paid functionary, secretary treasurer, received \$15 dollars a week.

The main concern of the various writers groups was the popularization of proletarian culture. This took the form of discussions, concerning literature,

critiques of members' works, and publicity for meetings and demonstrations. Many of the groups spent considerable time producing and financing their own pamphlets and publications.

The artists' groups discussed issues concerning the use of art in class struggle, and offered practical assistance to unions and organizations. Accompanying the JRC slogan 'art is a weapon in the class struggle,' was a real effort to make art and artists available and effective voices of the movement.

In general, chapter meetings were held weekly, or bi-monthly; on regularly scheduled days there was no advance notice, but in the case of special speakers, announcements were usually sent by mail. Occasionally, full chapter meetings were held to discuss important political events, or to inform members of specific demonstrations for which the JRC was to do propaganda. It is interesting to listen to the thoughts of one young JRC member, Jerry Mangione, as he recalls the JRC meetings:

As a young man attending some of the meetings of the New York John Reed Club, I listened to poets and critics orate with an eloquence more characteristic of barristers than writers, which alternatively impressed and bewildered less erudite members of the audience like myself. Yet, while the general tenor of the discussions was heavily intellectual, there was also

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practical talks concerning such matters as distributing leaflets, performing on public soap-boxes, taking part in pickets and anti-fascist demonstrations, and inevitably, agitating for a government sponsored agency that would give jobs to needy writers and artists. 46

Discussions about proletarian literature and art were varied. Topics included: "Social Forms in Print," "Cultural Status of National Minorities in Europe," "Theater as a Social Force," and, "The Present Crisis in Architecture." One lecture, which produced serious discussion afterwards, was the talk delivered by Diego Rivera, the Mexican muralist, on January 1, 1932. The invitation to speak was extended to the artist on the basis of his record as a revolutionary painter. At the meeting Rivera divulged his activities as a supporter of American imperialism through "its' tool, the Calles government." 47 After an extensive discussion and self-criticism session, the JRC decided to return Rivera's \$100 contribution, and vowed to be more careful in future selection processes. Rivera was branded a renegade from the Kharkov Conference, and had been reported as such in the December issue of the New Masses. Members of the New York chapter felt that this should have been investigated more carefully before opening doors to "the cultural agent of American imperialism." 48 After the incident with the John Reed Club, Rivera

declared himself an adherent of Trotsky, and at that point, the Club officially declared that they had nothing in common with the ideals of this man.

John Reed Club postcard: "Manifestations of Fascism in United States Art" - speaker William Dunne.

John Reed Club Dance : April 27, 1934. 35¢  
Hear Aunt Molly Jackson sing "Hungry Miner Blues." 49

As with any political or social organization, the John Reed Clubs experienced their share of local and national problems. Some were of a strictly technical nature, while others were concerned with ideological factionalism. Perhaps it adds credibility to the reality of the Clubs to let them themselves speak about their own problems, as discussed in the JRC National Bulletin, 1934:

Hollywood - Of late, our prestige and influence has fallen considerably, and almost the whole cultural burden has been carried solely by the Partisan. The function of the Club should be of a broader character, publishing the paper should be merely one phase of the Club's activity. This narrowness and shrinking of activity and membership must be remedied by a united effort to draw new forces into the clubs. There must be a place for those people that do not necessarily lie in either the creation of art or literature, but they are cultural workers in other fields.

What does the consumer of culture have in the JRC?

Philadelphia - Our club should probably be described as a 'producer' rather than a consumer. We admit only members who can actively contribute towards the production in cultural fields. Where we are really different from the New York Club ...is that, not all our members, in fact, few of them, have arrived at national prominence. The difference is one of degree rather than kind.

Detroit - The role of the JRC in this district, as opposed to New York, Chicago, and Hollywood, is that of broad work among all cultural units. It acts as the cultural federation among intellectuals and petty-bourgeoisie. 50

It seems from these reports that one of the major issues that the JRC dealt with was the question of the role of the non-producing member whose interest was in culture, yet who was not actively doing either art or literature. This was particularly a question crucial to the smaller chapters, where membership did not include the big name writers and artists of the New York Club, for example. Three small regional conferences, held in the South, mid-West, and West, in the summer and fall of 1933, discussed this very issue. It was agreed upon that the John Reed Clubs consisted as a general cultural organization, which included a minority of verified writers and artists. The Clubs resembled each other chiefly in their excellent rendering of "technical assistance to the revolutionary movement, in forms of banners, cultural events, as well as

in helping to initiate mass campaigns among middle-class elements, and in serving as recruiting for mass organizations and for the Communist Party, particularly in the field of agit-prop." <sup>51</sup>

Many of the JRC members were not writers or artists, but simply people interested in fostering revolutionary culture, and critiquing the culture of the bourgeoisie. Even though the emphasis was on developing the John Reed Clubs as an actual center for the production and distribution of revolutionary art and literature, all members interested in proletarian culture were considered important.

St. Louis JRC organized in early 1933 despite the protests that the city was not an art center. Art classes were taught in the Old Court House. 52

The story of the St. Louis JRC's struggle to secure work space offers an interesting example of how local chapters fought on the municipal level, defying archaic city ordinances to produce art for public consumption. The old courthouse of St. Louis was nearly a century old by 1933. Negro slaves were sold at auctions on the stairwell. From the windows, one could have seen the blood of the Civil War spill. In the late 1920's, the building was abandoned, and through a strange series of events, it became a warehouse for unsold art.

The entire space, some 18 or 20 rooms, was under the control of the St. Louis Art League. According to that city's JRC, the Art League consisted of one ex-  
museum curator who dabbled with various art racketeers. 53

The local JRC formed a committee to demand space. Joe Jones, an important JRC member from working-class background who had received national prominence, agreed to teach a class to unemployed art students without a fee. His conditions were that students of every race and color be admitted, and that all facilities, models, and materials, be available free of charge. The Art League called the JRC committee RED. After much legal wrangling, and the circulation of several petitions, one room was obtained.

The average attendance at the class was 30, over half of those students being black. The room was kept open from ten in the morning to eleven at night, seven days a week. At one end of the room was a large wall broken only by a small door. Jones decided to organize a collective mural project, which would depict scenes on the Mississippi. One side of the mural was to be dominated by the Eads bridge and on the other, a steamboat. In between, were to be a dozen scenes of levee workers, bonus marchers, unemployed, and typical river-front groups. A fund of \$100 was collected

and the students began. As one observer wrote:

The reaction of an observer to the Unemployed Art class at work is powerful. The feeling on entering the old room - where judges sat on the bench still elevated above the floor - would sound exaggerated if you tried to describe it. It is as if in this abandoned fortress of the old order, of the farce of capitalist justice, a new revolutionary life had already taken hold and was flourishing. 54

And in other cities, in other ways, the John Reed Clubs were making themselves heard. In Indiannapolis, the JRC started in 1932, and was working closely with the Farmer's League. In Grand Rapid, the JRC was printing the Cauldron. In Philadelphia, instruction was being given to the theater group at the Workers Relief Camp by the JRC. The Milwaukee Club constructed a 30 foot figure of a worker smashing capitalism and suspended it from the City Auditorium on May Day. The largest white-collar delegation to the New York May Day demonstration of 1934 was the John Reed Club contingent.

With the ascendancy of Hitler to power in 1933, the John Reed Clubs, in conjunction with the Revolutionary Writers Federation, distributed through its' organizational channels the following resolution:

Hitlerism, the fist of bourgeois class violence, has now been put into power by German big capital for the purpose of smashing the organization of working-class people,

and the evergrowing forward movement of the Communist Party, that leads the laboring classes of Germany towards the proletarian revolution.

Through a series of shameless provocations, an assassination, the arrest of thousands of working class leaders - militants, the throttling of the press, the abolition of civil rights, the anti-semitic excesses and chauvinistic demagogic incitements, the Nazi murderous hands are attempting the destruction of the mass struggle against fascism, and the entire hunger program of the capitalist class.

But capitalism, resorting to stark terror, the last desperate means it can wield in defense of this class domination, cannot sever aside the strong will of the German workers, who through a broad united front of millions of toilers, are rallying for the repulsion of Hitler's brutal attacks. The Nazi troop of kulaks and petty-bourgeoisie "gone mad" will not succeed in their frantic attempt to crush the German CP and the increasingly militant Social Democrat rank and file. An open civil war between capitalist and labor will be the inevitable culmination of Hitler's hooligan regime.

Here in the United States, where capitalism is undergoing the most profound economic and social cataclysm, the fascization of the state is proceeding apace. The capitalists seek to load the whole burden of the deepening crisis upon the workers, farmers, and impoverished lower middle class. It is clear that the struggle against bourgeois oppression of the working class must be fought wherever it exists.

We, the revolutionary proletarian writers and cultural workers, pledge our support of the German laboring masses and the vanguard Communist Party, and declare relentless war on fascism, and on capitalist rule in its' entirety. 55

The John Reed Clubs realized the threat of Hitler, and this resolution was one of their attempts to raise the consciousness of the American people, and to join with other leftist groups in a long, protracted struggle against fascism.

The John Reed Clubs expanded across the country, from 12 in 1932 to 30 by 1934. The need for a second conference was obvious, and in October, 1934, the Second National Conference of the John Reed Clubs was held in Chicago to over 40 delegates representing a membership of 1,200.<sup>56</sup> The conference opened with the reading of a radiogram from the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, calling upon the John Reed Clubs to "give the best of their creative powers to the task of fighting fascism, war, and reaction, and to building a socialist culture in America."<sup>57</sup>

Among the writers and artists present at the second conference were: Jack Conroy, Meridel Le Sueur, Alan Calmer, Orrick Johns, Joe Jones, Nelson Algren, William Phillips and Phillip Rahv (two men who were to play an important role in the Partisan Review), Alfred Hayes, Gilbert Roocke, Jan Wittenber, Mike Gold, Richard Wright, and many others. The many new faces testify to the fact that the Clubs had been drawing a considerable number of young writers and artists into the organiza-

tion. As one member describes the influx:

Young writers from the industrial Lake region, the northern wheat belt and the Missouri valley where farmers are starving and battling, from New York and the Eastern textile field, spoke to an overflowing audience of Chicago intellectuals. They brought something new, vital, revolutionary. They crystallized the struggles of their territories. They were the carriers of a fresh culture, young and bursting for outlets. And here they had an outlet; here they fraternized with others who shared their assurances of a proletarian world coming to birth. 58

From the opening speech, the sense of the conference was for widening the area of influence of the Clubs. Alfred Hayes, in the opening address, stressed the importance of a widespread campaign like that led by the American League Against War and Fascism, and indicated that in order to win large sections of the American intelligensia the sectarian approach of the cultural movement must be broken down.

Other speakers denounced the 'leftist' character of some aspects of revolutionary literature, and attacked the sloganized tracts that were passing as fiction. A.B. Magil pointed to the advances of American revolutionary literature. J.S. Balch demonstrated how inflexibility had frightened away several sympathetic writers. Meridel Le Sueur presented an analysis of the problems inherent in the creation of revolutionary

fiction. Joseph North dealt with the role of the New Masses in winning over middle-class intellectuals.

Reports by a number of artists showed the importance of programs to organize artists, and the example of Joe Jones, in St. Louis, was used.

Alexander Trachtenberg brought official greetings from the CPUSA. He stressed the potential of revolutionary literature in the fight against capitalism and joined in denouncing the sectarianism within the cultural movement. He proposed that the National Committee of the John Reed Clubs take the initiative in organizing a National Writers Congress within the next six months. The proposal was unanimously endorsed that, "the John Reed Clubs should make every effort to hold a National Writers Congress at some time within the next eight months."<sup>59</sup> In order to understand the full implications of this proposal, and the new non-sectarian approach, one must look to the new international communist policy of the united front. The activities of this policy were geared towards broad-based mass fronts to fight fascism. The direct effect of this policy on the JRC will be discussed in Chapter Five, but at this point it is necessary to say that it was partly due to this change that the John Reed Clubs were dissolved.

While the JRC was not a Communist Party organization,

it was affected by the thoughts and directions of the international communist movement. Perhaps only 25% of JRC members were simultaneously CP members. <sup>60</sup> It is certainly true that these members did meet on their own to occasionally discuss the political direction of the larger body. It would not be correct to assume from this though, that the Communist Party manipulated the John Reed Clubs. First of all, the importance of a group of writers and artists to the Communist Party should not be exaggerated or overestimated. Secondly, if the dual members were the more active, it can be explained by the fact that their level of political discipline was more advanced. So, to simply say that the CP wanted the JRC dissolved does not serve as a satisfactory explanation. Yet, it is the explanation most commonly accepted.

