COMMUNIST HISTORY NETWORK NEWSLETTER No 14 | SPRING 2003

Welcome to issue 14 of the *Newsletter*. The *Newsletter* continues to be made available in three formats: a print-version; an e-version (Word PC file attachment); and a web-version. The deadline for submissions to issue 15 is 30 September 2003, and contributions are welcomed.

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- **'AN INSPIRING EXAMPLE':** Don Watson writes: '*An Inspiring Example': The North East of England and the Spanish Civil War* by Don Watson and John Corcoran has been republished. This short book covers every aspect of the campaign for Spain in the North East of England — the International Brigade, the Basque refugee children, the aid Spain movement and the *SS Linaria*. It uses contemporary press material and photographs, oral history and interviews with two local International Brigade veterans.' For further information and ordering details, please e-mail Don Watson at: donwatson@btinternet.com.

- **MEMORIES FROM JARAMA**: John Corcoran writes: 'A group of researchers recently visited the Jarama battlefield', scene of one of the most important battles of the Spanish Civil War in which the International Brigades played a central role, 'and have created a gallery of photographs from our visit on the web. We arranged the trip because we had recorded a large number of interviews with British International Brigade veterans in our research, and also because we feel strongly that the sacrifice of theses anti-fascist fighters should never be forgotten.' Visit: http://www.comms.dcu.ie/sheehanh/photos/jarama.htm

- **'DISSENT' CONFERENCE**: The Socialist History Society is hosting a two day conference on 26-27 September 2003 on the theme 'Dissent and the State Since 1945'. Confirmed speakers include Peter Hennessy, Hilary Wainwright, Mark Seddon, John Callaghan and Trevor Carter. The conference will be held at the Institute of Historical Research, Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU. Further details are available from: Willie Thompson, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Lipman Building, University of Northumbria, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 8ST; e-mail w.thompson@newpolitics.org.uk.

- **'BRITISH LABOUR AND SOCIAL HISTORY'**: A special issue (No 27) of *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts fur soziale Bewegungen* edited by Stefan Berger focuses on 'Labour and Social History in Great Britain' with contributions from

Lawrence Black, Steven Fielding, John Callaghan, Kevin Morgan (on communist historiography), Alistair Reid, Chris Wrigley, Dan Weinbren, Andy Croll, Ross McKibbin, Edmund Neill and Karen Hunt. The issue costs 7.60 Euros plus postage of 3.50 Euros. E-mail: scholte@klartext-verlag.de; or write to: Klartext, Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, z.H. Christa Scholte, Dickmannstrasse 2-4, D-45143 Essen, Germany; or telephone 49-201-86-206-29 or 49-201-86-206-22.

- **CONFERENCE ON PCE**: A conference examining the history of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) between 1920 and 1977 will be held in Oviedo, Spain in May 2004. The draft conference programme, and call for papers (in Spanish only) can be accessed at: http://www.pce.es/FIM/histopce_programa.pdf

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RESEARCH NOTES

Piero Sraffa

I am currently researching material for a biography of the radical Italian economist Piero Sraffa (1898-1983). Naturally, I am interested in his relationship with other economists around the world and with figures on the Italian left; but I would also like to gather information on his relationships with members of the British left and with those in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in particular. Any help and suggestions that other researchers could provide would be most welcome. There are several important episodes in his political life about which I currently know very little; or which I hope to understand better. They include the following:

- In 1921, whilst Sraffa was studying at the London School of Economics (LSE) he worked for the Labour Research Department (LRD). Currently, I know very little about the nature of his work for the LRD.
- Information from a fascist source, dated 1927, suggests that during the same period Sraffa might have also been in touch with people closely connected to the Soviet Union. Again, little else is known about this aspect of his life.
- In 1924, Sraffa seems to have been a member of the '1917 Club', a 'lunch club' founded by Ramsay MacDonald; although information about his involvement and the work of the Club remains sketchy.
- Archive papers at the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester confirm that in 1932 Sraffa wrote to Rajani Palme Dutt to discuss Marx's reception in Britain; but no other correspondence between the two seems to have survived.
- Returning from Calais in January 1923, Sraffa was refused permission to land in Dover and to return to France. The reasons for this remains unclear — although it could relate to his activities in London in 1921-22; his trip to Ireland in 1922; or to diplomatic pressure on the British government by Mussolini.
- It appears that during World War Two, MI5 remained rather suspicious of Sraffa, whilst the SOE (Special Operations Executive) was not. Unfortunately, I have not been able to trace documents which might support this contention.

A very specific matter on which I am seeking help it this: in March 1999, at a small conference held in Rome, I had the opportunity to listen to a participant (who was fluent in Italian, but whose mother tongue I believe was English) who suggested that Sraffa's stance in the 1930s could be better understood by studying the contemporary debates on the British left, and within the CPGB in particular, rather than those of the Italian left of the day. He made reference to contacts between Sraffa and the Birmingham-based historian George Thomson. I have found no trace of this relationship in the 'Sraffa Papers', and would be very keen to make contact with this person (whose name I cannot recall) once again.

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FEATURES

Charles Poulsen (1911-2001): Cabbie, novelist, historian and poet

Charles Poulsen was born in Stepney on 15 October 1911, the son of Jewish immigrants from Tsarist Russia. The family name was Polsky, which he changed to Poulsen during the war, when a foreign name exposed one to suspicion. When he was very young the family moved to Croydon, where his father ran a photographer's studio and the family lived over the shop. Photography was a thriving business during the First World War, when soldiers and their parents, girl friends or wives wanted portraits. His parents were gentle, kind and pious, and they and their two sons and two daughters remained bound together all their lives by strong ties of affection. Croydon was on the edge of the country, and the house had a garden, where the girls grew vegetables and their mother kept chickens. The family went to the cinema regularly, and to the pantomime at Christmas. When their father, himself a book-lover, went to auctions to buy photographic equipment he always brought back piles of books for their children. At Croydon the foundations were laid of Charles's later interests, a love of the country, of animals, of books and of the theatre.

Croydon influenced his later life in one other respect. His parents paid ten shillings a week for the children to receive religious instruction from an aged Jew who could only translate Biblical Hebrew into Yiddish, and beat any of his pupils who asked questions. The boredom of these lessons was the first thing that caused Charles to question the value of unthinking orthodoxy.

In 1922, when Charles was due to sit for the examination which would decide whether he should receive a grammar school education, disaster struck. His father became ill, the lease of the shop expired, and the family had to move back to the East End, where his father and uncle opened a photography business in Whitechapel High Street. However, the end of the war had reduced the demand for photographs, and after cheap box cameras and roll film became generally available the annual visit to the photographer's was a thing of the past. Charles's father found himself forced to work twelve hours a day in the dark room of a film developing firm, with the result that he frequently became ill. To eke out the family income his mother worked at home on a sewing machine when jobs came her way. With Charles as with Dickens, the abrupt transition from a happy childhood to bitter poverty profoundly affected his psychological development.

The family shared two first-floor rooms in an ancient tenement in Old Montague Street, a long, narrow thoroughfare running parallel with Whitechapel Road. In one room the family lived, washed and ate, Mrs Polsky did her washing and laundry, and the two boys slept on a couch and an ottoman. In the other, which was divided by a curtain, the parents and the two girls slept. Like most buildings in the neighbourhood, the tenement was infested with bugs, whose emergence *en masse* from the walls and ceilings announced that spring had come.

In these surroundings the family practised their ancestral faith. The Sabbath, Passover and other festivals were strictly observed, but in time Charles came to chafe against the rigid taboos surrounding the Sabbath and described it in his memoirs as 'an ordeal of boredom and idleness'.[1] He greatly admired Jesus' saying, 'The Sabbath was made for

man, not man for the Sabbath', which he regarded as marking a revolution in Jewish thought. Yet he never entirely lost his sense of the beauty of the traditional Jewish way of life. When he first read Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' he was reminded of the Sabbath in his family home.

Education and self-education

After the move to Whitechapel, Charles continued his formal education at Old Montague Street Elementary (Boys) School, a large and grim educational factory, now demolished. Like most schoolchildren in the 1920s, he was subjected to much imperialist brainwashing, but this meant little to him. His patriotism owed more to his parents' stories of life in pre-revolutionary Russia and his consciousness that, however much anti-Jewish prejudice there might be in England, at least there were no pogroms and no legal disabilities against Jews as such.

Charles left school in July 1925, before his fourteenth birthday, for the little he could earn was badly needed at home. His first job was as an office boy in Tottenham Court Road, for which he was paid 7s. 6d. a week. When he asked for more money he was sacked. He moved on to the Houndsditch Warehouse, where jobs were much sought after for the children of orthodox Jews, as it closed on the Sabbath and opened on Sundays. In this environment he worked for six days a week from 8am to 8pm until he could stand no more. Over the next year or two he had a succession of such jobs, frequently falling foul of employers and finding the jobs were much the same. Moving into the fur trade, for about three years he was employed in a workshop off Oxford Street, where he learned the craft of a fur nailer, preparing skins to be made up for garments. It was very much a seasonal trade; during the busy season, from Easter to November, the staff worked fourteen or even fifteen hours a day without extra pay; during the slack season, extra workers were sacked and the permanent staff filled in time. After the business closed down, Charles drifted from one workshop to another as jobs became available, some large enough to be called a factory, others tiny back-street workshops.

In what spare time he had, and in his periods of unemployment, he set out to educate himself. Between the wars London offered many educational facilities free or at very low prices. Stepney had an excellent public library service, and although Shakespeare and Dickens remained Charles's literary idols, he developed catholic tastes, including Byron's *Don Juan*, Rabelais, Butler's *Hudibras* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. He indulged his love of Shakespeare at the Old Vic, where for sixpence one could watch from the gallery John Gielgud, Charles Laughton, Edith Evans, Laurence Olivier, Sybil Thorndike or Alec Guinness in the great Shakespearian roles. When unemployed, Charles spent much of his time in galleries and museums, and his love of classical music was kindled when at Circle House, the social and educational centre near Aldgate, he heard a young pianist who called himself Solomon play Beethoven's Piano Sonata No 21 (the Waldstein). He attended evening classes at which he increased his knowledge of English literature and attempted to learn the violin. Another important part of his education was played by the Boy Scout movement. Hiking and camping with the Scouts rescued him from the East End streets and inspired in him a deep love of the English countryside, for which he remained grateful to the movement long after he had rejected its ideology.

Discovering socialism

It was in February 1929, soon after he lost his first job in the fur trade, that, in his father's phrase, he 'discovered socialism'. He and his father, who was also unemployed, were playing draughts to pass the time when a choir of unemployed Welsh miners passed the house, singing for pennies. Moved by the beauty of their singing, Charles threw them one. The incident set him thinking. The miners were in rags, unemployed East End tailors were freezing around empty grates. Why should not the miners dig coal for the tailors and the tailors make clothes for the miners? When he put the idea to his father he learned the answer: the coal and cloth were privately owned, and were produced not for use but for profit. This explanation did not satisfy Charles, who began to consider himself a socialist.

