

## THE COMMUNIST EXPERIENCE: A PERSONAL APPRAISAL

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In the preface to the English edition of 1888 of the *Communist Manifesto* Frederick Engels explained why the Manifesto of 1848 could not have been called a *socialist* Manifesto. He continued:

By Socialists, in 1847, were understood, on the one hand the adherents of the various Utopian systems: Owenites in England, Fourierists in France, both of them already reduced to the position of mere sects, and gradually dying out; on the other hand, the most multifarious social quacks, who by all manner of tinkering professed to redress, without any danger to capital and profit, all sorts of social grievances, in both cases men outside the working class movement, and looking rather to the 'educated' classes for support. Whatever portion of the working class had become convinced of the insufficiency of mere political revolutions, and had proclaimed the necessity of a total change, called itself Communist. It was a crude, rough-hewn, purely instinctive sort of communism; still it touched the cardinal point and was powerful enough amongst the working class to produce the Utopian communism of Cabet in France, and of Weitling in Germany. Thus, in 1847, socialism was a middle class movement, communism a working class movement. Socialism was, on the Continent at least, 'respectable'; communism was the very opposite. And as our notion, from the very beginning, was that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself', there could be no doubt as to which of the two names we must take. Moreover, we have, ever since, been far from repudiating it.<sup>1</sup>

The time has now come for such a denial and repudiation. The period of Communism, centred upon the history of the Soviet Union since 1917, and of the countries of Eastern Europe since the late 1940s, which gave inspiration and hope to millions of people all over the world, has now ended in discredit and dishonour. There are still parts of the world — South Africa is an obvious example — where the name Communist Party still carries respect; but in Europe especially the name and the organisation are synonymous with economic incompetence and material ineptitude of a massive kind, together with the bitter political regimes of Stalinism. The disappearance of any credible alternative to capitalism in any part of the world today requires the most serious examination and analysis of the historical factors involved in the momentous events of 1989/1990. For someone like the present writer, who spent twenty-two years in the British

Communist Party until 1956, the enquiry is not into the nature and character of Stalinism and the extensive deformations occurring in countries which called themselves socialist, because that exploration began seriously in the year of **Khrushchev's** speech, and has continued since. It is rather the survey of the period as a whole and of a sombre assessment of the future of socialism. **'Goodbye to All That'** is the triumphalist cry of the enemies of socialism, but the hostility of the propertied classes everywhere has always been unrelenting. What we have to appreciate, however, is that cynicism towards the socialist project extends to very large numbers of ordinary people in the advanced industrial world, and that there is here a very serious discussion and debate to be revived and renewed. Such a debate cannot ignore the central problems of the contemporary world where a majority of the world's population remain in economic bondage, poverty and material degradation to whose conditions the industrialised sectors have always and continuously contributed.

It is necessary to begin, not with 1917, but with the three decades or so preceding the outbreak of the first great war of the twentieth century. It was in these earlier decades that there emerged the modern labour movements of Europe, and, to a more limited extent, of the United States and other countries of mostly white settlement. Continued technological change in the closing decades of the nineteenth century was producing the conditions **for** the assembly line: it was the age of steel and electricity superseding the first main stage of industrialisation based upon coal and iron. The advanced world was on the threshold of Fordism; and it was in these years that the ideas of socialism, anarchism, and especially in some parts of Europe, of marxism, gradually took hold of the minds of quite large sections of working people. Internationalism, and solidarity with the struggles of other nations has a long history: in modern times notably with the revolutionary France of the 1790s; but there was now developing a new sort of awareness of the interrelatedness of national struggles. The Paris Commune was a landmark in this appreciation that **'All Men are Brethren'**;<sup>2</sup> and Victor Serge, nearly four decades later, provided in his Memoirs an illustration of the growing internationalism throughout Europe. The occasion was the execution of the famous Spanish educationalist, Francisco Ferrer, in early October 1909. Ferrer was first an anarchist and then, in the later part of his life, a radical free-thinker concerned with education of a new kind; anti-militarist, anti-clerical, rationalistic and humanitarian. His Modern School became internationally known. Following a general uprising in Barcelona, with which Ferrer had no connection, he was framed, tried, and found guilty, and quickly brought before a firing squad. All Europe knew it was a judicial murder; and Serge described the reaction:

I had written, even before his arrest, the first article in the great Press campaign conducted on his behalf. His transparent innocence, his educational activity, his courage as an independent thinker, and even his man-in-the-street appearance endeared him infinitely to the whole of Europe that was, at the time, liberal by sentiment and in intense ferment. A true international consciousness was growing from year to year, step by step with the progress of capitalist civilisation. Frontiers were crossed without formalities, some trade unions subsidised travel for their members; commercial and intellectual exchanges seemed to be unifying the world. Already in 1905 the anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia had roused a universal wave of condemnation. From one end of the Continent to the other (except in Russia and Turkey) the judicial murder of Ferrer had, within twenty-four hours, moved whole populations to incensed protest.<sup>3</sup>

The spread of this internationalist sentiment was sharply reversed with the beginning of the first world war; but over the war years the horrendous carnage on both Western and Eastern fronts violently assaulted the consciousness of both combatants and civilians; and when the Bolsheviks took power in October 1917 it seemed to the socialists of Europe and in other continents that a beacon of light was now shining through the gloom of death and destruction. For many who were living at the time of the Russian revolution it was the electrifying moment of their whole lives. The people had taken power; the appeal of the new Soviet government was to the oppressed masses of the world; and in the colonial countries of European imperialism, the message of liberation and independence was never again to go unheard. Lenin and the Bolsheviks understood their own revolution as the precursor of the world revolution which would overthrow capitalism and put a new kind of society in its place. The national Communist Parties which established themselves immediately after the ending of the war and came together under the banner of the Communist International, shared the belief they were part of a world movement that through their disciplined leadership of the working people would achieve their revolutionary aims and objectives. For more than three decades after 1917 there was much that could support these ideas and ideals. The war which began in 1914 brought about the collapse of liberal democracies in one European country after another; and for the next forty years world capitalism moved through successive crises. Economic collapse on a world scale was followed by the conquest of power by Nazism in Germany; and the black night descended. The civil war in Spain and the outbreak of the second world war: for the propertied classes the world was staggering from one catastrophe to another. Fear — a bitter savage fear of communism, and of the potential power of ordinary working people — dominated the politics of international relations.