It is accepted just as it is that the CP activities of the 1930's verged on a master-minded plot to infiltrate innocent organizations and lead impressionable minds down the blind alleys of Communism. Much of this distorted interpretation was the result of the horrendous years of McCarthyism and the intense anti-communism that the entire country experienced. And, one can't deny that the CP did make sectarian mistakes, although these were made through honest miscalculations and not

premeditated conspiracy.

Perhaps now, after the 'liberating' 1960's, after the questioning of governmental honesty since Watergate, after inquiry after inquiry into the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., and John F. Kennedy, and after the mobilization of million to end the genocidal war against Vietnam and Cambodia, perhaps now, the history books can be reopened on the 1930's. Maybe now, the John Reed Clubs can be viewed with fresh eyes.

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3. Fay Blake. The Strike in the American Novel. New York. p 138.
4. Taken from correspondence by author with Joseph Pass in 1976, and is basic concensus among all other interviewees.
5. Taken from correspondence by author with Morris Colman in 1976.
6. Taken from correspondence with J. Pass, and he was not at liberty to name the eight man attending the first meeting.
7. Joseph Freeman. New Masses. June 16, 1936. p23.
8. Thomas Wolfe, Jr. The League of American Writers... Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale. pp 14-15.
9. New Masses. November 1929. p 21.
10. Mike Gold. "A New Program for Writers" New Masses. January 1930. p 21.
11. Ralph Cheney. New Masses. February 1930. p 21.
12. M. Gold. "New Program for Writers." p 21.
13. Taken from correspondence by author with Sender Carlin in 1976.
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15. New Masses. July, 1930. p20.
16. New Masses. May, 1930. p 23.
17. "Red Scare Protest Issued By Liberals" New York Times. ,ay 19, 1930. p 19.
18. Mike Gold. "Notes On Kharkov". New Masses. March

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19. "Kharkov Conference of Revolutionary Writers." New Masses. February, 1931. pp 6-7.
  20. Daily Worker. January 21, 1931. p 6.
  21. New Masses. July, 1931. p 21.
  22. from correspondence with Morris Colman.
  23. New Masses. July, 1931. p 21.
  24. New Masses. August, 1931. p 21.
  25. New Masses. October, 1931. p 28.
  26. Terror in the Mines: Harlan County Miners Speak.
  
  27. "Art As A Weapon - Program of Workers Cultural Federation." New Masses. August, 1931. pp 11-13.
  28. "To All Writers Of All Countries." New Masses. November, 1931. p 31.
  29. "A Call To Action" New Masses. December, 1931. p 31.
  30. "To All Workers Groups" New Masses. February, 1931. p 31.
  31. New Masses. May, 1932. p 21.
  32. Reader is referred to Max Eastman's Artists in Uniform and Eugene Lyons' The Red Decade.
  33. "The John Reed Club Convention" New Masses. July, 1932. pp14-15.
  34. Ibid., p 15.
  35. "Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Clubs" New Masses June, 1931. p 3. A complete copy of the manifesto is included as Appendix II.
  36. Daniel Aaron's Writers on the Left. p 243.

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37. "The John Reed Clubs" New Masses. July, 1932. p 14.
38. Aaron. Writers on the Left. p 244.
39. Ibid., p 246.
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41. "The John Reed Club Resolution Against War" New Masses. July, 1932. p 14.
42. New Masses. November, 1932. p 30.
43. A list of sample classes from the school is included as Appendix III.
44. Daily Worker. September 14, 1932. p 1.
45. Taken from correspondence with Morris Colman.
46. Jerry Mangione, The Dream and the New Deal. New York. p 33.
47. "Diego Rivera and the John Reed Clubs" New Masses. February, 1932. p 31.
48. Ibid., p 31.
49. Insert is from an unidentified postcard found in the files of the Special Sections Archives at the Stanford University Hoover Institute
50. JRC Bulletin. Vol I #2. May-June, 1934. p 2.
51. Ibid., p 4.
52. New Masses, February, 1934. p 21.
53. "St. Louis Artists Win" New Masses. March 6, 1934. p 28.
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56. Walter Rideout. The Radical Novel in the United

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States. p 146.

57. "National John Reed Club Conference" Partisan Review. V 6, 1934. p 60.
58. "The John Reed Club Meets" International Literature. Vol 6, 1934. p 145.
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## Chapter Four

What makes the proletarian spirit in American literature much more important than ever before is that it is now no longer the property of a few lonely enthusiasts, but is the mainstream of American letters...The proletarian movement of American literature today has developed into a dynamic force, with professional disciples and lay followers, with Clubs and magazines espousing its cause, and with critics, novelists, playwrights, and poets rallying to its support... Few writers, especially of the younger generation, have escaped the impact of this movement. 1

The socialist literature of the future will be a free literature, because the idea of socialism and sympathy with the working people, and not greed or careerism, will bring ever new forces to its ranks. 2

THE JOHN REED CLUBS  
AND THE PROLETARIAN LITERATURE MOVEMENT

The John Reed Clubs were in the forefront of the American proletarian literature movement. Their manifesto clearly states the intention of the Clubs to be, "We call upon all honest writers and artists to join with the literary and artistic movement of the working-class in the battle for a new and superior world."<sup>3</sup> The JRC philosophy on culture, the works that the Club produced, and the writers, artists, and poets that were given support and guidance, testify to the group's conviction and commitment to that stated intention.

The intensity of growth of the national and international communist literature movement, the deepening

economic crisis, and the tremendous transformation of the Soviet Union, all made the class struggle of the 1930's sharper than perhaps any other period. To demand that art and culture be part of that struggle was nothing new, but the intensity of the demand was in much part due to the increasing politicalization of the entire decade.

The historical tradition of American literature, like the spiritual backbone of this country's philosophical grain, has been overwhelmingly individualistic. The spirit of the pioneering man of the 18th century still remained alive in the early 19th, but by the 1930's, that American spirit no longer matched the reality. Farmers were poverty-stricken. World War I had sparked a technological and economic change throughout the face of America. Laissez-faire capitalism had become monopoly capitalism. The struggle of the individual had clearly become the struggle of classes. Along with the realization of classes that became apparent in the United States, a literature and culture which expressed the values and perspectives of the workers developed. It was a literature that expressed a proletarian conception of capitalism as they saw it, but which also carried with it ideas to replace the old outlook as it became emancipated from capitalist society.

Perhaps it would be fruitful at this point, to identify what is meant by class literature. When the writers of the John Reed Clubs spoke of proletarian literature, what did they mean? How does class influence culture?

Art, that flourished under the eyes of the aristocracies, for example, was moulded to please the palates and pretensions of that ruling class. It revolved about the aristocratic motif, just as the art that was nurtured by the Church pursued religious themes. As long as the aristocracy remained the ruling force in society, art and literature presented themes consistent with its domination. At that historical moment, when the bourgeoisie and merchant class rose to compete with the aristocracy for power, the rigidities of art and literature were released. The bourgeoisie had different interests which created, and were mirrored by, new cultural expressions. Artists, who now no longer had only kings and courts to turn to for stipends, found a new world open to them. If one accepts that the proletariat will rise and compete for power with the bourgeoisie as they rose against the aristocracies, then too, one must accept the necessity of cultural expression for this upheaval. And, just as the basis for bourgeois culture was within the aristocratic society, capitalism has

within itself, the material basis for socialist culture.

As the statement of the Workers Cultural Federation

reads:

The development of the press, the spread of literacy, the establishment of libraries, the movies, the radio, in short, the entire cultural apparatus of capitalism becomes the foundation for the mass proletarian culture, and the arsenal from which the workers take their cultural weapons even before overthrowing the bourgeoisie. 4

The John Reed Clubs believed it was part of their historic mission to promote and create this new proletarian culture within the belly of capitalism. They felt that their art had a purpose, and that their literature spoke for a new world.

Proletarian literature is not simply writing that deals with the working class. Aristocratic tragedies were aristocratic not only because their main characters were perhaps of noble birth, but because their whole outlook reflected that class ideology. Literature of the bourgeoisie is bourgeoisie, not because the central characters were of middle-class or mercantile origins, but because the entire philosophy of life expressed in it was bourgeois in spirit. Its use of religion, law, and money, are all components of that class expression. Proletarian literature therefore, would not be proletarian simply because the leading characters were of the

working-class, but because the conception of the world that was presented, the nature of the aspirations portrayed, are those belonging to the proletarian class. The ideals would be collectivistic instead of individualistic. The political democracy would be proletarian dictatorship. It would present itself as a militant force of opposition to the existing capitalist order. Since literature of an oppressed class develops in the birth of its liberation, culture - art, theater, music, journalism - become weapons in that struggle.

It should be mentioned that the possibility of creating a proletarian culture within a capitalist environment was doubted by a number of leftist theoreticians, including L. Trotsky. In his essay, "Literature and Revolution" (1925), he challenged the idea, and presented the thesis that "the proletariat acquires power for the purposes of doing away with class culture,"<sup>5</sup> and that:

The main task of the proletarian intelligensia in the immediate future is not the abstract formulation of a new culture, regardless of the absence of a basis for it, but a definite culture. It is impossible to create a class culture behind the backs of another class. <sup>6</sup>

This proposition met with criticism from Russian and American critics alike. A. Lunacharsky said that the crucial omission is, "that the culture that will develop in the transitional period will under no cir-

cumstances be universal, but clearly attuned to the class which will produce it - the proletariat." <sup>7</sup> And the JRC members pushed long and hard for the laying of the first stones of proletarian tradition within the United States.

As early as 1921, Mike Gold's article, "Towards Proletarian Art," laid a rather emotional appeal for the historic necessity of proletarian culture:

It is not in the hot house that the lusty great tree will grow. Its roots must be in the fields, factories, and workshops of America, in the American life.

When there is singing and music rising in every American street, when in every American factory there is a drama group of workers, when mechanics paint in their leisure, and farmers write sonnets, the greater art will grow and only then.

Only a creative nation understands creation. Only an artist understands art.

The method must be revolutionary. From the deepest depths upward. 8

Gold's call was ignored for much of the decade of the 1920's. The Harding-Coolidge Boom was under way, and with it, the deflation of the labor and radical movements. The tense mood of 1912-1921 had collapsed. The 1920's experienced the Palmer raids, fundamentalism, nativism, and the rebirth of the Klu Klux Klan. Radicalism, as an organized and aggressive force, was

pretty much destroyed for the majority of the decade. The destruction of liberal hopes, the repression of the Red Scare, the advent of "prosperity" and the standardization of archaic social values, all these factors and more, helped Gold's call fall on mute ears.

But with the first issue of the New Masses, May, 1926, with Freeman, Gold, and Gellert among the editors, the campaign for proletarian literature was begun. As the opening issue of the magazine states:

We Want To Print:

Confessions - diaries - documents -  
 the concrete -  
 Letters from hoboes, peddlars, small town  
 atheists, unfrocked clergymen and school  
 teachers -  
 Revelations by rebel chambermaids and  
 night club waiters -  
 The sobs of driven stenographers -  
 The poetry of steel workers -  
 The wrath of miners - the laughter of  
 sailors -  
 Strike stories, prison stories, work stories -  
 Stories by Communist, I.W.W. and other  
 revolutionary workers. 9

There had existed literature of the masses prior to the New Masses and John Reed Clubs. There was the literature of Jack London, Walt Whitman, Edward Bellamy, and the Muckrakers, to name a few. Vernon Loggins, in his book I Hear America, says that:

The theme of revolution is one of the oldest and most common in American literature. Without faith in political/social/ and economic change, Roger

Williams, Franklin, Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Twain, could not have written as they did. Each one in their own time, was a radical. Upton Sinclair is no more extreme than Emerson was...no literary red of the present is redder than was Tom Paine. The emphasis now is on men in the mass - on the people as Sandburg chose to say. In the past, it was on the individual. But the spirit of rebellion against existing systems is the same. 10

Yet, while many of these writers demonstrated their outrage at human suffering, few advocated that the entire system be changed by any means necessary.

The New Masses wanted to provide a forum for the 'new' American literature. The editors wanted to fill the pages with art, poetry, and fiction about the working class. The John Reed Clubs were to be the center where so inclined writers and artists could learn and practice their trade. To discover a world of revolutionary labor which had its own poetry, philosophy, style, and themes. It was to be a freedom from the commercialism of the art market. It was "what Carl Sandburg caught glimpses of; Jack London saw a gleam or two; and John Reed poured out his rich manhood for." 11

The campaign for proletarian literature was based upon the Marxist presupposition that the bourgeois society was dying, that the laboring class was the basis for the new society, and that the revolutionary elements

of the working class would usher in the future. Art and literature become weapons for those elements in this battle.