He heard a great deal of discussion of socialism. At Circle House the relative merits of Marxism, anarchism and many other schools of socialist thought, as well as Zionism, were heatedly debated in English and Yiddish over glasses of lemon tea. He included among his friends a number of members of the Young Communist League (YCL), although he found their jargon off-putting. The turning point in his political development was a by-election for the Whitechapel St George's seat held on 3 December 1930. The MacDonald government's White Paper on Palestine, which proposed that immigration should be limited, had offended many Jewish voters, and there was speculation that Barnett Janner, the Liberal candidate and a prominent Zionist, might win the normally safe Labour seat. Out of curiosity Charles attended all four candidates' meetings and found Harry Pollitt, the communist candidate, the most impressive, although he thought his approach to Palestine not very practical. He threw himself enthusiastically into the communists' campaign, although Labour held the seat with a reduced majority and Pollitt lost his deposit.

Charles joined the YCL in 1931, at a time when it was steeped in the ultra-leftism of the 'third period', and the Communist Party in 1933, where he found the atmosphere no different. One aspect of the party's ultra-leftism was its anti-religious propaganda. Charles had been converted to atheism by reading Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, rather ironically, as Paine intended his deist tract as propaganda *against* atheism. With his YCL comrades he once went to Tower Hill to heckle Donald Soper, the Methodist minister, Christian socialist and pacifist who regularly spoke there. When a League of Militant Godless on the Soviet model was formed under the leadership of T A Jackson, Charles was among its founder members. It established contact with its Soviet counterpart, which replied in a letter beginning 'Dear Comrades Militant Godless', and reported that it was engaged in its annual campaign against the celebration of Easter, which supplied the peasants with an excuse for neglecting their work and getting drunk. The British godless discussed whether to launch a similar campaign, but decided against it. The League seems to have been dissolved soon after, presumably because its activities were felt to be incompatible with the new Popular Front policy.

There was always a certain ambivalence in Charles's attitude towards religion. He did not allow his rejection of his parents' beliefs to interfere with his close emotional relationship with them. Christianity he found baffling but fascinating. When he obtained a copy of the New Testament from a Christian mission to the Jews, the missionaries were delighted and his family horrified. Both assumed that he was contemplating conversion to Christianity, but he had acted solely from intellectual curiosity.

One characteristic linking religion and politics in the East End was the Jewish tradition

of debate. A small workshop where Charles sometimes lent a hand was owned by two pious brothers, whose greatest pleasure was to argue over some knotty point of the Mosaic Law. This Jewish trait was not confined to the Orthodox, and in his memoir *Scenes from a Stepney Youth* Charles describes an argument between a barber and a tailor over whether virgin soil constituted a commodity in terms of Marxist economics. Perhaps this tradition explains why Jewish communists were often more interested in the economic and philosophical theory of Marxism than the pragmatic English. With my Protestant background, I referred to communists who believed that any problem could be solved by finding the appropriate text in Marx, Engels, Lenin or Stalin as 'fundamentalists', but to Charles they were 'Talmudists'.

A Whitechapel Poet

Charles wrote a certain amount of verse in the 1930s, though most of it has disappeared. His earliest surviving poem, 'The Whitewash Squad', is dated 1930, and was evidently written during or just after the Whitechapel by-election campaign, when he had helped to paint slogans under cover of darkness.

> We have no money for print, no cash for posters,
> For we are the poor, and what we do is illegal.
> But here is a city deserted, with walls and pavements
> Where people will walk, and they can't avoid reading our message.
>
> So the street or the wall is our canvas, our paint is whitewash,
> Our theme is class conflict, our love is expressed as hatred …

Where external evidence is absent it is difficult to date his poems, but he seems to have continued to write on East End themes for over fifty years. In one of his best poems, 'A Whitechapel Poet to his Muse', which apparently dates from the 1960s or later, he defines his attitude to the East End:

> Let me shout to the world our Whitechapel paradox,
> That it is those who love it the best that hate it the most.

The reason for his love is made clear in 'Stepney in the 1920s', published in 1988:

> Here we were more than a population, we were a community
> Knowing each other well, sharing our troubles.
> If there was little privacy there was less loneliness;
> Few suffered alone; there was plenty of trouble for all.
> But we shared it around in our street as I have seen
> The fortunate man with a fag still left him by Thursday
> Bring it out of the door and pass it around to his fellows,
> Each taking his small fraternal puff.

That sense of living in a community made as important a contribution to his socialism as his anger at the suffering caused by slum housing and unemployment.

Cabbie and firefighter

The Great Depression badly affected the fur trade. Periods of unemployment became longer and more frequent. After the formation of the National Government in 1931,

unemployment pay was savagely cut, and the unemployed were subjected to the humiliations inflicted by the Means Test. Tiring of this life, in 1935 Charles became a taxi-driver. He was fascinated by the traditions of the trade, some centuries old. Later he told me in a letter:

> These [the Thames watermen] were my trade forebears, and it's strange how much of their slang is used in the cab trade today (or yesterday, when I was a cabman …) A cabman, asked if he was busy, would answer 'Well, I've been rowing'. And the doorman of a hotel was still a 'linkman', though they went out with snuffers.

The persecution of the Jews in Germany, the attempts of Mosley's Blackshirts to win support in the East End, and the attacks on Jews that accompanied them outraged Charles's deepest instincts, and in 1936 he took part in the Battle of Cable Street, side-by-side with bearded Chassidim and Irish Catholic dockers. When war broke out he joined the Auxiliary Fire Service, as taxi-drivers were officially encouraged to do, and served through the Blitz. The only reference to his experiences in his surviving poems is in one written long afterwards, 'Carols in Chelsea'. However he wrote some prose sketches of his experiences at the time. One of them, 'Cooling down', was published in *Fire and Water*, an anthology of writings by members of the Fire Service, side-by-side with work by better-known writers such as Stephen Spender. When the Overseas Column of the National Fire Service was formed to accompany the allied invasion forces, Charles volunteered and was accepted. This unit moved ahead of the army, entering captured towns to extinguish fires before the troops arrived. In a poem, 'Nord Ingelheim, April 1945', he contrasts the beauty of the bright sky, the blossoming orchard and the Rhine shining in the sunlight with the ugliness of the dead cows, killed by shellfire and covered with bluebottles, and the other debris of war. He concludes:

> And the sunlight filters bleached through the luminous blossom
> On to abandoned weapons and rusting tins,
> Fouled paper, a burnt-out tank, the gear of the fallen,
> And all the junk and filth of the advance.
>
> But here on the clean-blown hilltop one can see only
> The lying stratum of blossom hiding under the garbage,
> As though God had winked and shrugged his uncaring shoulders
> And like a slut swept all his dirt under his carpet.

The novelist

Charles wrote comparatively little about his war experiences because he was fully occupied with his first and only novel. Fifty years later he described how it happened:

> There was this bloke in our station who slept in the next bunk to me, and he maintained that Britain by virtue of the pacific nature of its people and their willingness to compromise had escaped the long series of violent revolutions that most continental countries had been through, and through reason and law and constitutional practices had evolved through history to the fine state of popular representative democracy that we enjoy in England today. And so we argued for a bit, and then I thought I'd write a book about this, make it a novel. A bit ambitious perhaps.[2]

Nor surprisingly, the novel, which dealt with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, took a long time to write. Charles began work early in the war, writing it in his free periods, which during the Blitz were few and far between. He approached Lawrence & Wishart, who passed the project to a subsidiary, the Progress Publishing Company. When he went overseas he took with him a small notebook containing facts and dates and continued to write in what time he could snatch, using stolen sheets of toilet paper. Each chapter as it was completed was sent to the publishers, who brought it out in 1946 under the title *English Episode*. The jacket was designed by his cousin Abraham Games, who was then an official war artist. An introduction by William Gallacher gave the book the party's blessing, and it was subsequently translated into Polish and Czech. It took him years to get his royalties, but finally he received £400, which made it possible for him to buy a house.

Both the occasion of the book and its title are significant. Following the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935 writers in the British Communist Party produced a considerable number of historical and biographical studies, novels and poems on aspects of the British radical tradition, several of which contained the words 'England' or 'English'. Between 1936 and 1939 the party sought to appeal to national traditions for propaganda purposes, by means of marches of history and historical pageants on English, Scottish or Welsh themes. *English Episode*, which originated late in 1939 or early in 1940, formed part of the same movement. Its main historical source, Hymie Fagan's *Nine Days that Shook England* (1938), was agitprop rather than history. On one point in particular it was misleading. References in a few indictments to a *magna societas* had been translated by some historians as 'great society' or 'great company', and interpreted as evidence that the revolt was organised by a peasant secret society. More recent historians have preferred to translate the phrase as something like the 'big gang', but Fagan made the 'Great Company' virtually a medieval version of the Communist Party, and Charles followed his example:

> a band of men strong and brave, who live but for the day they could see all the lands owned by those who work them; the serfs free and wealthy, the lords crushed and powerless. Who spend their lives in building the might of the poor into a great hammer wherewith to smash their fetters. Aye, and who have their men in every town and many villages, waiting for the word to rise.

This obviously is a highly idealised picture of the Communist Party as Charles would have liked it to be. Other parallels are equally obvious. The pen portrait of Wat Tyler strongly suggests Harry Pollitt:

> He was not young, and a pink skull showed through his thin grizzled hair. A spreading paunch pushed at his jerkin and his face was round, red and jolly, though the years had sagged the muscles somewhat. Yet the eyes were fierce and full of light, and the smile was the smile of confidence and fellowship.

Behind the description of an apprentices' club, I suspect, lie Charles's memories of meetings of the Stepney YCL.

Inevitably *English Episode* contains inaccuracies. The picture of peasant poverty and seigneurial oppression in the earlier chapters is probably exaggerated, especially as they are set in Kent, where there was no serfdom and the powers of the manorial courts were

limited. In the story the rebels are admitted into Maidstone by the townsmen, who throw open the gates, and are welcomed by the mayor and the 'sheriffs of the councils'. In fact Maidstone was never a walled town, and did not acquire a mayor and corporation until 1549. However, in the circumstances in which the book was written, such errors are less surprising than the fact that there are so few of them.

Many aspects of Charles's personality are reflected in the book. His love and knowledge of the countryside are evident in the early chapters, in which there is a sense of a single creative force flowing through human sexuality and all nature, which is reminiscent of D H Lawrence. His feelings as a Jew dictated his sardonic comment on the pogrom of Flemish weavers:

> Nobody seemed to care very much for the Flemings. It was unfortunate for these poor emigrants that there were no Jews in London. For then 'prentices, thieves and rogues who were sacking their houses would have vented their rage on the Jews, and the Flemings would have gone unscathed.

Above all, his class loyalties permeate the book. I once told him, half seriously, that he had written the first English proletarian historical novel. Several Marxists — Leslie Mitchell, Jack Lindsay, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Iris Morley, Montagu Slater, James Barke — wrote historical novels in the 1930s and 1940s, but none of them achieved Charles's complete identification with the poor and oppressed. Some bourgeois characters are treated sympathetically, perhaps because Charles saw them, in party jargon, as 'playing a progressive role'. But the feudalists and their bourgeois collaborators, such as William Walworth, are beyond the pale. Such an approach narrows the scope of the book, but deepens its intensity.

Literary sources are hard to identify with any certainty. Charles had certainly read William Morris's *Dream of John Ball*; he greatly admired Morris, to whom his communism probably owed more than it did to Marx or Lenin. He also knew *Spartacus*, Leslie Mitchell's novel about a slave revolt. There are striking parallels between his picture of feudal oppression and that in *A Tale of Two Cities*. His Great Company suggests the Defarges' secret society; one of his characters, Jack, like Dr Manette, is held in solitary confinement for many years to emerge with his mind impaired; and his wife, Janet, strongly resembles Mme Defarge in her thirst for revenge.