By the 1930s, together with the introduction of the Five Year Plans, these developments enhanced the role and place of the Soviet Union in

world affairs, and strengthened the loyalty and devotion to the cause of **workers'** power on the part of increasing numbers of militant workers and a growing minority of intellectuals. We have become increasingly aware, in the most recent decades, of the bitter paradox of the history of the 1930s. On the one hand the ideal of the first workers' state won wider support than ever before in the minds of many sections of the international labour movement. The initiatives the Soviet Union took to build a unity against fascism; their support for Republican Spain; the vigorous part which national communist parties played against their own propertied classes who were appeasing the fascist powers and encouraging them to turn eastwards against Soviet Russia: all contributed to the growing support being **enjoyed** by the Communist parties in Europe and in many countries of the world. On the other hand it was in the same decade that Stalinist repression inside the Soviet Union became an integral part of the social order. The brutal realities of the tyranny inside the boundaries of the Soviet state which became known to any significant numbers of militants in the rest of the world was remarkably limited; and the different level of awareness in different countries was striking. In Britain, for example, the Trotskyist movement was numerically very small, and intellectually feeble, and appreciation of the nature and character of Stalinism was confined to very few within the broad labour movement. No doubt if war had not come in September 1939 the debates over the Soviet trials of 1936-8 would have led to a clearer understanding of the oppressive and bloody regime that Stalin presided over. But while the Nazi-Soviet Pact encouraged some anti-Soviet sentiment, the German attack upon Russia in June 1941, the sacrifices of the Soviet people in their Homeric struggles against German and other armies, the recognition that the overwhelming strength of the German forces were concentrated on the Eastern Front, and that if Russia had been defeated there would have been no victory over fascism: all induced a torrent of sympathy and support for the Soviet Union. It swept through the non-fascist world and was irrepressible in its warmth and responsiveness. Why and how this sympathy, apparently so deeply felt, so quickly evaporated after **1945** is a matter for complex historical analysis, for which the brief summary below offers only a few elementary pointers.

We must begin with the situation in **1945** when the crucial victories of the Red Army in the defeat of fascism together with the heroic record of the Communist parties in Europe, and within the national liberation struggles of South-East Asia, lifted the menace of bolshevism for the propertied classes of the whole world to new levels of awareness. The counter-revolution had already been widely discussed within the British Foreign Office and the American State

Department — and in other parts of their respective State organisations; and countervailing measures were already planned or in process of initiation. Within a month of the invasion of Normandy, in the summer of 1944 and nearly a year before the war with Germany was concluded, the planning staff of the British Chiefs of Staff were setting down on paper the possibility that Germany might have to be re-armed to counter the Russian **menace**;<sup>4</sup> and in the United States the list of required military and air force bases round the world were being seriously considered from 1943 on. When the Labour Government in Britain came to power in July 1945 there was no change in foreign policy, and it can be seriously argued that Ernest Bevin was more single-minded in his anti-Sovietism than a Conservative government would have been: not least because the opposition to Eden and Churchill carrying through the policies that Bevin achieved would have been much stronger and much more vociferous. Whitehall was more single minded in the early months of peace than was Washington in its anti-Soviet policies, but the forces for counter-revolution in the United States were always strong, and grew stronger month by month. George **Kennan's** Long Telegram was written as early as February 1946 — five months after the end of the war with Japan — and it provided the anti-Soviet groups in Washington with their theoretical guide-lines. Both countries, with the United States dominating, **co-**ordinated the strategy and tactics of the Cold War. The leadership of the British TUC and that of the American Federation of Labor played a not unimportant part in this global **strategy**;<sup>5</sup> and the Vatican, always reactionary, undertook a much more extended role than is usually appreciated. Above all, the capitalist west won the propaganda battle for the minds of their peoples, greatly aided by a Soviet Foreign policy that at times was stunningly incompetent and on a day to day basis exhibited attitudes of harsh stupidity and cruelty. The Soviet Union was not expansionist beyond its requirements of a cordon **sanitaire** on its western borders; and the widely believed idea that Russia was waiting only for the opportunity to march across Europe, or into the Middle East, is no longer accepted even by orthodox **historians**.<sup>6</sup> It was the great lie upon which the Cold War was nourished; but the ways in which the Soviet Union pursued its foreign affairs bears a considerable responsibility for its continued nourishment. The Soviet Union, it needs to be emphasised, was not, however, the major architect of the Cold War; that dishonour belongs firmly to the United States and the United Kingdom. Anti-Soviet policies began on the first day of the 1917 Revolution, and what has happened after 1945 has been their intensification and expansion.

If we take 1950 as roughly the year when the immediate post-war reconstruction had been achieved — in both the West and the East —

the decades which followed provided western capitalism with two developments of quite crucial importance in the struggle against the Soviet Union and its allies. The first was an economic boom of global proportions the like of which had never previously been experienced; and in the course of the boom the technology of Fordism began to move into the automation of the computer age. Within the Soviet Union itself the rapid development of Cold War practices by the western powers encouraged the intensification of an already pervasive Stalinism, and the fortress mentality which ensued effectively eliminated any forces for political change. The imposition of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe was followed by the fabrication of treason trials on the Russian model, and within the Soviet Union the doctors' plot would no doubt have offered the spectacle of the pre-war trials had it not been for the death of Stalin himself.

The consequences of the increased repression inside Russia, and the stories reaching the West of the cruelties within the Soviet zones of occupation, inevitably stimulated a growing recognition of the nature of Stalinism as it had developed through the 1930s and after. There was unquestionably exaggeration in many of the accounts that were published in the popular press, but the realities of the labour camps began to imprint themselves upon popular consciousness, and the ideals, and ideas, of socialism began slowly to wither; much aided by the rising standards of living that have been such a notable feature of the lives of most working people from the 1950s on. The mass Communist parties of Italy and France, with their outstanding record during the period of resistance, suffered less than other left-wing parties, but a steady seepage of support and membership has been a common feature in all the countries of advanced capitalism. Social-democratic parties — the word is used in the classical sense — have become steadily more reformist, and steadily less challenging to the capitalist system. The history of decline of the communist party in Britain in the decade or so after 1945 was slower than it might otherwise have been, partly because the American-British alliance was pursuing a counter-revolutionary policy on a global scale, but in Britain especially because the disintegration of the Empire was being met with bloody repression in Kenya, Malaya, Cyprus; and no socialist or communist could offer anything but opposition. It was when Khrushchev in 1956 officially pronounced upon the tyrannies and mass persecutions and executions of the Stalin era, all the doubts and misgivings now came together and produced a world wide crisis in the Communist movements that was accentuated by the invasion of Hungary in the autumn of the same year. Some of the smaller communist parties, the British among them, started to fall apart; and only the momentum of their past slowed down their inevitable decline.

There might have been some possibilities of renewal, both within the Soviet Union and inside the national Communist parties; but if Britain is any example, the forces of the old established bureaucracy, and the intellectual tyranny of old ideas, effectively submerged the possibilities of renewal. It is now clear that for a complex of reasons the Soviet Union found impossible to restructure the economy to take account of a rapidly changing technology, to develop a consumer goods market,<sup>7</sup> and to introduce a general flexibility in economic organisation at all levels. The results we have seen in the tumultuous events of 1989-1990.

