

# COMMUNIST HISTORY NETWORK NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 21 SPRING 2007

**W**elcome to Issue 21 of the *Communist History Network Newsletter (CHNN)*. As indicated in the last issue, the full-text search facility on the CHNN website has now been reinstated, so it is possible to run searches against the complete contents of all issues of the *Newsletter*. The editors are once again reviewing the suitability of the various formats that the CHNN is published in. While a small number of print copies of the *Newsletter* will continue to be made available to subscribers who do not enjoy internet access, we will continue to promote the electronic version of the CHNN as the preferred format. We would, however, be interested to know if online readers of the *Newsletter* are only effectively making use of the .pdf version of new issues (in which case the web page and Word versions of the *Newsletter* may no longer warrant the additional resources required to make them available). We would welcome any comments or feedback on this question. The deadline for submissions for the Autumn 2007 edition of the *Newsletter* is September 30 2007, and contributions are welcomed.

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- **COMMUNISME – SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE CPGB:** A special issue of the French-language *Communisme* journal ('Regards sur le communisme britannique') focuses on the history of British communism and the British communist party. The issue is comprised of the following articles: Guillaume Bourgeois, 'Entretien avec Sam Russell' ('Meetings with Sam Russell'); Kevin Morgan, 'Ainsi pour Gallacher: Remarques sur les autobiographies de communistes britanniques' ('Some views on the production of exemplary communist lives in Britain: the case of William Gallacher'); Gidon Gohen, Kevin Morgan and Andrew Flinn, 'Un cadeau de Russie: les communistes britanniques à l'École léniniste internationale ('A Gift from Russia: The International Lenin School and British communism'); Nina Fishman, 'La partenaire fidèle. La relation du Parti communiste de Grande-Bretagne avec le mouvement syndical britannique' ('The Constant Partner: The CPGB's relationship with the British Trade Union Movement'); Andy Croft, 'Leur cuisine vient Paris, leurs opinions de de Moscou: les écrivains et le Parti communiste britannique' ('Their Cookery from Paris, their opinions from Moscow: Writers and the CPGB'); John Callaghan, 'Le Parti communiste dans le Guerre froide ('Communist Politics in the Cold War'); Richard Cross, 'Fin de parti: Le déclin et la dissolution du PCGB' ('The Party's Over: the Decline and Dissolution of the CPGB'); and Christophe le Dreau, 'Parti Communiste de Grande-Bretagne: essai bibliographique' ('The CPGB: A Bibliography'); 'Reperes pour une histoire du trotskisme britannique, 1925-2005' (A chronology and bibliography of British trotskism, 1925-2005). Full details of the special issue are: *Communisme*, No 87, Autumn 2006, ISBN: 978-2-8251-3751-2. For ordering details, contact the publishers: L'Age D'Homme, 5 rue Férou, 75006 Paris, France.
- **SOCIAL DEMOCRAT AND BRITISH SOCIALIST INDEX:** Ted Crawford writes: 'The entire index of *Social Democrat* (1897-1911) and *British Socialist* (1912-1913) can now be found online at <http://marx.org/history/international/social-democracy/social-democrat/index.htm>. As yet, many articles that the Marxist Internet Archive has at other

points on the archive (under, for instance, the relevant authors) cannot be accessed from this index, but it is hoped that this facility can be made available in due course – plus other articles of interest which have no author on the main MIA list. Please note that none of this material is in copyright: the MIA puts everything into the public domain including the index.’

- **CHILE SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN RESEARCH:** Ann Jones, a researcher from the Australian National University, is studying the involvement of the British trade union movement in the Chile Solidarity Campaign from 1973 to 1989. She seeks to talk with trade unionists and/or participants who have memories of the campaign. She would also like to see any pamphlets, badges, posters, newsletters or other paraphernalia from the period. She will be visiting the UK in May-June 2007, and can be contacted via email: [ann.jones@anu.edu.au](mailto:ann.jones@anu.edu.au).
- **BERT RAMELSON BIOGRAPHY:** Roger Seifert, Director of the Centre for Industrial Relations at Keele University, has begun work on a research project which it is hoped will lead to the publication of a biography of prominent trade union activist and CPGB Industrial Organiser Bert Ramelson. As part of the project, he hopes to interview those who worked with, encountered or have memories of Ramelson at any point throughout his life. For more information about the project, please email: [r.v.seifert@hrm.keele.ac.uk](mailto:r.v.seifert@hrm.keele.ac.uk).
- **CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT: C L R JAMES AND *THE BLACK JACOBINS*:** Christian Hogsbjerg and David Renton write: ‘Throughout many of the events organised in Britain to commemorate the bicentenary of the British abolition of the slave trade, one voice has been missing: that of the rebellious slaves themselves, in particular those of St. Domingue/Haiti, the authors of the only successful slave revolt in history, and the people who did more than Wilberforce or anyone else to bring the slave system to an end. 2008 will mark the seventieth anniversary of the publication of *The Black Jacobins*, C L R James’s classic history of the Haitian Revolution. The London Socialist Historians Group and the Institute of Historical Research are commemorating this anniversary with a one-day conference to be held at the IHR, London, on Saturday 2 February 2008. Confirmed keynote speakers include Darcus Howe, Bill Schwarz, and Marika Sherwood. Papers will be considered on any aspect relating to *The Black Jacobins* and its legacy, including the following: (i) The making of *The Black Jacobins*: James’s biography and the writing of the work; (ii) *The Black Jacobins* as a historical masterpiece and epic “grand narrative” which overthrew existing interpretations of slavery and its abolition; (iii) The intellectual inspiration of *The Black Jacobins* for historians in Europe, America, Africa and the Caribbean; (iv) The intellectual inspiration of *The Black Jacobins* for those involved in liberation struggles in Europe, America, Africa and the Caribbean; (v) The Haitian Revolution and its impact on the struggle against colonial slavery, particularly in Britain; (vi) The legacy of Toussaint L’Ouverture as revolutionary leader.’ For further information or to send abstracts of papers (up to 1,000 words) until 1 October 2007: Christian Hogsbjerg ([cjhogsbjerg@hotmail.com](mailto:cjhogsbjerg@hotmail.com)) or David Renton ([david.renton@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:david.renton@sunderland.ac.uk)).
- **CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT – NATIONAL POLITICAL CULTURES AND THE WIDER WORLD:** ‘National Political Cultures and the Wider World: the transnational dimension of political ideas and party politics in Europe and the United States since 1918’. Matthew Worley, Jon Bell, Linda Risso write: ‘Historians have recently become increasingly aware of the extent to which political parties and organisations shared political ideas and experience in an age of rapid industrial and technological change. Although much work has been done on national political cultures and political parties, only in the last decade has much attention been paid to the connections between the national and international dimensions of the political process and of political ideas. From the relationship between different socialist parties after the First World War to the impact of national politics on the processes of European integration to the impact of welfare state building in Europe on American liberal politics after the Second World War, attention to transnational aspects of political change in the twentieth century is yielding new insights into the workings of the state in the modern world. These themes will be addressed at a

two-day conference to be held at the University of Reading, 4-5 September 2007. The key conference themes will be the transnational dynamics of political culture, political parties, non-governmental organisations, and political ideas in the industrialised world since the First World War. Confirmed speakers include Neville Kirk (Manchester Metropolitan), Victor Gavin (Barcelona), Kenneth Bertrams (Free University of Brussels), Daniel Stedman Jones (Pennsylvania), Jean-Marie Izquierdo (Bordeaux), Andrea Mammone (Leeds/Siena), Axel R. Schäfer (Keele), Wolfram Kaiser, Kevin Morgan (Manchester) and Tauno Saarela (Helsinki). Further details from Matthew Worley: [m.worley@reading.ac.uk](mailto:m.worley@reading.ac.uk)

