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For Equality or Against Foreign Oppression?

The Politics of the Left in Iceland Leading up to the Cold War

ABSTRACT

The Second World War was followed by a period of political renewal in Europe; so too, arguably, in Iceland. Those responsible for laying the grounds for the republic, founded in 1944, were inspired by radical thinking, social democratic as well as socialist. Public ownership, the welfare state and democratic reform were on the agenda. Taking as a point of departure the political discourses of the Left (the Social Democrats and the more radical Socialists) this paper explains how these ideals – the quest for economic, social and political equality – were eclipsed by the primacy of independence politics. This process was already under way in the 1930s, when the Communist Party (1930–1938) somewhat successfully equipped itself with a new version of Icelandic nationalism. It was further intensified during the war and culminated with the onset of the Cold War. The pro-Soviet Socialist Party (founded in 1938) thrived on its anti-imperialist nationalism, leaving the Social Democrats as the smallest of the four political parties. This paper is a contribution towards the ongoing debate on why Iceland's party system differs from that of the other Nordic countries, debates about the peculiarities of Iceland's political culture to this date, as well as discussions about how nationalism and national identity affected the politics of the left in Europe.

The economic crisis of the 1930s and the horrors of the Second World War were followed by a period of post-crisis renewal in Europe. It was what historians in recent years have called “a transnational moment of change” at which Europeans, despite the variations and profound differences of the war experience, “fostered a deep expectation of renewal in society, the economy and political institutions”. It was a period of reconstruction characterised by a wide-spread agreement on giving the common people what was to be a new and better society. Socialist and social democratic ideals were on the agenda, there was a consensus on forging welfare states throughout the continent.¹

Despite the profound changes caused by the war, Iceland emerged relatively unscathed. In May 1940 the country was occupied by British forces. The cultural, economic and political effects of the occupation were felt immediately and further intensified when the British were succeeded by American forces. In the spring of 1942 as many as 55 thousand soldiers were situated in Iceland which at the same time counted a little more than 120 thousand inhabitants. Not only did this generate profit in the service sector. The troops needed housing and other facilities – e. g. airfields and a naval base and thus many pairs of Icelandic working hands. The unemployment that had characterised the 1930s was replaced by fears of scarcity of manpower, especially in rural areas, as well as inflation and increased tension between workers and employers. On top of that were added greatly increased profits in the fisheries, both due to a reduction in the fishing of other nations and the favourable trading agreements which had been made with Britain and the United States in conjunction with their military presence in Iceland.² In short, and putting it crudely: a backward, poor, isolated and peripheral country became rich, robust and modern. Already during the war, Icelanders’ claimed that they had experienced a good war. And so it has lived on in the nations’ collective memory; it is frequently referred to as “the beloved war” (*blessað stríðið*) and remembered as pleasant, even fun.³

- 1 Aldo Agosti: Recasting Democracy? Communist Parties Facing Change and Reconstruction in Postwar Europe, in: Gerd-Rainer Horn/Padraic Kenny (eds.): Transnational Moments of Change, Lanham, Md. 2004, p. 13. See further e. g.: Tony Judt: Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945, London 2005, pp. 63–99; Geoff Eley: Forging Democracy. A History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000, Oxford 2002, pp. 278–291; Sheri Berman: The Primacy of Politics. Social Democracy and the Making of Europe’s Twentieth Century, Cambridge 2006, pp. 177–199.
- 2 Helgi Skúli Kjartansson: Ísland á 20. öld, Reykjavík 2002, pp. 221–222.
- 3 For a study of how the war is remembered in Iceland see Guðmundur Hálfðanarson: „The Beloved War“. The Second World War and the Icelandic National Narrative, in: Henrik Stenius/Mirja Österberg/Johan Östling (eds.): Nordic Narratives of the Second World War. National Histories Revisited, Lund 2011, pp. 79–100, p. 79. For examples of the way in which the transformations of the war are described in history books see e. g.: Gunnar Karlsson: Iceland’s 1100 years. The History of a Marginal Society, London 2000, pp. 313–318; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon: Wasteland with Words. A Social History of Iceland, London 2010, pp. 238–239. For an in-depth historical analysis and narrative of the war in Iceland see the works of Þór

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Iceland had been economically and socially backward, among the poorest of the European countries. While the economic depression of the 1930s had not been as deep in Iceland as in many other countries, the closing of its most important export market in Spain in the late 1930s meant that the depression dragged on throughout the decade. This caused high unemployment rates in Reykjavík and other areas dependent on fishing. But during the war, the economy took an about-turn, and as it drew to a close, Iceland had become one of the richest European nations (measured in gross national product per capita).⁴ Adding to this sense of the war as a period of profound and positive changes is the fact that in 1944 Iceland had completed its secession from the Danish kingdom. A 1918 agreement between Denmark and Iceland had established the country as a sovereign state in royal union with Denmark. And on the basis of this agreement, Iceland severed all ties with Denmark and established itself as an independent republic.