Yet the forms and definitions of that art and literature were constantly debated during the early Thirties. As Joseph Freeman explains:

We already have an economics, a sociology, even a journalism that tells the story; but there has yet to be an art form adequate to the new world as the art forms you saw adequate to the flowers, lanscape, the richly attired women. It will take alot of energy and sweat and thought to hew that art form, but hewn, it will be. 12

It was the John Reed Clubs which tried to hew that art form, and the results have been the subject of much discussion and criticism since.

While within the circle of JRC members, writers, and contributors to the New Masses, there was general agreement of the need for proletarian literature, definitions were quite varied. Defining a proletarian novel as any novel written from a socially conscious point of view, is not satisfactory. Some believed that the writers themselves must be of working class origins, yet, no one can deny that the Communist Manifesto is proletarian in nature even though the authors were from middle-class backgrounds. Some believed that the novel must be about proletarian situations and characters,

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but as mentioned earlier, bourgeois novels written about working-class characters were not considered to be proletarian in nature. To say that it depends upon the author's point of view assists in reaching a definition, but what then, does one define as a proletarian point of view? Most definitely, the proletarian novel depicts class struggle, advocates class solidarity, and is in militant opposition to the existing economic system. Edwin Seaver, in a speech before the first American Writers Congress in 1935, attempts a definition as:

In the last analysis, it is not style, not form, not plot, not even characters, not even the class portrayed that are fundamental in differentiating the proletarian from the bourgeois novel. These are only aspects of the superstructure of the novel...it is the concern with political orientation, with economic interpretation, with a certain materialist dialectic that is the basic distinction of the proletarian novel. 13

Shortly after the Kharkov Conference (1930), Mike Gold published an article where he states what he considers to be the primary elements of proletarian literature as: 1) that the work situations be described with utmost precision and knowledge, 2) that it deals with real conflicts of men and women, and has nothing to do with fine-spun affairs and sentimentality, 3) that it should have a usefulness, that it has a social function, 4) that it uses as few words as possible, no

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verbal acrobatics, 5) that it is written with courage and pride of proletarian life and its experiences, 6) that there is a direct line, swift action, and a clear form, 7) that there is not futility or expression of sordidness of life, 8) that there are no lies about human nature, everyone is a mixture of emotions which should be expressed with honesty and frankness, and 9) that there is no straining melodrama.

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It was along these general lines that the proletarian literature flourished. It is not within the scope of this thesis to analyze each and every novel, short story, and poem written by the JRC members in order to evaluate their merit. Although the results of a study such as that would prove interesting and fruitful, the parameters of this study allow for only a brief overview of the proletarian novels of the period, their common characteristics and similarities.

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The subject matter of the proletarian novel usually dealt with working class families and work situation. A minority did deal with middle-class characters, particularly those in tremendous periods of indecision. The theme of the American Dream, that any man with enough grits and determination could make it to the top, all but disappeared from American literature.

One of the central elements of the Thirties' novels

were their excellent, detailed, and accurate depictions of work and industrial processes. Nearly every classification of labor was touched upon by JRC members, from Southern textile mill workers, lumberers of the Northwest, automobile workers, seamen, farmers, agricultural workers, secretarial and white-collar workers, to structural steel and railroad layers. Even though the initial advice of Mike Gold to "have each writer attach himself to a single industry"<sup>16</sup> was not followed, in terms of each member becoming a worker himself, the proletarian writers spent much time learning the exacting processes of labor and industry. Their literature was real to working class readers, and educational to those not personally familiar with the situation.

The JRC authors used the strike as a symbol of hope, solidarity, and the coming of proletarian power. The novels depict strikes of lumber workers, steel workers, cotton and fruit pickers, migrant farmers, fisherman, and many more. "We see the strikes through the eyes of the workers, labor organizers, reporters, capitalists, and artists," wrote one literary historian. "Strikes are won, lost and unresolved, won only to be lost in the long view, and lost only to be ultimately won."<sup>17</sup> Many of the writers had personally experienced strikes, and due to their first-hand knowledge, they

offered the reader a credibility which is usually lacking.

Strikes were generally viewed through the eyes of the participants, and throughout the novels one finds use of the workers' vocabulary, the language of the insiders. Although it wasn't called "new journalism," this is definitely one of the most important techniques of that style of writing. A typical example of such writing is given to us in a piece written by several John Reed Club members as they marched on the Hunger March of 1932:

The townspeople, jobless by the thousands, turned out in scraggly legions to view the Hunger Marchers. They crowded about our trucks - bewiskered Slovaks, tattered Negroes, clean shaven native 100%ers.

Jeers. Our speaker climbed to the top of a truck, his sweated frame outlined against the dull Indiana sky.

A policeman's club against his shins sent him hurtling from his perch.

"Let him speak" roared pro-Hunger Marcher Hammond. Black, white, bony faces of Hammond's steel laborers shoved forward like spring ice cracking up in a freshet.

"Let 'em speak!"

The police scurried here and there in their blue uniforms. A tear gas bomb exploded. The crowd surged - gave way in the cloud.

A line of super-patriots and pool-room denizens rushed into the fray. Townspeople resisted. The streets rocked with

epithets. A store window crashed to the pavement. A windshield of a Hunger Marcher's truck caved in. Women delegates screamed. 18

It was not artificial that the John Reed Club members used the language of the insiders, for they themselves, were insiders.

One of the central premises of the proletarian literature was an adherence to the Marxist principle of class struggle through which the working-class would eventually take power. Within this theme, there was a wide variation of methods and strategies, ranging from an advocacy of militant unionism, to reform achieved through Christianity, to subversion within established institutions, to the ballot, to the bullet. Some novels portray a rightness of the CP line, others show suspicion of labor organizers, and still others had a total lack of any communist ideology.

Critics of the literary left of the 1930's, like Fay Blake and Granville Hicks, classify the literature as being oversimplistic and lacking good literary construction. Certainly, clumsy and poor literature was produced, as there would be within any artistic generation. Yet, despite the fact that many novels were awkward, they marked a break with the ivory tower, an insistence that society and its problems

were valid subjects for literary expression. Many of the simpler works, while not having long-lasting value, served as useful propaganda for more immediate purposes.

As one friendly critic wrote:

The proletarian writer feels he knows what the age to be born will bring. He was bred in despair and pessimism. He is a confirmed disciple of science. But constructiveness, hopefulness, and optimism make up his creed. He was turned about face from the gloom of the Twenties. Right or wrong, he is sincere. And his sincerity rests in his artistic strength... his standards of art are high. He proved that revolutionary propaganda can itself constitute beauty. Maybe his work is, as many critics believe, the great gift of the Thirties to American literature. 19

According to Dr. John Scott Bowman, between 1929-1936, there were 46 proletarian novels published. In 1929, one was published; 1930, four; 1932, five; 1933, four; in 1934, 14 novels were published; 1935 saw 11 published; and in 1936, four more novels. Many of these were directly inspired by the JRC and its widening influence among young writers. Notably, the strongest years of the JRC coincide with the years when the highest number of published proletarian novels was turned out. As the concept of proletarian revolution took hold, as the John Reed Clubs expanded, the literature they produced became marketable. There was an audience. Publishers added John Reed Club authors to their lists. Libraries ordered JRC novels and maga-

zines to their collections. John Reed Club publications spread across the country.

Was their literature simply propaganda? In an attempt to answer that question, Joseph Freeman said:

Literature was propaganda in favor of accepted ideas, propaganda was literature in favor of new ideas. 21

This quote sums up the nature of the two, for when novels of the bourgeoisie picture a neat, moral, and thrifty capitalist world, they are not considered propaganda, at least by the bourgeoisie. Yet, they are certainly no less biased than the literature which speaks of an immoral and thriftless capitalist society, or of an organized, humane, and new socialist order. The difference is only in who is defining.

Within the JRC circles, the 'art versus propaganda' dynamic was the subject of much debate. Some called 'art as propaganda' too schematic and vulgar; others called the 'art for art's sake' concept too escapist. Perhaps it is best to let those debating the subject speak for themselves:

Kenneth Burke: Insofar as a writer really is a propagandist, not merely writing work that will be applauded by his allies, convincing the already convinced, but actually moving forward like a pioneer into outlying areas of the public, and bringing them the first favorable impressions of his doctrine, the nature of his trade gives rise to

special symbolic requirements. 22

Mike Gold: A great body of proletarian literature will show the concrete facts. It will show our face. It will be the greatest argument we can present to show those people who juggle with theories of communism and fascism. We must build up a picture of what the working-class in the country looks like. We must use this as a final clinching argument - this picture of real life, of real working class struggle. We must use this as the final answer we can give to the intellectual abstractions of the bourgeoisie. 23

Granville Hicks: It is meaningless to say "All proletarian literature is intended to be propaganda," for it's not propaganda in any sense that the bourgeois literature is not. The aim of the proletarian author is the aim of any author: he wants to write about representative persons and significant events in such a way as to bring out what he believes to be the truth about them. 24

It was the intention of the John Reed Clubs to unify these two qualities. The literature was to be enjoyable and well written. It was also to be an active and effective weapon in the struggles against fascism and capitalism.

In order to push and assist the proletarian literature movement, the JRC's organized competition, offered critical reviews, and made themselves centers for the production, experimentation, and study, of radical literature. The John Reed Clubs gave young writers a place to learn, study, and publish. The JRC can be considered not only as the impetus, but also the source.

Today, when one looks through proletarian anthologies, such as Writers in Revolt, American Writers and the Great Depression, and Proletarian Literature in the United States, one finds that an overwhelming majority of the author, poets, and journalists included were members of the John Reed Clubs. Through its national organization and local chapters, the JRC was the practical foundation upon which the proletarian literature movement of the United States was built.

It would be a great omission to mention only the philosophy and production of proletarian literature, and to ignore an equally important ingredient. The consumers. Who read the literature of the John Reed Club? Did the JRC authors write only for themselves? Sales figures for certain proletarian novels, while they could be obtained from publishers, would not identify who was doing the reading. But a study was conducted in 1939 which tried to ascertain what class of people was reading proletarian literature. <sup>25</sup> After sampling 31 libraries, with a standard of 10 specific proletarian titles, the investigator, Dr. John Bowman, found that over 70% of the libraries had two or more of the books. As would be expected, the novels circulated less frequently than the national best-sellers, partly due to the fact that most libraries had many more duplicates

of the latter. Significantly, what the study did reveal was that proletarian novels were indeed being circulated and read. Forty percent of the sample titles circulated at the rate of four times a month, 80% at the rate of twice a month. Certain novels circulated up to six times a month, thereby rating quite favorably in comparison to the commercial sellers. The study indicated that the proletarian novel had a better showing than generally assumed.

As to the question of the economic class of the borrowers, the study is particularly significant. The distribution of borrowers was divided into four categories: Labor, White-collar, Professional, and Executive. While the classifications are arbitrary, and possibly more vague than would be allowable today, they were reasonable for the purposes of that study. The data indicates that 37.7% of the borrowers were from Labor, as against 50.9% from the White-collar group. It is possible that the findings could be open to question since the sampling of large industrially populated cities might imbalance the results. Yet, the study does afford us a rough estimate as to the reality that the proletarian novels were read, and read not only by left-wing intellectuals, but also by members of the working class. It indeed offers some sense of the validity

of the John Reed Clubs. Certainly, if literature is to be of and for the working class, it must also be read and appreciated by that class.

In the attempt to reach the widest possible audience, the John Reed Clubs did not confine their proletarian writing to novels. The JRC's were the nuclei for close to a dozen little proletarian magazines that dotted the map from one coast to the other.

Historically, the little magazines have been a phenomenon usually edited by a person or group in rebellion against a sense of formalism imposed by a conservative establishment. The little magazines of the first two decades of this century fought against the taboos of language and form. Whether they were expatriates on the Left Bank, or in Greenwich Village, the magazines espoused a liberation of style, an avant-garde use of words, and a sense of freedom from conventionalism. A short poem written in the early 1920's reveals the role that the little magazines played:

Amongst our literary scene,  
     Saddest this sight to me,  
 The graves of little magazines,  
     That died to make us free.    26

Most of the expatriates had come home before the big bubble burst in 1929. The large circulation magazines attempted to underplay the manifestations of the Crash:

it wasn't good for business to read about the Depression. But throughout the country, angry men and women began to gather together in various levels of revolt against a system that permitted people to starve in the face of such wealth.

Little magazines were reborn, in basements, back-  
rooms, even in cowsheds, <sup>27</sup> and they expressed the growing sentiment of discontent. Although there were a score of unaffiliated little magazines, the John Reed Clubs provided a center for young writers who found few established organs willing to publish their work. John Reed Club magazines sprung up across the country. Partisan (Hollywood). Left Front (Chicago). Partisan Review (New York). Left Review (Philadelphia). Anvil (Moberly). New Force (Detroit). Caulderon (Grand Rapids). Leftward (Boston). Hammer (Hartford). Although many of these magazines have been lost, what is available offers an interesting look into the actual work of young JRC members.

