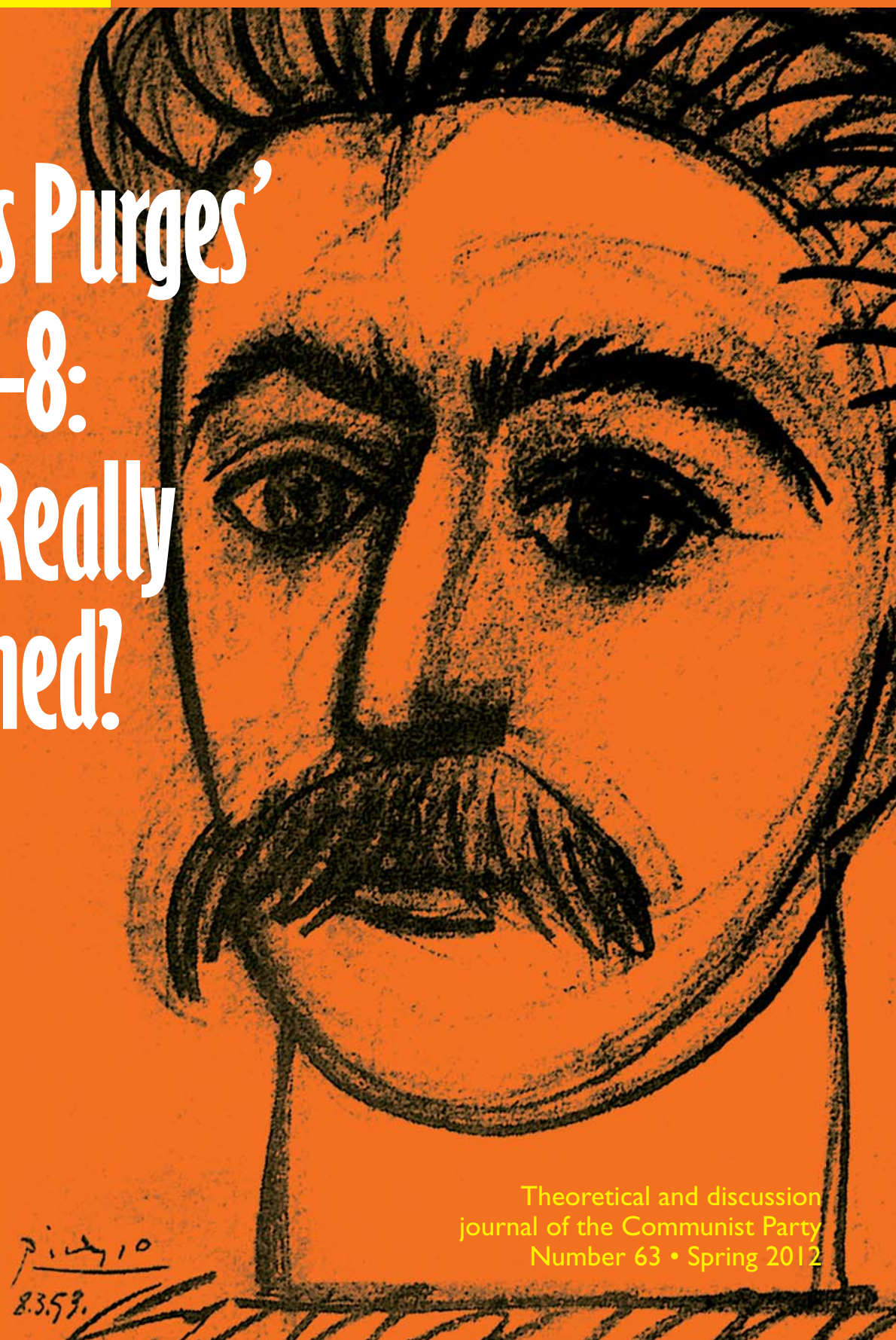
COMMUNIST REVIEW

- **Yuri Emelianov** 'Stalin's Purges' of 1937-8
- **Kenny Coyle** The Asiatic Mode of Production
- **Andreas Hüllinghorst** Philosopher of the Universal: On the Death of Hans Heinz Holz
- **Mina Boromand** Witness to Revolution, Iran 1979

'Stalin's Purges' of 1937-8: What Really Happened?



£2.50

Theoretical and discussion journal of the Communist Party
Number 63 • Spring 2012

COMMUNIST REVIEW

Theoretical and discussion journal of the Communist Party

Number 63 • Spring 2012
ISSN 1474-9246

EDITORIAL OFFICE
23 Coombe Road London CR0 1BD
tel: 020 8686 1659 • fax: 020 7428 9114
email: editor@communistreview.org.uk
web: www.communistreview.org.uk

Advertising rates on request.
Signed articles do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors or the Communist Party

Cover: Stalin by Pablo Picasso, March 1953

Printed by APRINT

■ *Communist Review* welcomes submission of articles (normally up to 5000 words), discussion contributions and letters – send to editor@communistreview.org.uk. Articles will be reviewed by members of the Editorial Board, and we reserve the right not to publish. Poetry submissions are also welcome – send to artseditor@communistreview.org.uk

contents

contributors

MINA BOROMAND escaped from Iran in 1980 and now lives in London, where she is a member of the North London Branch of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB)