Needless to say, the story of the war is more complicated than that. It was not just a story of joy and progress. First of all, a number of Icelanders were victims to the loss and human sufferings caused by the conflict. It has been estimated that more than two hundred Icelandic lives were lost, most at sea. And even though the relations between the occupying forces and the Icelandic inhabitants were in most respects friendly, there were important exceptions. The British arrested a number of its alleged enemies and deported them to Britain, and some never returned. Also, there were clashes between the soldiers and the Icelandic inhabitants, in some cases criminal assaults against women, men, and children.⁵ Moreover, the fundamental socio-economic and cultural changes, brought about by the war and occupation, were in themselves disrupting. The presence of the British and United States military forces and the increasing strategic importance of Iceland in the international power politics of the great powers put a strain on Icelandic culture and politics. The changes brought about by the war, the fun and economic profit the British and the US had brought with them, produced what could be called nationalist guilt that provoked intensive and wide-ranging debates about how English and American culture would pollute and destroy the nationality and national culture of the Icelanders. Most harsh was the reaction to the “Good-Time Girls” that were seen consorting with the foreign soldiers. As was the case in most other European countries

Whitehead. For English-language readers see his: *Iceland and the Struggle for the Atlantic*, Reykjavík 2007.

4 Guðmundur Jónsson: *Hagþróun og hagvöxtur á Íslandi 1914–1960*, in: Jónas H. Haralz (ed.): *Frá kreppu til viðreisnar. Þættir um hagsjórn á Íslandi á árunum 1930–1960*, Reykjavík 2002, pp. 29–37; Guðmundur Jónsson: *The Transition from Agrarian to Service Economy – Or, What Happened to Industrial Capitalism in Iceland?*, in: Peter Vikström (ed.): *Studying Economic Growth*, Umeå 2004, pp. 69–84.

5 Kjartansson: 227.

during the war – not only those occupied by enemy forces⁶ – these girls were accused of sexual immorality and treason.⁷

So while the war did have a more positive impact on Iceland than on most other countries, it also caused disturbances. It put Icelandic society into a state of shock or crisis which has to this date been given little attention in scholarly writing about this period.⁸ It was a crisis fundamentally different from that of societies that dealt with more profound economic and social problems; Denmark, Norway or Finland, to give Nordic counter-examples. Even so, it is clear that those responsible for laying the grounds for post-war Iceland, the newborn Icelandic republic, were inspired by the radical thinking that characterised European politics at this moment in time. The Icelandic electorate had shifted towards the left. The left-wing parties had gained in confidence, and even among the right, public ownership and the welfare state were on the agenda. To some extent this was the result of the social and cultural politics of the 1930s. The labour unrest and increasing presence of the unions during the long-lasting depression seem to have resulted in a broader consensus on welfare and public ownership. But instrumental also, it seems, was the shock and disturbance caused by the war together with the transnational post-war urge to build a new and better society.⁹

Despite this, I shall argue, the core values of the left, economic, social and political equality, were almost immediately eclipsed by the primacy of independence politics. The process had been set off already in the 1930s, when the Communist Party (1930–1938) had somewhat successfully equipped itself with a new version of Icelandic nationalism. It was further intensified during the war and culminated with the onset of the Cold War. The pro-Soviet Socialist Party (founded in 1938) thrived on its anti-imperialist nationalism, leaving the Social Democrats as the smallest of the four political parties.

First, I shall offer a few explanations as to the relative weakness of Social Democracy in Iceland compared with corresponding movements in Scandinavia. Second, I shall explain the strength of the Communist-Socialists. At the centre of the discussion about both political movements is the way in which left-wing politics was defined by Icelandic nationalism. Then, I shall turn back to the radicalism of Icelandic politics at the end of the war and, finally, offer a few words on how nationalism defined the Cold War discourses in Iceland.

6 For reactions to American troops in Britain see e. g. Sonya Rose: *Which People's War. National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939–1945*, Oxford 2003, pp. 71–92.

7 Bára Baldursdóttir: *Kynlegt stríð. Konur í orðræðu síðari heimsstyrjaldar*, in: Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir (ed.): *Íslenska söguþingið 30. maí–1. júní 2001*, Reykjavík 2001, pp. 64–74.

8 See Daisy Neijmann: *Hringsól um dulinn kjarna. Minni og gleyska í þríleik Ólafs Jóhanns Sigurðssonar*, in: *Ritið 12:1* (2012), pp. 115–139, pp. 115–116.

9 Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir: *Nýtt fólk. Þjóðerni og íslensk verkalyðsstjórnarmál 1901–1944*, Reykjavík 2008, p. 317.

The Weakness of Social Democracy

We need a variety of explanations for the relative weakness of Social Democracy in Iceland, but two sets of explanations are most important and relevant for what is under discussion here. The first set concerns the interplay between working-class politics and modernisation. In the European context we see that Social Democrats fared well in those parts of Europe where the modernising process had been set in motion by the beginning of the twentieth century; democratisation on the one hand and industrialisation and urbanisation on the other.¹⁰

While the timing of the former was in pace with that in the other Nordic countries, economic and social change was delayed for a few decades. The full transformation into a modern society occurred in the first decades of the twentieth century, and democratic reform came first, socio-economic changes last. There were some structural changes already under way in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but the most dramatic transformation occurred after the turn of the century, with the steep expansion of the fisheries sector and the concomitant and equally rapid urbanisation.