Probably one of the first questions to be asked in doing an overview of the little magazines is to ask why did they spring up, and were they in competition with the national New Masses. Voices of revolt were heard in many ways throughout the Depression. As a political/cultural organization, the John Reed Club was most

sued to be a center from which small proletarian magazines could flourish. The publications offered a creative testing ground for the still undefined genre of proletarian literature. They were a place to publish for those young writers and artists who were just developing, or who couldn't publish in establishment organs for a variety of political reasons.

Were the little magazines competing with the New Masses? It seems quite to the contrary. The New Masses and its editors, gave support to the Partisan Review. Although some writers claim that the New Masses was too sectarian, there was never a move by the magazine to suppress any of the little publications. In fact, it is quite preposterous to assume that the New Masses would resent what the little magazines were trying to do - to provide ample regional and local coverage; to expand the concepts and ideas of proletarian literature; and to give as many writers and artists as possible a chance to express themselves.

The magazines were plagued with a multitude of problems, not least of which was money. Being part of an opposition voice meant that standard channels of financing were unavailable, and being that it was the 1930's, not even movement sources could provide much support. Apart from the Partisan Review, whose history

will be discussed at a later point in the chapter, the magazines had short lives, from one or two issues up to a year or two. A good portion of the reason for the demise of the magazines can be attributed to the dropping of the John Reed Clubs from the communist intellectual movement in 1935. But the importance of the little proletarian magazine can not be judged simply by the duration of its public life, for many concrete external conditions hindered growth. Their value is more in what they had to say and how they said it, than in how long they were saying for.

Glancing at several magazines in a random fashion, (since their availability is scarce), one sees a variety and vitality to the publications. One of the earliest was the Left Front (Chicago), whose first issue of June, 1933, carried numerous articles, book reviews, JRC notes, a program for a Chicago Worker's Theater, and various fiction and short stories by local JRC members. Left Review (Philadelphia), formerly called Red Pen, came out with the first issue in February, 1934, with a cover depicting the fascism of the National Recovery Act. Included were articles on Philadelphia department stores and on the mission of loving Christ. The Cauldron (Grand Rapids) was the fifth JRC magazine to appear, and generally carried articles and stories con-

cerning industry and the rape of the land in the region.

New Force (Detroit) devoted its entire issue of March - April, 1932, to the Ford Massacre at the Dearborn plant. On March 7, 1932, the former employees at the plant decided to march to Dearborn and present a program through which they could be re-employed. As they entered the city lines, demonstrators proclaimed, "We don't want any violence. No fighting...Stay in line." As the marchers pushed ahead, the police and Ford service men opened a deadly round of bullets into the ranks of the unemployed. Sixty demonstrators were wounded. Four were murdered. The road was soaked in blood. The Jehn Reed Club contingent from Detroit was at the march, had planned and worked on the banners and songs, and had sent representatives from the New Force to the demonstration to report on the day's events. The 15 page issue included funeral marches, poems, a piece of journalistic fiction about the march from one who marched, artist's sketches of the demonstration, open letters to the city's prosecuting attorney and mayor, and an analytical piece on the power structure of Dearborn. The New Force issue is incredibly powerful as a portrayal of what has gone down in the history books as the "Ford Massacre."

Partisan, "A Journal of Art, Literature, and Opinion,"

first appeared on December, 1933, and sold for five cents. It was newspaper print as opposed to the more standard mimeograph form used by the majority of JRC publications, and the mailing address was Box 2088, Hollywood, California. The contributors included Lincoln Steffens, Michael Quin, Ella Winters, Harry Carlisle, Langston Hughes, and John Dos Passos. The contents of the issue covered the "Turn to the Left" trend among writers; "Campus Fascism is Born" on the harassment of UC Berkely's Social Problems Club by 'jocks'; an extensive article on "Mexican Labor in the United States," tracing the earliest exploitation of Mexican resources with the Diaz regime up through the dependency of all United States industry on Mexican labor. There was a story on cherry pickers, various poems by Hughes, a Marxist analysis on "The Wreckers of the Economic System," and "A Boy from Oregon" about John Reed, and written by his friend Lincoln Steffens.

The second issue, January, 1934, was published by the John Reed Clubs of Hollywood, Carmel, and San Francisco. Included were articles dealing with the Hollywood film industry and screen trends; a short story on a Mexican laborer; a review of a showing at the Los Angeles County Museum; an examination of the sterilization of Jews in Germany; poems by Walker Winslow; a

continuation of the piece on the cherry pickers, several book reviews; and an announcement of a regional JRC art exhibit at 2697 North Beechwood Drive, Los Angeles.

A review of only a few issues of the Partisan reveals that a regional approach was primary, although this did not mean the exclusion of a national perspective. The third issue of the publication verifies this assumption. The "Partisans", two representatives from the magazine sent to do investigative reporting on the Imperial Valley Lettuce Strike wrote the following:

We've got to understand the strikes. During the first 90 days of the NRA there were 1,000's of them. More strikes in the six months than in all United States history. In every instance, government agencies, whether administrative or military, owners and vigilantes, have sided with private industry against the interests of the working class. A strike wave of such dimensions cannot be confused with so-called labor disputes. Neither can these individual strikes be considered separate or isolated struggles. They are all part and parcel of one movement, the crystallization of the American workers as a class, finding their strength, tightening their ranks and presenting a fighting front against their common enemy. 28

The third issue of Partisan also included an analysis of Upton Sinclair's End Poverty In California (EPIC) gubernatorial campaign which revolved about a discussion of Social Democrats and reform versus revolution. In the issue were also several poems about California agricultural work, an article on chemical warfare, and

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a 'new journalism' piece about a woman waiting in line to fill out an application for employment which she knows she won't get. The author listens and talks to some of the many hundreds of applicants who are also waiting with her, each with their own stories of hunger, frustration, and despair. It would probably do well to distribute this article in the unemployment lines today.

The fourth issue of Partisan, published now by the "John Reed Clubs of the West," continues the article on the Imperial Valley strike; articles on the weakness of the NRA; poems and reviews; and closes with notes from the JRC of Carmel. The Club had almost disintegrated from lack of active participation in any struggles apart from literary discussions. A revival of sorts happened when the Club decided to join forces and push for unionization of agricultural workers in the area. Artists and writers began making bulletins in both Spanish and English, and at the request of the workers, began investigating contractors, the Chamber of Commerce, fake unions, as well as talking to local newspapers during the strike and doing publicity. This was the type of work that their skills and talents were suited for, and the JRC in Carmel again grew in membership.

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While the Partisan Review was a John Reed Club publication, it was substantially different from the other Club magazines. In the first place, it was published by the largest and oldest John Reed Club chapter. It tended to publish the works of the well established writers who did not necessarily belong to the JRC. The magazine has had the longest life of any JRC publication, it exists today although no longer with the same ideological basis. Finally, the Partisan Review (PR) immediately became involved in the center of the communist literary movement and was the base of operation for an ideological controversy that raged within the Left.

The story of the PR is complicated. It involves discussing whether the magazine started out in opposition to the New Masses and whether its' editors from the outset, wanted to 'free' revolutionary literature from political lines. Plans for the PR were voiced by the John Reed Club of New York in 1933, but the first issue didn't appear until February, 1934. The initial coast was financed by proceeds from a lecture delivered by John Strachey on "Literature and Dialectical Materialism."

Philip Rahv and William Phillips, both active members in the New York Club, came to Joseph Freeman in 1933

with the complaint that the New Masses was too doctrinaire. Freeman expressed some agreement with them, and helped them start the PR, a "bi-monthly of revolutionary literature" published by the John Reed Club of New York. The original editorial board included Nathan Adler, Edward Dahlberg, Joseph Freeman, Louis Lozowich, Wallace Phillips, Philip Rahv, Sender Garlin, Alfred Hayes, Milton Howard, Joshua Kunitz, Leonard Mins, and Edward Rolfe. While some historians feel that the PR was founded in opposition to the New Masses, it is obvious that the new magazine could not have appeared without the active support of the New Masses staff, some of whom appeared on the pages of PR up until October, 1936.

In the opening editorial statement, the editors pledged to publish the best work of the New York members and sympathizers, to maintain the viewpoint of the working-class; to struggle against war and fascism; and to defend the Soviet Union. It was obvious though, that the PR was out to be a 'liberated' magazine.

"We shall resist every attempt to cripple our literature by narrow-minded, sectarian theories and practices!"

From the first issue the magazine showed that it would be different from the rest, in that it felt that the New Masses had failed to perform necessary

cultural functions. PR editors felt that the New Masses was too concerned with politics and not concerned enough with literature.

Almost immediately there was hostility between the PR and the communist intellectual movement in general. From the outset, PR became the base of operation from which a literary, political, and ideological conflict was waged. The tension first emerged in the debate over proletarian literature when the magazine attacked the writing of the leftwings left.

The PR conceived of itself as speaking for the centrist elements among leftwing writers. In an article by Phillips and Rahv, "Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature," an attack was launched on the sectarian theories and practices of the leftwing writers. This was dubbed "leftism", a literary analogy to Lenin's political polemic against the extremists within his own party in Leftwing Communism and Infantile Disorders.<sup>30</sup> According to Phillips and Rahv, leftism is not an accident nor can it be regarded as simply youthful impetuosity. It was, according to them, a literary line that stems from an understanding of Marxism as mechanical materialism. The editors felt it was the job of the magazine to put an emphasis on all creative experimentation, leaving the much more political questions

to periodicals like the New Masses. PR editors felt they had not published up to the standards they would like because the majority of manuscripts received showed the influence of precisely those tendencies that they wanted to combat. "At least seventy-five percent of the stories and poems submitted, as well as those solicited, are leftist' in conception and execution."<sup>31</sup>

The debate should not be misconstrued as simplistic. While one can agree that political content should be merged organically with artistic sensibility, this does not mean that political content should be sacrificed for experimentality. Nor that formulated political lines are inherently rigid. Nor that placing a political emphasis above a literary one is 'leftwing infantilism.' Then too, if the majority of manuscripts received showed tendencies of leftism, than perhaps that wasn't the position of the extreme, but the central norm of thinking.

It appears that Phillips and Rahv, and the writers they represented, felt constrained by proletarian literature. Somehow, they wanted revolutionary literature without the revolution. It is not surprising that writers and artists felt a distrust of political, as opposed to artistic, sensibilities. Yet, radical writers were not, and are not, a homogeneous and mal-

leable group. It is difficult to imagine that political lines could totally dominate literary matters. But the PR took a needlessly negative tone in its "uncomradely" attacks.  
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One New York JRC member, Merris Colman, indicates that the factionalism within the Clubs did not exist prior to the instigation and agitation of Phillips and Rahv, whom he felt were extremely destructive elements within the JRC.  
33 While factionalism can be the result of a conscious campaign of one or more persons, the 'centrist' tendency existed from the beginning of the JRC. The fact that Phillips and Rahv organized and produced admits that they must have had a certain degree of support from members.

Joseph Freeman, in 1934, noted with some relief that sympathizers were being accepted, but warned against the danger that since they were not sufficiently educated nor in acceptance of Marxism they might swing the movement to the right.  
34

The writers and critics who today are in or near the revolutionary movement, may be divided into two groups; those who have spent the last ten years primarily in the movement; and those who, during the same period, have engaged primarily in perfecting their craft. Economic crisis has united these two groups politically...35

The literary and ideological conflict between the

centrists and leftists raged throughout the 1930's, and this battle within the JRC became one of the major obstacles to its growth. While some historian, like Daniel Aaron, doubt if the factionalism was a conscious attempt to split the ranks, ideology is seldom an accident. The story of the PR after the mid-Thirties is revealing in terms of the tendencies manifested in the early stages. With the demise of the John Reed Clubs, the increasing hostility within the communist movement, the Moscow trials, and the Spanish Civil War, the PR suspended publication in 1936. When it reappeared in 1937, the editors were Dwight Mac Donald, F.W. Dupee, and Phillips and Rahv. The editorial statement read:

There is a tendency in America for the more conscious social writers to identify themselves with a single organization, the Communist Party; with the result that they grow automatic in their political responses and increasingly less responsible in an artistic sense...Formerly associated with the Communist Party, Partisan Review strove from the first against its drive to equate the interests of literature with those of factional politics. Our reappearance as an independent base signifies our conviction that the totalitarian trend is inherent in that movement and that it can no longer be combated from within. 36

It should be made clear that being independent from the Communist Party does not mean that the magazine was politically unaffiliated. With the reappearance, the PR embraced Trotskyism, and many of that movements

leading spokespeople became major contributors to the publication. By 1939, the magazine was moving towards support of American participation in the war, and the split became even greater. Throughout the 1940's, the PR focused much attention on cultural alienation, the dilemmas of the intellectual, and anti-communism which was pursued with a great zeal during the Cold War. The magazine survives today as a spokesman for the uncovering of questions of modern society, its social, psychological, and political contradictions, but without the Marxist perspective of earlier years.