JOE CLARK is a retired engineer and a Communist Party member for over 50 years, having held a number of offices in the Party

KENNY COYLE is a former Assistant Editor of *Communist Review* and author of the CPB pamphlet *Asia: Imperialism and Resistance*

YURI EMELIANOV was a member of the USSR Academy of Sciences, working in the Institutes of World Economy and the International Workers' Movement. He has written biographies of Khrushchev, Stalin and Trotsky and remains one of the leading social scientists in the Communist Party of the Russian Federation

ANDREAS HÜLLINGHORST is a member of the German Communist Party (DKP) in Berlin, where he is publishing director of the left-wing daily paper *Junge Welt*

JIMMY JANCOVICH is a longstanding communist activist, born in Egypt and currently living in France

MIKE QUILLE is a writer living on Tyneside and is Arts Editor of *Communist Review*

GRAHAM STEVENSON was a full-time official of the Transport & General Workers' Union and then Unite the Union. He is currently a member of the CPB Political Committee and Executive Committee and is the Party's Midlands District Secretary.

editorial

By Martin Levy

PUTTING PICASSO'S 1953 sketch of Stalin on the front cover of a communist journal might at first seem to be a recipe for political suicide. After all, ever since Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956, the name of Stalin has been identified with the personality cult, arbitrary rule and mass repressions; and communists have been at pains to make clear, over and again, that such phenomena are alien to socialism and must be condemned.
As the latest edition of the Communist Party of Britain's programme, *Britain's Road to Socialism (BRS)*, states:

> "At times, and in the late 1930s in particular, severe violations of socialist democracy and law occurred. Large numbers of people innocent of subversion or sabotage were persecuted, imprisoned and executed. This aided the world-wide campaign of lies and distortions aimed at the Soviet Union, the international communist movement and the concept of socialism."[1]

Such criticism is no cosmetic exercise. Anyone interested in building socialism today has to avoid, as Hegel said, "that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it."[2] But history is never neutral. In the words of the old aphorism, it is written by the victors.

"Question everything" was Marx's favourite motto.[3] Of course he did not mean that everything was wrong. What he was saying is, "Don't take things for granted. Use dialectical materialist principles to investigate and work things out for yourself."

If we apply those principles to economics, politics, philosophy and the history of capitalist society, then isn't it equally important that we extend them to the development of attempts at socialism as well? Much has been written about the reasons for the collapse of those first attempts, including in the *BRS*, which criticises the inability of "the Soviet bureaucratic-command system … to utilise the full fruits of the scientific and technological revolution", the failure of the ruling communist parties in the USSR and Eastern Europe "to counter the appeal of capitalist 'consumerism' materially and ideologically", and the *de facto* limitations on women's rights and national autonomy.[1]

However, with regard to Khrushchev's secret speech there has until recently been no serious systematic questioning. Indeed, the scale of Stalin's alleged crimes, and the fact that mass repressions did take place, have provided the basis for a coherent historical narrative that dominates not only capitalist ideology but also the consciousness of the communist movement. Even if Khrushchev made errors of detail, wasn't he right in broad perspective? Didn't the speech need to be made to enable communists to come to terms with these terrible events and ensure they never happened again?

For such an outcome to be effective, however, fact has to be distinguished from fiction. While the Soviet Union existed, that was difficult, as archives were closed – consequently wild claims were made about the scale of the repressions. Paradoxically, the overthrow of socialism has allowed some archives to become available, and serious scholars – many of them non-communists – have done some digging. One recent Russian/US book[4] meticulously demonstrates that 60 out of Khrushchev's 61 allegations in the Secret Speech against Stalin and Beria are "provably false".

In his article *'Stalin's Purges' of 1937-8; What Really Happened?*, part 1 of which we publish in this issue of *CR*, leading Russian communist Yuri Emelianov draws on these new studies to demonstrate that the picture was much more complex than Khrushchev presented, with internal battles in the Central Committee, in which Stalin and his supporters were in a minority – and that Khrushchev himself, while Moscow province secretary in 1937-8, was responsible for liquidation and repression of the overwhelming majority of Party functionaries in the city committee and provincial committee.[5]

So why did Khrushchev make the speech? Readers will need to form their own conclusions. The German communist philosopher Hans Heinz Holz certainly regarded it as "counter-revolutionary".[6] But he identified the "revisionist turning point" not in the secret speech but in the political direction introduced by the 20th Congress of the CPSU, with "the setting free of bourgeois life expectations".[7] Sadly, Hans Heinz died in December; and as a tribute we print here the exposition of his life's work by his collaborator Andreas Hüllinghorst. Being a philosophical article, it will repay re-reading.
The Communist Party of Britain is currently investigating the English-language publication of Hans Heinz's 3-volume testament, *Transcendence and Realisation of Philosophy*.