English Episode was Charles's only novel. One on the Civil War which he began in the 1950s was abandoned after he had written a few chapters, and his most cherished project, a novel on the Maccabees, never came to fruition. An earlier East End Jewish Marxist, Isaac Rosenberg, had also planned a verse play on Judas Maccabeus, but this too was never written.

Unity Theatre

For a time after the war, Charles worked in editorial positions on popular educational works, first *Hammerton's Book of Knowledge* and then *Hutchinson's Twentieth Century Encylopaedia*. When all of the editorial staff on the latter were dismissed without notice in December 1948, he returned to the 'relative sanity and security of the cab trade', his opinion of employers lower than ever.

By this time he had received an invitation from Unity Theatre to dramatise *English Episode*. He envisaged his play, which he called *The Word of a King*, as an epic drama

on the grand scale, not unlike Shakespeare's histories. Although the dialogue was in prose, each act opened with a verse chorus modelled on those in *Henry V*, and the play ended with a lament for the dead which, he proudly assured me in a letter, 'will make *King Lear* look like *Charlie's Aunt*'. Unity, however, insisted that it must be drastically shortened. Some of his most cherished plans, such as a hawking scene, were rejected as impossible to stage, and all but one of the choruses were cut. He fought over every proposed alteration, but was usually forced in the end to agree. On the other hand, he welcomed a suggestion that the play should include songs, which a member of the Workers' Musical Association, an authority on medieval music, had offered to set, and a scene of May Day revelry. When the play was finally produced in 1951, at the time of the Festival of Britain, he was ordered after the first night to rewrite the closing scene, on the ground that tragedy was 'defeatist', and therefore reactionary, and to end his play on a more positive note. When he objected he was told that if he refused it would be rewritten for him, and he very reluctantly agreed. The task of persuading him to accept the changes was entrusted to the secretary of the Artistic Direction Committee, Edith, a Jewish widow with a daughter who had escaped to England from Vienna. They spent practically all their spare time together, and in the summer of 1949 they were married at Willesden Registry Office, though to please Charles's mother (his father had died in 1947) they were married again in a synagogue exactly two years later.

Though he was never a Zionist, Charles welcomed the establishment of Israel in 1948. 'I like to think there's one country in the world where I'm as good as the next man, and not just another dirty Jewish bastard', he remarked to me at the time. As a result he found the traumatic events of 1956 — Khrushchev's exposure of Stalin's crimes, the Hungarian uprising, the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt and the Soviet invasion of Hungary — even more painful than I did, partly because he had retained more illusions about Stalin, partly because of the particularly contemptible role played by Israel in the Suez aggression. When I remarked to him, 'It's not a pleasant feeling to be ashamed of both one's country and one's party', he replied bitterly, 'You can be thankful that at least you're not a Jew as well'. In the end he accepted the party line that the Hungarian rising was 'counter-revolutionary', whereas I saw it, rightly or wrongly, as a workers' movement intended to substitute democratic socialism for stalinism. I left the party in 1957, while Charles remained a member, but I could understand his reluctance to break with the party which, as he told me, had given him hope when life seemed hopeless.

Later life

In the 1960s Charles found a new and satisfying outlet for his energy as a popular evening-class lecturer on London History and Appreciation. The knowledge and enthusiasm he brought to the classes made them a great success, and as an offshoot of his interest in the history of London he wrote his first non-fiction book, *Victoria Park: A study in the history of East London*. This was published in 1976 with the help of a grant from the Leverhulme Trust, which enabled him to take time off driving to conduct the necessary research. The book is a serious historical study but never dull. Charles had loved the park ever since his childhood, and communicates something of his affection to the reader. He emphasises the artistic and cultural interests of some Victorian East Enders, who collected surplus cuttings from the park for their own gardens and joined the Victoria Park Ornithological Society, to the surprise of those convinced that 'east of Aldgate Pump people cared for nothing but drink, vice and crime'. Nor does he omit to mention the park's use as a forum for radical orators and a site for mass meetings of strikers.

His next book, *The English Rebels*, was originally commissioned by the Journeyman Press as a popular history of the Peasant's Revolt for its six hundredth anniversary in 1981. By this time Charles was more cautious about the 'Great Company' than he had been in *English Episode*, admitting that 'some historians dismiss it as a romantic invention', while stubbornly maintaining that there was a 'strong possibility' of its existence. Unfortunately, the publishers suggested that the book be expanded to cover English rebels through the ages, and the book did not appear until 1984 and was marred by factual errors. Admirable though it was, Charles had undertaken a task beyond his powers.

His final book, *Scenes from a Stepney Youth*, published in 1988, was by far his best. In it he tells the story of his life up to his YCL days, and paints an unforgettable picture of the East End between the wars. Many sides of his personality appear in it. There is anger and resentment at the poverty, the slum housing, the unemployment and especially at the indignities inflicted on the unemployed by the Means Test. There is affection for his fellow East Enders, and admiration of their warm-hearted generosity and their heroic struggle to keep their self-respect when the state and the economic system conspired to rob them of it. There is a rich Dickensian humour in his depiction of the many odd characters that haunted the East End, the street traders and entertainers, the old men disputing in Yiddish about the correct interpretation of the Torah, the cranks and fanatics on their soap boxes in Victoria Park or Tower Hill. And there is an underlying poetry that comes to the surface, for example, in his description of the *sofar*, copying out the sacred Scrolls of the Law in strict accordance with the ancient traditions of his people.

While working on these books he continued sporadically to write verse, but was almost unique among the poets I have known in underestimating the value of his work, and would not submit his poems to magazines. He also continued lecturing until he was seventy-nine, when he developed cancer. He kept up his reading and writing and his weekly walks in his beloved Epping Forest, where by his own wish his ashes were scattered after his death, which occurred on 30 September 2001. He was active in retired people's organisations, and was proud of the socialist activities of his stepdaughter Sylvia, a Labour councillor and mayor of Waltham Forest. Although he had grown more tolerant of differences of opinion, he never learned to tolerate injustice and cruelty. Just after his eightieth birthday he told Andy Croft, 'When a man stops struggling for what he believes in and believes to be right he might as well give up.' He never gave up. That was his strength.

Charles Hobday

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[1] For this and much of the information concerning Charles's his early life see his *Scenes from a Stepney Youth* (1988).

[2] Cited by Andy Croft, 'Authors take sides: Writers and the Communist Party 1920-56', in Geoff Andrews et al (eds), *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party*, (London: Pluto) 1995, p88.

The League Against Imperialism: British, Irish and Indian connections

> The whisperings of Labour officials suffering from the Communist complex have been supplemented by reports that Scotland Yard is keeping an eye upon the organisation [*the League Against Imperialism*] and that one should consequently be careful before associating with it. Of course Scotland Yard has its eyes upon it. A movement which sets out to unite and strengthen the subject peoples of the world in their struggle against Imperialism is not likely to be overlooked by the Secret Service of the most powerful Empire in the world![1]

The 'League Against Imperialism' (LAI) was originally a loose-based socialist coterie called the 'League Against Oppression in the Colonies'. Its appeal proved widespread and left-wing notables throughout Europe were eager to utilise its full potential. The LAI was an organisation of particular interest to Irish and Indian radicals, and became a vehicle through which connections between the two nationalist movements were established and strengthened. The mutual benefit that this relationship afforded both countries reached its crescendo in the early 1930s. In December 1926 the Government of India reported how the League 'continues to despatch literature dealing with "The Congress of the Oppressed Nations", which is to be held in Brussels… reference has already been made in previous reports to the fact that the League is almost certainly financed from Moscow.'[2] This international conference was held in Brussels in February 1927 and was the catalyst that led to the organisation's reformation. It was given both a snappier name, 'The League Against Imperialism' (LAI), and, according to Fenner Brockway of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a precise objective:

> To create a two-fold unity: first, between the organisations representing the subject races of the world; second, between such organisations and sympathetic movements in the Imperialist countries. The object was to bring about world solidarity in the struggle against Imperialism.[3]

The idea of staging a congress in Europe at which colonial nationalists could meet with western sympathisers was first suggested by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). It may have been instigated after the Comintern had commented unfavourably on the CPGB's progress, or lack thereof, in 1924. It highlighted its neglect of colonial work and instructed it to establish 'very close contact' with the nationalist forces in the British Empire. The CPGB established a Colonial Committee in 1925 under Clemens Dutt's leadership and began to probe for contacts in India, Palestine, China, Egypt and Ireland.[4] The setting up of an international congress, however, was actually carried through by Willi Münzenberg, general secretary of the Workers' International Relief and chief propagandist for the Comintern.[5] From the outset there was evidence of widespread suspicion in relation to this newly formed group. Before securing Brussels as a venue for the first International Congress the intention was for it to be held in Berlin. This would have been a most suitable and convenient location as it was Münzenberg's base, but the Weimar Republic refused permission. Then Paris was suggested. Needless to say the French authorities refused, fearful of reaction in their own colonies.[6] A key concern of these European states was the extent of Soviet direction of the LAI. Jean Jones has stated that Soviet Russia's initial reaction was one of scepticism towards the League, as they did not take kindly to Münzenberg's methods of recruiting broad-based support for communist causes.[7] Such doubts, however, began to wane as leading intellectual and political figures were seen to affiliate themselves

with the organisation, most importantly Jawaharlal Nehru but also Professor Albert Einstein, French writer Henri Barbusse and the American novelist Upton Sinclair. The appointment of a British delegation to the Brussels meeting was organised by Reginald Bridgeman, a Labour Party member and ex-diplomat of aristocratic roots.[8] It is perhaps because such a diverse range of participants, many with no communist affiliations, accompanied the LAI's initial introduction to the world stage, that its actual communist origins were to remain, at least publicly, in doubt.[9] The League was essentially established by two prominent communists who were in regular contact with Moscow: Münzenberg, as already mentioned, and the LAI General Secretary, Virendra Chattopadhyaya who was established in Berlin as a spokesperson for Indian Communists. The British authorities were baffled as to how they had managed to '[enlist] the sympathies of some prominent pacifist writers and men of learning.'[10] What they failed to realise was that this organisation provided a much needed service, namely the opportunity for anti-imperialists of a variety of political backgrounds and from around the world to meet and exchange ideas. The potency that this attraction had — at the expense, it might be argued, of winning communist converts — was an unintended by-product not foreseen by either the League's creators or detractors.

The Irish representatives at this Congress were Frank Ryan and Donal O'Donoghue, and upon their return to Ireland they took part in the formation of an Irish LAI 'section'. The first reference to an LAI-inspired anti-imperialist demonstration in Ireland can be found in a Garda (Police) report from 20 August 1928.[11] The meeting, around 600 strong, which assembled in Foster Place, Dublin, does not appear to have been very well organised. The main activity was centred on the burning of several Union Jack flags. On Westmoreland Street, the windows of premises flying the Union Jack were broken and several arrests were made. At this stage it seems, taking into account both the evidence from the archives and from contemporary press reports, the group responsible were seen as little more than an offshoot group of radical republicans whose concerns were primarily restricted to Irish affairs. The possibility of it developing significant international connections, communist or otherwise, in the fight against imperialism was not a concern. By October, with the help of Sean MacBride further meetings were organised of a more civilised nature. A meeting was held in the Mansion House on 5 October; a Garda report estimates the attendance at around 2000. Attendance swelled again the following month when Foster Place catered for nearly 3000 people at a meeting addressed by John Mitchell, Mrs Brugha, and Alec Lynn amongst others. The LAI in Ireland was taking shape.