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It is time to clothe this brief historical account with personal experience, my own in particular. What has happened in the year to 1990 has been an historical moment of great significance, not only for Europe and the relations with the United States, but on a world scale. Without question, there has taken place a major defeat of the socialist idea and ideal. It matters not that a majority of socialists in the world had long been aware of the internal problems of the USSR: its lack of elementary democratic procedures and the absence of civil rights, even though the excesses of the Stalin era seemed to have gone in Russia itself. Violations of human decency were common enough in the countries of Eastern Europe. The evil deeds of the bourgeois democracies were many but this was no argument to set against the common knowledge of what was happening in the countries of professed socialism, as the dwindling membership and influence of the communist parties in most countries were only too obvious a reflection. The shouts of triumph from bourgeois commentators are only to be expected, including the idiotic prophecy of Francis Fukuyama that 1989 was the end of history and the future belonged to the liberal free market; but what is much more of concern is the intellectual and political collapse of those on the Left, especially noticeable among people who remained within their own communist parties, that the whole Communist experience was a disaster, and that we either have to begin again or recognise that what is so widely and euphemistically called the market economy has proved its economic superiority. In many important matters we have indeed to begin again, and the process in historical terms will be long and bitter. To suggest, however, that the Communist experience has been a folly is seriously to misunderstand — indeed fundamentally to misunderstand — what it meant in global political terms, in the national politics of individual countries and within the individuals themselves who played their minor parts in the historical experience. We have all begun to

understand, much more clearly than ever before, what the radicals of the early nineteenth felt when they remembered the wonderful hopes they had all experienced with the Revolution in France, and witnessed its descent into Bonapartism thereafter. William Hazlitt is once again required reading.

Analytical accounts of the Communist experience in Britain are rare, as are serious memoirs of communist party militants. We are therefore much in debt to Raphael Samuel for his three articles in *New Left Review* (Nos 154, 156, and 165, 1985-87) although there is a great deal to disagree with in his accounts. He has, however, put up a number of important landmarks for serious discussion and debate, and we must all be grateful for this massive outpouring of argument and historical fact.

My own comments mainly relate to the concluding section in his first part in which he discusses the background to his membership of the Communist Party. 'Family Communism' he titles it, and his opening words: 'I was brought up as a true believer' provides the introduction to a remarkable story of his childhood and teenage days within a Jewish milieu in which twelve members of his family, including some by marriage, were Communist Party activists. For his mother's generation, he tells us, 'Communism, though not intended as such, was a way of being English, a bridge by which the children of the ghetto entered the national culture'. For Raphael himself:

Like many Communists of my time, I combined a powerful sense of apartness with a craving for recognition, alternating gestures of defiance with a desire to be ordinary and accepted as one of the crowd. If one wanted to be charitable, one might say that it was the unresolvable duality on which British Communists find themselves impaled today.<sup>8</sup>

I do not in any way deny the validity of Raphael Samuel's own personal history as he has set it down in these fascinating pages but the historian in him might have made the crucial point that it was a very unusual history, typical of many Jewish comrades but not in any way relevant to most of the working class militants who joined the Communist Party in its first thirty years or so, and not relevant either to most of the non-Jewish intellectuals who also became members. Anyone familiar with the intellectual and social history of the American Communist Party, especially in the New York area, will recognise many similarities with Raphael's own experience; and the American documentation is more prolific and more illuminating than anything we have so far produced on this side of the Atlantic. The point needs to be made at the outset that this is a very old country; there is a native radicalism among ordinary people which goes back a very long way, and the Communist Party which was founded in 1920 grew out of these traditions: a source, no doubt, of both its strengths

and its weaknesses.

There is a further point to be made in this context. One of the problems of Raphael's approach is that it offers strong support for the widely used argument that the Communist Party was a substitute for the Church; that Party members showed many of the characteristics of religious believers; and it follows, although Raphael does not make specifically this particular point, that when disillusionment sets in and resignation from the Party was accepted, it was **'The God that Failed'**. Let it be acknowledged that there were many inside the Communist Party whose commitment was total to the point of religious conviction. To work in any organisation of the Left requires a spiritual dedication, in some degree or other; without it there can be no sustained involvement against the powers of darkness, in whatever period of history or however defined. The history of radicalism in the past three centuries has been expressed in different language at different times, and in the twentieth century the language has often, not always, been expressed in secular terms. Faith, in some degree or other, a set of beliefs, a moral conviction, however inadequately articulated, there must always be; but for most people in this century dedication in the cause of human emancipation has stopped short of an intense religiosity which Doris Lessing so beautifully portrayed in her short story **'The Day That Stalin Died'**.<sup>9</sup> There are two points to be made in this context. The first is that political dedication in Britain of the kind experienced in the Communist Party has not in any way been unique to that Party. It has been represented within many individuals during the history of radicalism in these islands. Tommy Ramsay, born around 1810 in Durham county, spent his whole life preaching the necessity of organisation to the pitmen of his county. He was in the great strike of the **Pitman's** Union of Tyne and Wear in 1832, and in every major conflict thereafter. On many occasions he was victimised, and made homeless, and by the last years of his life was being refused employment from one **end** of the county to another. Like so many Durham miners he was a chapel-goer. Less than a year before he died, on June 15, 1872, he was a speaker at the first annual gala of Durham miners and their families; and looking over the great crowd of about 30,000, Tommy Ramsay spoke with feeling and great emotion at the unity of the workers for which he had striven so long: **'Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation'**. Just about a hundred years later Jack Nicholson died. He had been secretary of the Hull Trades Council for over thirty years; always on the Left but never a Communist Party member; and he worked seven days and nights a week. The day after his death his widow collected all his papers, pamphlets, books — and Jack was a magpie who saved everything and kept a mass of material in the shed

at the bottom of his garden — and burned the lot. A funeral pyre to commemorate the bitter years of neglect that Jack's devotion to the working class cause had conferred upon her.

Those who have been totally committed to the Union, or the Co-operative Society, or the Labour Party, or the Communist Party have, however, always been in a minority, and often a small minority. This is my second point: that in every political/social organisation, however revolutionary its principles or however strict its formal discipline, it has been unusual, except in times of crisis, for all their members to offer a commitment that was total. The minority of the totally committed have been surrounded by far larger numbers whose general agreement can be accepted, but whose practical contribution will never match that of the fervent minority of activists. It could not be otherwise. There are a myriad of reasons in most lives for not being a totally committed political activist. Bourgeois society constantly inculcates individualism and self-interest. On another plane, there are families to be worked for and cared for. There are many other things in life than politics, broadly defined, and a life of political activism can for some be intellectually and emotionally constricting. For most people to move into a position of opposition brings with it difficulties, problems, stress and strain; and for working people often hardship and oppression of varying kinds.