Over the past few years, it has not been unusual for *CR* to have serialised articles. Indeed that is all to the good, as it indicates that our authors are treating subjects seriously and in depth. However, with the first part of Kenny Coyle's *The Asiatic Mode of Production*, this may be the first time that we have had two serials running at the same time. In his article Kenny makes clear that "there are pressing reasons for socialists in the West to improve our understanding of Asia" and its pre-colonial societies. China will soon be the world's largest economy, "yet less than a century ago such a transformation appeared inconceivable."

With this edition of *CR* we also have two other new features: personal reminiscences, in the form of Mina Boromand's account of the Iranian revolution of 1979; and Joe Clark's theatre review, which actually connects rather well with the theme of "Revolution and Culture" from our last issue. Let us have more such articles! Jimmy Jancovich's discussion contribution continues the theme, as does *Soul Food*, which this time focuses on two new poetry anthologies. Communist history comes to life again in the two book reviews which complete this issue.

Notes and References

1 Communist Party of Britain, *Britain's Road to Socialism*, *8th edn*, 2011, p 16.
2 G W F Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History: Introduction*, at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/index.htm .
3 K Marx, *Confession*, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 42, pp 567-8.
4 G Furr, *Khrushchev Lied*, Erythrós Press and Media, Kettering, Ohio, 2011 (published in Russian as *Antistalinskaia Podlost'*, Algoritm, Moscow, 2007).
5 Y Emelianov, *Stalin's Purges of 1937-8: What Really Happened?, parts 2, 3*, to be published in *CR*64 and 65, Summer and Autumn 2012.
6 H H Holz, *Stalin's Philosophical and Political Testament*, in *CR*53, Summer 2009, p 33.
7 H H Holz, *The Revisionist Turning-Point*, in *CR*52, Spring 2009, p 38 ff.

‘Stalin’s Purges’ of 1937-8 What Really Happened?

By Yuri Emelianov

PART 1: THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

EVERY YEAR, before I start my lecture on the problems of modern Russia, I ask my students the same question, “What were the good points in Soviet life?” This year the first to respond was a tall and heavy boy. His loud answer may be translated into English as “A hell of a lot of good points!” Then more detailed answers followed from the audience: “People were socially equal”, “Rents and transport were cheap”, “Education and medicine were free”, “We used to have great science”, “People didn’t worry about their future”, “When in trouble you knew which authorities to address and you were sure that you would get help”, “People were more honest, friendly and kind”, etc.

Yet when I asked another traditional question, “What were the bad points of Soviet life?” the same boy shouted, “Stalin’s purges!” The almost automatic reaction of the student was understandable. Just three days before the lecture one of the main Russian TV channels had shown a four-hour long film, *Comrade Stalin*. It depicts a crazy tyrant planning to destroy the world and boasting of how he had made everyone afraid of him. Almost every day you can watch TV talk-shows or films dealing with arrests or executions during the Stalin period. Already, while at school, my students had attended special lessons on ‘Stalin’s purges’.

Here is a list of questions taken from a Russian school manual: What is a totalitarian regime? Why did Stalin need a system of mass reprisals? What were the reasons for increasing mass purges in the 1930s? What were the social and psychological consequences of the repressive system which existed in the country? etc. After many lessons schoolchildren develop automatic reactions when asked about Stalin and his time.

The purpose of these lessons and TV programmes is clear – that ‘Stalin’s purges’ should outweigh ‘social equality’ and ‘social guarantees’, ‘certainty about one’s future’, ‘successes of science and culture’ and many other undeniable characteristics of socialism. At the end of the ’80s and the beginning of the ’90s, shocking people with stories about the reprisals of the 1930s helped greatly to discredit socialism in the USSR. Now, by repeating these stories, the Russian ruling class is trying to conceal the failures of capitalist restoration, including the degradation of the economy and social conditions, the corruption of the administration at all levels and the wide use of political pressure and fraud. Over the past 20 years Russian bourgeois propaganda and education have continued to exploit the topic of ‘Stalin’s purges’, making people believe that the present regime saved the nation from such horrors.

Yet it is clear that the events of 75 years ago remain a major blemish on the reputation of the Soviet Union. In 1937-8, altogether 1,372,392 people were arrested and 681,692 executed. This means that, during the course of just these two years, approximately one third of all arrests and 85% of all executions from 1921 to 1953 took place. Why did it happen?

Old and New Explanations of the Reprisals of 1937-8

In his report to the secret session of the 20th Congress of the CPSU, on 25 February 1956, general secretary Khrushchev declared Stalin to be the main culprit of the tragedies of 1937-8 and explained them by the negative character of the Generalissimo. He said that Stalin