Throughout the nineteenth century the bulk of the population gained its livelihood on small farms. In 1900 around 80 per cent of the population lived in rural areas. In 1910 the figure had dropped to 65 per cent and by 1920 to 40 per cent. By the end of the Second World War, two-thirds of the population lived in urban areas.¹¹ This transformation had not been generated by an industrial revolution in the conventional sense – the industrial sector remained relatively small. It was the result of several interrelated factors and most importantly increased fishing and a growing service sector.¹²

The grounds for labour politics were thus lacking in the nineteenth century, and it was not until 1916 that a working-class party and labour union were formed in Iceland.¹³

10 What I have in mind here are the Scandinavian countries, Germany and Britain (where the Labour Party was founded later than in the other countries, but still grew to be relatively strong). For a comparative overview of the emergence of Socialist parties in Europe see: Geoff Eley, pp. 62–69. To be sure, the modernisation process was not identical in all of the Scandinavian countries. Full democratic reform occurred relatively late in Sweden and industrialisation and urbanisation later in Norway than the other countries. See Francis Sejersted: *The Age of Social Democracy. Norway and Sweden in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton and Oxford 2011, pp. 10–12, 51. But all the Scandinavian countries were, despite this, well ahead of Iceland.

11 Guðmundur Jónsson/Magnús S. Magnússon (eds.): *Hagskinna. Iceland Historical Statistics*, Reykjavík 1997, pp. 90–91.

12 Jónsson: *Transition*, pp. 69–84.

13 The party was named *Alþýðuflokkur* (lit. People's Party) and the union *Alþýðusamband Íslands* (The People's Union of Iceland).

This, in turn, meant that the Social Democratic Party¹⁴ was a fledgling when it was first faced with the Communist challenge. It lacked the strength of its sister parties in Scandinavia, which were founded in the 1870s and 1880s. By the time of the October Revolution, these were mature and strong social and political movements which made it easier for them to shake off the Communist competition without too much of a disturbance.

Turning to the democratisation process a rather obvious impediment was the electoral system. For the first three decades of the twentieth century, it was basically a simple majority system with unequal weight of votes between rural and urban constituencies. It was favourable towards parties with a broad electoral base, as well as parties which drew their support from rural areas. The system was therefore to the advantage of the right-wing Independence Party, claiming to represent the interests of all classes. So too did it favour the agrarian and rurally orientated Progressive Party. The Social Democrats, on the other hand, were greatly under-represented in parliament (*Alþingi*). In its first decade, notwithstanding increasing support among the electorate, the Social Democrats only held one seat in parliament. It was not until after elections held in 1927, which secured the party five of the 42 seats, that it could form a parliamentary group and thus have some influence on the legislature and government.¹⁵

Other aspects of the democratisation process are relevant too. Even though not as straightforward as that of Iceland's late industrialisation or the development of the electoral system, it can be argued that because the Social Democratic Party was formed in 1916, a year after the introduction of more or less universal male and female suffrage in Iceland, it missed the opportunity of presenting itself as the main proponent of democracy. This link between democracy and the left was an important aspect of the political programme and political identity of European Social Democracy around the turn of the century. Widening the existing franchise was a key issue for European Social Democrats

14 The first programme of the *Alþýðuflokkur* was a home-grown and somewhat eccentric version of Socialism. In the early 1920s, however, it adopted a new programme that was more in tune with Scandinavian Social Democracy. A further complication to this story is caused by the fact that Communists, who worked in somewhat informal organisations already in the 1920s, were at the same time active members of the *Alþýðuflokkur*, not founding a Communist Party until in 1930. Despite this, to avoid confusion, I shall call the leaders and members of *Alþýðuflokkur*, Social Democrats throughout this paper. For a discussion on this formative period of the *Alþýðuflokkur* see: Kristjánsdóttir: Nýtt, pp. 67–97, 171–217.

15 This result was still not in accordance with the party's overall support; 19 per cent of the total vote only secured them 11 per cent of the seats. For a discussion on the parliamentary system and its effects on the Icelandic party system see Ólafur Þ. Harðarson: The Icelandic Electoral System, in: Bernard Grofman/Arend Lijphart (eds.): The Evolution of Electoral and Party Systems in the Nordic Countries, New York 2002, pp. 151–164.

before the First World War.¹⁶ So unlike the Social Democratic parties in most other European countries, and the other Nordic countries, apart from Norway,¹⁷ the Icelandic party did not partake in the struggle for extending voting rights to the property-less (and women).

The second set of explanations as to the relatively poor standing of Social Democracy in Iceland has to do with the main elements of the political discourse of the party, and the way in which that related to and was defined by other political discourses. The fact that the party missed, so to speak, the opportunity of participating in the struggle for formal political rights for the working poor called for a clear commitment to other forms of citizenship. It made it ever more important that the party had a good strategy in its battle for social rights, as well as in the more informal quest for the recognition of workers as an important social group worthy of support and respect.