In London in 1921, a new state-run surveillance and monitoring agency — Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) — had been established, in reaction the development of Indian anarchist activities in England since the turn of the century. IPI was run jointly by the India Office and the Government of India. UK, European and American operations were run by IPI in London. IPI reported to the Secretary of the Public and Judicial Department of the India Office, and the Director of Intelligence Bureau (DIB) in India and maintained close contact with Scotland Yard and MI5. One of IPI's main concerns in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s was the LAI. Its members, contacts and activities were all monitored closely. Unlike the Irish authorities who were concerned with the immediate danger of anti-imperialist meetings and their potential to incite public disorder, the IPI's agents concerned themselves with the League's communist and subversive affiliations. As far as the IPI were concerned:

> the main objects of the League are to foment trouble and discord in the foreign possessions of the Colonial powers and to exploit unrest in the

> interests of Moscow. The League has addressed itself persistently to the exacerbation of feeling in India.[12]

Within a year of the formation of the LAI the India Office realised that pragmatic action of some sort was needed to counteract the success the League had had in gaining international support. As a result of liaising with Scotland Yard, the IPI and various other departments, it was decided that measures were to be taken to prevent, if possible, the granting of Empire-wide travel permits to known LAI members.[13] This was by no means an easy task to carry out, as IPI explained to R T Peel of the India Office in December 1927:

> membership of the League is rather nebulous. Except perhaps in certain countries, members of the League do not appear to pay subscriptions, but likely persons are 'roped in' on occasions when they are of use, and in this way become members… it is therefore difficult to compile a complete and accurate list… We do, however, know the names of the various office-bearers of the League, but this again presents a difficulty, because a number of them are Socialist MPs.[14]

It was finally decided that instead of black listing the entire known membership of the League, a narrower list would be drawn up of persons (other than Indians) who were consistently active in the LAI. It contained the names of those the authorities considered:

> the more dangerous persons in the League… IPI suggest(ed) that the Home Office should be asked to ensure that no visa for India (be) granted to any of (these people) without previous reference to (IPI).

After consultation with Scotland Yard, IPI were in a position to submit further names of both 'Britishers and Aliens who appear to constitute the main figures other than Indians connected with the League's activities'. It contains some intriguing additions. Three of those newly named were stated as being nationals of the Irish Free State, regarding whom Scotland Yard wrote as follows:

> As regards Landon, McBennett and O'Donoghue, these people are subjects of the Irish Free State. Landon and McBennett are believed to be aliases, since it is known that in addition to O'Donoghue one Peadar O'Donnell and a certain Frank Ryan attended the Conference of the League Against Imperialism which was held in Brussels in December last. O'Donnell is a member of the IRA Executive Council and is Editor of the Republican weekly newspaper An Phoblacht. Ryan, who is a student, is also attached to the IRA GHQ as Inspector Officer. O'Donoghue is assistant to O'Donnell on the staff of An Phoblacht and is 'Vice O/C [*Officer Commanding*] Dublin Brigade', IRA [*Irish Republican Army*].

Previously our attention has only been drawn briefly to IRA attendance at the LAI World Congresses in February 1927 and July 1929 in the shape of those mentioned above as well as Sean MacBride.[15] The meeting referred to in the extract by Scotland Yard, however, was an executive council (EC) meeting of the LAI held in Brussels in December 1927. That O'Donnell, Ryan and O'Donoghue were also in attendance at a gathering of this calibre, and possibly other EC meetings implies that they contributed more to the LAI than was previously realised. Yet their inclusion on the list is of interest

for another reason, one that demonstrates how the LAI was providing the British authorities with far-reaching and unforeseen problems. Even before the infamous External Relations Act of 1937, and even amongst the higher echelons of the British administration, misunderstandings prevailed about the exact legalities of Irish citizenship in relation to Britain and the Empire. The Scotland Yard report suggested that the:

> alternative would be to ask the Free State Government to cancel their British Commonwealth endorsement. This is a matter of some delicacy and one which we feel should, if possible be avoided… It frequently happens that Free State subjects turn up abroad with a Free State passport and ask to have it made available for certain countries. The Consul invariably replies that he cannot make an entry on a Free State passport, but that if the subjects care to have a British passport he would be quite ready to issue one with the necessary endorsement.

Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain was opposed to the idea of treating all members of the League as communists, yet was prepared to agree to the refusal of endorsements for India to all persons whom the Home Office considered dangerous. He did not consider this to be any significant change of existing policy and — it was reported — went on to express his irritation at:

> being asked to do what is really the business of the Indian Government to do in India. He considers that India should refuse admittance, as all other countries do, to those whom she objects to receive.

The Second World Congress of the League Against Imperialism again hoped to meet in Paris but instead opened in Frankfurt-on-Main on 21 July 1929. A good example of the League's growth in popularity as well as the enthusiasm of its organisers was the proposal to hold a Youth Congress to coincide with the Second World Congress.[16] An *Anti-Imperialist Youth Bulletin*, published by the Youth Section of the British LAI, soon appeared. Amongst other publications produced by the LAI in Britain — held in the files of the Dublin Department of Justice — were *Indian Front* and *Irish Front*; both edited by Ben Bradley, then secretary of the LAI British Section.[17] *Irish Front* contained contributions from members of the 'Republican Congress' movement based in London, such as Tommy Paton; and those affiliated with *The Irish Worker's Voice*. Produced several years later in the LAI's life, in the mid 1930s, these publications are more explicitly communist in outlook, and demonstrate how the CPGB continued to use anti-imperialist organisations as conduits for the party's own propaganda.

By 1929, LAI sections had been established in many non-European countries including Mexico, Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba and South Africa, and the surveillance of any form of Indo-Irish collaboration within the LAI had stepped up a gear. Correspondence between the LAI's branches in London and Berlin was being intercepted. A Garda report records that MacBride attended the Frankfurt gathering as an 'Irish Communist Delegate.'[18] Irish questions were dealt with at a morning sitting of the congress in which O'Donnell presented the general outline of the Irish Freedom Movement. MacBride, who extended attacks on the British Labour Party, is noted as having remarked how no British delegate had been present during the discussion of the Irish questions. However preoccupied the British delegates were with their own troubles,[19] the Irish had avid listeners in the shape of those Indians present. After O'Donnell's talk, Hassan Mirza, an Indian activist in Europe who was suspected of

arms smuggling by IPI, added: 'The defeat of the Irish Freedom Movement would be a lesson to the Indians not to place their trust in the "bourgeois leaders".'[20] This Second World Congress saw more involvement from the Russian delegates and it became apparent that a new Comintern policy was in effect, to reverse the previous policy of tolerance towards the non-Communist left and colonial nationalist movements.[21] It was also at this conference that a few new appointees were unveiled, most notably Shapurji Saklatvala, the London based Indian CPGB member who was MP for Battersea in 1922 and again from 1924 until 1929. This new direction however was not exactly welcomed with open arms. There is evidence that Münzenberg made some attempts to block it, and thought it necessary to solicit the help of figures not long ago considered favourable. In a letter intercepted by the British authorities from the American LAI member Roger Baldwin to Jawaharlal Nehru, he states his belief that:

> Münzenberg's stand for a real united League (Against Imperialism), rather than the agent of Moscow which the League pretty nearly became as a result of the Frankfurt Congress, would be greatly helped by letters from influential persons such as yourself.[22]

However, by 1931 many of the prominent figures whose support had been warmly welcomed in Brussels and who had substantiated the LAI's claim to be open to all individuals and organisations supporting the anti-imperialist struggle, had either resigned or been expelled. This included Nehru, who in April 1930 in his capacity as President of the Indian National Congress directed it to cease all correspondence with the LAI.[23]

By late 1929, after the Second World Congress, the LAI Dublin meetings had acquired a more international tone. On 10 November 1929 at a gathering in Findlater Place, organised by Frank Ryan and Maude Gonne MacBride, two resolutions were put to the people:

> To pledge themselves to resist by every means in their power any display of Imperialism and to agitate for the release of the political prisoners and secondly to have the Imperial troops withdrawn from India, Egypt and other oppressed colonies.[24]

The radical press covered the growth of the LAI in Ireland with great zeal. Articles began to emerge containing detailed histories of other countries under imperialist rule, most notably India. At this time, in one of *An Phoblacht*'s many articles covering these meetings, they tell us how they had reason to believe that the British authorities in India were forbidding the import of Terence MacSwiney's book *Principles of Freedom* as well as Dan Breen's *My Fight For Irish Freedom*.[25] September 1930 was a busy month in Ireland for those affiliated with the anti-imperialist movement. 'Thousands of Republicans' we are told in *An Phoblacht*, 'attended a *Monster Aeridheacht Mor* on the slopes of Lough Leane, near Collinstown West Meath last Sunday (13 September 1930) to meet the Indian Nationalist, Rainzi.'[26] He brought greetings 'from 350 million of his countrymen who were engaged in a life or death struggle to free, not only India, but… to help liberate the other down trodden nations of the world.' This was a prelude of sorts to the main event about two weeks later. On 24 September an LAI meeting was held in the Mansion House. The focal point of this meeting was events in India. Several Indian representatives were there and over 1200 people attended. A Garda report tells us how 'members of the Irregular organisation acted as stewards inside the house and included Michael Price, J.J. McConnell, Joseph Burke, Michael Kelly and Thomas O'Brien.'[27]

There were nine speakers in total and on the platform were four men and one woman of Indian nationality, who accompanied Krishna Deonarini,[28] the Indian Representative of the LAI and the main guest speaker. Sean MacBride was the chairperson and the Irish speakers included Peader O'Donnell, Peader O'Maille, Mrs Sheehy Skeffington, Alex Lynn, Helena Maloney and Jim Larkin Jr. A long and aggressive resolution was first proposed:

> That this mass meeting of Dublin Citizens declares the solidarity of Republican Ireland with the Indian masses in their struggle against British Imperialism and its Indian allies. We would urge on our Indian comrades the lesson of the betrayed Irish Revolution and would appeal to them to guard against the dangers that halted our struggle. […] We call on the labouring masses of the Irish race to recognise that Imperial Britain and revolutionary India are at war, and that the loyalty of revolutionary Ireland is to the enemy of Imperial Britain.[29]

An Phoblacht attempts to impress upon its readership a sense of great historical significance to this Indo-Irish collaboration when it states that:

> Not since before the 'Treaty' was signed has that historic venue seen so large or fervent a gathering… the Round Room was packed until not even standing room was available, while an enthusiastic overflow meeting took place on the street outside.[30]

The meeting was concluded by Frank Ryan who read over the motion that was passed with three cheers for India and then three more for the Workers Revolutionary Party of Ireland. The Red Flag was then sung as the crowd stood to attention.[31] Rienzi went on to attend another rally the following week in Cork and his visit appears to have been a great success. The Garda report informs us that Rienzi, who the IPI noted the following year was trying to gain admission to Trinity College Dublin (TCD), was accompanied by Madame Charlotte Despard.[32] She played a major part in arranging his visit. Although by this time quite elderly and not an active member of the LAI in London she was however affiliated with another group there that was under the watchful eyes of the IPI; The Independence of India League (IOIL). One time suffragette and friend of Stafford Cripps and other British socialists leaders, and the sister of Lord French, viceroy of Ireland from 1918 to 1921, Charlotte Despard was involved in the 'Release the Prisoners Campaign' with Maude Gonne MacBride, Helena Maloney and Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, who all became involved in the LAI Irish Section. Her house in Eccles Street was being used as a workers' college by the left-wing IRA and was also the headquarters of the Irish section of the Friends of Soviet Russia.[33] Through her membership of the IOIL, and friendship with Vithalbhai Patel,[34] she had many Indian contacts in London and was actively involved in Indian nationalist campaigns there. At a 'Friends of India Conference' held in Tottenham Court Road in June 1932 those in attendance welcomed her presence describing it as a 'happy augury since she had been many times associated in championing lost causes… which had ultimately turned out to be victorious issues.'