- **PRESSE COMMUNISTE:** José Gotovitch and Anne Morelli (eds), *Presse Communiste, Presse Radicale 1919-2000: Passé/Présent/Avenir?* ("The Communist Press and the Radical Press, 1919-2000: Past/Present/Future?"). These are the published proceedings of a conference organised by the Centre d'histoire et de sociologie des Gauches (ULB) in October 2005 and focusing on the roles played by the left-wing press – communist, social-democratic, anarchist, trotskyist, anarcho-syndicalist – both in Belgium and comparatively. Contributors include Pierre Van Den Dungen, Nicolas Latteur, Mathieu Beys, Laurence Mundschau, Nicolas Naif, Manuel Abramowicz, Henri Wehenkel, Alexandre Courban, Leon Strauss, Françoise Olivier-Utard, Sylvain Boulouque, Georges Ubbiali, Kevin Morgan, Luciana Castellina, Didier Monciaud and the personal testimonies of the journalists Georgette Smolski, Jean-Marie Chauvier, and Jacques Moins. For further details and orders, contact: José Gotovitch: [jgotovit@ulb.ac.be](mailto:jgotovit@ulb.ac.be); CHSG - c/o Gotovitch, ULB CP 175/01, 50 av FD Roosevelt, B-1050 Bruxelles, Belgium.
- **SYNDICALISM AND REVOLUTIONARY TRADE UNIONISM:** The seminar, to be held at the University of Glamorgan on Saturday 22 September 2007, is the second in a series of three one-day seminars at the universities of Manchester, Glamorgan and Leicester. The theme of the seminar series is 'Identity and Self-Representation in European Communist Life Histories'. The seminars aim to reflect on the growing body of research on communist life history and collective memory. While this seminar gives due attention to Wales, the series offers a comparative approach across both national and political dividing lines. The speakers include Alex Gordon (Council of Executives, RMT Union), 'Charles Watkins and Syndicalist Railwaymen'; Kevin Morgan (University of Manchester), 'A A Purcell and Syndicalist Internationalism'; Ralph Darlington (University of Salford), 'The Origins of Syndicalism: An International Comparative Analysis'; Sharif Gemie (University of Glamorgan), 'Heartland of Syndicalism: Spain'; John Manley (University of Central Lancashire), 'The Canadian Communist Party and the Industrial Working Class during WW2'. The organisers, in collaboration with a number of other researchers in the field, aim to turn this initial series of seminars into a regular event. The focus of these seminars – and potentially annual conferences – will be the left; but other related topics will be considered, particularly if offering comparative insight into the left or methodological innovation. The event will cost £10.00 per person, including a buffet lunch and morning and afternoon coffee/tea. More information from Norman La Porte, email: [nlaporte@glam.ac.uk](mailto:nlaporte@glam.ac.uk).

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## **‘Children of the Red Flag’**

### **Growing up in a communist family: A comparative research of the British and Dutch communist movement 1940-1979.**

In April 2001 the ‘People of a Special Mould’ conference on communist biography and prosopography was held in Manchester. Historians of the communist movement from nearly 20 different countries were brought together and almost 60 academic papers were presented. Even though the conference consisted of drawing parallels and suggesting differences, only a few of the papers took an explicitly comparative perspective. According to Stefan Berger, one of the biggest obstacles to be overcome in the writing of comparative history is acquiring the necessary language skills to keep in touch with work being produced by historians in other countries.<sup>1</sup> Because of this language obstacle British historians have stronger academic links with parts of the former British empire (Anglo-Saxon countries) than with Europe.<sup>2</sup> This research, however, is based on the study of two of the smaller west European communist parties.

Its origins lie in a ground-breaking project about the communist movement in the Netherlands on which I worked in 2002 with Margreet Schrevel of the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam. Margreet’s main research interests are the non-political aspects of communism, and the extreme left in the Dutch labour movement. Together we interviewed 21 people who grew up in communist families in cold war Holland. I also studied the Dutch communist party archives held at the IISH to complement the interviews in building up a picture of what it was like to grow up in a communist family. On the basis of our research, Margreet published an article in the journal *Holland; Historisch Tijdschrift*,<sup>3</sup> and I used the interviews for my MA dissertation.<sup>4</sup>

Since no comparative studies of the Dutch and British communist movement have yet been written, I want to carry out the same project in Britain in order to compare the results. By comparing the communist movement and the problem of social isolation in these countries my aim is to gain a better understanding of how different societies dealt with broadly the same problem. Centrally, the project will be a comparison between the post-war communist movement in a country that was not occupied by the nazis, and the post-war communist movement of a country that was. My intention is to provide a case study that will illuminate the impact of Nazi occupation on the history of the communist movement. Kevin Morgan has recently argued that ‘it is... the development of more comparative approaches to the CPGB that the most promising lines of future development seem to lie’.<sup>5</sup> The same might also be said of the Dutch communist party, and this research will offer the opportunity to contribute to the development of such a comparative research agenda.

I should be grateful for any contacts or suggestions in connection with this research. In particular I am looking for people who meet the final criteria:

- Born between 1935-1955. (‘Silent Generation’ and the ‘Protest Generation’) My intention is to bring out changes over time (between the two generations).
- Raised in a ‘strict’ communist family, i.e. excluding families where only one parent was a communist but not excluding families where the parents joined or lapsed while the children were growing up.
- Who grew up in greater London, Liverpool or Manchester.

But of course I should be glad to hear from anyone who has any further suggestions for my project.

**Elke Side-Weesjes, University of Sussex**  
emweesjes@hotmail.com

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial, 'Red Lives', *Socialist History* 21, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Berger & Greg Patmore, 'Comparative Labour History in Britain and Australia', *Labour History*, Vol 88, May, 2005, p9.

<sup>3</sup> Margreet Schrevel and Rode Luiers, 'Hollands fabriikaat Communistische gezinnen in de jaren vijftig', *Holland; Historisch Tijdschrift*, Vol 36, No 4, 2004, pp327-352.

<sup>4</sup> Elke Weesjes, 2004, 'De communistische beweging in Nederland. Isolement en Samenwerking 1945-1975.' ['The communist movement in Holland. Isolation and cooperation. 1945-1975'], unpublished MA thesis, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Morgan, 'Labour with Knobs on? The Recent Historiography of the British Communist Party', *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen*, No 27, 2002, p82.

## A new biography of Eugen (Jenő) Varga (1879-1964)

Eugen (Jenő) Varga was for many years Stalin's preferred economist, having specialised in international relations and economics. Varga was a 'man of study', not a gun-fighting revolutionary from the Balkans. Knowing him, is also knowing marxism of the European semi-periphery and how it later on was transformed into marxism-leninism.