And so to my personal history. I refer to brief biographical details, not because the history of one individual is of any particular significance, unless the person concerned is of national importance which the present writer emphatically is not, but because the variety of experience in the Communist movement in its most expansive period requires emphasis. Ordinary people, those who were in the **majority** of communist recruits in the years between the wars and during the second war itself, came from a wide sample of the population. Unlike Raphael Samuel, for example, I myself had no need to develop a sense of belonging: I did belong, and it never occurred to me to have any doubts about my position. It was not at all that I belonged to the privileged groups of society, except in the important sense that I was never subject to material insecurity. Most of my life as a child and a teenager was lived in a comfortable petty-bourgeois family milieu. I had the advantage — which became more obvious to me later in life — that I spent my first four years in a working class home in a small industrial town in Lincolnshire where I was offered all the love and emotional security that young children need, even though my own mother was away working in London. From the age of six my mother and I moved into a lower middle class environment, into a house in which my mother acted as housekeeper, and in a few years married the man she worked for (her first husband, my father, had been killed

during the first world war). My mother was an active Anglican, and my step sister and I went to church twice a day on Sundays, and I sang in the choir. Later, when I had become a communicant, I became a server, an assistant to the priest. I was never committed in a religious sense and by the time I was fourteen I had ceased consciously to be a Christian; but it made no difference to my life-style. There was no point in creating a family upheaval, and the church provided an extremely lively social life for its teenagers. So I continued to go to Church, enjoying the singing and in later life being grateful for the knowledge I acquired of the Old and New Testaments, but much more at the time the round of tennis, dancing, family parties that group life round the Church brought with it. Until the age of sixteen when I took the equivalent of today's 'O' levels, I was uninterested in academic work, much to the dismay of my mother, but I was increasingly competent at most sports and I was exploring the mysteries of life with the help of girls at the local convent school. I was willingly, and pleasantly, seduced when I was sixteen by the elder sister of my current girl friend, and in my sixth form years I was occasionally offered a return of her favours. The last two years at what was a very good grammar school were very different from those that had gone before. For reasons which I cannot explain but must have been connected with the excellent teaching in the sixth forms, I turned over from being idle at my books and began working extremely hard. I continued a range of sports and ended my last year at school as Captain of the school, and captain of association football, swimming and athletics. In all three I represented my county of Essex. I entered the London School of Economics in the autumn of 1934, with a junior scholarship, to which was automatically added a County Major scholarship; and I joined the Communist Party within two months.

I became a member of the Communist Party without any sense of exultation although it would be wrong to deny in any way the intellectual excitement that a discovery of marxism created. Moreover it is not difficult to understand why intelligent young men and women joined the Communist Party from the mid-1930s on. For one thing the stupidities of the 'social-fascist' period were mostly over, but much more important was the world capitalist crisis, the ravages of which were still blindingly obvious, both in Britain and in the world as a whole. Fascism had come to power in Germany in the early months of **1933**, a description which it is too easy to understand in an academic way without appreciating the passionate hostility that developed against its bestialities among my contemporaries. At the same time the feebleness of the Labour Party leadership following its ignominious defeat in **1931** developed a scepticism towards social-democracy which in my case has never abated. There was a general failure of the Labour

Party to offer a sustained opposition to the National Government; a refusal to provide any support for the national Hunger Marches which Wal Hannington and his comrades so successfully organised; its advice to the labour movement not to oppose Mosley and his fascists on the streets; the endorsement which was given to the infamous policy of Non-intervention in the first eighteen months of the Spanish civil war: who could support these broken-backed politicians by joining their Party? Quite a lot of Communists did, of course, infusing a vigour in local and regional Labour groups which would not otherwise have been **there**.<sup>10</sup>

For young intellectuals with any generosity of spirit there were additional factors beyond the poverty of so many of their own people, and the brutalities of fascism. Bourgeois society was under increasing criticism for its callousness, greed and cultural emptiness. *Left Review*, especially in its first years, was as lively a journal as one could wish for;<sup>11</sup> and within my own intellectual environment of LSE the sterility of the orthodox economics of Lionel Robbins and von Hayek was taken as given. Against the leading economists there was Harold Laski whose influence on the present writer was far-reaching. Laski drove one into the library, while Communist Party activity often involved the streets. It has, however, often been remarked that communist students were expected to be 'good' students, and this has not seldom been misinterpreted. I speak here for myself but to be a good student meant that if you were going to play any part in the undermining of bourgeois society, it was necessary to be able to engage the philosophers and cultural apologists of bourgeois society on their own ground. Long before I read Gramsci this was my understanding of what was involved in being a 'good' student. There was never a suggestion that it was the necessary road to an affluent career in the future; there was indeed something of an unemployment problem for graduates. Intellectual competence to the highest level of **one's** ability was assumed to be a desirable good, and in **one's** Final year at LSE, every member of the Communist Party was excused all political activity, and it was expected that you would get the best degree that you were capable of.

What the LSE years provided was a continuous confirmation of the marxist analysis of contemporary capitalism. It was, it needs to be emphasised, not a dogmatic marxism that went unquestioned. In the matter of Russia matters were different, and that question is discussed briefly below. The marxism that we taught ourselves was based first upon the writings of Marx and Engels, and the literature of classical marxism that was gradually being made available. For me, the publication of the *Selected Correspondence* in 1934 was of **major** significance. No one could read the letters of Marx and Engels

without becoming aware of how conscious they were of the complexities of their contemporary world and of historical explanation in general. There was also a growing volume of work upon British history. Apart from the **Marx-Engels** Correspondence, superbly edited by Dona Torr, John **Strachey's** *The Coming Struggle for Power* which had its fourth edition in 1934 (first appearing in 1932) was an exciting intellectual experience and there was Hessen's study of '**The Social Roots of Newton's Principia**' which made such an impact upon the radically minded young scientists of the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> I got a great deal from Theodore Rothstein's *From Chartism to Labourism*, which I have always thought an under-rated text<sup>13</sup> and in 1937 Allen Hutt produced *The Post- War History of the British Working Class*, and in the following year A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England* provided the Left with an alternative version of their island's history. I started collecting socialist and communist literature from my early days as a student — not least through the annual *Daily Worker* bazaars in London — and I began reading the left wing literature of the early labour movement with *Labour Monthly*, which carried a good deal of historical material, probably the most important. I also went beyond Britain. Laski in his lectures encouraged his listeners to read the French writers of the Enlightenment, and I did; and he also talked a great deal about the contemporary United States with whose radical literature I gradually became familiar. I cannot recall why I became fascinated with the history of modern China, but my reading began with Louis Fischer's *The Soviets and World Affairs* (1930), and went on from there. When the Left Book Club began in the summer of 1936 the range of world politics available widened considerably. In all this we were fortunate to have access to the LSE library, one of the few academic institutions with an international labour and socialist collection.

It is necessary to emphasise the intensity of intellectual debate and discussion during my formative years at LSE. For one thing nearly half the total student body were post-graduate students and they seemed to use the **junior** common room more than their own but more important, we all ate together in the same refectory. Among communist students — and the nominal total at one time was around a hundred members — '**Bolshevik self-criticism**' was a phrase commonly on our lips — mainly as a **joke**, it must be said — but we did assume that it was incumbent upon us to evaluate critically the national and international situation. All our party meetings opened with a political discussion and although Palme Dutt's '**Notes of the Month**' in *Labour Monthly* were always taken to be the most important signposts to be followed, I do not recall that they were accepted without question. In general, of course, the major issues of

the years from 1934 to the beginning of war were in broad terms agreed upon by all or most of the Left in Britain. The exception was the internal situation in Soviet Russia, with the political trials of the Old Bolsheviks in the years 1936 to 1938 as the centrepiece of argument and discussion. One of my contemporaries was Alec Nove with whom I argued for many hours about the trials. He was right and I was wrong, although it is always necessary to appreciate why so many others were wrong with me. It was not the case in the United States where there was a Trotskyist movement of some intellectual liveliness; but there was surprisingly little critical comment from within the United Kingdom. It was not wholly absent and some of the best minds of the labour movement were either sceptical or in firm opposition. The *New Statesman* articulated the doubts; the *Manchester Guardian* kept its columns open to all points of view; H. N. Brailsford, the greatest socialist journalist of the inter-war years, consistently regretted and sharply criticised the trials; and Emrys Hughes, editor of the Scottish *Forward* attacked the procedures of the trials and maintained a principled policy of opposition while keeping his columns open to different views. What must be appreciated however are two things, and these are put forward not in an apologetic sense but as historical explanation: the first was that the weight of evidence available to British readers on the Left was overwhelmingly in support of the trials; and the second was the international situation through 1937 and 1938. Bukharin was shot three days after the Nazis marched into Austria in March 1938; Munich provided the major betrayal in the autumn of the same year; and the Spanish Republic collapsed in the early months of 1939.<sup>14</sup>