The first labour newspapers had emerged around the year 1900, and while they provided a forum for discussions concerning the social and political circumstances of the urban poor, they reveal their publishers as a group of Icelanders standing on the border between two worlds. Most of the contributors wrote in the language of orders rather than class. So on the one hand, and more prominently, there was the old rural society in which the urban poor had traditionally been considered outcasts, a threat to the rural order. But on the other hand, and alongside rural views and values, there was a still obscure idea of a modern society, in which workers demanded recognition as fully fledged members of the nation. This demand did not appear in the guise of Marxist ideas about the redefinition of power relations within society. Rather an attempt was made to expand the definition of who really belonged to the nation, so that it also included workers. One example of such attempts was the way in which the positive image of the farmer is appropriated and applied to the identity of the workers. Another manifestation is that this identity is expressed, not with terms such as *verkamaður*, “worker”, or *verkalýður*, “proletariat”, but rather the term *alþýða*, which can be translated as “people” or “the common people” (*folk* in the Scandinavian languages).¹⁸

In due course, when time was ripe for the founding of a political party and labour associations, these features influenced the way in which the movement defined its objectives and role. The political discourse of the Social Democrats was, right from the beginning, embedded with claims that workers be recognised as a homogenous group that played an important role in society and had a right to the state’s securing them the possibility of leading a decent life. And the name chosen for the party was *Alþýðuflokkur*

16 Eley, pp. 17–32; Stefan Berger: Democracy and Social Democracy, in: *European History Quarterly* 32:1 (2002), pp. 13–37, p. 15.

17 In Norway universal male suffrage was introduced before the Labour Party had elected members in parliament, see: Sejersted, p. 62.

18 Kristjánsdóttir, Nýtt, pp. 31–63.

(the party of the common people) which can be seen as an attempt to integrate workers with the rest of the nation.¹⁹

But it complicated matters that alongside the struggle to secure the rights and respect of workers the party was engaged in another struggle which was partly analogous to the recognition of workers as members of the nation, but partly in opposition to it. This was the struggle for the redefinition of the object of politics. From the mid-nineteenth century the main if not the only object of Icelandic politics had been its relations with Denmark; nationalist arguments of one kind or another dominated the political discourse. Securing the autonomy of the Icelandic polity had been considered the ultimate duty of Icelanders.²⁰ This meant that it was difficult for the party to disregard nationalism.

To be sure, such a strong emphasis on nationalism was widespread in Europe at the time, and nationalism affected the politics of Social Democratic parties throughout the continent.²¹ This was especially the case in countries which were aiming at full independence. In the Nordic context this applies to Norway and Finland, as well as Iceland. In Norway during the nineteenth century, and before the secession from Sweden in 1905, there had been a strong link between democratic reform and national independence and thus between nationalism and Social Democracy.²² Similarly in Finland, before independence in 1917, there was a strong link between nationalism, the development of democracy and the labour movement. Advocating Finnish autonomy or independence was a part of labour's quest for and defence of civil rights, democratic institutions and thus their opportunities to fight for social and economic reforms for the workers.²³

But the Icelandic case is exceptional in that, together with the country's late industrialisation, the way that Icelandic politics was impregnated with nationalism had delayed the emergence of modern political parties. Indeed, when the Social Democratic Party was founded in 1916, it was the first party to be organised on the basis of distinct interests or on a distinct ideology. During the nineteenth century there were no political parties, only informal political blocks formed around the question of independence. And the

19 Kristjánsdóttir, *Nýtt*, pp. 88–97.

20 For the hegemony of the nationalist discourse see e.g. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson: *Severing the Ties. Iceland's Journey from a Union with Denmark to a Nation-State*, in: *Scandinavian Journal of History* 31:3–4 (2006), pp. 237–254.

21 See: Marcel van der Linden: *The National Integration of European Working Classes (1871–1914)*, in: *International Review of Social History* 33:3 (1988), pp. 285–311; Stefan Berger/Angel Smith (eds.): *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity 1870–1939*, Manchester 1999; Michael Forman: *Nationalism and the International Labour Movement. The Idea of the Nation in Socialist and Anarchist Theory*, University Park, Pa. 1998, pp. 19–113.

22 See: Anders Kirkhusmo: *Sosialister og nasjonalister? Det norske Arbeiderparti i 1905*, in: *Arbeiderhistorie* 19 (2005), pp. 5–27.