This biographical study departs from the thesis that German and Austrian marxism of the Second International had partially laid the foundations for marxist-leninist economic analysis and thought. Varga was one of the fathers of this variant of marxism that was developed at the Soviet academies during the 1920s and 1930s and that was based on the works of Kautsky and Hilferding. By mixing them up with Lenin's imperialism theory and empirical research, Varga contributed to the formation of a corpus characterised by scientism and economism. Varga was neither an original nor a brilliant scholar of marxism and was therefore suited to the development of marxism as a kind of policy science for communist party leaders. The marxism he propounded could be textually transformed into books with a high educational use value; for his publications were aimed at party militants and academies and always set out to explain concrete problems by reducing them to choices to be made or to objective economic developments. Marx's *Capital* was the ultimate source of inspiration giving a conceptual answer to any question deriving from problems such as the cyclical nature of capitalist crises, the concentration movement of capital and the realisation problem of surplus-value. This allowed Varga to develop from orthodox marxism into the stalinist variant into which this was gradually transformed. His polemics with Kautsky, Hilferding and Bauer were therefore mainly based on different interpretations of this orthodoxy and inspired by a revolutionary belief in the inexorable decline of capitalism. Capitalism in its monopolist variant would not be able to guarantee the proletariat's survival and inevitably led to (civil) wars and revolutions.

Brief details of Varga's life are provided. If anybody can assist with contacts or suggestions regarding this project, please contact: [ahmommen01@hetnet.nl](mailto:ahmommen01@hetnet.nl). I am particularly interested in information regarding the views and contacts with Varga of British marxist economists.

## Biography

Varga started his early career as a social democratic journalist and teacher after having studied philosophy at the Budapest University. Before the First World War he became an epigone of Rudolf Hilferding, studying cartels and industrial concentration in Hungary. He became friends with Karl Kautsky through sending articles to the Kautsky's *Die Neue Zeit*. Though Varga belonged to the marxist left in the Hungarian social-democratic party, he never became involved in factional struggles or in outspoken 'revolutionary' activities challenging the reformist party leadership. Indeed, he did not actively participate in party politics. When the party debated for more than a decade its proposed agrarian strategy, Varga did not at any point come to the fore as its leading theoretician. Eventually, he was to draft the agrarian programme adopted by the party at the end of 1918 once the social democrats had entered into government. In March 1919, when the councils' republic governed by social democrats and communists was declared, Varga became People's Commissar of Finance. However, he left this post after a few weeks for a newly created post of

People's Commissar for Production and would later on preside over the National Economic Council.

The councils' republic collapsed on 1 August 1919. Together with other people's commissars Varga fled to Vienna where a long period of exile began. By this time he was already forty years old: not the age for a married man with a child to begin a revolutionary career. His short-lived appointment as a people's commissar was for Varga an experience which exercised a deep influence on his way of thinking and behaving. During these 133 days of the dictatorship of the proletariat, he had become a communist. From a 'man of study' he had been transformed into a politician having to defend the economic and social reforms he implemented in a period of crisis and war. When he was interned in Vienna, he wrote and published a very interesting analysis of the economic reforms the councils' republic had implemented and the difficulties that had arisen.

In the summer of 1920, Varga and other leading communists left Vienna for Moscow. There, they were able to participate in the second world congress of the Communist International, held in July-August 1920. Varga was immediately received by Lenin who had been much impressed by his analysis of the difficulties faced by the Hungarian councils' republic during the short period in which it exercised power. At Lenin's behest, Varga remained in Moscow and began working for the Comintern and the Profintern whilst also publishing articles on agrarian politics and international economic relations – a topic in which he would soon specialise as the author of a quarterly survey published in *International Press Correspondence*. Meanwhile Varga had transformed himself into a bolshevik, joining the Communist Party of Russia and participating in the Comintern's revolutionary activities.

In 1922, he moved to Berlin where he occupied an office at the Soviet legation as a specialist in international trade relations. At the same time he was involved in political activities and the writing of articles on German politics or economic reports discussed at the congresses of the Comintern. As a 'man of study' he kept his distance from the different factions in the Russian and German communist parties. At the third world congress of the Comintern in 1921 he had reported together with Trotsky on international economic stabilisation. Then he moved in the direction of Bukharin. Though Varga always stressed that capitalist economic instability was due to imperialist rivalries and the uneven development of capitalism, he was well aware of the impossibility of predicting the moment of collapse of capitalism. Therefore, he always stressed the importance of revolutionary movements conducted by a proletarian vanguard party. In his theory of the 'decline of capitalism' one can find several elements of Hilferding's *Financial Capitalism*, Rosa Luxemburg's 'underconsumptionist' thesis or Lenin's theory of imperialism, which Varga incorporated into his theory of the decline of capitalism. He rejected Hilferding's theory of organised capitalism as a stage towards socialism and pointed to the fact that the national capitalist economies were exporting problems with the realisation of surplus-value to other countries of the colonies and the capitalist periphery. This, Varga argued, would inevitably lead to wars and economic and monetary divisions.

In 1927 Varga moved back to Moscow where he was appointed director of the Institute of World Economy and Politics. Stalin, who had defeated the leftists, was now preparing for his turn to the left. Bukharin, who was directing the Comintern and as leader of the right, also promoted the idea of an alliance with the peasants, and was removed from his leading functions. Though Varga had never taken a clear stand in the Stalin-Bukharin rivalry, he was nonetheless to be attacked by several militant stalinists and soon lost his position as a leading Comintern economist. In the last analysis, he kept his post of director of his institute working for the Comintern because he had never opposed Stalin's turn to the left. Though not a typical sectarian, Varga was a convinced enemy of social democracy and reformism and was eagerly to subscribe to the then official Comintern theory of 'social fascism'. His eclipse lasted until Dimitrov took over the Comintern leadership at Stalin's behest in 1934. Varga was asked to help preparing the seventh world congress of the Comintern that convened in 1935. He wrote its economic report, *The Great Crisis and its Political Consequences*, which gave an overview of economic and political events since the sixth world congress in 1928. He also contributed to the report which Dimitrov as secretary presented to the congress. This indicates that Varga's influence on the Comintern's direction was still of some

importance. Though he had followed Dimitrov's move to popular front politics, on the other hand, one can continue to find in his texts several leftist influences.

Varga survived the ensuing stalinist purges that hit the Comintern bureaucracy. However, his influence declined after the collapse of the popular front in France and of the Spanish republic. During the Second World War, Varga became an adviser to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with responsibility for German reparation-payment problems. Disgrace followed in 1947 because he had the previous year published an analysis of post-war economic problems considered too accommodating to capitalism and overestimating the capabilities of the bourgeois state to prevent a new economic crisis. Again, Varga managed to survive and make a comeback after Stalin's death in 1953 as an 'elder Academician' once again publishing books and articles. However, Khrushchev's politics of 'peaceful coexistence' also meant the obsolescence of Varga's analytical framework based on inter-imperialist rivalries and economic stagnation.

With more than seventy books and pamphlets and some 1,000 articles published in a multitude of journals and newspapers, Varga was the Comintern's most prolific author. However, he never published a book or paper promoting him to the status of one of the outstanding theoreticians of marxist economics. His work consisted mainly in compiling lengthy reports and generating articles based on newspaper clips, official statistics and comments on bourgeois authors. Because he was a party man, his publications were aimed at educating militants and workers, not at developing marxist economic theory beyond the Kautskyist variant of marxism. Bukharin, who was also Varga's rival in the 1920s, called him a man always writing comments on statistics he had collected elsewhere. Trotsky called him the 'Polonius of the Comintern'. Others saw in him a typical German professor, a bookkeeper, or a vulgar pedant working backstage producing reports the wielders of power needed.