These were years when we learned that the British ruling classes were wholly unscrupulous and that they would go to any lengths to protect what they regarded as their fundamental interests; that the hostility to the Soviet Union, and to their serious challengers on the Left, was all-pervasive; that the leadership of the Labour Party and the TUC could never be expected to offer any significant opposition to the ruling groups, and that only pressure from below could be expected to achieve some degree of change. Certainly I never believed that socialism for Britain was on the agenda, and my view has not altered for the past half century. In personal terms what I learned from my communist years at LSE was intellectual discipline and a strong commitment to party work. This was not true of the majority of my student comrades since most left the Communist Party either during the war or within a few years of the end of the war; but few resigned with feelings of bitterness that expressed themselves in the kind of denunciation that has not been uncommon with the American Communist Party or in certain of the Communist parties of

Europe. I would guess that my practical commitment was always stronger than the majority of my friends, and that my six years in the army during world war two were important in strengthening my political position. Before however expanding that statement, let me just say that student political life in the Communist Party was exciting, very lively intellectually, and fun. Leonard Woolf titled his memoirs of the years between the wars *Downhill All the Way* and on any rational assessment this was a wholly reasonable description of an exceedingly unpleasant and grim period of world history. But we were young in the 'thirties, and youth has a resilience and a buoyancy that shines through the darkening vistas of the future. It was not that we were Pharisaical in our denunciations of the evils of fascism, or the hypocrisy of our own politicians; but we still had hope and there was a life before us. So alongside our serious study, and our whole-hearted support for Republican Spain and our deeply felt emotions when the Spanish cause began to be overwhelmed, we also led a happy social life: we danced, we had lots of parties at which memory suggests we seemed to be singing much of the time, we fell in love, and we went to Paris for five pounds a week: a skilled worker's wage. We were young, and learning about life was still exciting.

I graduated in the summer of 1937 with what is known as a good degree; and I was unemployed for the next nine months, in the end having to take a job in business. In my period of unemployment I worked on a voluntary basis for Dorothy Woodman's Union of Democratic Control and in particular for the China Campaign Committee. I also became London organiser for the student communist party, and in the year before war broke out I began to work with the London organisation of the National Unemployed Workers Movement, and thereby made the acquaintance of one of the great militants of Communist history, **Wal** Hannington. The London organiser was Don Renton, who had fought in Spain.

My own political education broadened considerably during the six years of war. I was called up in the spring of 1940 and refused to take an officer's training course that was soon offered me. It was all a matter of accent. The political advice the Communist Party offered was that all comrades who were offered commissions should take them, and this seemed to me quite the wrong approach. I had a number of arguments with senior party officials at King Street — which was the national headquarters of the Party in Covent Garden — and went away unconvinced, and unchanged in my attitude. My argument was that it would be wrong to enter a class-based structure that it would be impossible to change, and moreover that if there was any 'trouble' — I had no idea in 1940 what 'trouble' meant — it would be more sensible to be in the NAAFI canteen with ordinary

soldiers than in the officer's mess. The irony of my army career was that I was soon promoted to be gun sergeant in charge of a heavy **anti-aircraft** detachment: we were on 3.7 inch guns which fired a shell weighing about half a hundredweight. This promotion I did not object to, since all the fifteen in my gun detachment had joined up the same time as myself, and by this time we were all friends. Most were labouring working men from the East End of London, and with one other I was the only middle-class member of the group. I talked politics a lot of the time, and my wife sent me each week a bundle of literature which I sold on a regular basis. The trouble came after about **18 months**. We had spent the year of the blitz — August **1940** to May **1941** on the docks in Liverpool, and had been firing almost every night. It was very hard work, and occasionally dangerous, and there developed strong bonds of comradeship between all of us. By this time I was known throughout the Battery (a Battery is made up of eight guns) as a Red, or so I was informed by the Quarter-master Sergeant one day who asked me where I got all the literature that I sold each week; and it was therefore with some surprise that I learned I was to be promoted to sergeant-major to take over a new Battery that was about to be formed. My own unit was scheduled to go abroad: to North Africa as it turned out. I refused the promotion, was brought before the colonel of the regiment, and after half an hour was still saying no. When I returned to my own Battery I was told by the Major — with whom I had good relations — that the Colonel was giving me the option of accepting promotion or a posting to Iceland, where the tour of duty was two years. I accepted promotion.

I spent a year in the Shetlands and then transferred into a course for Gunnery Instructors. It was a three months course and if you passed you became one of the elite groups in the Royal Artillery. I was still with the rank of sergeant major, and after becoming highly specialised in German gunnery equipment, and therefore expecting a posting to the second front in Europe, I was shipped to India where I remained for the last two years of my army career.

My Indian years were to be crucial in the way my political thinking developed **and** in the commitment to my socialist ideals. It was not just the poverty, although the early months of contact with the levels of material degradation that the masses endured were numbing and never ceased to shock. As a contemporary liberal commentator said: 'It burns like acid into the **brain.**' Even more was association with members of the Indian Communist Party. I had known in England that I was going to India, and went carrying letters to the Party leaders in Bombay, where the Party headquarters were. Mohan **Kumaramangalam**<sup>15</sup> was president of the Cambridge Union just before the war — a close friend of Victor Kiernan — and he was now

the youngest member of the Central Committee. Through him, of course, I met all the leading members of the Party including its General Secretary P. C. Joshi, and wherever I went in India I made contact with the local Party. So did many other British communists, I should add. What impressed me, and it has always remained with me, was the self-sacrifice and dedication of the full-time Party workers. I had contact, to a much more limited extent, with the rank and file. I gave talks to peasant groups and on two occasions to industrial workers but real contact was much more difficult, not least because of the language problem. I became reasonably fluent in Urdu — I had to because for much of my time I was attached to Indian regiments — but it was Army Urdu full of English gunnery expressions.

To listen to these Party activists, some of whom had been terrorists in their youth, and to their stories of underground work and their life in prison, was both exhilarating and sobering, much more the latter than the former. British Imperialism became a reality of a kind that is not always accessible from books although one must never underestimate the importance of anti-imperialist writing. I had one extraordinary piece of luck at the end of the war with Japan, in that friends were able to obtain educational leave of absence for me to attend the Bombay School of Economics. My own headquarters knew nothing of this; it took them two and a half months to find me; and during that period I worked every day at the Party headquarters while living with a liberal Quaker family in a middle class area of the city.