Recent Russian Studies on the Stalin Period

Yuri Zhukov, *A Different Stalin: the Political Reform in the USSR in 1933-7*, Moscow, 2003.
Yuri Zhukov, *Stalin: The Mysteries of Power*, Moscow, 2005.
Dmitry Lyskov, *Stalin's Repressions*, Moscow, 2009 (based on NKVD archives).
Mikhail Tumshis and Alexander Papchinsky, *1937:The Great Purge*, Moscow, 2009 (based on NKVD archives).
Leonid Naumov, *Yezhov's Plot*, Moscow, 2009 (based on NKVD archives).
Sergei Minakov, *Stalin and the Generals' Plot*, Moscow, 2005.
Arsen Martirosyan, *The Marshals' Conspiracy*, Moscow, 2003.
Rudolf Balandin and Sergei Mironov, *Conspiracies and the Fight for Power: From Lenin to Khrushchev*, Moscow, 2003.
Nikolai Kapchenko, *A Political Biography of Stalin*, 3 vols, Tver, 2004-2009.
Georgi Kumanev, *Close to Stalin: Candid Witnesses, Meetings, Conversations, Interviews and Documents*, Bylina, Moscow, 1999.
Alexandr Ostrovsky, *Who Stood Behind Stalin?*, Moscow, OLMA, 2004.
140 Talks with Molotov, interviews by Felix Chuev, Moscow, 1991.
Andrei Malenkov, *About My Father Georgi Malenkov*, Moscow, 1992.
Nikolai Baibakov (former USSR Planning Commitee chairman), *From Stalin to Yeltsin (Memoirs)*, Moscow, 1998.
Vladimir Pyatnitzky, *The Plot against Stalin*, Moscow, 1998.
■ The author of the present article has also dealt with the same subject in a number of books, including: *Notes on Bukharin*, Moscow, 1989; *Stalin: The Road to Power*, Moscow, 2002; *Stalin: At the Top of Power*, Moscow, 2002; *Trotsky: Myth and Reality*, Moscow, 2003; *Khrushchev: From Shepherd to Central Committee Secretary*, Moscow, 2005; *Khrushchev: The Trouble-Maker in the Kremlin*, Moscow, 2005.

> "practiced brutal violence, not only toward everything which opposed him, but also toward that which seemed, to his capricious and despotic character, contrary to his concepts. Stalin acted not through persuasion, explanation, and patient cooperation with people, but by imposing his concepts and demanding absolute submission to his opinion. Whoever opposed this concept or tried to prove his own viewpoint, and the correctness of his own position, was doomed to removal from the leadership collective and to subsequent moral and physical annihilation."[1]

Khrushchev blamed Stalin personally for the reprisals, saying that

> "many abuses were made on Stalin's orders without reckoning with any norms of Party and Soviet legality. Stalin was a very distrustful man, sickly suspicious. … Everywhere and in everything he saw 'enemies', 'two-facers' and 'spies'. Possessing unlimited power, he indulged in great wilfulness and stifled people morally as well as physically. Stalin put the Party and the NKVD up to the use of mass terror when the exploiting classes had been liquidated in our country and when there were no serious reasons for the use of extraordinary mass terror."[1]

Khrushchev claimed that the main victims of Stalin's tyrannical methods were the Party functionaries. He stated that, out of 139 members of the Central Committee of the Party, 98 were arrested and executed. Khrushchev specifically mentioned alternate members of the Politburo Postyshev, Eikhe and Rudzutak among those who were arrested and executed. The very fact that a person was a Central Committee or Politburo member served for Khrushchev as undeniable proof of their innocence.

According to Khrushchev's explanations, the Party and NKVD were either blind tools in the hands of Stalin or helpless victims of his mania. This interpretation allowed Khrushchev to claim that essentially the Soviet system was good but it was corrupted by Stalin and his personality cult.

Despite capitalist restoration, the explanations of the purges of 1930s given in modern Russian school text-books do not differ much from those given by Khrushchev. Thus one 11th grade general school book, *Russian History, 20th Century to the Start of the 21st* [2] explains the repressions of the '30s by Stalin's desire to suppress opposition to his policies amongst communists. The book states that Stalin "launched reprisals upon the leading bodies of the Party, state, army, punitive administration and the Comintern." As the people who belonged to these institutions were Party members it means that the communists were the main victims of 'Stalin's purges'.

Another school text-book of the same title somewhat enlarges the scope of people who were arrested and executed. It states:

> "The main goal of the mass repressions of these years was to deal a blow not only at communists who refused to recognise that the Stalinist methods of building socialism were correct

> or just had doubts about them .... The terror destroyed the best free-thinking part of the nation, which was able to think critically and by the very fact of its existence threatened the personal power of J V Stalin."[3]

Authors of all these versions had no doubt that all of those who were arrested and executed were innocent people, since practically all of them were rehabilitated either in the '50s or at the end of the '80s.

The constant attention to the topic of 'Stalin's reprisals' has prompted many Russian researchers to study thoroughly Stalin's life and activity, his time and especially the events of 1937-8. The opening of some of the previously closed archives has provided access to documents which had never before been published. Written memories, long buried in family archives, were brought to light. Some of the witnesses of the historic events were still alive and their testimonies were registered and printed.

This research has resulted in many books, some of which are listed in the box on the preceding page. Their contents, as well as that of others and many articles published in Russia within the last two decades, have refuted the most widespread versions of events of 1937-8 and demonstrate that the truth was by far more complex and contradictory.

Who Were Those Arrested and Executed during the Reprisals of 1937-8?

Careful study of new documents and other evidence on these events shows that the old versions ignore the most essential facts and figures of the reprisals.