The majority of John Reed Club magazines had a much less complicated existence. Their short lives testify to the multitude of creative people that demanded attention in the early Depression years. To assume that they merely spouted the Communist Party line is to underestimate their true value as rebel voices searching for a way to express their discontent. It also overestimates the power and domination of the Communist Party. To assume that writers and artists were so mindless as to blindly follow a political dogma, negates not only the honesty of the Communist Party's intentions, but also the honesty of hundreds of individuals making a protest.

The numerous writers, artists, and poets, that

believed in the John Reed Club philosophy testify to the force of their convictions to proletarian literature. Whether they actually succeeded in writing the socialist literature of the coming age will be judged by history. Whether the judgement is affirmative or not, those writers and artists of the John Reed Clubs sincerely attempted to unite their creative desires with the battle of the working-class for a new and superior world.

NOTES

1. quoting V.F. Calverton in John Scott Bowman's The Proletarian Novel in America, Ph.D. Dissertation. Pennsylvania State. p 69.
2. V.I. Lenin. Collected Works V 10. p 48.
3. "Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Clubs" New Masses. June, 1932. p 4.
4. Refer to the statement of the Workers Cultural Federation quoted on pp 72-73, Chapter Three.
5. quoting Trotsky Literature and Revolution, in V.F. Calverton's "Can We Have A Proletarian Literature?" Modern Quarterly V 6 #3, 1932. p 46.
6. L. Trotsky. Literature and Art. New York. p 49.
7. Calverton. "Can We Have A Proletarian Literature." p 46.
8. Mike Gold. "Towards Proletarian Art" Liberator. February, 1921. p 5.
9. Mike Gold. "The New Masses I'd Like" New Masses. June, 1928. p 2.
10. Vernon Loggins. I Hear America. New York. p 253.
11. New Masses. June, 1928. p 20.
12. Joseph Freeman. American Testament. p 304.
13. Edwin Seaver's "The Proletarian Novel", reprinted in Henry Hart's American Writer's Congress. New York. p 100.
14. Mike Gold. "Elements of Proletarian Realism" New Masses. June, 1930. pp 1-5.
15. A list of proletarian novels published from 1929-1936 is included as Appendix III.
16. Refer to p 62 of Chapter Three.
17. Fay M. Blake. The Strike in the American Novel. p 119.

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18. "On To Washington" New Masses. January, 1932. p 15.
19. Vernon Loggins. I Hear America. p 253.
20. John Scott Bowman. The Proletarian Novel in America. p 68.
21. Joseph Freeman. American Testament. p 289.
22. Henry Hart. American Writer's Congress. New York. p 88.
23. Ibid., p 167.
24. Robert Cantwell "What the Working-Class Reads" The New Republic. July 17, 1935.
25. John Scott Bowman. The Proletarian Novel in America. pp 157-178. Here he gives his method of investigation, sampling technique, and interpretation of his data.
26. quoting Keith Preston in Writers in Revolt edited by Jack Conroy. p ix.
27. According to Jack Conroy, Anvil's first issue was printed in a cowshed.
28. "Pacific Coast Newsreel" Partisan V I #3, Feb. 1934. p 1.
29. "Editorial Statement" Partisan Review V I #B, February - March, 1934. p 1.
30. V.I. Lenin. Leftwing Communism and Infantile Disorders. International Publishers, New York.
31. Philip Rahv and William Phillips "Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature" Partisan Review V I #3, June-July, 1934. pp 6-7.
32. Daniel Aaron. Writers on the Left. p 316.
33. Taken from correspondence by the author with Morris Colman in 1976.

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34. Walter Rideout. The Radical Novel in the United States. p 230.
35. Joseph Freeman "Ivory Towers" Partisan Review.  
V I #3, June-July, 1934. p 24.
36. Editorial Statement Partisan Review V 4. 1937.  
p 3.

## Chapter Five

The capitalist system crumbles so rapidly before our eyes that, whereas ten years ago, scarcely more than a handful of writers were sufficiently far-sighted and courageous to take a stand for proletarian revolution, today, hundreds of poets, novelists, dramatists, critics, short story writers and journalists, recognize the necessity of personally helping to accelerate the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a worker's government. 1

THE JOHN REED CLUBS  
AND THE POPULAR FRONT

In August, 1935, the Seventh Congress of the Comintern inaugurated the policy of the Popular Front. The policy was proposed by Dimitrov as the political program of a great international anti-fascist front. The immediate necessity of a world-wide movement to combat fascism could not be underestimated. A wave of pessimism and alarm swept over the bourgeois world during the three years that passed between the outbreak of the economic crisis and Hitler's rise to power.

Europe and the United States were shaken by mass demonstrations, strikes, hunger marches, and clashes between workers and the armed forces of the State.

Meanwhile, fascism and traditional reactionary groups increased their activity, and found response among millions of desperate, dispossessed middle-class.

The Popular Front policy was adopted as a pragmatic response to the threat of fascism, the threat of war, and in defense of the Soviet Union. The central theme of the Seventh Congress was "the fight for peace and for the defense of the Soviet Union." More specifically, said Dimitrov: "The struggle for peace opens up before the Communist parties the greatest opportunities for creating the broadest front. All those interested in the preservation of peace should be drawn into this united front."<sup>2</sup>

The Seventh Congress basically excluded any mention of strategy for a world-wide revolution, for how could that be reconciled with the need for the USSR to form alliances with liberal governments, including the United States, who were interested in the preservation of peace. That is why, at a time when the world system of imperialism was experiencing the worst economic crisis of its history, the Congress refrained from undertaking any theoretical analysis of the socialist revolution in the Western world or the anti-imperialist revolutions in dependent countries.

One of the dominant themes of the Congress was that

the great advance of fascism showed that the bourgeoisie was unable to restore itself by the traditional means of parliamentarianism and bourgeois democracy. The logic of this theme was that fascism was the final political form of capitalism, the 'open terrorist dictatorship of finance capital.'

The assumption of the united world-wide front for peace was that since capitalism was no longer in a position of self-recovery, it would be unable to meet demands for popular reforms. The people who had been drawn into these mass movements would be radicalized. Therefore, the political platform of the Popular Front did not include radical aims that could possibly frighten off politically less-advanced sections of the population. Eventually, in its concern to attract a broad base, the Seventh Congress adopted a general policy that tried to align the entire spectrum of the leftwing movement.

American communists by 1935, advocated joining a popular front which united the widest possible grouping of working-class, petty-bourgeoisie, and liberals. The threat of fascism at home was widely felt as many of the fascist elements of the ideology were evident - racism, anti-Semitism, anti-communism, super-patriotism, and organizations like the Liberty League, the Hearst

and McFadden press, and individuals like Huey Long and Father Couglin.

Within the American communist literary movement, the Popular Front policy paved the way for the League of American Writers (LAW), which was given birth at the second national convention of the John Reed Clubs, in 1934. Some JRC members feel that the proposal for the League and the dissolution of the Clubs had very little to do with the Popular Front.<sup>3</sup> Certain historians, like Aaron and Rideout, feel that the dissolution had absolutely everything to do with the new policy. Certainly, the feeling of the time was to develop an organization that would attract as many writers and artists as possible. Yet it would be absolutely incorrect to assume that the John Reed Clubs and League of American Writers could not have existed simultaneously. One continuing with the work of promoting proletarian literature, and the other, with the more immediate task of fighting fascism.

The Clubs were open to any writer or artist who believed in class struggle. Its members included Marxists and non-Marxists, Party members and independents. Yet, in the last years the JRC had been split by factionalism, and according to one member, "It outlived its usefulness, dwindled in membership, and became narrow and ineffectual."<sup>4</sup>

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It is highly doubtful whether an organization dedicated to proletarian literature or committed to social change can ever be outlived. But being held down in factional disputes at a time when political necessity demands swift action tended to make the Clubs obsolete.

As a unanimously endorsed suggestion by Alexander Tractenberg at the Second National Convention of the John Reed Clubs,<sup>5</sup> a call was put forward for an American Writer's Congress scheduled for May 1, 1935. The call, as published in the New Masses, stated:

The capitalist system crumbles rapidly before our eyes that, whereas ten years ago, scarcely more than a handful of writers were sufficiently far-sighted and courageous to take a stand for proletarian revolution, today, hundreds of poets, novelists, dramatists, critics, short story writers, and journalists recognize the necessity of personally helping to accelerate the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a worker's government.

We are faced by two kinds of problems. First, the problem of effective political action. The dangers of war and fascism are everywhere apparent; we can all see the steady march of the nations towards war and transformation of the sporadic violence into organized fascist terror. The question is how can we function most success against these twin menaces.

In the second place, there are problems peculiar to us writers, the problems of presenting in our work the fresh understanding of the American scene that has come from our recent enrollment in the revolutionary cause. A new Renaissance

is upon the world; for each writer there is the opportunity to proclaim both the new way of life and the revolutionary way to attain it. Indeed, in the historical perspective, it will be seen that only these two things matter. The revolutionary spirit is penetrating the ranks of the creative writers.

Many revolutionary writers live in virtual isolation, lacking opportunities to discuss vital problems with their fellow writers. Others are so absorbed in the revolutionary cause that they have few opportunities for thorough examination and analysis. Never have the writers of the nation come together for fundamental discussion.

We propose therefore, that a Congress of American Revolutionary Writers be held in New York City on May 1, 1935, that to this Congress be invited all writers who have achieved some standing in their respective fields; who have clearly indicated their sympathy to the revolutionary cause; who do not need to be convinced of the decay of capitalism or the inevitability of revolution. Subsequently, we will seek to influence and win to our side those writers who are not yet convinced.

This Congress will be devoted to exposition of all phases of writer's participation in the struggle against war, the preservation of civil liberties, and the destruction of fascist tendencies everywhere. It will develop the possibilities of wide distribution of books and the improvement of the revolutionary press, as well as the relations between writers and bourgeois publishers and editors. It will provide technical discussion of the literary application of Marxist philosophy and of the relations between critic and creator. It will solidify our ranks.

We believe that such a Congress should create the League of American Writers affiliated with the International Union of Revolutionary Writers.

The program for the League would be evolved by the Congress, basing itself on the following: fight against imperialist war and fascism; defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression; for the developing and strengthening of the revolutionary labor movement; against white chauvinism and against the persecution of the foreign born; solidarity with colonial people in their struggle for freedom; against the influence of bourgeois ideas in American liberals; against the imprisonment of revolutionary artists and writers, as well as other class prisoners throughout the world. 6

The call was signed by Kenneth Burke, Erksine Caldwell, Jack Conroy, Malcolm Cowley, Theodore Dreiser, Waldo Frank, Joseph Freeman, Mike Gold, Josephine Herbst, Langston Hughes, Ella Winters, Lincoln Steffens, Meridel Le Sueur, John Howard Lawson, and many more. The majority of signers were members of the John Reed Club.

The decision to liquidate the JRC came from the Club leadership and not the rank-and-file. With the Popular Front, an organization that included a broader-base of writers received more emphasis. The CP and political leaders of the left pushed for a congress of writers which would be restricted to those with national prestige. It excluded many of the younger writers who

had been developing with the proletarian literature movement, the very fruits of the last few years of struggle. While this emphasis doomed the JRC, its logic was not necessarily negative. The necessity of immediate and strong political action, the factionalism that the Clubs had been experiencing, and the fundamental changes within the international communist movement, made the JRC a remanent of the early Depression years. It probably could have been revitalized, but the effort was directed into other directions. The John Reed Clubs fell by the wayside.

When the Congress opened at the Mecca Temple in New York City on the night of April 26, 1935, there were present 216 writers from 26 states, and 150 guests and fraternal delegates from Mexico, Cuba, Germany, and Japan.<sup>7</sup> The hall was filled to capacity with 4,000 spectators, making it an unprecedented event in American literary history. The honorary presiding committee included Louis Aragon, Henri Barbusse, Andre Malraux, and Raphael Alberti. Messages of international solidarity were read to the congregation:

My brotherly greetings to the Congress of American Writers organized for the intellectual struggle against fascism and a new bloody war. We are with you, dear friends. With joy and approval we see how the forces of honest people courageously oppose class exploitation and racial oppression which are growing throughout

the world.