23 Risto Alapuro: *State and Revolution in Finland*, Los Angeles and London 1988, pp. 123–127, 158–161.

first political parties to emerge at the beginning of the twentieth century were cadre parties formed around rival political leaders, rather than ideological differences.²⁴

So in order to justify the establishment of a Social Democratic Party, the emphasis on the struggle for national independence had to be reduced. The party had to struggle for the redefinition of the object of politics. This led to the emergence of two distinct and not altogether compatible goals; the party attempted at the same time to secure the recognition of workers as Icelanders, true members of the nation, and reduce the importance of the struggle for independence within the political sphere. In order to engage in a dialogue on politics, the workers (and those who spoke on their behalf) had to demonstrate that they were indeed part of the nation, but in order to justify the establishment of a party, the emphasis on the struggle for national independence had to be reduced. The political discourse of the first years of Icelandic Social Democracy was thus, as it turned out, confining and in some respects contradictory.²⁵

At its founding moment, nationalist traits were constitutive of the political identity and objectives of the party. Prior to 1918, the year when Iceland was granted sovereignty, both this identity and the party's objectives were characterised by an eagerness to show that the struggle for securing the interests of the working class (or rather the *alþýða*, or common people, Scandinavian *folk*), was in fact a struggle for the preservation and maintenance of the Icelandic nation. But during the 1920s and until 1944, the party became ever more vague and unresolved in its view on how to integrate matters of nationhood and nationality into its political agenda. The party's participation in the negotiations leading up to the 1918 agreement on Icelandic sovereignty had complicated matters. One reason was the party leadership's eagerness to get the independence issue out of the way. During the negotiations on the sovereignty agreement, the party had decided to propose that the Icelandic negotiators accede to the Danish request for joint citizenship between the nations.²⁶ This, together with the party's relationship with Scandinavian (and mostly Danish) Social Democrats was met with various charges of the party being non-nationalist or even guilty of treason. The idea proposed was that the party's support for joint citizenship had been secured by a grant from the sister party in Denmark.²⁷

Allegations that the party was un-Icelandic persisted through the interwar years. And together with the increasing impact of conservative nationalism in the 1920s, they caused

24 See: Harðarson, pp. 106–107.

25 Kristjánadóttir: Nýtt, pp. 67–70, 96–97.

26 Kristjánadóttir: Nýtt, pp. 101–124.

27 This episode in the party's history resounded in political debates throughout the twentieth century and spilled into the Cold War history writing about the party, particularly among left-wing writers. See especially: Ólafur R. Einarsson: *Sendiförin og viðræðurnar 1918. Sendiför Ólafs Friðrikssonar til Kaupmannahafnar og þáttur jafnaðarmanna í fullveldisviðræðunum*, in: *Saga 16:1* (1978), pp. 37–74.

the initial objective of identifying the party's political struggle and Iceland's national interests to be gradually set aside. The party did not reject Icelandic nationalism. Its politics still contained various references to Icelandic nationhood and nationality. But these were general and defensive in character. The party did not tackle Icelandic nationalism on its own terms or, to put it differently, try to create a new version of Icelandic nationalism suited to their general political aims.

The Social Democratic Party therefore did not take up an outright opposition to conservative ideas concerning the future of the Icelandic nation that characterised the nationalist discourse of the 1920s. We can even see the party accepting ideas that ran contrary to its main objectives. Most notable here were conservative nationalist ideas concerning the degenerative effects of industrialisation and urbanisation on rural communities and thus the national culture. The party thus partook in maintaining the idea that the urban poor were second-rate citizens, as well as the idea that urbanisation and related developments, indeed the very foundation of the party's existence, were unfortunate and fraught with danger.²⁸ Unlike the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties which during the 1930s were identifying with the nation state – creating on the way, it seems, its own version of the nationalist discourse²⁹ – the identification of the Icelandic Social Democrats with the nation was vague and uncertain. And while the rise of Scandinavian Social Democracy was to an extent the result of a new and modernised compromise with the agrarian parties,³⁰ the Icelandic party had from the outset had close dealings with the traditionalist and agrarian Progressive Party and been hesitant to sever those ties in favour of a more clearly modern vision of the future of Icelandic society.³¹

All these factors made it difficult for the Social Democrats to secure their prominence on the political scene, and reduced their credibility as the proper voice and representative of the working class. This is not to say that the party's identity as a worker's party was in itself blurred or unclear. Alongside the ideas explained above, it did maintain that there was indeed a working class in Iceland, and that its situation was dire, that it had to struggle against other classes for securing its own interests, and that it should aim at a socialist society. What it lacked, however, was a clear identity which its members could

28 Kristjánsdóttir: *Nýtt*, pp. 128–168.

29 See e. g. for Norway, where this integration has been extensively researched: Svein Ivar Angell: *Fra splid til nasjonal integrasjon. Norsk nasjonalisme i mellomkrigstida*, Oslo 1994; Hans Fredrik Dahl: *Fra klassekamp til nasjonal samling. Arbeiderpartiet og det nasjonale spørsmål i 30-årene*, Oslo 1969; Gunhild Aaby: *Røde roser, norske flagg og Internasjonalen*, in: *Arbeiderhistorie* 14 (2000), pp. 149–165. For Denmark see: Niels Finn Christiansen: *Socialismen og fædrelandet. Arbejderbevægelsen mellem internationalisme og national stolthed 1871–1940*, in: Ole Feldbæk (ed.): *Dansk identitetshistorie*, vol. 3, Copenhagen 1992, pp. 512–586.

30 See for Sweden and Norway: Sejersted, pp. 78–87.

31 Kristjánsdóttir: *Nýtt*, pp. 140–147.

communicate with ease and lucidity. In short: The party lacked confidence, a clear idea about whom it served and whom not and who were its main opponents and possible allies in its political struggle.