First: although the figures of those executed in the USSR from 1921 to 1953 were high enough, they were often exaggerated many times. Solzhenitsyn[4] and many other authors asserted that their number was close to 50-60 million, instead of the real figure of about 800,000. This distortion led to a gross exaggeration of the number arrested in 1937-8. According to Roy Medvedev[5] and others, 5-7 million people were arrested for political reasons at that time. The authors of one university text-book[6] state that, in 1937-8 "millions of people were subjected to repression .... The general number of those executed was over 2 million."

Second: according to widespread versions, most of those arrested and executed were members of the Communist Party. Thus the school manual *Fundamental Course of Russian History*[7] claims that the number of communists arrested and executed in 1937-8 "exceeded 1.3 million people". Repeating this figure, historian Vadim Kozhinov, in his book *The Truth of Stalin's Repressions*,[8] came to the conclusion that Party members constituted over 90% of those subjected to repression in 1937-8. He claims that 43% of Party members were arrested. The real figures, which are now at everyone's disposal, show that during these two years 116,885 Party members and candidate Party members were subjected to repression. They constituted 4.2% of all communists and 8.5% of those who were arrested in 1937-8.

In reality about 49% of those who were subjected to mass reprisals were former kulaks (rich peasants) who had lost their property during collectivisation in 1929-32. Most of them had been exiled but by 1935-6 they had returned to their native villages. About 26% of those who were arrested in 1937-8 constituted penal criminals (thieves, robbers, murderers and others). About 25% of the arrested belonged to a category called 'active anti-Soviet elements'. Apart from communists and non-Party people accused of treason and espionage, this category included members of parties banned during the Civil War, former White Guard officers and priests of different religions (the latter accounting for 3% of all the arrests).

Yet former kulaks and penal criminals, who comprised 75% of those arrested in 1937-8, are never mentioned by the school text-books and TV programmes.

Third: there are strong doubts as to the absolute innocence of all those who were declared guilty in 1937-8. Commenting upon the fact that, at the end of '80s, almost 100% had been rehabilitated, historian Dmitry Lyskov wrote:

> "The speed of reassessment of sentences and rehabilitation was fantastic. Within 15 months the special committee had rehabilitated 1.5 million people. The committee studied 67,000 cases within a month, or 2,000 cases a day. The rate and scale of rehabilitation makes one doubt whether court sessions took place. And, if the cases were considered in large groups, it is dubious that any judicial and constitutional norms were observed."[9]

Yet the existing versions of the purges never mention how the reassessment of the verdicts of 1937-8 took place. It is obvious that ignoring the real facts and figures about the reprisals and rehabilitation has resulted in serious distortions of historical events. It is thus doubtful that the older, orthodox versions can offer reliable explanations of why the grim events of 1937-8 occurred.

What Factors Were Most Important for the Soviet Union in the 1930s?

In order to explain why the purges were launched in the middle of the '30s the authors of the orthodox versions insist that at that time Stalin met with growing opposition among Communist Party members and "the best free-thinking part" of Soviet society. In order to prove that point, Roy Medvedev, in his book *On Stalin and Stalinism*,[10] stated that during the election of the Central Committee at the 17th Party Congress Stalin received the least number of votes in favour. Medvedev wrote that "270 Congress delegates voted against Stalin", and that the least number of negative votes was received by Politburo member Sergei Kirov. Medvedev suggested that the results of the voting made Stalin prepare reprisals against the Congress delegates and start planning Kirov's murder.

But Medvedev's statement was proved false as a result of information published in the July 1989 issue of the magazine *News of the Central Committee of the CPSU*. Paradoxically, at the peak of the anti-Stalin campaign of the perestroika period, a protocol of the election committee of the 17th Congress was published, running contrary to the dominant mood. The protocol, signed by the chairman Y Zatonsky, and other members of the committee, stated that J V Stalin received 3 votes against and S M Kirov, 4 votes against.

Contrary to the school text-book versions, there was by the middle of the '30s no significant opposition inside the Communist Party to the policies of the Central Committee and its Politburo led by Stalin. All opposition groups had been defeated in the open debates of the 1920s.

By 1934 the most important opposition figures

Sergei Kirov and Joseph Stalin, 1934

who had previously been exiled had returned to Moscow; and those who had been expelled from the Party had regained their membership. All of them occupied good jobs. Grigory Zinoviev published his articles in the Party's major theoretical magazine, *The Communist*. Nikolai Bukharin was editor-in-chief of the *Izvestia* newspaper, which was second in importance to *Pravda*. Alexei Rykov was the People's Commissar for Posts and Telegraphs. He and Bukharin were members of the Party Central Committee.

All former leaders of opposition groups (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsky, Preobrazhensky, Radek and others) addressed the 17th Party Congress (January-February 1934) to announce that their struggle against the majority of the Central Committee objectively undermined the socialist state and served the cause of counter-revolution. All of them repented of their old deviations and hailed Stalin profusely.