Around this time also IPI became aware of another intriguing Indo-Irish connection in London. They were tracing the steps of one Philip Rupasangha Gunawardena who had arrived in England from America around 1929.[35] Born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) he was a member of the 'Cosmopolitan Crew', an anti-Government political association there. Upon arrival in England it did not take long for him to meet with other Indian

activists. He joined the Indian Freedom League (IFL) and made regular speeches at their meetings in Hyde Park, and through it soon joined the LAI. He made regular trips to Berlin to carry out work connected with the LAI and was considered by IPI to be an active communist agent of the organisation and was therefore regarded as quite dangerous. It was noted with particular attention that on 16 November 1931 Gunawardena met with one Captain J White 'who has recently been in London associating with known extremists, having come from Ireland by appointment at… the office of the LAI'. Captain Jack White was a founder of Connolly's Citizen Army and leading figure of the 1913 Dublin lockout. By the 1930s, White was liaising with left-wing notables in Dublin like Sheehy Skeffington.

The following year IPI suggested that Gunawardena's passport should not be renewed so that his movement around the continent be hindered. They held out hope that he would return to Ceylon for a trip and — denied a passport renewal — would be unable to return. However this became doubtful after they were informed that he had been given a letter of introduction to Dan Breen to use in connection with another visit which he contemplated paying to Ireland.

The thirties saw the LAI's decline towards its eventual demise in 1937. The consolidation of Nazi power in 1933 finally forced Münzenberg's LAI International Secretariat to flee to Paris, where it remained for a few months until finally moving to London in November.[36] Reginald Bridgeman took control of the organisation there, which by this stage had a severely reduced membership encompassing mainly communists and other far left activists. The Comintern's change of policy was a success — insofar as the LAI no longer had the affiliation of those influential non-communist anti-imperialist thinkers from around the world. Figures such as Nehru, who could have helped the group become a legitimate international lobby for those who were genuinely suffering under imperialist rule in the colonies, now stood estranged from the LAI. Throughout 1934, Bridgeman, with increased help from Indians like Saklatvala, made vigorous attempts to keep the organisation going, and the Secretariat met eleven times.[37] Existing Irish LAI activists stepped up their efforts; linking their anti-imperialist actions to work around the Republican Congress movement in Dublin. O'Donnell was again present at a conference held that year on Blackfriars Road in London. The speakers were to include 'Conrad Noel, Alex Gossip, Harry Pollitt, S. Saklatvala, Ben Bradley (one of the Meerut prisoners) R. Bridgeman, and fraternal delegates form Ireland, India, China, Palestine (Arabs) and Cyprus.'[38] The two countries that featured most heavily on the agenda were Ireland and India with the Sunday sitting devoted to talks on 'The struggle of the Indian Workers and Peasants', followed by 'Ireland and the National Fight for Liberation'. A Scotland Yard report detailed the event and O'Donnell's speech, in which he said that:

> the Irish Republican Congress came into being, not only to combat British Imperialism, but to fight against local imperialists and autocrats. Ireland was now governed more or less on fascist lines. O'Donnell, who criticised Mr. de Valera and his Government at some length, suggested that an anti-Imperialist congress should be held in Dublin next year. This resolution was seconded by the chairman of the Dublin District Committee of the Congress, and was supported by a woman.[39]

As seen earlier, Irish radicals had their regular trips to London and the continent reciprocated by the LAI. However it was primarily Indians based in London, as opposed to the British themselves, who were keen to advance relations with the Irish. One such

trip paid in 1934 is noteworthy. Early that year a new Indian political group, the Indian Independence League (IIL), was formed — comprised of Indian activists, most of whom were already LAI members — with Saklatvala and Rienzi at the helm. At an IIL meeting held on 27 September 1934 it was agreed to send delegates to the Irish Republican Congress which was to take place in Dublin later that week. Saklatvala was elected as a delegate from the London Branch of the Indian National Congress. He then informed the meeting that 'a man named Connolly and his sister, were influential members of the congress and were interested in India and the group should get into communication with them'. Scotland Yard were being kept up to date on the Republican Congress movement. A brief file note recorded that:

> The Irish Republican Congress is being called by a group of men and women who broke away from the IRA in April 1934. The 'Connolly and sister' reference made by Saklatvala are Roderick and Nora Connolly O'Brien, son and daughter of James Connolly who was executed because of his activities in the Easter week 1916 rebellion.

At the 1934 IRA army convention there occurred a split involving the secession of the left wing. Amongst them was O'Donnell who proposed a resolution that the IRA should mobilise a united front called the 'Republican Congress' that would campaign to wrest the leadership of the national struggle from the forces of Irish capitalism. What became of Republican Congress (recorded at length elsewhere) was helped greatly by one of the characteristics that it had adopted inadvertently from the IRA — the propensity towards schism. A devastatingly balanced split occurred at its very first meeting, which which Saklatvala and his co-delegate Yajnik were planning to attend. It is possible that O'Donnell's involvement in the LAI had quite an influence on Republican Congress. Doubtless his many trips and attendances at varying LAI conferences and EC meetings since 1927 provided a crash-course education in international networking and anti-imperialist mobilisation. It appears that the earlier LAI model of an anti-imperialist 'umbrella' organisation — as opposed to the strictly communist one of its later years — appealed to O'Donnell. In fact the following quote, concerning the Republican Congress, cold easily be used in relation to the early LAI: '(O'Donnell) did not aim to build a socialist organisation, but a republican, anti-imperialist one, in which workers, socialists, and the labour movement would be in the lead'.[40]

Both Saklatvala and Yajnik did attend the celebrated Republican Congress meeting in Rathmines Hall. Interestingly, considering that the meeting had had such a negative outcome for Republican Congress itself, Saklatvala was most enthusiastic upon his return to London. He met with Bridgeman and Bradley to discuss the meeting. He informed them that the leading members of the Irish Republican movement were very sympathetically inclined towards the ideal of an India completely free from British rule and influence, and that six Irish republicans had promised to attend an upcoming Indian Political Conference.[41] He apparently considered his trip most worthwhile, and it proved to be a useful excursion for another unexpected reason. A few months later in December 1934, Saklatvala was thinking of finding an alternative venue for the IIL meetings — his motive being to discard certain undesirable members in a subtle fashion. IPI reported him as having said that he had it 'on good authority' that Yajnik was in fact:

> either an India Office or Police Agent. He added that Yajnik was practically driven out of the Irish Republican Congress and that but for him delegates from the (Irish) Congress Party would have attended the last Indian Political Conference. [42]

He would not however bar Yajnik from attending any meetings as such action might give rise to a 'spy scare' and keep other Indians away. It seems that Congress members were wary of Yajnik, unfortunately for what reason is not made clear. It also is not apparent from the IPI files whether Saklatvala's concerns in relation to Yajnik in particular were accurate. One thing was certain, that someone from the higher echelons of the LAI British section was an agent who provided the authorities with accurate and up-to-date reports on a weekly basis.

Information gathering from within the LAI structures was a vital source for IPI and Scotland Yard. It not only shed light on the nature of this ostensibly communist organisation and the apparent threat that it posed to law and order in the colonies, but also led to the authorities becoming more aware of less easily discernable radical contacts that had been established in the shape of Indo-Irish collaboration. Further investigation would demonstrate that such connections did not stop with the LAI.

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This article is based on continuing doctoral research into Irish and Indian radical interconnections in the inter-war years, and the effects that this had on the British Empire.

Notes

[1] *The New Leader* 26 August 1927, extract from an article by Fenner Brockway.

[2] British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, India Office Records [hereafter BL OIOC IOR], L/P&J/12/226. See also L/P&J/12/27. According to Reginald Bridgeman, the secretary of the British section of the League, by 1931 there were 17000 members in India with representatives in every province.

[3] BL OIOC IOR, L/P&J/12/267.

[4] John Callaghan, 'The Heart of Darkness: Rajani Palme Dutt and the British Empire – A Profile', in *Contemporary Record*, Vol. 5 No. 2, (1991) p262.

[5] Jean Jones, 'The League Against Imperialism', *The Socialist History Society Occasional Paper Series*, No. 4 (London, 1996) p4.

[6] B Gross, *Willie Münzenberg: A Political Biography* (Michigan, 1974) p185.

[7] Jones, p6.

[8] Ibid, p7.

[9] Many of the Labour Party members were to reach a crisis of conflict with regard to LAI membership. The Labour and Socialist International (LSI) opposed membership to the LAI believing it to be a communist front body whose ultimate aim was to discredit the Second International whilst promoting the spread of communist ideas in the colonies. Matters came to a head in 1927 when British Labour Party members George Lansbury and Fenner Brockway had to choose between the LAI and their party. They both chose the latter. Brockway had earnestly maintained that the LSI's suspicions in relation to the LAI were unjustified. See *The New Leader*, various articles throughout 1927.

[10] Public Records Office [hereafter PRO] KV2/772.

[11] National Archives of Ireland [hereafter NAI] Department of Justice [hereafter JUS] 8/682.

[12] BL OIOC IOR, L/P&J/277.

[13] BL OIOC IOR, L/P&J/268, following extracts until otherwise stated taken from same.

[14] The MPs who were declared LAI members and were finally named on the revised list submitted to the India Office by the IPI in 1928 were James Maxton, John Beckett, Ellen Wilkinson and Col C E Malone.

However, Wilkinson and Malone, like Brockway and Lansbury before them, had already resigned their membership of the LAI in late 1927 after the LSI had rejected any form of affiliation with it.

[15] For some examples see Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (London, 1995), Sean Cronin, *Frank Ryan: The Search for the Republic* (Dublin, 1980), Donal O'Drisceoil, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Cork, 2001) and Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 1984).

[16] BL OIOC IOR, L/P&J/12//385.

[17] See Jean Jones, 'Ben Bradley. Fighter for India's Freedom', *The Socialist History Society Occasional Paper Series*, No. 1 (London, 1994).

[18] NAI JUS 8/682.

[19] Speeches at the Congress primarily consisted of assaults on the British Labour Party, or more specifically James Maxton, by CPGB and Russian delegates furious with the British Labour Government's colonial policy.

[20] NAI JUS 8/682.

[21] Jones, p13.

[22] PRO KV2/772.

[23] Jones, p16.

[24] NAI JUS 8/682.

[25] *An Phoblacht*, 30 November 1929, p2.

[26] *An Phoblacht*, 13 September 1930, p1. The actual spelling of this name is 'Rienzi' and his full name was Adrian Kola Rienzi, a native of Trinidad of Indian parentage. He was also known as Krishna Deonarine. He was affiliated to the LAI British section in the early 1930s. An article in An Phoblacht on the 27 January 1934, tells us how he became an appointed trustee of the Vithalbhai Patel fund for foreign propaganda on behalf of the Indian Nationalist Movement. He attempted to establish Indian newspapers in London, Dublin and New York, see also BL OIOC IOR, L/P&J/12372.

