

Of cults and cul-de-sacs

Mike Fenwick reviews

The Prophet's Children: Travels on the American Left by Tim Wohlforth
(Humanities, £12.95)

TIM WOHLFORTH was a leading American Trotskyist in the '60s and '70s. His major "contribution" was to build the American Healyite organisation, the Workers' League. Nowadays he is a proselytising anti-Leninist.

He first joined the Trotskyist movement in the mid 50s, in the form of Max Shachtman's Independent Socialist League. He could have saved himself and the reader a lot of trouble by sticking with Shachtman and embracing social democracy in the early '60s. Instead, it took him 30 years and another couple of organisations to get there.

After the ISL Wohlforth, together with a small group of youth (including Jim Robertson, now leader of the Spartacist Tendency) joined Cannon's SWP. The splitting issue was Shachtman's approach to political regroupment. He looked to the right wing of the Auto Workers' Union and Socialist Party, while the SWP concentrated on the CP and the Progressive Party. On joining in 1957 he found the SWP to be a moribund and routinist organisation still dominated by the veterans of the 1930s. In discussing the SWP, he develops the idea that revolutionary groups all have an individual character, usually that of its political leader. It is in such terms that he describes all the groups he encounters. He seems to see this organisational personality as something over and above politics.

In discussing his faction fight in the SWP he says "By rights we were also entitled to a National Committee alternate, a position we did not get. I protested to Jim Cannon who bluntly said: 'You are not entitled to anything. We give you what we want to give you...' Oh well, it was his party, so I guessed he ought to know." [p104]

If this was just a one-off, throwaway line, he might be excused of glib cynicism. However, this attitude seems to determine his judgement. So the first thing we are told about Healy and the Socialist Labour League is Healy's energy and activism. That Healy was always very busy and "travelled some 1,200 miles a week" on political business must have been quite exciting compared to the slow-moving SWP. The political issues Healy was factionalising around also corresponded with those of Wohlforth's minority. A negative assessment of the Cuban revolution, and a critique of Pablo-

ism (the record of the European-based International Secretariat of the Fourth International) provided the basis for opposition to the SWP majority. Pabloism was the political myth which Cannon, Healy and Co. in the ICFI had used to justify their split from the IS in the early '50s. Its contention that Pablo wanted to liquidate the Trotskyists into the Stalinist or social democratic mass parties, and adopt an almost uncritical support for Stalinist expansion and nationalist revolutions. If these charges were applied evenly each side of the dispute, both would have been found guilty. At the time, however, Healy and his French collaborator Pierre Lambert could cover their own records through bluster and demagoguery about the need for an independent revolutionary party and their own frantic attempts at party building.

After being expelled from the SWP Wohlforth set out to build a new organisation based on Healy's SLL. Combining hyperactivity and a rigid and vindictive regime with a set of catastrophist perspective he built quickly from the anti-war and civil rights movements. But it was the frenzied urge of activity that built the group, the Workers' League.

"As we increased the pace of our activities, we stepped up the internal struggle within the organization. Each branch meeting was dominated by attacks against comrades who failed to sell sufficient tickets to an event or to sell papers or subscriptions, or who failed in some other fashion. The comrades were forced to confess their own middle-class weaknesses, even their purported hostility to the working class and to the party. A physically exhausted membership found itself under continuous attack. Believing in the party and our ideals as we all did, each of us became preoccupied with our own internal demons. These kept most of us, at least for a while, from questioning the party's perspective. It was, as I can now see clearly, a highly effective method of brainwashing and thought control. We held on to and inspired a hardworking membership at the cost of becoming — a political cult!" [p225]

He was not ignorant of the effects of such methods. During visits to England he had seen Healy humiliate members of his Central Committee, such as Cliff Slaughter. He knew of the physical intimidation. Yet he saw fit to duplicate all this in America. Unlike people in Britain like Alan Thornett, he chose not to fight Healy politically. When the machine he helped create turned on him, he just accepted it and deferred once more to Healy. At first he accepted demotion to staff writer, rather than leader, and then he just resigned.

After leaving Healy Wohlforth rejoined the SWP. He found it a party of a different

character, in his terms, a new leader. Jack Barnes had succeeded Farrell Dobbs and Tom Kerry and had built, on the basis of quite rapid growth in the early '70s a party machine of full-timers. Wohlforth seems to have soon tired of fighting within another monolithic party, and gradually gave up on his own position, dropping out of the SWP altogether by 1979. He has spent much time since picking.

As I said above, he seems to have been unable to distinguish between political and personalities and so has developed a critique of Leninism, or more specifically democratic centralism, on the basis of what happened to him. That the organisational question is at the root of the evil, but he has also rejected the political content. So Marxism is a European import. What is needed in America is "a radical, democratic, socialist movement that would go beyond the Russian experience, beyond Trotskyism, communism and Leninism."

Despite such grand ambitions, he has been unable to go beyond either Healyism or its Stalinist-coloured caricature of Leninism. Not only has he failed to make any thoroughgoing criticism of his own actions, so failing to take responsibility for anything he has done, he relies on his critique of Leninism to explain it all away. He also uses it to excuse Healy. "The blame," he says, "goes beyond Healy to the traditions and institutions that permitted it to happen."

The argument for Leninism as a democratic form that emphasises politics over organisation and demands critical thinking from its members need not be gone into here. What is clear here is that Wohlforth is and was a political cultist. Not only must he attempt to absolve himself from any blame but also his cult leader. The easiest way is to go back in history to find the source of this evil, a time far enough past to remove any personal responsibility he may have had.

So the cultist remains intact. Yet it's obvious that he had the ability and opportunity to make things different, to have fought against Healy and his methods. But in his formula Leninism = vanguardism = Stalinism = Trotskyism = root of all evil. He raises issues which were in his hands to change and influence through conscious activity to the level of something mystical. It is this detachment and the accompanying self-indulgences that make this book one of the most irritating I have ever read. You get fed up of saying to him "Why didn't you fight?"

As such, it's not a useful guide for our practice today. Along the way there are a few interesting insights, pieces of Trotskyist tittle-tattle etc. But in terms of his story being an example for us, it can only be a bad one. ■