Maxim Gorki

Separated by oceans, seas, and thousands of miles of land, the revolutionary writers are connected by the common struggle for a new world. Now, when the drums of war are being heard, the revolutionary writers, with increasing clarity, must realize that there is but one able force to suppress fascism and abolish war - the force of the revolutionary proletariat. In this hour the writers' weapon is his work. To conquer, the weapon must be sharp and strong. Sharpen your weapons! Develop the art of the revolution! May your Congress be the impetus to a wide front of struggle against fascism, against imperialist wars, and for the defense of the Soviet Union. Ardent revolutionary greetings to the first American Congress of Revolutionary Writers

International Union of Revolutionary Writers 8

The presiding committee of the first meeting election was: Harry Carlisle (JRC), Jack Conroy (JRC), Eugene Gordon (JRC), Michael Blankfort, Malcolm Cowley, Henry Hart, Granville Hicks, Orrick Johns (JRC), John Howard Lawson (JRC), Meridel Le Sueur (JRC), Edwin Seaver, Bernhardt Stern, and Alexander Tractenberg. As many of the people on the committee had been important figures in the JRC their passing into the new organization meant the sliding out of the old one.

The six sessions covering both Saturday and Sunday, addressed such questions as, "The Writer's Part in the Struggle Against Fascism," "Tradition of American Revolutionary Literature," "Communism and

Literature," "Reportage," "Proletarian Novels," and the "Revolutionary Press."

In the final session, after lengthy discussion on proletarian literary development in the United States and the role of the writer in revolution, Mike Gold addressed the crowd:

Now comrades, friends, and fellow authors, we approach a very serious historic moment in this Congress. We are about to organize a permanent organization of American Writers in order that the work of this Congress may be spread during the next year. 9

With these words, the League of American Writers was founded, and Waldo Frank (a non-Party member) was elected as secretary. Frank, in his acceptance speech assured the crowd that the League would have a policy of broad-based support, and that it would stay free from sectarian politics and rigid theories.

Also in the last session, the following resolutions of domestic and international solidarity were passed. The LAW was to work towards the release of revolutionary intellectuals and writers incarcerated throughout the world. It was to protest against the closing of schools, burning of books, and the suspension of civil rights in Cuba. There was a resolution to fight against the censorship of press in Mexico. Another resolution that passed was to fight against various deportation and

sedition bills proposed by numerous state legislatures. Another was against the Hearst publications, the next against the terror in Gallup and the resulting trial. Finally, the last resolution passed was to fight against the persecution of Tom Mooney and the Scottsboro boys.

The first Congress ended April 28, 1935, on a relatively optimistic note. The delegates hoped to be able to spread the revolutionary spirit they had generated at the Congress.

While in comparison to the JRC, the LAW members produced less proletarian literature; the League's work received more national attention. Probably this was due to the prominence of its members, and the more moderate program of the Popular Front.

But by 1936, the trend was obvious. The Communist Party had declined significantly in popularity. It seemed that what brought the League back to life in 1936 was the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Over 3,000 Americans went to Spain to join the Loyalists in their fight against fascism. A number of writers and journalists from the League joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and the many writers who didn't leave America's shores wrote from home to raise the public's consciousness about what was considered to be the 'final test' against fascism.

Most of the League's activities between the years 1936-1939 were centered around support work for the Spanish Republic, and the second Congress focused almost entirely on that subject. The question of proletarian literature was bypassed. Ernest Hemingway, in his speech to the second Congress said:

There is one form of government that cannot produce good writers, and that system is fascism. For fascism is a lie told with bullets. 10

Most of the speeches delivered at the Congress differed substantially from the first Congress and from the National Conventions of the John Reed Clubs. There were few references made to proletarian literature, few speeches on the role of the revolutionary writer, and even fewer on the unity of worker and writer.

New Left critics of the CP's strategy in the 1930's charge that the Party faulted by not continuing to agitate the 'struggle at home.' Certainly, the JRC was one of the unnecessary sacrifices. The small proletarian magazines that had sprung up under the JRC fold slowly died off as the issue of proletarian literature was sacrificed for the issue of international fascism. Laying foundations for proletarian culture and eventual working-class revolution is not secondary, yet, maybe it is hindsight that allows us to view those

events with a sense of balance that was impossible at the time. The Popular Front, while attempting to gain strength and numbers lost much, and the Clubs were one of its first victims.

Whereas 1929 marked the year when intellectuals were declassed and forced into the realities of hunger, poverty, and unemployment, 1938 marked the time when they were renouncing their past affiliations with the militant left. Communism had not spread through Europe. The United States had lived through the Great Depression. The most serious economic crisis in the history of capitalism instead of being the final crisis that was to result in the proletarian revolution, turned out to be the birth pangs of a new phase of capitalist development - state monopoly capitalism. The failure of the revolutionary writer was not so much in his/her failure to correctly identify the contradictions, but in the inaccuracy of the entire left to assume that the 1930's was to be the decade when capitalism was to fall. With a gradual return back to normal economic conditions many of the left turned their backs to earlier militancy and made peace with the establishment.

There were a variety of reasons why writers and intellectuals renounced their communistic sympathies as times got better. Inevitably, there are always 'summer

soldiers' who experienced politics as a fad. As economic conditions returned to some semblance of normalcy, their fling and passion vanished. Also, many were alienated by inflexible political lines and dogmatic methods. While the renouncements were a form of treason to the cause, many felt it was they who had been betrayed. The Stalinist purges for some, blurred the distinctions between communism and fascism. The exile of Trotsky and the Moscow trials shook confidence in the honesty and justice of the 'homeland of the proletariat.' The Nazi-Soviet Pact was the ultimate breaking point for others. The post-Depression and pre-War normalcy blinded many to the immediacy of the struggle. And, in the post-War years, fear was an important factor that cannot be underestimated. McCarthyism frightened many people. Some acted shamefully while others, like the Hollywood Ten, acted bravely. The 1950's broke the back of the spirit of the Old Left, just as it was meant to do. It was the decade that, due to its repression and hate, split the experiences of the 1930's from the movement of the 1960's.

The depth and intensity of the writers' disillusionment depended upon the motives that first drew him/her into the movement. Malcolm Cowley felt that, "the writer who joins the proletarian movement in the

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expectation of getting saved or being endowed with leadership, or being reborn to genius are likely to leave suddenly..."<sup>11</sup> The movement was not, and is not, a messiah for those looking for salvation for the world's problems. For these, the disillusionment was intense and lonely. This was especially true for the majority of fellow-travelers whose rejection of bourgeois society was less than they imagined. With the restabilization of capitalism they yearned to be reabsorbed into the America they had previously denounced. Mike Gold, in an attempt to understand and explain this massive "I was once a Communist" confessionals, proposed that these migratory intellectuals had never really cut the umbilical

<sup>12</sup> cord. Although much responsibility does rest with their vacillating sense of commitment, political dogma deserves its due. Also, there were errors in organizing sympathizers into the communist movement without the necessary preconditions of an understanding that one was not entering a 'perfect political movement.' And too, the Popular Front was misconstrued by many, including Party members themselves, to be only a limited platform against fascism. And when the limited reform of the New Deal was granted, many left the left. By the hundreds.

The tradition of the revolutionary literature of

the John Reed Clubs did not die with the demise of the organization. Revolutionary art moved into the medium of film. A new contingent of writers, screen-actors, and producers were to carry on the tradition. Dalton Trumbo. Paul Robeson. Lester Cole. John Howard Lawson. Albert Maltz. Men and women who would one day be asked, "Are you or have you ever been...?"

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NOTES

1. New Masses, January 22, 1935.
2. Fernando Claudin. The Communist Movement. p 185.
3. Taken from correspondence with Morris Colman
4. Taken from correspondence with A.B. Magil.
5. Richard Wright, as one of the younger writers at the Congress, was totally shocked by the decision to call for a new Writers Congress and dissolve the JRC. When he asked what would become of the young writers who had joined the Clubs but who would be excluded from the LAW because they weren't big names, he got no reply, and no one seconded his protest. The God That Failed. edited by Richard Crossman. pp 115-120.
6. "Call for the American Writer's Congress" New Masses. January 22, 1935.
7. Henry Hart. The American Writer's Congress. p 12.
8. Ibid., pp 12-13.
9. Daniel Aaron. Writers on the Left. p 291.
10. Jack Salzman. Years of Protest. New York. p 191.
11. quoting Malcolm Cowley in Henry Hart's The American Writer's Congress. p 60.
12. Mike Gold. Hollow Men. International Publishers. New York. 1941.

## Chapter Six

Where are the great ones of the Thirties, the whole school of talented progressive writers who arose out of the unemployed struggles led by the Communist Party - and the great drive to build the C.I.O? Where are the exciting regional spokesmen who made a new American literature in those years? To read off their names is like reading a roll-call of the dead, but none of them is dead; only the spark of compassion is gone from them. 1

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR THOSE WORKING IN

RADICAL MEDIA TODAY

The John Reed Clubs charted the course of the proletarian literature movement of the early 1930's. As a politically radical organization of writers, journalists, artists, and other cultural workers, the group served not only as the propaganda arm of the militant left, but was also a nurturing ground for many young artists and writers who were aligning themselves with the struggle of the working class. In attempting to draw conclusions and recommendations for those interested in incorporating media and cultural work within the Left,

it is necessary to first start with a brief summary of the major points of this study.

The assumption of the name John Reed immediately directs one to the focus and ideology of the Clubs. The organization, like the man, believed in combining class struggle with artistic sensitivity and beauty. The journalists and writers of the 1930's felt that art and culture rose with socialism and was not destroyed or debased by political tendentiousness. And, just as Reed himself was not satisfied with simply writing about revolution, the Clubs assumed that even as a cultural group they had a political purpose. Throughout the study, one's attention is drawn to the fact that again and again, the Clubs tried to actively work with the militant left. As labor joined in struggle, the Clubs united their talents and skills with the working class. John Reed Club Schools tried to teach workers skills in the arts. Their discussions and seminars tried to educate the middle-class intellectuals as to their role in revolutionary change. Their novels and art work tried to raise the consciousness of the American public. And the organization itself, tried to create a body of revolutionary artists and writers who believed in class struggle and their unity with it. Within a Marxist analysis, the middle class is considered to have a

vascillating position, and writers, artists, and intellectuals certainly exemplify that tendency. John Reed, and the John Reed Clubs, represented a possible road out of that vascillation. A united front : cultural workers whose belief and committment was with the working class and militant left in the struggle to create a proletarian and humane society.

The John Reed Clubs can only be seen in the light of the Depression decade and the economic battles fought within that period, for political movements are the result of economic, political, and social conditions, and not the brainchild of any one person, event, or group. The Depression was a time when practically everyone suffered, from working class to middle class. Few were left in comfort. Out of discomfort grew discontent. Out of discontent will come social change.

As unemployed workers turned into strikers, as veterans marched the streets of America, and as the hungry demanded food, writers, artists, and intellectuals turned with the leftward tide, and out of that current came the John Reed Clubs. The story of the leftward turn of the Depression intellectual has been told many times. While it would be a disservice to that movement to try and summarize it here, some important ideas can be drawn out.

Firstly, the economic stability of the middle-class intellectual is not an inevitability. The Depression of the 1930's shattered the ivory tower. And the economic crisis of the 1970's has again shown that middle-class comfortability is only a given as long as the economic system is functioning adequately. At its first shaking, the tenable position of writers, artists, and cultural workers will be shattered.

The second concept to be drawn out of this is that middle class intellectuals remain vascillating only as long as their economic position is secure, or as long as they think it is secure. Whereas we saw writers living in carefree Bohemia in the 1910's, we find them residing in Hooverville by 1930. It is important for those today to understand that with economic and social conditions in crisis, and a certain degree of consciousness, writers and artists can, and will, become important forces in political change.

The John Reed Clubs, and the proletarian literature movement as a whole, certainly have a rightful place within the study of the American left. The John Reed Clubs, the New Masses, and a score of radical intellectuals, brought the study of literature and the study of society together. The theories were sometimes simplistic, but inspite of the failings, their importance is

in their attempt in considering literature in the light of political, economic, and social conditions.

The Clubs, as a center for political/cultural events of the 1930's, brought into leftwing organizations through the portals of art and literature, the normally unaligned artists and writers. And, although trying to proletarianize writers through their books and stories is perhaps not the most effective means of class transition, many of those young intellectuals were so strongly affected by what they saw and learned during their years as Club members that they carried those experiences with themselves for decades.