[27] NAI JUS, 8/682.

[28] Actual spelling 'Deonarine', as mentioned Deonarine and Rienzi are one and the same person.

[29] *An Phoblacht*, 4 October 1930, p3. This entire issue of An Phoblacht was devoted to Indian affairs. The front page is covered with illustrations depicting the 'Imperialist Terror in India' and through out its pages are articles detailing the lives of prominent Indian Nationalists and their fight against British rule.

[30] Ibid.

[31] NAI JUS, 8/682.

[32] BL OIOC IOR, L/P&J/12/270.

[33] Coogan, p76.

[34] Patel was founder of the 'Indo-Irish League'.

[35] BL OIOC IOR, L/P&J/12/409. All following quotes until otherwise stated taken from same.

[36] Jones, p31.

[37] Ibid.

[38] BL OIOC IOR, L/P&J/12/274. All following quotes until otherwise stated taken from same.

[39] The man was Ryan and the woman was possibly Despard. The only references to this proposed Irish Congress that I have found is a file contained in the NAI Department of Foreign Affairs titled 'World Congress of the LAI in Dublin, June 1935' which is unfortunately restricted.

[40] Richard English, *Radicals and the Republic* (Oxford, 1994) p230.

[41] BL OIOC IOR, L/P&J/12/274.

[42] Ibid. Apparently the six Irish Republicans who had committed themselves to attending the meeting did not show.

REVIEWS

James Eaden and David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain Since 1920*, (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2002) ISBN 0-333-94968-4, £45 (hardback).

The authors of this — the fourth single volume history of the British Communist Party to have appeared since the CPGB's dissolution in 1991 — can legitimately claim to offer a different perspective on the life and work of the party than any of their three immediate predecessors. As trotskyist historians, Eaden and Renton offer what they describe as 'a committed socialist history of the party, sympathetic to the views of the founders, critical of the husk that the Communist Party became.' (pxvi) Yet while this account of the CPGB's loss of 'revolutionary' intent makes use of a fairly orthodox trotskyist model, this is far from being a narrowly didactic narrative — it eschews both the insistent accusatory tone of Pearce and Woodhouse, and the 'programmatic' critique of the erstwhile *Newsline* CPGB historian Alex Mitchell.[1]

Rather this is a history which treats the agency of the CPGB seriously; that is willing to acknowledge what are seen as the party's successes; and that is sufficient aware of the debates within contemporary communist historiography to offer its own critique of the 'new revisionist' as well as the earlier 'heroic' treatments of the party. Indeed, the authors' interest in documenting the CPGB's 'merits' alongside its 'defects' will doubtless draw criticism from more 'orthodox' trotskyist analysts of 'British Stalinism'. Despite the occasional factual — and more frequent typographical — error, this is a scholarly work of an entirely different calibre to the most recent one-volume history of the party by Laybourn and Murphy.[2]

It is, however, also a study with a pronounced set of priorities. From the discussion of the formation of the party, in the explosive aftermath of Red October, to its disintegration, in the wake of the CPSU's own demise, the authors concentrate their attention on what they consider the decisive aspects of the Communist Party's political life: the CPGB's industrial work; its relationship to other currents with the labour movement; its position relative to the Labour Party; and its perennial conflicts with rivals on the British far left. There are short discussions on aspects of party culture; of branch life, and of the work of CPGB writers, historians and theoreticians — but these appear as secondary concerns. There is scant coverage of the party's often-troubled engagement with the politics of feminism; and little appreciation of the changing position of women within the party. Treatment of the issue of race is subsumed within coverage of the party's anti-fascist work — although the CPGB's 'anti-colonial' activities are briefly addressed. Yet it is inevitable that concise histories offer selective coverage of their subject; and here the book's priorities reflect the authors' desire to scrutinise the agency of the CPGB through the prism of its traditional left critics.

The party is credited for its street-level anti-fascist work; involvement with the London squatting movement; support for the International Brigades; the mobilisation of the National Unemployed Workers Movement; the Kinder Scout trespass; the ambitions of the *Daily Worker* and more besides. Yet, corrupted by the 'sectarianism' of the Third Period; the 'collaborationism' of the Popular Front era; and occasional patriotic seizures, the ossification of the party's revolutionary vigour is seen as complete by the close of the War. In this history, there is little to celebrate after 1945.

Perhaps the strongest element of the book is its attempt to characterise the position of communists in the workplace. Eaden and Renton capture — in ways which have often eluded the party's trotskyist critics — many of the competing pressures and pulls of allegiance which communist militants on the shopfloor had somehow to reconcile. They describe convincingly the strained relationship which sometimes existed between factory branches and the party hierarchy; and attempt to unpack common conceptions of the CPGB's industrial 'reach'. There is still trenchant criticism of the caution and conservatism of the party's leading trade unionists, but there is recognition too that King Street's ability to 'instruct' its members on industrial questions was circumscribed for a whole range of reasons. There are also cogent discussions of the party's understanding of the role of the shop steward layer and of Communist Party's support for productivity drives in 'critical' economic times.

Throughout the text the authors make efforts to provide a 'populated', and not simply an institutional, history of the party — offering thumbnail sketches of party leaders and activists at all levels; and integrating original oral-testimony from party members gathered during an earlier period of research. Prudent use is made of materials from the official party archive, although this research is based principally on the existing secondary literature (much of which is drawn from the pages of Socialist Worker Party journals; or the work of SWP authors); integrated with extracts from the CPGB's own press.

Although all historians of the British party struggle with the same explanatory synthesis, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain the authors' view of the importance that should be afforded to the 'Soviet dimension' in understanding the party's 'degeneration'. Sometimes the *diktats* of the Kremlin are seen as wholly culpable; at other times it is the CPGB's own reluctance to 'seize the moment' that condemns it. There is an uncertainty here over the degree of the Communist Party's autonomy that this model affords — and about the interplay between 'inevitability' and 'subjectivity' that the authors see at work in the CPGB's departure from the revolutionary road. It is also notable, given the importance that Eaden and Renton place on the *international* determination of the CPGB's politics, that British trotskyism is here depicted as emerging in reaction to the *domestic* labour movement failures of the CPGB.

The counter-factuals on offer here are familiar ones — that the CPGB should have renounced reformism and embraced the 'politics of revolution'; resisted co-option into the bureaucracy of the labour movement and encouraged rank-and-file activism; and embraced the industrial and not the electoral route to socialist advance. It is through such rejoinders that this account reveals its own most orthodox face. It is perhaps not too surprising that the authors' political history of the British far-left outside the CPGB is less critical. Some readers may struggle to recognise the rather benign and selfless image of the International Socialists (IS) and SWP which emerges in fragments here — unsullied by any of the political or bureaucratic shortcomings for which the CPGB is condemned; unflinching in its defence of 'revolutionary' principle; and uniquely gifted with strategic foresight.

What this adds to the literature is a clear and, in the main, well reasoned general history of the party, summarising a sharp trotskyist case against the CPGB in a clear and accessible way. With so much contemporary writing on the British party now taking a cultural, biographical or literary approach, it is important that there are also studies which continue to take seriously the question of the CPGB's status as a political agency 'for socialism'.

Given the structure and format of the book, the publishers appear to hope that Eaden and Renton's work will become an approved teaching text for students of the British left. Few tutors could object to its inclusion on module reading lists — even those who would draft rather different lists of the 'lost opportunities' of British communism from those presented here.

Richard Cross

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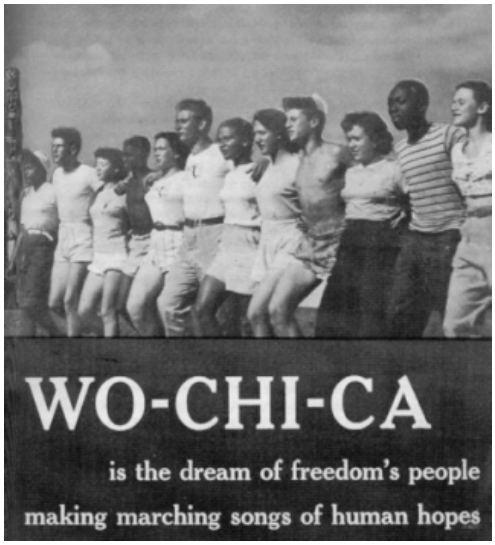
[1] See Brian Pearce and Michael Woodhouse, *A History of Communism in Britain*, (London: Bookmarks) 1995 [originally published 1969]. For Mitchell's work, see, for example: Alex Mitchell, *Behind the Crisis in British Stalinism*, (London: New Park) 1984.

[2] Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy, *Under the Red Flag: A History of Communism in Britain*, (Stroud: Sutton) 1999.

June Levine and Gene Gordon, *Tales of Wo-Chi-Ca: Blacks, Whites and Reds at Camp*, San Rafael (California), Avon Springs Press, 2002, ISBN 0-9717435-0-9.

On one level, this book is straightforward to describe. It's mainly a collection of reminiscences collected recently from Americans who spent part of their childhood summer vacations at a camp called Wo-Chi-Ca, woven around an account of the camp's history.

Though its name, perhaps consciously, suggested a 'Red Indian' chant, it actually stood for Workers Children's Camp, and it was primarily run through the International Workers Order (IWO) — a relatively broad organisation, linked to the Communist Party of the USA, which was a central vehicle for Popular Front politics in the States. The camp ran from 1934 to the early fifties, on the site of a farm bought by the IWO at the height of the depression in rural New Jersey, south of New York. Every summer, hundreds of city children came out to spend time — a week or two, sometimes a whole vacation — living together in simple wooden huts or under canvas, sharing the chores, taking part in sports and concerts, and joining in political discussions.



The letters and e-mails collated by the enthusiastic authors of this book show that a remarkable, enjoyable and progressive culture was developed and nurtured by Wo-Chi-Ca. The whole book is full of memories of happy days, challenging and confidence-building activities, and good friendships between children from different racial groups. There are stories, too, about the hardly-paid staff and dedicated volunteers who ran the camp, recounting how these young adults were an inspiration to the children, both for their skills in sport, or dance, or art, and through their style in relating to the children and to each other. Many contributors also reminisce about celebrated visitors to the camp, amongst whom Paul Robeson was most prominent. The singer visited every year from 1940 until shortly before the camp's

demise, and raised money towards a purpose-built recreation hall on site.

All these positive stories, page after page, chapter after chapter, build up a strong sense of how much the contributors got out of their Wo-Chi-Ca days. Scattered amongst the accounts are plenty of facts and anecdotes which will enrich any reader's knowledge and understanding of the American communist movement and wider left in Popular Front days and the 1940s. But these are not ordered, much less indexed. The book's sense of childhood excitement is reinforced by the sometimes jumbled and repetitive use of material, a chatty, non-academic writing style, and by the scrapbook-style use of photos, illustrations, poems, songs with music, and reproductions of camp ephemera.

As the dusk jacket quotes from folk singer Pete Seeger and others make clear, the effect of all this is to 'rekindle the spirit' and give a sense of the 'flavour' and 'feeling' of Wo-Chi-Ca. But some readers, even those sympathetic to the causes the camp promoted and

organised around, will sometimes find the tone of the book a little cloying. The authors themselves notice and reflect, at page 231, that they 'run the risk' of producing 'a vanity book or an in-group chronicle'. Indeed.