Commenting upon these speeches, historian Isaac Deutscher, who was a devoted Trotskyite, wrote:

> "Their recantations were neither wholly sincere nor wholly insincere .... Among them the 'fathers' of the opposition grumbled, sighed and talked their troubles off their chests. They continued to refer to Stalin as the Genghiz Khan of the Politburo, the Asiatic .... The grumblings and epithets were immediately reported to Stalin, who had his ears everywhere. He knew the real feelings of his humiliated opponents and the value of their public eulogies. But he was also confident that they would not go beyond violent verbal expressions of their public impotence."[11]

Of all the former opposition leaders only Trotsky continued from abroad to call for active struggle against Stalin and his supporters. In October 1933, in his magazine *Bulletin of the Opposition*, Trotsky urged the organisation of a new underground Communist Party. At the same time, he announced that there were no constitutional ways to fight Stalin's government, and called for violent action. But Stalin did not consider the Trotskyites to be a strong force in the USSR. In March 1937 he recalled that, even 10 years earlier, there had been no more than 12,000 Trotskyites. He added that since then "many of this number became disillusioned with Trotskyism and left it ... you get a conception of the insignificance of the Trotskyite forces."[12]

The only small underground group, called the Union of Marxist-Leninists, was organised in 1932 by Martemyan Ryutin, who was a former Moscow Party secretary and supported Bukharin. But the members of the group were soon arrested.

Perhaps Trotsky

understood that it was futile to organise a new mass Communist Party in the USSR. Therefore he appealed to those who so far actively supported Stalin. Though for years Trotsky proclaimed himself to be an ardent opponent of 'the Stalinist bureaucracy' he suddenly addressed in his *Bulletin of the Opposition* those who worked in the Party apparatus. He wrote:

> "Stalin's strength has always lain in the machine, not in himelf .... Severed from the machine Stalin ... represents nothing .... It is a time to part with the Stalin myth .... Stalin has brought you to an impasse .... It is time to carry out at Lenin's final and insistent advice: "Remove Stalin!""[13]

This appeal meant that Trotsky had some information about the mood of some of the Party functionaries who for a long time had been loyal Stalinists. Faced with growing problems of fulfilling the first Five-Year Plan, especially in agricultural production, some high Party and Soviet functionaries had misgivings about Stalin's policy. In 1932 a number of high officials were caught in clandestine activity directed at changing the Party and State leadership. Among them were Central Committee secretary A P Smirnov, USSR People's Commissar for Supplies N B Eismont, Russian Federation People's Commissar for Domestic Affairs V N Tolmachev, alternate member of the Politburo and chairman of the Councils of the People's Commissars of the Russian Federation S I Syrtzov, and first secretary of the Transcaucasian Regional Committee of the Party V V Lominadze.

By the beginning of 1934 all of these people had been dismissed from their posts. Eismont and Tolmachev were expelled from the Party. At the 17th Congress Lominadze made a speech of repentance.

Despite much attention to Ryutin, Syrtzov, Lominadze, Eismont and Tolmachev and others in the Party press, there was no serious threat to the Soviet Union from their clandestine activity, nor from the appeals of Trotsky or the grumblings of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov and others. The greatest threat came from abroad. The war scare of 1927 showed that the USSR did not have adequate military strength with which to oppose an attack from the West. It turned out that the USSR had fewer tanks and planes even than Poland.

Rapid industrialisation was undertaken mostly for the purpose of building adequate defence of the USSR. On February 4 1931 Stalin announced: "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or they crush us."[14]

The possibility of war became more real after Hitler came to power in Germany on 30 January 1933. In December of that year the Politburo voted for the USSR to join the League of Nations, and approved other actions on the international arena in order to thwart Nazi aggressive plans. The USSR was ready to form a united anti-fascist front together with some leading capitalist countries.

Apart from the Nazi menace, there was the threat of aggression on the Far Eastern borders of the USSR from militarist Japan, after Manchuria was occupied in 1931. At the 17th Party Congress Bukharin spoke not only of his deviations but also, and at length, of the possibility of a joint German-Japanese intervention. In his report of the Congress Stalin explained the necessity of creating a new agricultural base east of the Volga in terms of "the possibilities of complications in the sphere of international relations".[15] Thus Stalin hinted that the Soviet control over major agricultural bases in the Ukraine and the Northern Caucasus might be lost during a forthcoming war. At the same Congress the Chief of the Red Army General Staff Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky warned that the Soviet defence industry lagged behind that of the Western countries as far as introduction of new technologies was concerned.

The possibility of attack against the Soviet Union made the Soviet leadership place emphasis on patriotic propaganda. In August 1934, Stalin, Kirov and Zhdanov wrote relevant comments on school history books. Stalin even criticised an article written by Engels[16] which had been used by German social-democrats to approve of the attack by Germany on Russia in 1914 and to explain their support for the Kaiser's government.

The war preparations and the needs of new industries and new industrial cities demanded rapid increase of agricultural production. The mechanisation and modernisation of agriculture was possible only on the basis of large rural enterprises. But extremely rapid organisation of collective farms followed by division of property of the kulaks caused new problems. The violent measures which accompanied collectivisation led to bitter conflicts. The kulaks were sometimes supported by poorer peasants, who constituted the majority of the Soviet population. In 1929-31 there were a number of peasants' uprisings which were suppressed by the armed forces.