The intention of the John Reed Club was not merely to bring under its fold the liberal sympathizer, but to actually nurture a whole new generation of writers and artists that identified with the working class in creating a new world order. On this score, the JRC rates perhaps one of its most important achievements. When one looks at the anthologies of proletarian literature of the 1930's; when one reads any of the numerous proletarian novels of the decade; or, when one examines any of the multitude of little magazines of the period, the majority of names of writers, authors, journalists, poets, and dramatists, will be members of the John Reed Clubs. Out of its center came the expression of an entire

movement.

In terms of a mass communications analysis, the John Reed Clubs were an important experiment in the popularization of culture and the demonopolization of information. Standard communications theory says that there is a hierarchy of information which moves in a two-step flow from the senders to the receivers. The JRC members took that structure and turned it upside-down. They made the receivers the senders. The popularization of mass communications is when it is truly MASS, and the Clubs tried to make their art to, for, about, and by, the masses of working people in the United States. It took the information that the New York Times didn't print and made it public information. It was something like an organized dissemination by alternative media, which we see rise again in the 1960's. The John Reed Clubs took the high culture of literature, theater, and art, and made it peoples' culture. Proletarian novels about Depression America and the people who were surviving it. The proletarian literature movement was truly the beginnings of the peoples' expropriation of culture, and although it has had many setbacks we can see the first signs of liberation in the 1930's. The first signs of a mass culture as opposed to a mass-produced culture.

While this proletarian cultural movement had its failures and deficiencies, the simplistic and crude efforts can be balanced out by a multitude of worthwhile works. John Reed Club members produced some of the best literature of the decade: Robert Cantwell's Land of Plenty, Josephine Herbst's trilogy, Mike Gold's Jews Without Money, Joseph Freeman's An American Testament, Nelson Algren's Somebody in Boots, Jack Conroy's The Disinherited, and Edward Dahlberg's Those Who Perish.

Apart from the novels, the proletarian literature movement sparked the proletarian short story, social reportage, and the journalistic documentaries that filled the pages of the JRC publications. And the literary contributions of that movement even outweigh the achievements of individual writers and artists. The proletarian literature movement introduced new experiences and new characters into the range of American literature. It emphasized the relation of the individual character to his/her social environment. It concerned itself with the depiction of the working-class, broadening the understanding of that class by both readers and writers alike. It let writers and artists develop a sense of respect for the common experience of ordinary people. And finally, it gave the writer an identity not as a novelist or author,

but as a citizen and social being.

For all the positive points about the Clubs, it is also necessary for one to examine the deficiencies and faults. But before entering into that discussion it is important to preface it with the fact that the Clubs entered the 1930's as an embryonic organization, and by 1935 they were already considered obsolete. The Clubs were afforded little time to mature and see through their mistakes. The JRC was split under the pressure of factionalism, political immaturity, and inflexibility, but it is hindsight which allows us the ability and ease to criticize. For it was because of the very fact that they were an immediate response to national and international crises which gave the JRC little time to meditate on theoretical questions or analyze the politics of dogma.

At time, the John Reed Clubs were uncritical in their acceptance of a given political line, particularly in respect to the CPUSA. This grows out of the fact that the CP was the major political voice of the time and being connected to the international communist movement, received much of its direction from the USSR.

It is important to notice that many of the John Reed Club members were not Communists prior to their joining the Clubs. For some, it was their first

encounter with radical politics. They were ill-equipped to argue political lines with trained and experienced Party members. One of the major criticisms to be made of the JRC is their very lack of rigorous study of Marxism and literary criticism. If an organization calls upon its members to support the working class in struggle, than it is the responsibility of that organization to equip its members with an understanding of class struggle, dictatorship of the proletariat, and revolutionary change. These are not idealistic phrases that can be defended with emotions, but are scientific terms that need study and discussion to be understood. One cannot sacrifice theoretical foundations for practical application. Marxist theory is a necessary for the emergence of proletarian culture, and it was in this area that the Clubs shirked their responsibility as a political organization.

The John Reed Clubs viewed art as a weapon in the struggle for a socialist society. In the sense that art plays an important role in the raising of consciousness and the battle of the minds, this is totally valid. But, art is not politics. Within political struggle, each person finds a niche, some as artists and some as theoreticians. It is highly unlikely that one person can do both tasks equally well. The expectation that

each JRC member should be a political theoretician is ludicrous, although being a political being, using and integrating political concepts into one's art was the essence of the Clubs. While believing in "a free socialist art," the organization at times insisted that every cultural worker play a politically pragmatic role, and that every piece of art and literature should be utilitarian. The lines of demarcation are quite delicate, and overstepping to one side or the other creates disillusionment and alienation. It would have been absolutely unjustifiable for the Clubs to have pushed revolutionary art without the revolution. Equally so, they could not develop political art without the art. Somewhere in between is the balance. Certainly, the Clubs shouldn't have adopted a policy of neutrality towards form or content, but political ideas must be advanced through study and proof, not by dictates from above.

A cultural arm is necessary for any revolutionary movement, and the JRC offered those very necessary tools to the militant left of the early Depression years. We today, can learn much from their example. In order to lead into recommendations from the lessons learned, the author wishes to quote at length the words of one John Reed Club member, Morris Colman:

The whole progressive movement throughout the world, especially in the United States, was in a formative stage with respect to the question of culture in the early 1930's. We were all trying to grasp something new, and we all made many sectarian mistakes. Nearly half a century has passed since then, and in that period, a tremendous amount of history, political experience, and ideological clarification has taken place throughout the world. And, we have all had the opportunity to share in it.

No doubt that today any cultural organization based on Marxism-Leninism would be much sounder and richer and more effective than it could have been in those days, but of course, at the same time, many strong anti-Marxist currents have been developing within what is broadly called the leftwing movement. Many more so than at that time. So, ideological struggle within the movement itself has not become more simplified but rather more complicated. The enemies of Marxism have been learning tricks of their own, and the general demoralization of our society, ideological decay sparked by corruption and loss of values at the highest levels, have created a great deal of confusion in the minds of many young people. The tendencies to abandon the struggle, or go into communes or mysticism, or a variety of other cults, are depriving us at this point of the intelligence and energy of large numbers of young people who really belong in a logical, determined, and fair-minded political movement.

Any organization that can offset these decadent tendencies is obviously an important organization on that account. It would probably though, need to deal with issues in a much less simplistic fashion than was the best we could manage more than two generations ago. 2

Colman, in his analysis, hits upon two extremely important areas concerning political/cultural organizations today. One, is the need to develop political concepts and not rest on crude or simplistic explanations. He attributes many of the sectarian mistakes to the newness of the progressive movement in the 1930's. Obviously, any group today cannot use that excuse. If cultural workers enter a political movement with only the most simplistic interpretations of political processes then mistakes and errors in judgement will result in disillusionment. The examples of writers and artists "turning coats" after Stalin, or being misguided after World War II, or committing treasonous lies during the years of McCarthy, all support this premise. One can easily be discouraged and feel lost when idealistic dreams turn sour, or do not reach utopia. If this study teaches us nothing else, it is that any left organization, political or cultural, must stress through study and discussion, as well as in practice, the dialectical process of political change and the scientific nature of socialism.

The second important concept which Colman stresses in his analysis is that young people today are falling into cults and tendencies which are diverting their energies away from political struggle. The movement is

being deprived of "large numbers of young people who really belong in a logical, determined, and fair-minded political movement." How do we of today, reach this 'lost' generation? Certainly, the 1960's showed us that the cause is not hopeless. But the anti-war movement and its ramifications were spontaneous, and so was the commitment of many of its believers. A "logical and determined movement" implies something more than spontaneity.

People, young or old, middle or working class, intellectual or not, will be reached through the realities of life. Vietnam was a reality. As is unemployment, economic depression, and poverty. Those are the types of issues with which a political movement will find its base, and media and culture are perhaps the most effective means through which individuals and groups can explain, attract, and create consciousness of these questions.

Media today has more of an audience than it had during the Great Depression. Firstly, it has more power. It was television which brought Vietnam into every American household. It was television which had millions of families watching "Roots," perhaps the first commercial attempt at exposing the history and brutality of American racism. It was journalism, the

printed word, which told the story of Watergate, or at least part of it, on every front page in the nation. Alternative media too, has done its share. Numerous 'free presses' have exposed the dealings of the Central Intelligence Agency. And the art of the Third World, women and prison movements have made peoples' struggles for survival a visual reality.

It is important that political movements realize the necessity of cultural expression. It seems that the United States progressive movement has been the most guilty among numerous countries in not understanding this. Cuban art and film has brought that revolution to many nations. Chinese ballet is considered some of the most beautiful in the world. The music of Allende's Chile can still bring tears to many. To categorize cultural workers as secondary appendages deprives the leftwing movement of one of its most important weapons.

From the acceptance of this premise, one must then determine what are the forms and content of art and media most effective for dealing with this period of political struggle. In this area too, we can learn from the history of the John Reed Clubs.

Not all political art and literature can, nor should, have immediate and utilitarian purpose. Although it sounds romantic, political culture must stir the hearts

and consciousness of the public. It needs to integrate the common experience and struggle of the people in a language that can be understood and identified with. This does not exclude incorporating new techniques such as video to express and visualize concepts. What it does mean is that artists and writers should not get involved in new technology at the expense of content. Peoples' culture must be created out of the culture of the people, and not the technology of IBM and Sony.

The history of the John Reed Clubs shows something else. Cultural groups cannot be amorphously connected to political struggle, but must be integrally connected to it. Artists and writers can exist in a defined relationship to politics. They can gain perspective and guidance, and a focus for their art. Political parties, too, must struggle to include cultural workers, for it is these workers who can add the sensitivity and conceptualization of political ideas so that they come out of the books and into the hearts. In the true essence of the John Reed Clubs, the artists are activists, and the activists are the artists. As Lincoln Steffens said of John Reed, "He is a poet. He is a Communist."<sup>3</sup>

Hopefully, this study has done more than offer the history of the John Reed Clubs. Hopefully, it did more

than simply examine the role of revolutionary writers during the Great Depression. If it has done nothing else, the author hopes that it has given to those working for social change today, some insights and information useful for the continuation of that struggle, and the increased incorporation of culture and media in revolutionary movements.

NOTES

1. Howard Fast "Intellectuals in the Fight For Peace" Masses and Mainstream. New York. p 14.
2. Taken from correspondence with Morris Colman
3. quoting Lincoln Steffens in Michael Quin's "Definition of a Name" Partisan VI #3, 1934. p 7.

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52. "The John Reed Club Convention" New Masses. July, 1932. pp 14-15.
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APPENDIX ONE

Signers to the Red Scare Protest as published in the New York Times, May 19, 1930, on page 19.

- |                    |                       |                     |
|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| L. Adohmyan        | Ruth Hale             | Anton Refregier     |
| Sherwood Anderson  | Jack Hardy            | Philip Reisman      |
| EmJo Basshe        | Minna Harkavy         | Louis Ribak         |
| Helen Black        | S.Ralph Harlow        | Boardman Robinson   |
| Franz Boas         | Charles Yale Harrison | Anna Rochester      |
| Alter Brody        | Aline Davis Hays      | Anna Rosenberg      |
| Samuel Brody       | Arthur Garfield Hays  | Julius Rosenthal    |
| Fritz Brosins      | Lowell B. Hazzard     | Martin Russak       |
| Jacob Burck        | Josephine Herbst      | Samuel Russak       |
| David Burlink      | John Herrman          | David Saposs        |
| R.B.Callahan       | Harold Hickerson      | E.A. Schachner      |
| Walt Carmon        | Grace Hutchins        | Theodore Scheel     |
| Ralph Cheyney      | Eitaro Ishigaki       | Isidor Schneider    |
| N. Cirovsky        | Hoseph Kaplan         | Evelyn Scott        |
| Lydia Cinquegrana  | Ellen A. Kennan       | Edwin Seaver        |
| Sarah N. Cleghorn  | C.D. Ketcham          | Edith Segal         |
| Ann Coles          | Frank Kingdom         | Esther Shemitz      |
| Malcolm Cowley     | I. Kittine            | William Siegel      |
| Franz E. Daniel    | I. Klein              | Upton Sinclair      |
| Miriam A. De Ford  | Alfred Kreymborg      | John Sloan          |
| Adolf Dehn         | Joshua Kunitz         | Otto Soglow         |
| Floyd Dell         | Melvin P. Levey       | A. Solataroff       |
| L.A.DeSantes       | Louis Lozowick        | Walter Snow         |
| Babette Deutsch    | Grace Lumpkin         | Raphael Soyer       |
| Carl Van Doren     | Norman MacLeod        | Harman Spector      |
| John Dos Passos    | A.B. Magil            | J.M. Stalnaker      |
| Robert W. Donn     | Jan Matulka           | Genevieve Taggard   |
| Max Eastman        | H.L. Mencken          | Eunice Tietjens     |
| Charles Ellis      | Norma Millay          | Carlo Tresca        |
| Fred Ellis         | Harriet Monroe        | Louis Untermeyer    |
| Ernestine Evans    | Frank McLean          | Joseph Vogel        |
| Kenneth Fearing    | Scott Nearing         | Keene Wallis        |
| Sara Bard Field    | Alfred Neumann        | Frank Walts         |
| Waldo Frank        | Eugene Nigob          | R.E. Waxwell        |
| Harry Freeman      | Joseph North          | C.C. Webber         |
| Al Fruen           | Harvey O'Conner       | G.F. Willison       |
| Hugo Gellert       | M.J.Olgin             | Edmund Wilson       |
| Michael Gold       | Joseph Pass           | Adolf Wolff         |
| Floyd S. Gove      | Morris Pass           | Charles E.S. Wood   |
| C. Hartley Grattan | Nemo Piccoli          | Art Young           |
| Horace Gregory     | Harry A. Potamkin     | Avraham Yarmolinsky |
| William Gropper    | John Cowper Powys     | William Zarach      |
| Rose Gruening      | Juanita Preval        |                     |
| Carl Haessler      | Walter Quirt          |                     |

## APPENDIX TWO

### Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Clubs New Masses June, 1932 pp3-4

Mankind is passing through the most profound crisis in its history. An old world is dying; a new one is being born. Capitalist civilization, which has dominated the economic, political, and cultural life of continents, is in the process of decay. It received a deadly blow during the imperialist war which it engendered. It is now breeding new and more devastating wars. At this very moment the Far East seethes with military conflicts and preparations which will have far-reaching consequences for the whole of humanity.