British Communists throughout the armed forces very often engaged in political activity. There was no directive of any kind from the British Party, but it was the obvious thing to do. At one RAF camp outside Karachi they put up a communist candidate at a mock general election in the summer of 1945; and there was earlier, of course, the famous Cairo Parliament in which Communists and left Labourites worked together. In my own case I had succeeded in forming discussion groups and in selling literature during most of my time in Britain. Shetland was an exception, but in India there were Communist groups in a number of places I visited; and since in my role as gunnery instructor I travelled around a good deal, I had rather more opportunity than most of making contacts. The last months in India were in political terms the most lively. I had returned to Karachi following my sabbatical at the Bombay School of Economics, and while there was absolutely nothing for anyone to do except wait for demobilisation, I was banished to take charge of an empty site nearer the town; a move which suited me very well. We had a party group of about twenty-five, of which I was chairman. Most were RAF and it was the biggest station in the region which carried through a ten day strike as protest against the slow rate of demobilisation. The CP

group had not initiated the protest but it was a Party decision on the evening of the first day to move in and provide leadership; and this was done. It was obviously quite a radically minded camp of over 5,000 RAF (I had earlier spoken for an hour at a meeting of over 600 against British military intervention in Greece, and we had won overwhelming **support**). This is not the place to tell the story of the strike, which received widespread publicity all over India and also in Britain, with questions in Parliament, except to mention the courage and steadfastness of the small group of Communists who directed the strike; and especially Arthur Attwood, an electrician from the London area who was later arrested, kept in solitary confinement and who was only released after a three month campaign in the United Kingdom. An exemplar of the working class communist **militant**.<sup>16</sup>

The Indian experience toughened me in a number of ways. It made me appreciate more sharply than ever before the class nature of British society, with the hierarchical character of the army only the most extreme example of a social structure immanent throughout British life. The army everywhere was class-bound, and for every officer in combat role there were probably ten in the long line behind, enjoying the best food and the best conditions that were available. Life on troopships probably illustrated the different treatment of the common soldiery and the officer classes more strikingly than in any other situation; but in India, partly no doubt because of imperialist rule for so long, the class distinctions were more blatant than in Europe, or so it seemed to me. Railway travel illustrated differences of approach to the worth of the various levels of army life. India is a very large country; and there was a constant movement of troops across the continent. Journeys could take two or three days, sometimes longer, and travel conditions were often uncomfortable and disagreeable. The Indian railways did not have through coaches; each coach in the first and second class was self contained. Officers travelled first; warrant officers like myself second; and the rest third class, where the seats were wooden and where there might or might not be reserved compartments for British troops. Subsistence pay was on the usual graduated scale. I reckoned to spend around ten rupees on food and drink on a day's journey. The scale for privates was four rupees a day, moving up to ten to twelve rupees for warrant officers, with junior officers beginning just above that level. First and second class coaches had uncrowded sleeping accommodation, ice boxes renewed at every main stop, and generally bearable conditions. Travel for the ordinary soldier was always unpleasant; in the hot season exceedingly unpleasant.

India also exhibited the racism of the British in obnoxious ways. Again there was the long tradition of white superiority into which

the conscript Army fitted very easily. It was my common experience that young soldiers were horrified at their first contact with the poverty of the Indian peoples, and were willing to concede that as the responsible power the Empire should go; but within three months the 'wogs' were being blamed for their filthy conditions of living, for their destitution and poverty, and for the often cringing attitudes that were the inevitable accompaniment. Clive Branson's *British Soldier in India* is one of the great pieces of anti-imperialist writing, and offers a more authentic account of army life and army attitudes than any other I have read (Branson's biography is in volume 2, *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, 1974). He was a troop sergeant in an armoured corps and was constantly confronted with the racism of ordinary British soldiers. In my own case in this respect I had a different, and easier, experience than Branson. Much of the time I was attached to Indian regiments, which had British officers who were always careful in their attitudes towards their own men; and for another I never became part of any British unit but was always an outsider. Travelling around, of course, meant a certain amount of confrontation with unpleasant attitudes towards the people of India and I never lost any opportunity to use my rank of sergeant-major to put down racist opinions; but such occasions were relatively rare.

I returned to England at the end of March 1946 with my Communist convictions strengthened. I had seen imperialism at its revolting worst, and I had followed closely the reactionary foreign policy of the British government which became more pronounced as the war came to an end. The military intervention in Greece in December 1944 was the outstanding public demonstration that the old order had changed not at all and that the Labour leaders in the War Cabinet, Attlee and Bevin in particular, were wholeheartedly with Churchill in his counter-revolutionary actions. Since I was in India at the end of the war I was more aware than most of the central part which the British army played in re-establishing the French in what was becoming known as Vietnam — the bulk of 'British' troops were of course Indians and Gurkhas — and the parallel action in Indonesia on behalf of the Dutch against the national movement.<sup>17</sup>

I remained in the Communist Party for another ten years. It was the decade of the Cold War, of civil conflict of the bloodiest kind in Korea, and of a series of rearguard actions by Britain as the imperialist basis of the metropolitan country was steadily eroded. Indian independence was achieved in 1947 because the British had not the resources to hold India in subjection; but where military action was practicable, as in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, British troops were used against those who seemed to believe that the right to exercise sovereignty over your own country was inalienable. These military

exercises were accompanied with varying degrees of atrocities; the full details only gradually became known, and in the case of Mau Mau in Kenya it has taken forty years before the full extent of the brutalities perpetrated by the British have become known. No socialist could support the foreign policy of the Attlee-Bevin regime between 1945 and **1951** and of the Conservative governments thereafter. The military and political subordination of Britain to the United States was already becoming defined, but again the full details of the subservience involved — not least in the establishment of over 150 American military installations in the United Kingdom — has only slowly been revealed. The continued support for the Soviet Union, as noted above, was based above all upon the heroic struggles of the Russian people against German fascism; but it was less easy to remain a Communist from about 1947 than in the previous decade. Some of the reasons have already been briefly touched upon, but the McCarthy years in the USA were devastating to the Left in general and not only to the communists, while in Britain the Cold War was more repressive than is usually suggested.

The British Communist Party lost remarkably few of its intellectuals before 1956. It was, after all, our own country Britain, which was carrying through its infamous policies in colonial countries, and which had already destroyed the chances of democracy in Greece while avoiding any action against Franco Spain; and whatever else was happening in the world, our main responsibility was for British actions round the world. For radicals of all **kinds**, there are always these difficult choices to be made; and for communists after **1945** the problems were acute and became increasingly so. I can only offer my own history. Hindsight can often be misleading and inaccurate, and it is always tempting to **re-write** one's own life in rational terms. Certainly this is a serious problem for communists although it is apparently not such a problem for liberals and social-democrats when confronted with the history of the barbarism of their own bourgeois democracies. Those who in the last resort come down on the side of contemporary capitalism have no choice but to engage in hypocrisy, sanctimoniousness and double talk. We have lived in the bloodiest century in recorded history and the present (January **1991**) war in the Middle East is the latest infamy in the savage and violent chronicle of the twentieth century. Marxism, in my Anglo-Saxon version, is a morality that does not accept ethical justification for unpleasant deeds that have to be done. I myself was aware of labour camps in the Soviet Union though not of their extent nor of the brutality practised within them; I thought the Lysenko controversy both unfortunate and unnecessary, as with the cultural pronouncements of Zhdanov; and I finished reading James Klugman's