Many Soviet people believed that, in case of war, former kulaks and those peasants who were sympathetic to them would rise against the Soviet regime and support the invading armies. A book about the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal,[17] presented to 17th Party Congress delegates, stated that many former kulaks had escaped from exile and were employed as construction workers in Moscow. These authors, including outstanding Soviet writers, claimed that the kulaks wrote threatening phrases, with swastikas as signatures, on the walls of Moscow houses promising execution of all communists. At the same time the book glorified the influential leader of OGPU (United State Political Administration – in fact, political police) Henrich Yagoda and his deputies for putting many kulaks under arrest and making them work on the construction of the Canal and in other places under the GULAG (Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies).

The economic, social, ideological and foreign political problems were by far more acute and pressing for Stalin and other Soviet leaders than relations with some communist oppositionists. These complicated problems demanded by far more profound and difficult decisions than efforts directed at coming to terms with or silencing small groups of malcontents as is asserted in the widely spread tales about 'Stalin's purges'. Besides, many oppositionists were aware of the gross problems facing the USSR. Explaining the behaviour of the former opposition leaders Isaac Deutscher wrote:

> "They felt that they were all, Stalinists and anti-Stalinists, in the same boat .... One of Trotsky's correspondents in Russia thus described the mood of these men in 1933: 'They all speak about their hatred for Stalin ... But they add, "If it were not for him ...

everything would have fallen into pieces by now. It is he who keeps everything together."'[18]

Contradictions inside the Communist Party

It is obvious that the international and domestic challenges facing the USSR had to be answered by broad and rapid social and economic reconstruction of the country, and radical changes in foreign policy and ideological work, all performed under Stalin's leadership. These challenges demanded profound political reforms because the Soviet political organisation was practically the same as it had been in the first days of the October Revolution and the Civil War.

The USSR Constitution, which had been unchanged since 1924, reflected the economic, social and political situation of the years immediately after the Civil War and the class struggle which had continued, sometimes in the form of armed conflicts, in the 1920s. According to this Constitution, election to the Soviets was open and indirect. Delegates to local Soviets were chosen by show of hands at open assemblies. Local Soviets chose delegates to the provincial Soviets in the same manner. The latter chose the delegates to Republican Congresses of Soviets – who in turn chose the delegates to the USSR Supreme Soviet. Employers of hired labour (kulaks and owners of urban enterprises), priests of all religions, former land-owners of big estates, former policemen and members of the political parties banned during the Civil War were forbidden to take part in the elections.

Apart from this obviously undemocratic procedure, the rural and the urban populations were unequally represented in the Soviets. In the 1930s the former constituted more than 70% of the total, but they were represented in provincial Soviets on the basis of 1 delegate for every 25,000 citizens, compared with 1 for every 5,000 in urban areas. As a result the delegates from rural areas constituted a minority in all provincial Soviets. Due to the multi-stage system of elections the rural population was even more strongly under-represented in republican Soviets and the USSR Supreme Soviet. It is obvious that the election system prevented not only the rural bourgeoisie (kulaks) but also their potential supporters from getting control of the Soviets.

After 1933 almost all peasants became either members of collective farms (kolkhozes) or workers on state farms (sovhozes), and private capitalist firms in towns and cities were closed, so it was clear that the classes of rural and urban bourgeoisie had been done way with. There was no basis for continuing with the political discrimination of the peasantry. At the same time the threat of the coming war, and the need for political consolidation of the country made a change in the election system especially urgent. Stalin and most other influential members of the Politburo (Molotov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, Kalinin, Kirov) came out for changing the election procedure and making elections general for all (liquidating all kinds of political and social discrimination), secret, direct and equal.

Later, Stalin and his supporters added that voters should have a choice between several candidates and that the old practice of voting for a single candidate should be abolished. On 1 March 1936, explaining the gist of the new election system to Roy Howard, president of Scripps-Howard Newspapers, Stalin said that he expected a very lively election campaign:

> "There are not a few institutions in our country which work badly. Cases occur when this or that local government body fails to satisfy certain of the multifarious and growing requirements of the toilers of town and country.
> Have you built a good school or not?
> Have you improved housing conditions?
>
> Are you a bureaucrat? Have you helped to make our labour more effective and our lives more cultured?
>
> Such will be the criteria with which millions of electors will measure the fitness of candidates, reject the unsuitable, expunge their names from candidates' lists, and promote and nominate the best.
>
> … Our new electoral system will tighten up all institutions and organisations and compel them to improve their work. Universal, direct and secret suffrage in the USSR will be a whip in the hands of the population against the organs of government which work badly."[19]

Such elections had no precedent in Russian history. During the elections to the tsarist Duma there were property barriers, which meant that workers and poor peasants were heavily under-represented. Women and many national groups had no right to vote. Even during the secret, direct, equal elections to the Constituent Assembly in 1917 the voting did not embrace all the voters since it was conducted in less than half of all election districts of Russia.

But it was doubtful that all members of the Communist Party, especially its functionaries, were ready for a new system of elections. On the one hand most of the Party functionaries supported Stalin's policies in the ideological battles of the 1920s. They constituted a consolidated body of professional leaders who were disciplined by the October Revolution and the Civil War. They demonstrated their abilities to perform difficult missions during the restoration of the Soviet economy after the Civil War and in the period of industrialisation and collectivisation.