Meantime, the prevailing economic crisis is placing greater and greater burdens upon the mass of the world's population, upon those who work with hand or brain. In the cities of five-sixths of the globe, millions of workers are tramping the streets looking for jobs in vain. In the rural districts, millions of farmers are bankrupt. The colonial countries reverberate with the revolutionary struggles of oppressed peoples against exploitation; in the capitalist countries the class struggle grows sharper from day to day.

The present crisis has stripped capitalism naked. It stands more revealed than ever as a system of robbery and fraud, unemployment and terror, starvation and war.

The general crisis of capitalism is reflected in its culture. The economic and political machinery of the bourgeoisie is in decay, its philosophy, its literature, and its art are bankrupt. Sections of the bourgeoisie are beginning to lose faith in its early progressive ideas. The bourgeoisie is no longer a progressive class, and its ideas are no longer progressive ideas. On the contrary: as the bourgeois world moves toward the abyss, it reverts to the mysticism of the middle ages. Fascism in politics is accompanied by neo-catholicism in thinking. Capitalism cannot give the mass of mankind bread. It is equally unable to evolve creative ideas.

This crisis in every aspect of life holds America, like the other capitalist countries, in its iron grip. Here there is unemployment, starvation, terror, and preparation for war. Here the government, national, state and local, is dropping the hypocritical mask of demo-

APPENDIX TWO

cracy, and openly flaunts a fascist face. The demand of the unemployed for work or bread is answered with machine gun bullets. Strike areas are closed to investigators; strike leaders are murdered in cold blood. And as the pretense of constitutionalism is dropped, as brute force is used against workers fighting for better living conditions, investigations reveal the utmost corruption and graft in government, and the closest cooperation of the capitalist political parties and organized crimes.

In America, too, the bourgeois culture writhes in a blind alley. Since the imperialist war, the best talents in bourgeois literature and art, philosophy and science, those who have the finest imaginations and the richest craftsmanship, have revealed from year to year the sterility, the utter impotence of bourgeois culture to advance mankind to higher levels. They have made it clear that although the bourgeoisie has a monopoly of the instruments of culture, its culture is in decay. Most of the American writers who have developed in the past fifteen years betray the cynicism and despair of capitalist values. The movies are a vast corrupt commercial enterprise, turning out infantile entertainment or crude propaganda for the profit of stockholders. Philosophy has become mystical and idealist. Science goes in for god-seeking. Painting loses itself in abstractions or trivialities.

In the past two years, however, a marked change has come over the American intelligensia. The class struggle in culture has assumed sharp forms. Recently we have witnessed two major movements among American intellectuals the Humanist movement, frankly reactionary in its ideas; and a movement to the left among certain types of liberal intellectuals.

The reasons for the swing to the left are not hard to find. The best of the younger American writers have come, by and large, from the middle-classes. During the boom which followed the war these classes increased their income. They played the stockmarket with profit. They were beneficiaries of the New Era. The crash in the autumn of 1929 fell on their heads like a thunderbolt. They found themselves the victims of the greatest expropriation in the history of the country. The articulate members of the middle-classes - the writers and the artists, the members of the learned professions - lost faith in capitalism which during the Twenties

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trapped them into dreaming on the decadent shores of post-war European culture. These intellectuals suddenly awoke to the fact that we live in the era of imperialism and revolution; that two civilizations are in mortal combat and that they must take sides.

A number of factors intensified their consciousness of the true state of affairs. The crisis had affected the intellectual's mind because it had affected his income. Thousands of school-teachers, engineers, chemists, newspapermen and members of other professions are unemployed. The publishing business has suffered acutely from the economic crisis. Middle-class patrons are no longer able to buy paintings as they did formerly. The movies and theatres are discharging writers, actors and artists. And in the midst of this economic crisis, the middle-class intellectual, nauseated by the last war, sees another one, more barbarous still, on the horizon. They see the civilization in whose tenets they were nurtured going to pieces.

In contrast, they see a new civilization rising in the Soviet Union. They see a land of 160,000,000 people occupying one-sixth of the globe, where workers rule in alliance with farmers. In this vast country there is no unemployment. Amidst the decay of capitalist economy, Soviet industry and agriculture rise to higher and higher levels of production every year. In contrast to capitalist anarchy, they see planned Socialist economy. They see a system with private profit and the parasitic classes which it nourishes abolished; they see a world in which the land, the factories, the mines, the rivers, and the hands and brains of the people produce wealth not for a handful of capitalists but for the nation as a whole. In contrast to the imperialist oppression of the colonies, to the lynching of Negroes, to Scottsboro cases, they see 132 races and nationalities in full social and political equality cooperating in the building of a Socialist society. Above all, they see a cultural revolution unprecedented in history, unparalleled in the contemporary world. They see the destruction of the monopoly of culture. They see knowledge, art and science made more accessible to the mass of workers and peasant. They see workers and peasants themselves creating literature and art, themselves participating in science and invention. And seeing this, they realize that the Soviet Union is the vanguard of the new Communist society which is to replace the old.

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Some of the intellectuals who have thought seriously about the world crisis, the coming war and the achievements of the Soviet Union, have taken the next logical step. They have begun to realize that in every capitalist country the revolutionary working-class struggles for the abolition of the outworn and barbarous system of capitalism. Some of them, aligning themselves with the American workers, have gone to strike areas in Kentucky and Pennsylvania and have given their talents to the cause of the working class.

Such allies from the disillusioned middle-class intelligensia are to be welcomed. But of primary importance at this stage is the development of the revolutionary culture of the working class itself. The proletarian revolution has its own philosophy developed by Marx, Engels and Lenin. It has developed its own revolutionary schools, newspapers, and magazines; it has its worker-correspondence, its own literature and art. In the past two decades there have developed writers, artists, and critics who have approached the American scene from the viewpoint of the revolutionary workers.

To give this movement in arts and letters greater scope and force, to bring it closer to the daily struggle of the workers, the John Reed Club was formed in the fall of 1929. In the past two years, the influence of this organization has spread to many cities. Today there are thirteen John Reed Clubs throughout the country. These organizations are open to writers and artists, whatever their social origin, who subscribe to the fundamental program adopted by the international conference of revolutionary writers and artists which met at Kharkov, in November, 1930. The program contains six points upon which all honest intellectuals, regardless of their background, may unite in the common struggle against capitalism. They are:

- 1) Fight against imperialist war, defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression;
- 2) Fight against fascism, whether open or concealed, like social-fascism;
- 3) Fight for the development and strengthening of the revolutionary labor movement;
- 4) Fight against white chauvinism (against all forms of Negro discrimination or persecution) and against the persecution of the foreign-born;
- 5) Fight against the influence of middle-class ideas in the work of revolutionary writers and artist;

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6) Fight against the imprisonment of revolutionary writers and artists, as well as other class-war prisoners throughout the world.

On the basis of this minimum program, we call upon all honest intellectuals, all honest writers and artists, to abandon decisively the treacherous illusion that art can exist for art's sake, or that the artist can remain remote from the historic conflicts in which all men must take sides. We call upon them to break with the bourgeois ideas which seek to conceal the violence and fraud, the corruption and decay. We call upon them to align themselves with the working-class in its struggle against capitalist oppression and exploitation, against unemployment and terror, against fascism and war. We urge them to join with the literary and artistic movement of the working-class in forging a new art that shall be a weapon in the battle for a new and superior world.

APPENDIX THREE

The John Reed Club School of Art (1935-36)  
131 West 14th  
New York

Courses of Study

PAINTING

Drawing; Graphic Arts; Painting; Chemistry of Artists' Media; Easel Composition; Oil; Water Color; Mural

SCULPTURE

Life; Sculpture; Wood Carving; Stone Cutting; Casting

POLITICAL CARTOON

Life; Political Cartoon; Wood Cutting; Lithography; Poster Design & Lettering; Mimeographing

POSTER DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

Life; Silk Screen Process; Linoleum Cutting; Poster Design; Graphic Arts; Mimeographing

WOOD CUTTING

Life; Poster Design & Lettering; Political Cartoon, Wood Cutting

LITHOGRAPHY

Life; Poster Design; Political Cartoon; Lithography

#### APPENDIX FOUR

The following is a list of proletarian novels published between 1930 and 1936. The list was compiled by Dr. John Scott Bowman in The Proletarian Novel in America, a Ph.D. dissertation at Pennsylvania State University, 1938. The initials (JRC) beside particular novels indicates the authors who have positively been identified as John Reed Club members.

- Algren, Nelson. Somebody in Boots, 1935 (JRC).  
Armstrong, Arnold. Parched Earth, 1934.  
Bell, Thomas. All Brides Are Beautiful, 1936.  
Bodenheim, Maxwell. Slow Vision, 1934, (JRC).  
Boyd, Thomas. In Time of Peace, 1935.  
Brody, Catherine. Nobody Starves, 1932, (JRC).  
Burke, Fielding. Call Home the Heart, 1932.  
A Stone Came Rollin, 1935.  
Cantwell, Robert. The Land of Plenty, 1934, (JRC).  
Colman, Louis. Lumber, 1931.  
Conroy, Jack. The Disinherited, 1933, (JRC).  
A World to Win, 1935, (JRC).  
Curran, Dale. A House on a Street, 1934.  
Dahlberg, Edward. Those Who Perish, 1934, (JRC).  
Dos Passos, John. The 42nd Parallel, 1930.  
1919, 1932.  
The Big Money, 1936.  
Endore, Guy. Babouk, 1934.  
Frank, Waldo. The Death and Birth of David Markhand, 1934.  
Gilfillen, Lauren. I Went to Pitt College, 1934, (JRC).  
Gold, Michael. Jews Without Money, 1930, (JRC).  
Gallomb, Joseph. Unquiet, 1935.  
Halper, Albert. The Foundry, 1934, (JRC).  
Harrison, Charles Y. A Child is Born, 1931, (JRC).  
Havingshurst, Walter. Pier 17, 1935.  
Herbst, Josephine. Pity is not Enough, 1933, (JRC).  
The Executioner Waits, 1934, (JRC).  
Kromer, Thomas. Waiting for Nothing, 1935.  
Lavin, Meyer. The New Bridge, 1933.  
Lumpkin, Grace. To Make My Bread, 1932, (JRC).  
A Sign for Cain, 1935, (JRC).  
Levy, Melvin. The Last Pioneers, 1935.  
Newhouse, Edward. You Can't Sleep Here, 1934, (JRC).  
Page, Myra. Gathering Storm, 1932, (JRC).  
Rollins, William. The Shadow Before, 1934.  
Seaver, Edwin. The Company, 1930, (JRC).  
Smedley, Agnes. Daughter of Earth, 1929.

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- Steele, James. The Conveyor, 1935, (JRC).
- Steinbeck, John. In Dubious Battle, 1936.
- Tippett, Tom. Horse Shoe Bottoms, 1935.
- Traven, Bruno. The Death Ship, 1934.
- Vorse, Mary Heaton. Strike!, 1930, (JRC).
- Weatherwax, Clara. Marching! Marching!, 1935, (JRC).
- Zugsmith, Leane. A Time to Remeber, 1936.