This no doubt explains why he survived successive purges and persecutions. Though he did not return to Budapest in 1945, he did not forget his old comrades in arms who were now exercising power there. Nevertheless, except for some visits as a consultant and the advice he extended to Rákosi, he was never to lose his faith in Soviet communism.

## **Andre Mommen**

### **Reports**

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## **The French Communist Party and 1956**

**O**n 29-30 November 2006, delegates gathered in the trade union offices of Bobigny for a conference on the significance for French communism of the cataclysmic year of 1956. The setting was suitably symbolic: a building by Brazilian marxist architect Oscar Niemeyer, in close proximity to the avenues Maurice Thorez, Salvador Allende and Lenin and the Karl Marx housing estate, in the capital of Seine-Saint-Denis, one of the last two departments to have a communist president. The latter, Hervé Bramy, alluded to the 'irrationality, confusion and violence' of recent riots in the erstwhile Red Belt, and appealed for understanding and dialogue rather than division. He was followed by the embattled PCF national secretary and presidential candidate, Marie-Georges Buffet, who made an eloquent and moving speech based on poet Aimé Césaire's letter of resignation to Thorez. Buffet, herself a history graduate, lamented the 'missed opportunities' of 1956: not only the party's approval of Soviet tanks in Budapest and denial of Khrushchev's secret speech, but also the voting of special powers in Algeria, opposition to birth-control, and the 'fracture' between the party and intellectuals and other social layers. It was necessary, in the words of Césaire, to 'remake what has been undone'. This conference was, from the outset, as cathartic as it was scholarly.

In the light of documents found in the archives of the Comintern in Moscow and of the PCF in Bobigny, the opening roundtable set out the debate concerning how far 1956 constituted a turning-point in the history of the PCF. Denis Peschanski traced the hesitations of the PCF leadership after the twentieth congress of the CPSU: that summer, Thorez and Jacques Duclos would take advantage of Khrushchev's retreat, in the face of conservative opposition, to minimise criticisms of Stalin and suppress the report. Marc Lazar evoked the violence of the debate in the party, which is captured on the recordings of meetings of the central committee. Here, the majority resisted any attack on the foundations of their political identity, and re-affirmed an absolute fidelity to the USSR. For example, the PCF would follow the other parties in approving the execution of Imre Nagy. On this issue, the only dissenting voice was Poland's Gomulka, and not the Italian communist leader Togliatti. Indeed, in Lazar's view it is necessary not to overstate the differences between the PCF and PCI leaderships, for the latter only modified its line under pressure from the rank and file.

For Lazar, the demystification of Stalin undermined the 'teleology' and frame of reference of the PCF. Or, in the words of Bernard Pudal, it threatened to break the 'magical ties of identity'. According to Serge Wolikow, the party, faced with the secret speech and Hungary, but also the escalating war in Algeria and the Suez expedition, fell back on itself and its relationship with the USSR. No doubt alluding to events fifty years later, Roger Martelli – who has resigned from the PCF leadership over Buffet's candidacy – spoke of the 'cultural temptation of immobility'.

A nuanced view of 1956 emerged from these exchanges. The events did encourage a move towards more collective leadership, as well as attempts to listen to, as well as control, the intellectuals. But in this dramatic year, which, notably during the Soviet intervention in Hungary, saw violent assaults on PCF offices, the party apparatus was shaken but remained intact, while the vast majority of its membership and electorate stayed loyal. The process of disillusionment and decline would take longer. In retrospect, it seems that 1958 was far more catastrophic for French communism, which could understand neither the De Gaulle phenomenon, nor the rapid modernisation of French society.

In the sessions that followed, case studies showed what did and did not change in 1956: crisis in the party press but resilience of *L'Humanité*; unrest among party lawyers over 'socialist legality' in the eastern Europe; replacement in the party cadre school of Soviet manuals with French ones; campaigns in favour of the Algerian nation and against the sending of troops... Although the interventions had a scientific rigour, it was regrettable that more was not said on how these events were lived by the party activists: such testimonies could supplement or even contradict the archives and relativise the 'monolithic' nature of the party. There was little or no reference to culture: one paper on communist posters, but nothing about literature, cinema, or the burgeoning popular culture of the time. Nor were there references to non-French scholarship on 1956.

Constant claims of dispassionate 'objectivity' were also irksome, and made me wonder why on earth they chose to study the subject in the first place. It was therefore a relief to hear the impassioned *témoignage* of Henri Martin, communist veteran and symbol of the anti-colonial struggle. He reminded the younger historians in the hall that it was necessary to remember the 'context': soldiers mobilised for Algeria after a bloody and futile war in Indochina, *L'Humanité* seized by the authorities for calling for the independence of Algeria, communists lynched in the streets of Hungary, 'which ten years previously was the last ally of Nazi Germany', the 'warlike strategy' of NATO... It was therefore with 'immense relief' that Martin heard Duclos, in his infamous speech at the Salle Wagram, refer approvingly to Stalin. At the end of his oration, Martin was surrounded by ashen-faced and apologetic young scholars protesting their objectivity. We might quibble with Martin's take on 1956, but it was good to have a living sense of the passions of that year.

**Gavin Bowd, University of St Andrews**

## Budapest's Statue Park

**B**ack in the 1970s, in the wake of the communist victory in Vietnam, there was a growing body of opinion in the west that believed the future lay with communism. In a number of articles pundits pointed out that no country had ever been 'de-communised'. There was talk of a ratchet effect: once communists gained power they kept it. Indeed there was some discussion as to whether a country could be de-communised: once the omelette had been made, the eggs could not be reconstituted.

These views read oddly today. Communism has collapsed in Europe and the former communist states have carried out de-communisation measures, each in its own way. The privatisation of publicly-owned industries and services has taken a different form in different states but the main thrust has been the same: namely, the transfer of state assets to private ownership. Concurrently across Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union the symbols of communism have been removed. Towns and cities named after communist heroes have reverted to their former names. The most notable example being the changing of Leningrad back to St Petersburg; and inside these towns and cities many street names have reverted to their pre-communist titles.

The various communist regimes were very fond of statues and memorials. Statues of Marx and Lenin were common in every part of the communist world, and huge memorials to the Red Army were erected in those countries liberated by Soviet forces. Gigantic statues of idealised workers were also fairly common, some as memorials and others as pieces of art. Most of this statuary has been removed: the most dramatic removal being the pulling down of the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet secret police, in front of the Lubyanka prison in Moscow.



A ticket for the direct 'tourist bus service' to Statue Park in Budapest – offering the visitor the chance to view 'Gigantic Monuments from the Communist Dictatorship'

Most of the former communist states have carried through removal programmes. In Hungary the post-communist government had a novel idea. It decided to remove all communist statuary and gather it together in a park named Szoborpark or Statue Park, located on the outskirts of Budapest. Here can be seen statues of Marx, Engels and Lenin; there is a Dimitrov statue, and a head of Rakosi, all that has survived of a full-length figure of the Hungarian dictator. The massive Soviet war memorials have been removed from the centre of Budapest and deposited here; and the

memorial to those Hungarians who fought in the International Brigade has ended up in the park. There are also some huge proletarian figures on view. Curiously, there are no statues of Stalin in the park, the reason being that many statues of the Soviet leader were destroyed or defaced during the Hungarian uprising of 1956. However statues are still being added to stock, so a Stalin may yet turn up. It is certainly a major omission in the collection.