The Strength of Communism

We also need a set of explanations to understand how the Communist-Socialist movement fared in Icelandic politics. First, as already mentioned, it did help that the Social Democratic movement was young and thus relatively weak when international Communism reached Icelandic shores. This for example meant that in the 1930s, during the years of unrest and conflict in the labour market, Communists often got the upper hand, both on-site, i. e. where the strikes took place, and within labour unions around the country.³² Their position within the unions was thus certainly important, but equally and even more important, was that their political identity was more clear-cut than that of the Social Democrats. And key to their identity-building was the way in which they equipped themselves with a new version of Icelandic nationalism.³³

This had started already in the 1920s when young Icelandic Communist intellectuals had contemplated how they could make use of nationalism “on a communist basis”.³⁴ It was a complicated process that called at the same time for a sincere interest in the Icelandic cultural heritage, a commitment to nationalist ideals, and a good knowledge of the ideology of the Communist International (Comintern). The leaders of the Communist movement were important actors in channelling radical European ideas into Icelandic politics and cultural life. Unlike the leaders of the Social Democratic movement these were young intellectuals, students of history and literature, studying in Copenhagen and later Berlin where they had easy access to left-wing intellectual currents of the time.³⁵

To be sure, the political discourse of the Icelandic Communist movement had been founded on that of the international movement. And the views expressed by Icelandic

32 Þór Whitehead: *Kommúnistahreyfingin á Íslandi 1921–1934*, Reykjavík 1979, pp. 71–83; Stefán F. Hjartarson: *Kampen om fackföreningsrörelsen. Ideologi och politisk aktivitet på Island 1920–1938*, Uppsala 1989, pp. 179–234.

33 I discuss this in more detail in: Kristjánsdóttir: *Nýtt*, pp. 171–217 and in a comparative perspective in: Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir: *Communists and the National Question in Scotland and Iceland, c. 1930 to c. 1940*, in: *Historical Journal* 45:2 (2002), pp. 601–618 as well as: Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir: *Nordic Communists and Nationalism, from the 1920s and into the Cold War*, in: Silke Neunsinger/Mary Hilson/Iben Vyff (eds.): *Under the Northern Star. Labour, Unions and Politics in the Nordic Countries 1600–2000* (forthcoming in 2013 or 2014).

34 *Icelandic National Library*. Papers of Stefán Pjetursson. Letter from Einar Olgeirson, Akureyri 3 June 1924.

35 Kristjánsdóttir: *Nýtt*, pp. 199–205.

Communists were mostly in accordance with international Communism. Their nationalist emphasis was based on the decrees of the Comintern and on Marxist-Leninist ideology. At the same time it was based on and grappled with specific features of the Icelandic nationalist discourse. The result was an effective political tool which determined much of what followed in the history of the left in Iceland. It was what could be called a “counter-discourse” or “counter narrative” that was based on the theses and political ideology of the international Communist movement, but at the same time securely rooted in Icelandic culture and politics. Its force was drawn from how it adapted to Icelandic circumstances, how the Communists translated international Communism into the Icelandic context, instead of simply importing the Comintern ideology and rhetoric, whatever its shortcomings. Furthermore, not sticking to past tunes of Icelandic nationalism, they aimed at bringing about changes. They criticised and rejected those facets of Icelandic nationalism that ill suited the movement’s politics, rewrote the history of the nation, and redefined on their own premises the basic features of the Icelandic national identity. The leadership of the Icelandic Communist movement had found, from within the stated ideology of the international Communist movement, a way to define its own political function as a continuation of the nineteenth-century struggle for independence. They brought under a single heading, and even identified, Icelandic working-class politics, the struggle for national independence, and the international revolutionary role of Communists.

Their struggle began with a radical critique of the conservative nationalism that had been promoted by various Icelandic intellectuals in the twenties. From the mid-1920s onwards, five years before the Communist Party was actually founded (which was in 1930), Communists started demanding a radical re-evaluation and reorientation of the cultural identity of Iceland. They brought under one heading, and even identified, the labour struggle, the struggle for national independence, and the international revolutionary role of Communists. In short; the Icelandic Communists adopted the following equation, which became an axiom, or foundational premise, for all their politics and rhetoric:

Icelandic working-class politics
= The Icelandic nation’s fight for freedom against foreign oppression
= The politics of the International Communist Movement (The Soviet Union)

Evidently, this move was controversial. In 1931 the Comintern executive, assessing the manifesto of the newly founded Communist Party, was sceptical towards the assertion that Iceland was fighting a revolutionary struggle for national liberation, but finally decided against any severe critique of this particular issue.³⁶ More controversy, however,

36 This can be deduced from documents in the Comintern Archive in Moscow. My argument for this, based on these documents, is in: Kristjánsdóttir: *Nýtt*, pp. 212–215.

was created in Iceland, as the other political parties objected to the claim that the future of Icelandic nationhood and nationality depended on the success of international Communism. They attempted to undermine the leftist agenda, for example by arguing that due to the close relationship between the Communist left and the Soviet Union, all their talk of nationhood and nationality was badly compromised. Notwithstanding that, this Communist formula did get through to a large part of the electorate, and it helped to broaden the base of the Icelandic Communist movement.