*From Trotsky to Tito* sceptical and unconvinced. I was a personal friend of Klugman, and I have to record that I did not tell him of the many doubts I had of his book. The pre-war Moscow trials were being much written about, but it was not, in my recollection, an issue of any importance in the labour movement circles in which I moved, and it never became a matter of serious discussion. I should add that before the war and after I personally never met a Trotskyist, or was confronted by one at any meeting I addressed; and the same was true, with only a very few exceptions, of members of the ILP. The one controversy that related to internal developments of the Soviet Union, as against matters of foreign policy, was anti-semitism; and here I took an uncompromising stand against any suggestion that it existed in Russia. There were two reasons: the first was that we had all become extremely wary of the bourgeois press, and with very good reason in many cases; and the second was personal to myself. I had a large circle of Jewish friends, some of them first generation emigres from Russia. They spoke Russian and had Russian contacts. Hyman Levy, professor of mathematics at Imperial College, was among my Jewish comrades, but there were many others who are still living. Why should I believe the bourgeois press and not my political comrades?

There is another reason, of great importance in my own life, and in the lives of many others, why the Communist Party provided an organisation one was proud to belong to. There were some members I positively disliked, and mistrusted; there were others I tolerated; but most were comrades in the meaning of the term: friendly, dedicated and self-sacrificing. Not all were wholly committed, but that can never be expected; but the British Communist Party had a solid base in the working class and a quite large group of intellectuals who were not dilettante but serious in their political and intellectual work. I was fortunate to be of the generation that established the Communist historians' **group**<sup>18</sup> and for ten years we exchanged ideas and developed our marxism into what we hoped were creative channels. It was not chance that when the secret speech of Khrushchev was made known in the West, that it was members of the historian's group who were the most active among the Party intellectuals in demanding a full and uninhibited debate and discussion.

I do not propose to discuss in any detail the traumatic events of 1956 when at least 8,000 members left the Communist Party. There was already a serious discussion, and many misgivings, when Edward Thompson and I published the first number of the *Reasoner* in the summer of 1956; and the third issue over the weekend when Soviet troops invaded Hungary. At that point we both resigned having come to the conclusion a couple of months earlier that it was

improbable we would ever be able to shift the top leadership into an honest discussion of the revelations in the secret speech, and their implications for the history of the Soviet Union. The bitterness against us was intense, much more acerbic than some recent colloquia have suggested. It needs to be emphasised that the idea of resigning from the Communist Party was not in our minds when we began the *Reasoner* and it was only in the following months that we recognised, with great reluctance, the fundamental conservatism, not only of the leadership but of many of the rank and file. It was all too understandable, as was the steady decline of the Communist Party in the next twenty years. The momentum of the past kept the party going through the nineteen sixties, but as their prominent trade union leaders either resigned or retired because of age, the failure to recruit the young, the refusal to analyse seriously the phenomena of Stalinism in its many aspects: all contributed to the disintegration of the organisational basis of the Party in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup>

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For the first time in the history of the modern labour movement in Britain, from the 1880s to the present day, there is no effective political grouping to the left of the mainstream labour and trade union **organisations**. The Trotskyist and later more generally *gauchiste* groupings have remained marginal, and above all they have failed to recruit a substantial working class base. There have been two war situations in the 1980s. The first was the wholly unnecessary Falklands War, and the second was the Middle East war which began in January 1991. In both situations the official Labour and trade union leadership accepted the lead of the Tories: that, after all, was not unexpected. While there has been an active minority of Labour MPs, and organisations such as CND and ad hoc anti-war committees, it is the absence of an effective political organisation capable of co-ordinating the whole range of political opposition that is disturbing. There are more marxists in Britain today than there have ever been; there are more socialist books on the shelves than at any previous period; and there are serious journals of the Left. The gap, however, between socialist theory and socialist practice continues to widen, and while we are not yet in the American situation, where an annual meeting of 3,000 socialist scholars can meet in New York, with almost no impact on practical politics, we do seem to be moving, albeit slowly, in the same direction.

The Communist experience in Britain, although it was never more than a minority experience, does offer some important lessons for socialist work and activity in the present and in the future. It

represented, it must be emphasised again, an historic moment in the development of the labour movement in Britain which is not likely to be repeated in the same terms in the future. More than two decades before 1918 recognition of the urgent necessity of an independent socialist educational movement had led to the efforts of the Socialist Labour Party in Scotland, and the Plebs League and the National Council of Labour Colleges in South Wales and elsewhere. This is a permanent requirement for any socialist movement: an independent educational movement, separate from the mainstream of colleges and universities. It may be admitted that the facilities in the British system for adults to re-enter education are growing, but they touch only a fraction of the total working population, and their curricula are usually orthodox or near orthodox. More importantly, many trade unions today have much improved facilities for their members, often with radically-minded tutors. There still remains, however, a quite crucial area of political information and analysis which only a socialist educational movement could supply. Today there is no shortage of materials for study: we know far more about the workings of bourgeois society than at any previous period in the history of capitalism. We cannot predict the future; that was always a myth, but we **can** explain what is happening today, and what might happen tomorrow, in greater detail and with more accuracy than ever before. What is lacking are the organisational facilities for providing regular discussion and instruction: instruction based upon debate and argument, with no one bringing down the Tablets from on high.

The second, and perhaps the crucial component of any viable movement in the future, is the world of trade unionism. For more than a decade after its foundation the British Communist Party was uncertain in its attitudes towards the existing trade union movement. The **major** problem was whether Party members should work within the existing reformist unions or establish independent revolutionary organisations. Attitudes became more sectarian during the Third Period, when the Comintern imposed the Class Against Class line upon the theory and practice of the world communist movement. With the rise of fascism in Germany in 1933 the approach towards the reformist trade unions changed. In most countries the majority of working people who were organised, were in reformist trade unions, and no revolutionary socialist could ignore the fact.

What has never happened in Britain, except to a minor extent and on a localised scale, was the emergence of a labour/socialist culture that pervaded ordinary peoples' ways of life. Scotland and South Wales have developed a mixture of nationalist and labour ideas that provided an ethos absent in most of England. It is reasonable to argue that such a culture, albeit in a not very pronounced way, was

beginning to develop during the inter-war years and the war years, but it declined rapidly after 1950. Here the unions must be seen as the starting point. It will be necessary first to have recruited as large a proportion of the working population as can be achieved, and this means increasingly women and ethnic minorities. Whatever the personal motivation for joining a union, organisation on a basic economic level is the first and necessary step. With intelligent leadership a tradition can be built within a union which achieves three things: the first, the organisation of most workers to the point of the closed shop; the second, the intimate involvement of the union and its members, at all levels, in the technology, managerial working styles, as well as working conditions, within the particular industry; and third, the political education of their membership towards an understanding of their place in the world at large. Political education must be interpreted broadly, not just in terms of classes and tutors. It should be social as well as straight educational, involving families and groups. In the 21st century the Union has to organise a wide range of social, sporting and intellectual activities outside and beyond what has come to be regarded as the normal range of union responsibilities; working towards the creation of a labour/socialist culture on an international plane; one that is not self-contained, as was the life inside the German Social-Democratic Party before World War One, but open and influential within the wider community. The role and place of the union in the coming decades is crucial; it must be European at least in its international contacts; and what must not happen is the American experience. All this will require an imagination, a fertility of ideas, a richness of social invention that has so far eluded the whole of the Left in Britain; and while the bitter years of the Thatcher era have begun to produce the beginnings of new concepts and new ideas, it will be a long haul.