Statue Park has become a tourist attraction. It is open every day and there is a small entrance charge. Special coaches run from the centre of Budapest every hour and there are long queues during the summer months. There is a kiosk on site selling communist kitsch, such as models of Trabant cars; pocket watches with red stars on their faces; lighters bearing the hammer and sickle; and mugs with Lenin's portrait on them. There are also postcards of old communist posters on sale. Hence there's undoubtedly an element of commercialisation on the site that some might find distasteful; however, for anyone interested in the history of European communism, Budapest's Statue Park is worth a visit.

**Archie Potts**

## **Reviews**

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### **Bolshevism and the British Left**

**Kevin Morgan, *Bolshevism and the British Left, part one: Labour Legends and Russian Gold*, pp315; *Bolshevism and the British Left, part two: The Webbs and Soviet Communism*, pp263, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2006, ISBN: vol. 1: 1905007256, vol. 2: 1905007264.**

These are the first two of a three-volume history of British bolshevism, which portrays British communism as an integral part of the wider British labour movement. The first volume amounts to a detailed account of the funding of the CPGB by the Communist International within the framework of party funding in Britain in the interwar period. Initial lavish funding of the CPGB in the 1920s allowed the party to employ an array of paid organisers but also brought internal criticisms of 'Moscow gold' fostering adventurism, demoralisation and bureaucratisation. The Labour intellectuals in the Labour Research Department (LRD), looking for some independent means of finance, were tempted by the Soviet offer only to find that it came with strict Soviet control. George Lansbury was also tempted to accept funding for his struggling *Daily Herald*, but was ultimately forced to decline the offer

In relation to members of parliament and candidates, Morgan shows clearly how Labour MPs and those aspiring to be Labour MPs remained dependant on wealthy backers during the entire interwar period. Party financing in the UK had an inbuilt 'democratic deficit', which, according to Morgan, might explain why the issue of 'Moscow gold' received relatively little attention in the 1920s. Processes of professionalisation and centralisation within the working class parties were eyed suspiciously by many activists, as they saw it as going against the grain of voluntarism and activism.

On the important issue of the impact of 'Moscow gold' on the development of the CPGB, Morgan admits that it furthered the process of stalinisation but argues that its impact on the British party should not be overestimated. He finds little evidence of a systematic and continuous political control of the Comintern over the CPGB and points to the importance of political capital of Communist leaders acquired outside of the apparatus of the CP (e.g. Arthur Horner). Leaders such as Pollitt also showed a lack of deference to the Comintern officials over issues such as cross-party collaboration. Making good use of the comparative method, Morgan argues that in party journalism and over ventures such as the Left Book Club, the CPGB cooperated with other sections of the labour movement in a way which ensured that the Communists were often perceived as part

and parcel of a wider labour movement. The CPGB's policy of revolutionary permeation was in marked contrast to the insistence on independent leadership of such sister parties as the German KPD. Within the Comintern this led to acrimonious debate with Morgan wondering whether it was mere linguistic incompetence when Pollitt referred to the KPD's Wilhelm Pieck as 'Comrade Prick' (p227). In the 1930s, when 'Moscow gold' was drying up for the British communists, their independence from the Comintern increased, as the CPGB was learning to stand on its own feet.

Overall, the first volume successfully contextualises the issue of 'Moscow gold' within the wider framework of party finance in interwar Britain and asks pertinent questions about the inter-relationship of democracy and mechanisms of financing political parties. The second volume addresses the issue of fellow travelling and chooses Beatrice and Sidney Webb as central actors to be analysed. The Webbs were in many respects archetypal figures of an English reformist tradition of socialism (fabian gradualism), yet in the 1930s they famously came to endorse Soviet communism as the beginnings of a 'new civilisation'. Through an in-depth and complex exploration of the continuities in their political thinking which predisposed the Webbs and many of their fellow socialists to become fellow travellers, Morgan highlights the affinities between strands of social democratic thought and Soviet communism. Interestingly those affinities were particularly strong not among statist socialists but among guild socialists, cooperators and those with non-statist conceptions of socialism. Morgan thus demonstrates that there were a variety of different routes from British socialism to British bolshevism. En route, Morgan also fills an important gap in the literature on fabianism in that he sheds light on the Webbs' political thought after 1910 and in that he discovers the Webbs as theorists of community rather than the state.

Among those factors which made the voyage from fabianism to bolshevism possible for the Webbs and their collaborators (such as the Coles, which also receive a considerable amount of attention), the distinct lack of a worked-out theory of the state figures prominently. Other factors, which are all discussed thoroughly in this volume, include a marked indifference to party ties, enmity to social 'parasitism', thinking in terms of human civilisations (sometimes with distinct eugenicist and racial overtones), the elitist cult of the expert, the idealisation of voluntary working class organisations, such as trade unions and cooperative societies, the idea of a rationally organised society and of 'rational consumption', the wholesale embrace of modernity (including technocratic rationality), the lack of any proper conception of politics, disappointment with 'Labour corruption' in the wake of 1931 and the desire to see an improvement in the social status of intellectuals like themselves. Morgan discusses all of these factors with great sophistication and insight into the mechanisms of fellow travelling.

The underlying question connecting those two volumes (and arguably also the third) is why British political culture into the 1940s allowed considerable overlaps and fuzzy borders between social democrats and communists, when these borders were often far more firmly drawn on the European continent. One possible explanation alluded to throughout is that ideas of state and party were far less central to British socialists than to continental ones. Especially in volume one Morgan makes excellent use of comparison to shed light on this question. Sadly there is much less comparative material in volume 2, although the issue of fellow travelling lends itself, just like party finance, to the comparative gaze. However, overall one can already confidently say that this three-volume history of British bolshevism will be a lasting achievement of more than two decades of intense research about the British left. No one working on the British left will be able to ignore these volumes. Given the contested nature of some of the questions these volumes seek to provide answers to, there will be no doubt scholars who would put the emphasis on this or that question differently, and one hopes that these debates might be carried out in the spirit of tolerant pluralism that was after all, for many continental socialists, one of the defining characteristics of the British labour movement.

**Stefan Berger, University of Manchester**

## The Lost World of British Communism

**Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism*, London: Verso, 2006, pp224. ISBN: 1844671038.**

Raphael Samuel (1934-1996) was both a socialist and a historian. These two aspects of his life, political and academic, were closely connected. Born into a communist family milieu, he was educated at the progressive King Alfred's School and at Balliol College, Oxford, where he was taught by Christopher Hill. Already as a young man, Samuel was a member of the Communist Party Historians' Group, alongside much older figures including Hill, E P Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. Like many of these historians – Hobsbawm was one of the exceptions – he left the CPGB in 1956 and was then prominent in the New Left. A founder of the History Workshop movement at Ruskin College, where he was a tutor, he played a major role in the establishment of the *History Workshop Journal*. Much of his historical work was produced in interaction with adult students, often from working-class backgrounds.