A Nationalist Discourse for the Cold War

In 1938, the Communist Party joined forces with a splinter group from the Social Democratic party, thus transforming itself into a new party under the name Socialist Unity Party (*Sameiningarflokkur Alþýðu – Sósíalistaflokkur*, hereafter Socialist Party).³⁷ In this reincarnated form, the far left fared well. The party received 16 per cent of the votes in its first parliamentary elections of 1942, doubling the electoral strength of the Communist Party, which had received eight per cent in the preceding elections of 1937. At the same time the Social Democrats suffered. They had obtained 19 per cent of the votes in 1937, which now sank to 15 per cent. They were left as the smallest of the four main political parties in Iceland,³⁸ and remained so until the 1980s. While the Scandinavian sister parties, from the 1930s onwards, received between 40 and 50 per cent of the votes, the Icelandic party was stuck with between 15 to 20 per cent of the total votes cast, consistently a little less than the Socialists.³⁹

The Socialist Party was led by the same young intellectuals that had shaped the Communist movement, and the basic tenets of the Communist ideology and rhetoric were kept intact. So the Marxist-Leninist version of Icelandic nationalism, the equation sketched out above, continued to serve as an axiom. This was in some respects an effective way of playing out equality politics in Iceland. It entailed an emphasis on the workers, the urban poor, precisely that part of Icelandic society that had been considered a threat to Icelandic nationhood and nationality in the nineteenth century. In this revised version of Icelandic nationalism, this group played the leading role in the struggle for

37 Even though, as I am arguing here, the nationalism of Icelandic Communists was in many respects instrumental in the success of the radical left in Iceland, I would not claim that it was the nationalist rhetoric that lured an important section of the Social Democratic Party into co-operation with the Communists. The split had more to do with the political dynamics, and personal disputes within the Social Democratic Party.

38 Largest was the right-wing and broad-based Independence Party (*Sjálfstæðisflokkur*), second largest was the Progressive Party (*Framsóknarflokkur*).

39 Election results can be found on the website of Statistics Iceland, at: <http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Elections> (accessed on 28 May 2013).

independence. In short: by portraying Icelandic workers as the leaders of the independence struggle, they exalted the outcasts.

But gradually the second part of the equation – the part that put an equal sign between the independence politics of the Icelandic nation (as a unified organic entity) on the one hand, and international Communism on the other – became more important than the part that emphasised the role of the working people of Iceland.

During the war, Socialists presented themselves as the main guardians of Icelandic nationality, as the bravest fighters against any threat posed by foreign powers. When the British forces arrived in May 1940, the Socialists announced the beginning of a new independence struggle.⁴⁰ They addressed the whole nation, not just the working class, warning it that the age-long isolation of the country had been breached. Calling for the resolve of the nation as a whole, they claimed that from now on the Icelandic nation had to be suspicious and cautious toward all foreign powers, those that approach the nation under the guise of friendship, as well as those that would be downright hostile.⁴¹

Similarly, in the political disputes leading up to the founding of the republic in 1944, the Socialists took an overtly nationalistic stance. There were two main camps in the wider Icelandic debate. One camp emphasised the importance of sticking to the procedure for separation prescribed in the 1918 agreement between Iceland and Denmark (according to which Iceland was a separate state under the Danish crown). The other camp argued that due to the circumstances of the war, the German occupation of Denmark, and the latter's inability to uphold their part of the agreement, Iceland should immediately break off from Denmark. The Socialists were advocates of the latter, and supported their argument by claiming that the Icelandic nation had a natural right to independence and that it was therefore not obliged to honour the established conditions for the termination of the 1918 agreement on the relationship between Iceland and Denmark. And at the founding moment of the Republic in 1944, they systematically portrayed themselves as heirs to the heroes of the nineteenth-century independence struggle, maintaining that their party could best protect Icelandic independence.⁴²

The inter-war Communist nationalism and its further development through the war, proved an excellent basis for the anti-imperialist politics of Socialists during the Cold War. When it became clear, shortly after the war ended, that the United States wanted to

40 Kristjánsdóttir: *Nýtt*, pp. 312–317. This was in accordance with the stance of Moscow-oriented Communists throughout Europe. See e. g. (for Denmark and Norway): Jesper Jørgensen: „Vort parti er et dansk parti“. DKP og det nationale 1936–1952, in: *Arbejderhistorie 2* (2005), pp. 49–66, pp. 54–55; Terje Halvorsen: *Mellom Moskva og Berlin. Norges kommunistiske parti under ikke-angrepspakten mellom Sovjet-Unionen og Tyskland*, Oslo 1996, pp. 16–22.

41 Following the twists and turns of the Soviet view on the war, they did not openly oppose the presence of the US forces that arrived in Iceland in July 1941.