And the defensive and inconsistent reactions to the rare criticisms of the camp which are reported add to the danger of the book being overly celebratory. An entirely plausible anecdote about a girl being bullied by other children on the pretext that her father was a 'capitalist' because he owned a gas station is treated as if it is a damaging anti-communist slander. It is actually evidence that the children who came to Wo-Chi-Ca were real kids, who'd find available 'reasons' to tease and taunt each other, even though the staff were — quite effectively, it's clear — working to build up standards of tolerance, respect and responsibility.

Overall, the book presents clear evidence of why the grown-old children of American communists and left wingers in the 1930s and 1940s have good cause to be defensive of the value of what they had, and helps us understand why they regret so much its passing. The story of the demise of the camp is told with great dignity: the effects of the anti-communist Smith Act and wider cold war hysteria; the armed attacks on the camp and on Robeson's concerts by brutal right wing 'patriotic' thugs; the regrettable but understandable defensive reactions of parents holding back from sending their children, and of camp organisers, weakly changing its name to Wyandot for the last couple of years. The final blow to the camp, in the political context of the end of the Korean War,

and the judicial murder of the Rosenbergs, was the all too personal event of the death of a young girl camper from polio, and resultant concern on the part of parents and camp organisers about the risk of a wider epidemic.

What was lost as Marian Cuca was buried and the camp abandoned was a set of dreams and possibilities about the kind of America these children could have grown up in. Perhaps this is most well illustrated by the lived commitment to anti-racism and integration which the camp organised around. The left wing families who spontaneously wanted to send their children were from Jewish, Irish, Italian, Polish and Slavic backgrounds. But the organisers took pro-active steps to reach out to Black communities, particularly through Harlem based voluntary organisations, inviting them to send their children to a camp 'where integration and equality were guaranteed … [S]o successful were these pioneers of affirmative action that by 1943 (when most of the big city was lily-white and Harlem chiefly Black) Wo-Chi-Ca could count one Black child in every group of five campers'.

A careful reading of the book raises interesting issues about the success and extent of the integration. It's clear that many camp friendships between Jewish and Black children were not sustained back in 'the big city' (though many children would look forward to meeting their summer camp friends again next time). And there is much to reflect on in the fact that nearly all accounts here are of white children stating their appreciation of the opportunity to meet Black children.

But anything less than respect and appreciation of this aspect of the work of Wo-Chi-Ca would be out of order. Like other strands of Wo-Chi-Ca, it was carried through into the progressive movements of the sixties, with camp graduates playing significant roles in the civil rights movement, anti-war activity and a wider range of left wing and progressive work.

The connections which contributors make between their childhood activities and aspects of their later lives confirm that this book is really most interesting as an example of a collective act of memory and affirmation of important personal values which the cohort of contributors have held through their lifetimes. There is, however, hardly any careful or critical reflection on the psychological processes of memory and value-affirmation which the book focuses and expresses. Perhaps this is linked to the fact that this reviewer finds it more difficult to describe and unpick this quality in the book, as compared to its relatively simple historical account it offers. It is, anyway, unfair, to expect such critical reflexivity from authors who breathlessly conclude by telling us that their next book will be 'about Shakespeare and hot springs and chess and movies and music and all we love about life'.

On the strength of this book, we can predict that this projected volume will win no prizes for rigorous structure, and that footnotes will be few and far between. But it will be enjoyable, direct, engaging and suffused with progressive values and the joy of living. And, in these times, who can complain about any of that?

Martin Willis

The reviewer was a youth worker in Lancashire and Merseyside in the 1980s and 1990s. Photographs of Wo-Chi-Ca camp, recent reunions, and relevant links can be found on the internet at www.wo-chi-ca.org.

Stephen A Resnick and Richard D Wolff, *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR*, London, Routledge, 2002, £16.99. ISBN 0-415-93318-8

The class nature and structure of the USSR is a very important question, if only because the Soviet authorities presented and justified their regime in class terms from the very outset. The question has been debated for decades by Marxists and non-Marxists alike, with no consensus ever emerging. For Resnick and Wolff, this confusion stems largely from the fact that analysts have used erroneous conceptions of class, based on property or power relations. Instead, the authors recommend another approach, for which they claim the authority of Marx. In their view, class relations should be understood in terms of the production and appropriation of a surplus. Where the producers and appropriators are the same people, communist class relations prevail, and where they are different groups of people, exploitative class relations prevail. In modern societies, the latter means capitalist class relations. This, in a nutshell, is their basic premise, which they attempt to apply to the history of the USSR.

As the authors themselves freely confess: 'We are not historians and this is not, in the main, a work of empirical history.' At this point, a historian will immediately become suspicious: how else can one gain useful insights into Soviet class relations, if not by empirical examination?

Instead of starting from an examination of an existing society, Resnick and Wolff prefer to start with some which do not exist, and never have done. They discuss some of the theoretically conceivable forms of communist class structure which can be derived from their understanding of class. They apply the concept of 'class structure' not merely to the analysis of relations between large social aggregates, but even to economic relations within individual households. Their presentation of communist class structures then serves as a yardstick for their subsequent discussion of the class structure of the USSR.

Next, Resnick and Wolff consider various forms of capitalism. Here they are on firmer ground, in that, at least some of the time, they are discussing social and economic relations which either exist or have existed in the past. The purpose of this discussion is to support their contention that, overall, the USSR is best characterised as an example of state capitalism. Their argumentation is roughly as follows. The Soviet economy was based on exploitation, in that the appropriators of the surplus product (state officials) were not the same people as its producers (the workers). Exploitative economies can be slave, feudal or capitalist economies. Rejecting the first two options, the authors are left with the third. Why there can be no fourth option is not adequately explained. This is followed by a discussion of earlier theories of state capitalism, all of which are dismissed for failing to concentrate on surplus labour.

However, the test for any new theoretical approach must be: how far does it help us understand things which have hitherto been obscure? Does it answer more questions than it poses? In the final part of the book, Resnick and Wolff attempt to apply their conception to the history of the USSR. It is at this point that their lack of familiarity with the historiography of the Soviet Union begins to show itself. They ignore non-English language materials completely, and show no awareness whatsoever of the vast and ever-growing Russian-language historical literature. Consequently, their discussion tends to remain on a very general level. Where the authors deal with detail, they

frequently get it rather confused. Thus their discussion of the economics of War Communism (summer 1918–March 1921) outlines the important role played by Gosplan (which began operation in April 1921). Worse still, their 'analysis' talks blithely of industrial growth, extraction of surplus, price policy — in a period when gross industrial output collapsed to 20% of its pre-war level, hyperinflation raged, and the major source of state revenue was the printing of banknotes.

A similar lack of historical context afflicts Resnick and Wolff's discussion of social and economic relations within individual households, which they define in 'class' terms as either 'feudal' or 'ancient'. They regret that little came of the ideas of certain early Bolsheviks on socialising domestic work, and attribute this largely to social conservatism and an inadequate class theory. Anyone who has ever seen a Russian village could add a third reason — its sheer physical impracticability.

It is in relation to the Soviet rural economy that Resnick and Wolff advance their most startling argument — that the collectivisation of agriculture led to the emergence of 'communist' class structures in at least some collective farms, in that the immediate appropriators of the surplus were the collective farm members themselves, rather than state officials. Indeed, these are the only post-1917 Soviet class structures that the authors consider to have been either socialist or communist.

This assertion provides the reader with a yardstick with which to gauge the usefulness of the authors' approach to class and class analysis. In the early 1930s, at the very time that 'communist class relations' were being established in Soviet agriculture, famine in the Ukraine and North Caucasus — largely the consequence of excessive state procurements from collective farms — led to the deaths of thousands, possibly millions, of peasants. For these unfortunates, there was no 'surplus', and the food they had produced was not 'appropriated' by themselves, whatever the internal organisation of their farms. For all their strictures against the 'class blindness' of those who analysed Soviet class relations in terms of ownership or power rather than surplus-appropriation, Resnick and Wolff have overlooked one crucial feature of the Soviet system: whoever held the power *determined* the allocation of most, if not all, of the product.

In the authors' presentation, over the last century the national economy of Russia and the USSR merely swung from private to state capitalism and back again, with some minor oscillations on the way. As state capitalist economy began to fail to deliver an adequate surplus from the 1970s onwards, private capitalism re-emerged to displace it. Household economy remained 'ancient' or 'feudal' throughout.

The evolution of class relations in the USSR, the distribution of power, property, income *and* surplus-appropriation, is a fascinating subject from which we can learn a great deal. But theoretical conclusions should stem from empirical research and data. In this book, the history of the USSR is merely a vehicle for the authors to advance an interpretation of Marx they had developed years before. That is not a good methodology for serious historical study.

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John Peck, *Persistence: The Story of a British Communist,* (Nottingham, 2001). Available for £13.60 (including UK post and packing) from: 21 Highbury Walk, Nottingham NG6 9AT. Cheques/POs payable to 'John Peck'

When John Peck was elected as a communist councillor in Bulwell, Nottingham, in May 1987, his victory was a remarkable anomaly in the otherwise relentless decline of a party only four years away from dissolution. Peck was elected at a time when the CPGB's remaining councillors in England, Scotland and Wales could be counted on the fingers of one hand. His victory in Bulwell was testament to more than three decades of dogged electoral campaigning in the city, and the culmination of more than forty individual — and unsuccessful — electoral contests, in local council and parliamentary wards.

It is the story of the lifetime of 'persistent' grassroots political activity that underpinned his electoral efforts that provides the central thrust of John Peck's self-published autobiography. Beginning with a brief account of his childhood and early family life in Lancashire, Peck describes how his sense of injustice at the privations and poverty he experienced around him, combined with a passion for reading and current affairs, led him to the works of Emile Burns and George Bernard Shaw — and a subscription to the *Daily Worker*. Enlisting as a pilot in the RAF in 1940, Peck trained in the USA; saw active service in India — where he pored over *Volume 1* of *Capital* and involved himself in the work of camp committees — and flew on bombing raids across Occupied Europe, winning several commendations.

Peck had joined the Communist Party whilst on home leave, in October 1944, and first stood as a CPGB candidate, in Scunthorpe in March 1946, using a campaign poster depicting him 'in RAF uniform with all my medal ribbons.' (p49) Peck recalls that the party organised little door-to-door work in support of his candidacy, and that amongst local electors he was simply an 'unknown communist'. These early contests convinced Peck that electoral success for the party was premised on embedding the CPGB's candidates in the communities in which they were campaigning; connecting to the immediate doorstep concerns of voters; and combining the struggle for incremental, piecemeal reforms with the overall fight for socialist advance. Peck's belief in the utility of such an approach never wavered throughout the forty years of electoral campaigning that was to follow that initial contest.

By 1948, Peck had joined the East Midlands District Committee of the party; and become a full-time organiser, based in the combined bookshop and CPGB office in Nottingham's Lace Market. After fighting his first electoral contest in the Bulwell area in 1955, Peck moved into the constituency that would become his permanent political home. Immersing himself in the life of the local area, Peck became involved with an ever-growing array of community and tenants' organisations; and the activities of the local branches of groups as diverse at the Woodcraft Folk and the British Legion. He was involved with campaigns against council rent increases; for greater flood protection measures; and against the closure of local services and facilities in and around Bulwell. At the same time, Peck was involved with distributing the *Morning Star*; holding factory gate and public meetings; raising party funds and promoting the CPGB's own campaign agenda.