*The Lost World of British Communism* is a series of pieces originally published in *New Left Review* in the mid-1980s. It is a series of essays, rather than an academic work, and is based more on Samuel's memories than on archives. Even when he uses historical materials, these are mainly published sources – a reminder, perhaps, that not even British communist archives were properly accessible to researchers in the 1980s. Samuel's tone is personal, close to political journalism, and nourished by a lively memory. More than an academic contribution to the history of British communism, this is a major contribution to the field of autobiographical narratives written by former British communists, especially intellectuals. There is an extensive literature of this type in French, written by ex-activists, and these have provided a fruitful source of data for social scientists and historians. Bernard Pudal's discussion of the autobiography of the former French communist leader Gérard Belloin is a good recent example.<sup>1</sup>

Even so, though Samuel's is not a conventional academic account, his essay could perhaps have been more personal and less general, and the information provided about his own life is not really the main story. Rather, it is the party itself, not Raphael Samuel, that provides the book's main character, with Samuel writing as a dependable witness seeking to describe the construction of a communist mentality around certain vividly depicted values and practices. This demonstrates the richness of the marxist historiography which Samuel learned from the party. It also sheds much light on the everyday life experience of a young communist activist of the time, notably through cultural activities such as song, cinema, etc. The communist mentality Samuel depicts is not so far removed from the French one. For the most part there is the same sense of history and the same set of references inherited from the Soviet influence.

Two points are particularly worth emphasising for those studying British communism in a more comparative perspective. The first is the way in which British communism seemed to be nourished by the outside world. Contrary to a more simplistic way of depicting the communist mentality, Samuel paid attention to the impact of British (and English) culture on the political culture expressed by the CPGB's followers. British communist sensibility was thus composed of national norms and the party's norms, and Samuel stressed that behavioural norms of the time were not always so specific to the CPGB. By the same token, his attention to the period preceding the party's formation to explain its subsequent forms and norms is heuristic in character. Samuel's view is of interest because he doesn't examine the party in itself, but within the context of the whole of British society. The comparison with the Labour Party, as the dominant British working-class party, is present in all the essays.

The second point is that the essays provide another autobiographical piece about the British marxist historians, which may be compared with recent discussions around Eric Hobsbawm's *Interesting Times*.<sup>2</sup> Samuel too as a young man belonged to the Communist Party Historians' Group, which displayed enormous energy and acquired a great intellectual influence from 1946 to 1956. Whereas in France intellectuals were under strict party control,<sup>3</sup> in the small British communist party historians enjoyed greater autonomy of work. This freedom led to a rich marxist

historiography which could be then be pursued from outside of the party's own ranks, as it was by a number of ex-communist historians after 1956. Samuel may in some sense be regarded as a communist (or a socialist) without a party. This would have been more difficult in France, where one could not be considered a communist except as a member of the party.

In Samuel's case, what is also surprising from a French point of view is the absence in the work of a marxist historian of any serious economic or social treatment of the communist party. Instead he produces a cultural or political history of communism at the expense of the socio-economic analysis one might expect to find at the heart of a marxist approach. In Samuel's essays, the CPGB's decline is linked more to a cultural revolution than to social change, for example through the increase of individualism and the undermining of collective ties. This is arguably one of the volume's limitations, and further social contextualisation would be necessary to appreciate more fully the reasons for the decline of the communist party. At the forefront of Samuel's essays there is the perception of decline as seen by a specific social group, namely intellectuals and academic communists. For working-class activists, on the other hand, things could well have been very different. The autobiography is a type of document typically written by intellectuals or leaders, and in both France and the UK the result is the presentation of mainly intellectual points of view about the crisis of communism. Alongside the analysis of this kind of autobiography, Samuel might well have made more use of interviews with rank-and-file activists and drawn more widely on historical data to understand the complexity of communist life.

Raphael Samuel was professor at the University of East London at the time of his death. He established a centre there, now called the Raphael Samuel History Centre, which is dedicated to promoting historical enquiry, especially East London history. This not just an academic centre, and is committed to taking history into the wider community. With all their strengths and limitations, the *Lost World* essays exemplify Samuel's approach to the writing of history and provide a fitting memorial.

## **Julian Mischi**

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Pudal, 'Gérard Belloin, de l'engagement communiste à l'auto-analyse', in O.Fillieule (ed). *Le désengagement militant*, Paris, Belin, 2005, pp155-169.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, London: Penguin edn, 2002. For the French debate around this historian, see *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine*, special double issue, 2006, pp53-4.

<sup>3</sup> Frédérique Matonti, *Intellectuels communistes, essai sur l'obéissance politique, La Nouvelle Critique (1967-1980)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005.

## **The Forgotten Biography of Ernst Thälmann**

### **Peter Maslowski's Forgotten Biography of Ernst Thälmann as Führer of German Communism under the Weimar Republic.\***

**\* Peter Maslowski, *Thälmann*, Leipzig: R Kittner Verlag, 1932**

Almost two decades after the fall of East German communism in 1989, there is still no critical biography of one of twentieth-century communism's most well-known leaders – Ernst Thälmann. For former East Germans over thirty years of age, his name remains today associated with the 'antifascism' propagated by the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in order to legitimate its rule.<sup>1</sup> In no small part, this confirms how far the 'Thälmann myth' was a central feature in the East German school curriculum and, more broadly, stood at the apex of the state's 'political-ideological' educational work.<sup>2</sup> It was disseminated using a vast array of means and materials, from school textbooks, exhibitions, films and slide shows with sound recordings to the national Buchenwald Memorial centre, where Thälmann had been murdered by the Nazis in August 1944. Thälmann's image was also carried through the streets in the official events commemorating 'antifascist resistance'.

Importantly, too, a highly formulaic form of biography writing played a central role in the SED's construction of the 'Thälmann myth'. From the appearance in 1948 of Willi Bredel's *Ernst Thälmann*, which carried a foreword by Wilhelm Pieck, the former leader of the KPD was stylised as an exemplary communist, a hero of the antifascist resistance to be emulated by East German citizens.<sup>3</sup> Autobiographies, too, were used to cultivate the SED's 'Thälmann image' (*Thälmann-Bild*). In all such accounts, from the highest SED leader to unknown local officials, a meeting with – or recollection of – Thälmann was *de rigueur*.<sup>4</sup> In this legitimating narrative, party veterans participation in the pre-war 'antifascist struggles' was presented as what Epstein called 'the embodiment of revolutionary virtue and personal authenticity'.<sup>5</sup>

It was a leadership cult in all but name which, despite some shift in presentation over time, lasted until the end of the GDR's existence in 1989. But its origins were not in the GDR, but rather in the KPD during the Weimar Republic. The key features of the SED image of Thälmann were also core components of the cult of leadership constructed by the KPD's agitprop department from the mid-1920s.<sup>6</sup> It is in this respect that Peter Maslowski's 1932 biography of Thälmann valuably summarises many aspects of the KPD's *Führerkult*. His depiction of Thälmann had at its core four interrelated components: (1) he was the son of a worker, who enjoyed an intimate relationship with the 'working masses'; (2) he was close to Lenin, both ideologically and in terms of his 'honesty' and loyalty to the party; (3) he was a brave 'soldier of the revolution', as demonstrated by his model role in the 'Hamburg Rising' of 1923 and the pursuit of the fight against fascism. Each one of these characteristics was included in the later SED depiction of Thälmann; only Thälmann's subsequent martyrdom under the Third Reich was missing.