42 Kristjánsdóttir: *Nýtt*, pp. 312–324.

continue its military presence in Iceland, Socialists joined forces with prominent intellectuals, many of whom had not been supporters of the party, and set up a nationalist camp in fierce opposition to the new (imperialist) enemy that they claimed posed a mortal threat to Icelandic nationality. A few years later, as parliament decided that Iceland would be a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Socialists were the only party unanimously in opposition, taking the same stance as the radical left in other European countries.⁴³ Again, they supported their stance with a Marxist-Leninist anti-imperialist claim that they were fighting for the preservation of Iceland's most valuable possession, its sovereignty, as well as its precious national culture. Those who supported NATO-membership and western cooperation were called traitors. Indeed, wrote the Socialist Party leader Einar Olgeirsson, the advent of Iceland's NATO-membership was more than "a simple act of treason, it was an attempted murder of the Icelanders." Never in Iceland's history had "a ruling class taken a more un-Icelandic stance than the Reykjavík capitalists had, never before had any so slavishly followed the orders of a foreign power."⁴⁴

Conclusion

To be sure, the Socialist Party was committed to a post-war reconstruction (or renewal) of the sort mentioned at the outset. It promised to build a society that emphasised economic and social equality. The idea of a new beginning was prominent in the party's discourse at the end of the war. Claiming that new political currents were coursing through Europe, they urged "all classes" to unite in securing the nation's prosperity by means of a nationalised and planned economy.⁴⁵ In late 1944 the party was instrumental in forming a coalition government with (somewhat surprisingly) the right-wing Independence Party as well as the Social Democrats. Calling itself the Government of Innovation (*Nýsköpunarstjórnin*), it set out to build up a social security system on a par with those being planned throughout Europe. But reading the texts produced by the Socialist leaders on the eve of what was to be a new era, it is striking how they were intoxicated with nationalist fervour. It is safe to say that the ideals of equality had been eclipsed by the primacy

43 For Iceland's entry into NATO from a transnational perspective see: Valur Ingimundarson: *The Rebellious Ally. Iceland, United States and the Politics of Empire 1945–2006*, Dordrecht 2011, pp. 29–36.

44 Einar Olgeirsson: Þjóðsvikin 30. Marz, in: *Réttur* 33:1–2 (1949), pp. 68–82.

45 See e.g.: Það þarf þjóðareingu um nýsköpun atvinnulífs á Íslandi, in: *Þjóðviljinn* 13 September 1944, pp. 4–5.

of the fight against (real and imagined) threats to the Icelandic nation; if not in practice, then certainly in the party rhetoric.⁴⁶

Indeed, it was rather the Social Democratic Party that held up the banner of equality. Their participation in the Government of Innovation had been conditional on a wide-ranging improvement of the social security legislation. Furthermore, their leaders had, during the war and in relation to the founding of the republic, promoted the idea of an internal struggle for independence. Borrowing the Scandinavian metaphor of the state being a people's home (Swedish, *folkhemmet*, Icelandic, *þjóðarheimili*), they called for the interiors of the new "republican building" (*lýðveldisbyggingin*) to be arranged so as to relieve the people of constraint, poverty, ignorance and destitution. But such Scandinavian ideals were, it seems, swallowed up in the turmoil and accusations that arose around the party's argument for a civil separation from Denmark. The party leadership had sided with those that argued that despite the changed circumstances, Iceland should respect the terms of the 1918 agreement between Iceland and Denmark.⁴⁷

In the disputes about how to sever the ties with Denmark the two parties of the left had thus placed themselves on the opposite ends of the spectrum. Similarly, the Social Democratic leaders supported both the 1946 agreement allowing the US continued access to the military air base it had put up at Keflavik during the war, as well as Iceland's membership in NATO. As was the case with the sister parties in Scandinavia, the Social Democrats took a determined anti-Soviet, anti-Communist and pro-American stand during the Cold War. The Social Democratic leaders not having the hegemonic position of the parties in Scandinavia, thus aligned themselves with the centre-right of Icelandic politics.⁴⁸ This, together with the fact that the two parties had been, and continued to be, engaged in a fierce competition for the support of the same Icelandic voters made co-operation between them all but impossible.

So despite the fact that the Icelandic electorate had, during the 1930s and the war, taken a shift towards the left (together the parties had the support of around a third of the electorate), and despite clear indications that the radical thinking of post-crisis Europe was to be at the fore in the newly constructed Icelandic republic, the core values of the left, economic, social and political equality were pushed to the margins of the political agenda of the left-wing parties in Iceland.

46 I base this claim on my reading of the party's texts from this period. A digital search through the text of *Þjóðviljinn*, the party's paper at this time (see online at: http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pubId=257&clang=is, last accessed on 28 May 2013), establishes that the words *jafnrétti* and *jöfnður* (which both translate into English as equality) do not occur nearly as often as words such as *sjálfstæði* (independence), *nýlendukúgun* (colonial oppression) and *þjóðareining* (national unity).

47 Kristjánsdóttir: Nýtt, pp. 304–312.

48 For an analysis of the international aspect of Iceland's Cold War politics see: Ingimundarson.

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