The final requirement for a socialist renewal is unquestionably the most difficult. Communist parties, in their most successful years were highly disciplined, united in their purposes, and provided with a vigorous and dynamic leadership. The tougher the situation the more these qualities were needed, and it was at the extreme end of the human condition — the Resistance and above all the concentration camp — that there was exhibited in a remarkable way the resilience, the courage, and the indomitable spirit of ordinary men and women. Unlike most of the world, we in Britain live in a bourgeois democracy; a society which is a good deal less democratic than its apologists suggest, but one in which certain liberties are available, if not guaranteed, and in which the possibility of reformist change is realisable. A highly disciplined political party is no longer practical politics except for very small groups whose nature and character

encourages a dogmatism that ensures a high turnover of membership. The essence of capitalist democracy has not however changed; the world of global capitalism has not changed. Since 1945 there have been at least 150 wars, large and small, mostly in Third World countries, fought with armaments supplied by the advanced industrial nations, some of whom, Britain included, accept the sale of arms to the rest of the world as an essential item in their balance of payments. The problem therefore remains: how to develop movements for change, for societies that offer adequate material living standards with democratic liberties for all. We know how at least two-thirds of the world will exist in the 21st century. They will continue as they are now: half-starved when they are not suffering from periods of complete starvation. We can expect tribal wars, national wars, and continued exploitation by the advanced industrial countries. The 20th century has been horrendous: the torture and the killings of many millions; it may be overtaken by the century which follows. In the industrial world there will be remarkable shifts in the centres of power, and whether this will lead to a repetition of the uneasy peace of the second half of the twentieth century, or to wars between major powers, it is impossible at this time to predict. What we do know is that assuming peace and sustained economic growth, bourgeois societies will continue to develop their appetites for greed; corruption will deepen; and violence within communities will increase. We can look at New York and Calcutta today and see the future.

In the long run, that is, within two or three centuries, all may be different; but it will only be different if we begin to develop methods of opposition to the degeneracy already afflicting America and Europe; methods that draw upon the humanist spirit which over the centuries has been very slowly maturing. In political terms we have to find ways of working that draw upon the revolutionary ideas and practices of the past century without the flawed organisational structures within which the Communist experience has crumbled and disintegrated. This, so it seems to me, is our major task: to search for new forms of organisation in which socialist intellectuals will join forces with a core of working class militants to create movements without illusions; firm in their understanding that the struggle will be long and hard; and founded upon a comradeship that will sustain and support the self-discipline and self-sacrifice without which the principles, and the aims, of the Good Old Cause will never be achieved.

## NOTES

1. Karl Marx, *Selected Works*, Vol. I (1942), pp. 201-2.
2. This was the motto of the German Workers' Education Society which was founded in London in 1840; and it was taken over by the Fraternal Democrats which G. J. Harney established in 1847. For the latter, A. R. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge* (1958), Ch. 6 and all subsequent writing on Chartism will have some relevant material.
3. Quoted, *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (eds. J. M. Bellamy and J. Saville), Vol. VII, p. 239.
4. A British Chiefs of Staff document dated 20 July 1944 discussed future problems and included the words: "however unpalatable the fact might be, there might well come a time when we should have to rely on her [ie. German] assistance against a hostile Russia". This appeared six weeks after the Allied landing in Normandy, with another nine months of the war in Europe in the future: COS (44) 24 8th Meeting (0) (14), Public Record Office, Kew, London.
5. There is a full and excellent account of the involvement of the British TUC and the American Federation of Labor with their respective Foreign Offices in the development of Cold War strategies in Peter Weiler, *British Labour and the Cold War* (Stanford, 1988).
6. And also by politicians who played a part in the early days of the Cold War. Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (1989) describes his role as International Secretary of the British Labour Party from January 1946: 'Like most Western observers at the time, I believed that Stalin's behaviour showed that he was bent on the military conquest of Western Europe. I now think we were all mistaken. . . ' (p. 101). What Mr Healey does not go on to say is that as a result of this mistaken judgement forty years of Cold War followed.
7. It is widely accepted by economists that part of the problems of the capitalist world in Europe during the years between the wars was the failure to develop their home markets, and that a considerable part of the boom of the post war era was the great upsurge of consumer demand that economic policies encouraged.
8. *New Left Review*, No 154 (November/December 1985), p. 53.
9. *New Reasoner*, No 2 (Autumn 1957), pp. 30-39.
10. In the last years of the 1930s, before the outbreak of war, quite a sizeable number of members of the Communist Party worked inside the Labour Party. In most cases their membership of the Communist Party was not known; but there was no doubt that a good deal of active political life was thereby injected into what was so often a lethargic electoral organisation. London was a particularly important centre. There is a brief discussion in Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (1985), p. 157. I had personal experience of these matters since for a short time in 1937-8 I was secretary of my local Communist branch in my home town of Romford, Essex.
11. The volumes of *Left Review* were reprinted by Cass in 1970 and were the occasion of a sparkling commentary by Edward Thompson, *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 February 1971.
12. The most useful account of the radicalisation of the scientists of the 1930s is G. Werskey, *The Visible College. A Collective Biography of British Scientists and Socialists in the 1930s* (1978).
13. Reprinted in 1983, with an introduction by John Saville.
14. For a somewhat fuller discussion of the background to the trials in Britain, although a good deal more documentation is needed, see John Saville, 'May Day 1937', in *Essays in Labour History, 1917-1938* (eds. A. Briggs and J. Saville, 1977), esp. pp. 259-270.

15. For a brief biography, see *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. 5, pp. 132-4.
16. The full story of Arthur Attwood and the strike at the RAF base at Drigh Rd, Karachi, has not, unfortunately, yet been published. D. N. Pritt, *Autobiography Part Two. Brasshats and Bureaucrats (1966)*, p. 237 ff, gives a long account of his own crucial involvement in the case. See also R. Kisch, *The Days of the Good Soldiers. Communists in the Armed Forces WWII (1985)*, Ch. 10 has some additional material.
18. For a very good journalistic account, written before the official papers became accessible, see George Rosie, *The British in Vietnam. How the Twenty Five Year War Began (1970)*; and for a more academic account, P. Denis, *Troubled Days of Peace. Mountbatten and South-East Asia Command, 1945-46 (Manchester, 1987)*.
19. For which see the essay by Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party', in *Rebels and their Causes in Honour of A. L. Morton* (ed. M. Cornforth, 1978), pp. 21-47.
20. For a brief account of the *Reasoner* period, see John Saville, 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party', *The Socialist Register (1976)*, pp. 1-23.