Notably, Maslowski's biography was not commissioned by the KPD leadership. It was published by the Leipzig-based 'bourgeois' publishing company 'R Kittler Verlag' in a series of biographical studies entitled 'Männer und Macht' (Men and Power). But, as an editor working on a wide range of the party's regional newspapers from 1920 onwards, he was in a position to know from the inside how Thälmann had been built up by the KPD as the leader of German communism.<sup>7</sup> What is most intriguing about Maslowski's biography is that it underlines the importance of the cult of leadership constructed around Thälmann during the Weimar Republic. Although this evolved in stages, from becoming the public face of communism in 1924 to receiving a *Führer* ovation at the party's twelfth congress in 1929, there is good reason to identify Thälmann as a prototype of the cults of leadership later featuring through the world communist movement.<sup>8</sup>

In almost identical fashion to the SED account, Thälmann's social origins are presented by Maslowski as resolutely proletarian. He is the 'son of a worker' who took risks to support the illegal activities of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) during the Anti-Socialist Laws of the later nineteenth century. Maslowski then presents Thälmann's experiences in the German workers' movement as the development of the 'natural leader' of the KPD. As a member of the SPD (1903) and the Free Trade Unions (1904), he turned down offers of a salaried position in the Hamburg branch of the transport workers' union on the grounds that membership of the union bureaucracy would have alienated him from the 'mass of workers' in the factories. His experience of the 'moderate' pre-war Hamburg SPD, its support for the Kaiser's war effort and the suppression of the 'German Revolution' led him from the SPD through the USPD to the KPD in 1920. Even before joining the KPD, Thälmann is depicted as being a leninist. During the revolution of 1918/19, he had read Lenin's *State and Revolution* in German and 'understood' that 'the basic cause of defeat, in Hamburg as throughout Germany, lay in the absence of a united revolutionary party' (p33). It was this knowledge that led him to work within the USPD to bring its left wing to the KPD. His role here is acclaimed by emphasising that 90% of the Hamburg USPD came over 'with Thälmann' to the KPD at the unification congress in late 1920.

After Thälmann entered the KPD's Central Committee (1921), Maslowski's anti-bureaucratic rhetoric continues. Rather than taking his salary from the party, Thälmann reputedly retained the closest possible connection with the 'masses' as a Hamburg shipyard worker. As a party editor, Maslowski would have been familiar with the central importance of this image of Thälmann as the Hamburg worker who spoke, dressed and acted like a fellow (communist) worker. In his first visit to Moscow, during the Third World Congress of the Comintern (1921), an explicit link is made

between Thälmann's 'honesty' and his class background: he is held up by no less a figure than Lenin as 'a genuine proletarian' from the USPD and, thus, in a position to bring the proletariat under KPD leadership in the mass struggles to come.

An important aspect of both the SED's and Maslowski's 'Thälmann image' is his role as 'hero' of the 'Hamburg Rising' of 1923, which was the KPD's last armed action under the Weimar Republic. Following the 'line' adopted by Moscow at the time, both accounts emphasise that the struggle of the 'Hamburg proletariat' had only failed because it had been abandoned by the then party leader, Heinrich Brandler. While Brandler's strongholds in Saxony and Thuringia failed to fight, the Hamburg party organisation with Thälmann at its head proved able to hold out at the barricades for three days and nights. Intriguingly the SED's *Ernst Thälmann* (1979) and Maslowski's biography conclude with the same quotation from Thälmann on the 'lessons of the Hamburg struggle': 'The uprisings of the proletariat are stages in the triumphal march of the revolution: not only through their directly positive results, but also as a result of the lessons which are hammered into the entire working class'.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, too, both accounts present Thälmann as a symbol of hope in the coming German revolution: 'Saxony and Brandler – that in the minds of the workers is the epitome of failure. But Hamburg and Thälmann – there their hearts beat; their mood of conviction rises that success could have been on their side if the German proletariat had fought like the Hamburg workers under the leadership of the KPD' (p49).

In Maslowski's account, it is Thälmann's pre-eminent role in the KPD, rather than Moscow's intervention, that explains how he took on the leadership in 1925. Thälmann is credited with defeating rival factions in the party's power struggle, enabling the KPD to finally re-orient itself toward the bolshevik ideological and organisational model. In extra-parliamentary campaigning, it is Thälmann who recognised how to 'fight fascism' – an understanding that led to terror attacks on his Hamburg home by 'bands of young fascists' in 1922. Notably, too, Thälmann is credited with enabling the KPD to break with Rosa Luxemburg's belief in the 'spontaneity' of revolution, replacing this with the ideology of the vanguard party. It is Thälmann who sweeps away the 'remnants' of the party's social democratic past, replacing it with bolshevism. He is also applauded as the head of the communist Reichstag faction, whose 'Marxist-Leninist analysis and prognosis' enabled him to 'point the way' in the 'line to be marched' by the party (p55-56). His role as chairman of the party's paramilitary organisation, the League of Red Front Fighters (RFB), and his candidacy in the 1925 and 1932 presidential elections are also used as examples of how Thälmann was both pre-eminent German communist and a 'typical man of the communist workers' (p54). In short, he is depicted as the person enabling 'Bolshevik unity and clarity of leadership' (p54).

Possibly with his wider 'bourgeois' readership in mind, Maslowski's presentation of Thälmann as theoretician and public speaker departs from the KPD's official propaganda and later SED accounts. Maslowski concedes that there are 'more elegant' writers, better theoreticians and 'fierier speakers'. But the text remains hagiography. Maslowski stresses that Thälmann – who is known as 'Teddy' to his comrades – can hold his own with any party intellectual. Trust in him is linked to his class background, as is his 'instinctive' ability to know the correct party line and to spot even the slightest deviation from it. At party conferences he 'picks apart' political deviations and demonstrates how they would damage the party. In short, Maslowski present Thälmann as the embodiment of the party: Thälmann's 'political instinct is not the property of a single person [...it] rises from the collective experience of the entire party' (p63). This aspect of the biography also implicitly aims to explain why the 'anti-bureaucratic' Thälmann become a 'professional revolutionary'. Maslowski refutes the non-communist claims that a 'professional revolutionary' is someone who earns money through revolutionary activity. Instead, it is redefined as a total identification with communism that all party members should aspire to without remuneration:

[A] Communist will never state that he is firstly a sportsman or Free Thinker or the father of a family or a "person" or something of the sort and then alongside this a communist. Rather, in his entire interests, functions, work, in all of his emotions and in his entire life and everything he undertakes, in every case he is first and above all else a Communist and decides everything according to communist principles' (p65).

As Börrnert's study of the SED's mobilisation of the 'Thälmann myth' in the East German education system convincingly demonstrates, for many young people growing up in the GDR the 'Thälmann legend' offered an attractive image, even an imagined alternative to 'really existing socialism'.<sup>10</sup> But it is an image which owed little to reality.<sup>11</sup> Since the opening of the archives, researchers have had access to Thälmann's own autobiographical sketch, written during his imprisonment by the Nazis, which offers a very different life history and self-representation. Perhaps the most surprising of Thälmann's autobiographical revelations is that he was a brave soldier on the Western Front throughout the First World War. Wounded four times, Thälmann recalled that, 'I only ever spent short times in the garrison, because I was not a malingerer, a scaredy cat [or a] coward'.<sup>12</sup> In the typed East German version of the manuscript, Thälmann's recollections about the war and his attitude towards it are omitted and a note inserted which read 'to be related verbally'.