Suspicion at Peck's communist affiliation amongst local community groups often faded

as the energy, commitment; and political reputation of his local CPGB branch became more widely known. As the years past, many electors in the safe Labour ward came to see Peck as a dependable and articulate ally in their conflicts with council officials over neglected repairs; unsafe road crossings; inadequate bus services; and a host of personal benefit, employment and housing problems. As his profile increased, and his vote rose, so this caseload of meetings and advocacy work multiplied, and the queue of callers at the family home for the Friday night surgery grew longer.

In the late 1970s, Peck's political position shifted considerably as he became an enthusiastic supporter of the rising 'Eurocommunist' tendency within the party. In the Gramscian conception of the 'war of position', Peck found support for his own electoral strategy, arguing that it was through collaborative local political work, on the ground in local constituencies, that the party would build the electoral alliances necessary to win council and parliamentary seats — in the way anticipated by the perspectives of the *British Road*. Such a specifically-electoral reading of the new 'broad democratic alliance' certainly had its supporters, but many CPGB Eurocommunists, excited by the debates at the Communist Universities of London (CUL), and Jacques' makeover at *Marxism Today*, simply did not see the 'counter-hegemonic struggle' including any sort of independent electoral role for the British party.

If some party 'reformers' were unconvinced by Peck's approach, many 'traditionalists' were actively resistant. In the context of the deepening splits soon evident across the party, simmering conflicts in the East Midlands District were soon to come to a head in the late 1970s and early 1980s. To Peck's evident irritation, a number of district party officials had long given what he saw as perfunctory support to his Bulwell campaigns, making little effort to rally the party cadre at election time. It became clear that in some 'traditionalist' quarters of the party there was great antagonism to Peck's approach: both from members who believed that the CPGB should not 'pointlessly' oppose Labour at the ballot box; and from those adamant that Peck's 'drains and dustbins' approach required the abandonment of the CPGB's 'socialist programme'. The conflict polarised, as his opponents on the district and area committee sought to isolate or neutralise him; while Peck commuted to other districts rallying support for the Executive Committee's campaign to have 'traditionalist' dissidents expelled by the party's congress.

As the CPGB's decline accelerated, the party's pitifully weak electoral standing, local and nationally, worsened — a process exemplified by the party's humiliation in the Bermondsey by-election in February 1983; when the CPGB stood its own candidate against Labour left-winger Peter Tatchell, only to be receive fewer votes than the Monster Raving Loony Party. Undaunted, Peck had agreed to become National Election Agent for the party. In this new role, Peck was able to extend his efforts to have the party re-prioritise its electoral work. Yet after the 1983 general election debacle, the number of electoral enthusiasts in the party had reduced further still, and Peck appeared somewhat sidelined — having to confront the CPGB leadership's renewed interest in 'tactical anti-Tory' voting. Despite his official position, he was unable to win a place on the 'recommended' slate for the Executive Committee (EC) — something which changed only after his election in Nottingham — and could do little to reverse the sharp contraction of the CPGB's electoral work.

Eventual victory in Bulwell soon gave Peck the casting vote on an otherwise hung council, and for next term he supported the Labour administration in the city, serving on the Housing and Environment, and Policy and Resources committees of the council, whilst continuing his work in the constituency. As the CPGB itself unravelled, Peck was

able to add to the party's draft *Manifesto for New Times* a commitment to continuing electoral work — something that might otherwise have been omitted — but by the May 1990 council elections it had become clear to him that 'the majority of communists had voted with their feet not to be communist candidates and not to support fully those who were.' (p246) Disappointed at the CPGB's terminal trajectory, Peck resigned from the Communist Party to join the Greens; who were, he explained to the CPGB's EC, 'not socialist but met well my other criteria.' (p247) Peck's subsequent re-election as a Green councillor (in 1991 and 1995) was to many of his former-CPGB critics irrefutable confirmation that his was a personal vote, unconnected to his wider political connections. Peck countered that the Green Party expressed many of the same progressive values as the CPGB-of-old (combined with a fuller recognition of the importance of ecological and community politics); and shared his commitment to a democratic, electoral road.

Those hoping that Peck might situate the story of his unflinching electoral enthusiasm in the context of a wider strategic framework will be disappointed. Nowhere in these pages does the author offer a clear conception of how, cumulatively, the CPGB might have realistically challenged Labour's electoral hegemony on the left in any mass sense. The obvious implication of Peck's insistence that there was 'nothing special about Bulwell' is that the Communist Party's electoral weakness was essentially the consequence of insufficient *effort* by the party and its members. Yet the author does not discuss the numerous other obstacles that faced the CPGB on the electoral road; deal satisfactorily with the critics' case against him; or explain how own political evolution from 'red to green' should have proved so unproblematic for the 'communist' voters in his ward.

Persistence provides a methodical, chronological account of Peck's political life, that amply documents the campaigns and organisations with which he and the local party branch were involved over many years. Although elements of the wider world of the CPGB and of the international communist movement appear — alongside discussion of a number of inner-party conflicts — the principal focus is Peck's work at the ward level. The wealth of detail on offer, when combined with the frequent switches in focus, makes for a sometimes exhausting read; and some might find the narrative overly-dry. What emerges from the book is a sense of relentless determination and political conviction, and of long years of door-knocking, canvassing, letter-writing and pavement-pounding: a lifestyle that demanded numerous personal and familial sacrifices, and, for the most part, offered precious few tangible political compensations.

Had Peck opted for a life in the Labour Party, there is little question that he could have begun work as a campaigning councillor many years earlier, working to improve the day-to-day quality of life of his constituents. Yet, up until the party's endgame, he remained convinced that the CPGB could be fashioned into a successful and principled independent electoral force. Ultimately, he won relatively few lasting converts within his own party to this belief. It is perhaps surprising that this autobiography does not reveal more forcefully the sense of the frustration and exasperation that Peck must surely have continually felt at the CPGB's 'inability' or 'refusal' to see what to him was a self-evident truth: that the party was compelled to stand slates of candidates in contests large and small. There is certainly no sense of regret expressed here over the investment of decades of hard constituency work which won John Peck his brief tenure as a 'communist councillor'.

Richard Cross

Daniel J Leab, *I Was a Communist for the FBI*, Pennsylvania University Press, 2000, ISBN 0-271-02053-9, pp. 170, hbk; David McKnight, *Espionage and the Roots of the Cold War: The Conspiratorial Heritage*, Frank Cass Publishers, London, Portland, Oregon 2002, ISBN 0-7146-5163-X, pp. 226, hbk.

These are two good books to add to the burgeoning literature on Cold War intelligence. Daniel J Leab tells us everything we ever wanted to know about Matt Cvetic, who infiltrated a Pittsburgh branch of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) in 1943, under the control of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). It is not his fault that Cvetic is a uniquely dull subject. Cvetic's five minutes of fame was to be achieved denouncing radicals as members and secret members of the American Communist Party, to congressional committees and security agencies during the heyday of McCarthyism in the 1950s. In fact Cvetic found out very little about the alleged secret activities of American communism, and spent most of his time smearing and denouncing idealistic left wing teachers, civil servants and lawyers to the anti-communist network in early Cold War America. What distinguished him from other 'informers' was that his 'adventures' were to become immortalised in celluloid, in the television series, '*I was a Communist for the FBI*'.

This bore about as much relation to reality, both in terms of portraying the communist menace and Cvetic's contribution to exposing it, as the contemporary *Spooks* does in accurately presenting the operations of MI5 on BBC1; or seeing James Bond as a portrayal of how an MI6 agent operates. What distinguishes Leab's book is his exploration of the mixed motives of Cvetic in the seedy era of post 1945 McCarthyite Cold War America. Cvetic appears to fall nearer the cynicism of such informers as Harvey Matusow, who saw further exposure of those who had been denounced by others as an upwardly mobile career move. It was a route to social mobility in a situation in which other opportunities were severely limited, given Cvetic's taciturn personality and average abilities. He was not like those evangelistic anti-communists, such as Elizabeth Bentley and Whittaker Chambers, who were as much convinced of the communist threat to subvert the USA as George W Bush is of the menace of Saddam Hussein. He was a catholic anti-communist who collaborated with local politicians to 'expose' how communists were on the verge of subverting the good folks of Pittsburgh; a small time operator supposedly doing his bit for America.

David McKnight's book is more ambitious in its scope. It seeks to reinterpret the conspiratorial methods of the Soviet intelligence network and the Communist International, their significance to the emergence of stalinism, and their role in the decision making process of various national communist parties in the 1930s. Whilst the originality of this approach may be overstated he does provide some fascinating examples to illustrate his claims. David Dallin, for example, long ago pointed to the conspiratorial behaviour of the Russian radical and Bolshevik underground as the model for leninist and stalinist methods. This, rather than the development of the mirror image of the surveillance and interrogation techniques of the Tsarist secret police, whose archives had fallen so conveniently into the hands of the Soviet authorities, was the main origin of Bolshevik secret intelligence techniques. Using the selective opening of the files of the Communist International in Moscow, the archives of the former Communist Party of Australia, and the records of the Shanghai Municipal Police in the National Archives in Washington, McKnight is able to present a challenging

reinterpretation of the development of the Comintern under the smokescreen of the Popular Front, and the uses of secret intelligence. Particularly interesting is his interpretation of the stalinisation of the Comintern, the decline of international revolution and the rise of conspiratorial methods. There is also some excellent material on how the communist underground operated in China and the role of the Comintern in Asia. Most interesting of all, however, is the story of how stalinist control of the Australian Popular Front, and the use of infiltration and espionage methods, under the control of the Comintern was used to manipulate the ruling Labour Party's response to the coming of the Second World War, and the changing meanings of 'anti-fascism' in Australia before 1941.

Since the research for the book was completed two new sources have appeared which will lead to rapid development of the undoubted contribution which McKnight has made to revising the history of the Comintern. These relate to English intelligence and security material, even if part of it is in a Moscow archive. Since 1997 MI5 has been releasing files into the Public Record Office at Kew and significant numbers of these relate to the links between the Communist International (CI) and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). In particular these include the files taken in the Special Branch raid in 1925, which led to the imprisonment of the leading members of the organisation during the General Strike, and the Special Branch and MI5 reports of the Arcos Raid which led to the breaking of diplomatic relations between the British government and the Soviet Union in 1927. There are also significant personal files relating to many of the leading functionaries in the CPGB (including Harry Pollitt and J R Campbell); those involved in secret wireless transmissions with Moscow in the 1930s; and attempts to subvert the armed forces and to instigate naval mutiny. The files released include a significant number from the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) whose archive still remains closed.

Perhaps even more interesting is the release from the Soviet intelligence archive of an SIS file relating to the Comintern agent Johann Heinrich de Graff. The contents of this file were sent to Moscow by the Soviet mole John Cairncross during the war. It relates to the SIS mole 'Jonny X' in the Comintern in the 1930s. Disillusioned by continuing Soviet and German military co-operation following the Rapallo Treaty, and by the purging of his wife in the early 1930s, Jonny X became a 'walk in' agent for SIS, and provided much information relating to Comintern operations in Britain and other european countries, China and South America. His evidence was an important part of the information which led to MI5 executive action, which led to the passing of the Incitement to Disaffection Act in 1934. Jonny X's information and activities also led to the failure of the Brazilian revolution in 1935. His story is told in the biography of his case agent in Michael Smith, *Foley: The Spy who saved 10,000 Jews.* The revelations from Soviet archives are far from exhausted. Let us hope that liberalisation, both of Russian and other national sources, will lead to new work which is as challenging and as informative as David McKnight's contribution.

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