In the historiography of German communism, the movement phase is almost always isolated from the regime phase. Yet, as this review hopes to show, a fuller understanding of communism as a twentieth century phenomenon would be well served by overcoming this artificial periodisation. Similarly, we know much more about the SED's construction of the 'Thälmann myth' than the historic figure, which underlines the importance of a critical biography.

### **Norman La Porte**

With thanks to Dr Rene Wolf for making available to me valuable literature on the 'Thälmann myth' in the GDR.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For English-speaking readers see, for example, A. L. Nothnagle, *Building the East German Myth. Historical Methodology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989* (Ann Arbor, 2000), esp. chapter three.

<sup>2</sup> R. Börrnert, *Wie Ernst Thälmann true und kühn! Das Thälmann-Bild der SED in Erziehungsalltag der DDR* (Bad Heilbrunn, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> S. Barck, *Antifa Geschichten. Eine literarische Spurensuche in der DDR der 1950er und 1960er Jahre* (Cologne, 2003), esp. chapter four.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the memoirs of party veterans in: Author Kollektiv/SED, *Deutschlands unsterblicher Sohn. Erinnerungen an Ernst Thälmann* (Berlin, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> C. Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries. German Communists and Their Century* (Cambridge Mass., 2003), p9.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the party press and related materials, a collection of material, in particular articles carrying Thälmann's name, are collected in: Bundesarchiv (Berlin) SAMPO, RY 1/1/2/707/57.

<sup>7</sup> For a biographical sketch, see Weber/Herbst, *Deutsche Kommunisten. Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945* (Berlin, 2004), pp487-88.

<sup>8</sup> N. LaPorte/K. Morgan, 'Kings among their Subjects: Harry Pollitt and Ernst Thälmann and the Cult of Leadership as Stalinisation', in: N. LaPorte/K. Morgan/M. Worley (eds.), in: *Stalinisation and Beyond* (Basingstoke, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Maslowski, p46; IML, *Ernst Thälmann. Eine Biographie* (Berlin, 1979), p186.

<sup>10</sup> Börrnert, op. cit., p 189.

<sup>11</sup> For an interesting, if little documented, study pulling apart the 'Thälmann myth', see Thilo Gabelmann, *Thälmann ist niemals gefallen? Eine Legende stirbt* (Berlin, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Ernst Thälmann, 'Gekürzter Lebenslauf', in: SAPMO-BArch, Thälmann Nachlass, NL 4003/1 (pp1-29), p20.

## **The German Revolution 1917-1923**

**Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution, 1917-1923* (translated by John Archer, edited by Ian Birchall and Brian Pearce), London: Merlin Press, 2006. ISBN: 0850365791.**

Thanks are owed to Brill and to Merlin for bringing out this English translation, thirty-five years after *La Révolution en Allemagne* first appeared in France. In the intervening period, Broué's book has acquired an underground following: I remember the first time I was told of it, browsing in the Porcupine bookshop beneath Housmans. 'It's the best thing that has been written on the period', I was told, 'just you wait and see when it comes out.' For once, a book does indeed live up to its advance billing.

Broué's thesis can be stated simply: in 1919, 1920 and again in 1923, a large enough number of people in Germany desired a communist revolution and a small enough number opposed it, so that such a revolution (or at least a communist government) was capable of being achieved. That this revolution failed to happen was a result of a combination of determined opposition by the majority social democrats, the murder of key communists in 1919, and the contradictory mood of many rank-and-file socialists in Germany, who wanted (Broué argues) more than the SPD would offer, while remaining tied to that party by considerable bonds of loyalty.

To make this argument compelling, Broué addresses key moments in German history, which will be familiar to many readers, but he does so in a fashion which makes them seem new. 'Everyone knows' that the Spartacist uprising of 1919 was ill-conceived. Opposed by its own leaders, with no support other than from a few dozen deluded fanatics, the movement deserved to go down to defeat. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht's murder was history's verdict against the error of putschism.

Read Broué's *German Revolution*, however, and this suicidal mission is treated in the light of its protagonists' views at the time. The central committee of the newly founded communist party played the opening moves with caution. Luxemburg was opposed to any uprising, fearing that it was indeed premature. What swung her towards insurrection were the signs that a majority of workers in Berlin favoured this approach. The great demonstrations of 5 January 1919, during which workers blocked the centre of the city, from the Siegesallee to the Alexanderplatz, were among the largest protests Germany had then ever seen. There was no absence of mandate. Communists, Independent Socialists and revolutionary shop stewards worked as one. Within forty-eight hours, however, it was apparent that the mood had gone. Organised and determined retreat now was necessary. It was in this second stage of the struggle, Broué argues (convincingly) that the decisive mistakes were made.

Broué makes much again of the second opening, that produced by workers' successful resistance to the Kapp putsch of 1920. With the elected government in voluntary exile, prominent trade unionists displaced the SPD at the head of the movement. Their demand was for socialist unity. Although this was not achieved, a period followed which was open to the left. The communist party, which had practically ceased to exist by spring 1919, was rebuilt under the leadership of Paul Levi, Rosa Luxemburg's last disciple. Levi successfully wooed the membership of the Independent Socialists, who then voted for fusion with the communists. By the end of 1922, membership was around 250,000: the KPD employed some 230 full-time staff, and published some thirty-eight daily newspapers, including publications for women, for peasants, for trade unionists, adolescents and children. The KPD was especially influential in unions such as the seamen's union, the ship carpenters' union, the building workers' union, the rail union, the local government and the transport workers' union. The party had 50,000 members in Rhineland-Westphalia alone.

The frittering then of this revolutionary base, Broué explains in terms of the removal of the one communist, Paul Levi, best trained in the habits of campaigning unity with the SPD; the ascendancy of a KPD 'left' around individuals such as Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow (who were the most hostile to the SPD); and a general failure of collective will in 1923, the year of inflation, during which the KPD seemed constantly on the brink of leading a successful insurrection, while lacking at every stage any sort of thought-out plan to make this next step happen.

A very great deal of the book is dedicated to the decisions of individuals in positions of leadership. Levi is generally treated sympathetically, in contrast to Karl Radek who, despite his hostility to the 1919 uprising (which Broué endorses), is dismissed ultimately as a populariser of other people's ideas, incapable of matching up to a period of crisis. If anything, Broué seems to pull his punches with regard to Zinoviev, the leader of the International for much of this period, who disastrously shielded the KPD ultras. Great criticisms could also be made of Lenin, who was often ill-informed of events, but who did at least acknowledge his errors afterwards.

I was not persuaded by Broué's sympathetic account of the attempts made in 1923 by some communists to woo the nationalist fringe: Broué argues that the nazis' audience was winnable to

the left. I think he exaggerates the coherence of the approaches made as well as their integrity. The tactic might be excusable in general, it may even have been necessary at this time – but its execution was all wrong.

This latter criticism aside, Broué's book is a superb testament to a period which until now has lacked the major English-language study that it deserves.

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