They ardently supported Stalin. The tradition of praising Party leaders, starting from the first days of the October Revolution – when all the speeches ended with cheers to Lenin (and also to Trotsky, with less frequent cheers to Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and Stalin), and when the assembly halls were decorated with portraits of Marx, Engels and Lenin (and also Trotsky) – changed from 1929 when cheering Stalin became standard, and portraits of Stalin and Lenin became principal decorations of Party meetings. The adoration of Stalin took the form of a veritable personality cult.

Yet, for most Party functionaries, it was not easy to perform the political reform designed by Stalin and his supporters. Their level of competence and education, their political experience and even understanding of Marxism were put to a difficult test.

The level of education of most of the Party functionaries was inadequate for a country which was in the process of 20th century modernisation. In his report to the 17th Party Congress, the Credentials Committee chairman Nikolai Yezhov announced with satisfaction that since the previous Congress in 1930 the proportion of delegates with a

university education had risen from 4.1% to 10%, and the proportion of delegates with a secondary education had risen from 15.7% to 31%.
Yet, despite the progress achieved, a majority – 59% – of the Party elite represented at the 17th Congress still had only a primary education, which was absolutely inadequate for a country engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the most developed countries of the world.

At that time a veritable cultural revolution took place in the USSR. The illiteracy typical of the majority of pre-revolutionary Russia's population practically disappeared in the 1930s. Millions of people received secondary education. Tens of thousands of new specialists with university diplomas worked at newly built plants and factories. Some of them were delegates to the 17th Congress. But the predominant majority of Party functionaries were veterans. In his report Yezhov stated that, while the number of those who had joined the Party before 1920 constituted only 10% of Party members, they comprised 80% of the Congress delegates. "Thus," said Yezhov, "this basic and well-tested layer of Party members who were schooled in the Civil War retain the leadership of the Party."

This "well-tested" layer was not homogeneous. Among these members were those who had joined before 1917. There were 24,000 Bolsheviks at the time of the February 1917 revolution. The vast majority of them had been arrested, imprisoned, exiled and/or condemned to penal servitude during tsarist times. Many of them emigrated abroad. The great majority of them were unable to get a formal higher education. Even such figures as Trotsky and Bukharin, who were considered to be 'intellectuals' of the Party, had but one year of university attendance. They compensated for their lack of formal education by self-teaching, often in prison and exile. Almost everyone, including workers with primary education, diligently studied the works of Marx, Engels and their followers.

They were engaged in propaganda work directed at improving the economic conditions of the workers, and for liberties and democratic rights. Before February 1917 the Bolsheviks fought to overthrow the tsarist regime and for democratic revolution. Although they had sharp debates with members of the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), Socialist-Revolutionary Party members and anarchists, they often cooperated with their ideological opponents in their struggle against the monarchy. The final goal of the Bolsheviks was a socialist revolution but they had no clear idea of when it would come in Russia. Stalin, as well as all other Politburo members in 1934 (Molotov, Voroshilov, Kalinin, Kaganovich, Kirov, Kuibishev, Ordzhonikidze, Andreev, Kosior), belonged to that oldest ('Leninist') generation of the Party.

Another and more numerous group constituted those members who, like Yezhov, joined the Party between February and October of 1917. At that time the Party grew from 24,000 to 350,000 members. Most of the newcomers lacked any previous experience of political struggle and any theoretical knowledge of Marxism, but they were carried into the Party by Bolshevik speeches at the never-ending public meetings of 1917. These people joined the Party when Lenin announced the socialist revolution to be the primary goal of the Bolsheviks and they were now in conflict with almost all other socialists of Russia.

From October 1917 to the end of the Civil War, the Party

Become a Member of the "Down With Illiteracy" Society
Moscow, c. 1925-1926.

increased its membership to 700,000. Khrushchev, Beria, Malenkov and many other Soviet leaders belonged to this generation of members. Together with older Party members they performed bravely in the throes of the Civil War. Yet, unlike those who were Bolsheviks before 1917, they were aware that they had joined the ruling Party. Soon after the break-up of the alliance with the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, and with almost all members of all other parties joining the White Guards during the Civil War, the Bolshevik (or Communist) Party became the only ruling party in Soviet Russia. The new communists were not accustomed to debates with people of other political views and they treated them as mortal enemies of the Soviet republic.

Many of this new generation came to occupy jobs in the Party, the Soviets and other offices. In 1920, while 52% of Party members were industrial workers by background, only 11% of them continued to work in plants and factories. Over 80% of Party members worked in the new Soviet, Party or army offices or in other office establishments. For some people, becoming a communist meant first of all getting a good job. That is why Lenin time and again after October 1917 warned about opportunists and careerists who became Party members.

After joining the Party most of these new members did not bother to study Marxism or develop their general education. At the 17th Congress Stalin spoke about

"the not very high theoretical level of the majority of our Party members, the inadequate ideological work of the Party bodies, and the fact that our Party functionaries are overburdened with purely practical work."[20] In 1937 he stated, "I do not know how many members of the Central Committee learned Marxism."[21]

From 1917 to 1920 the vast majority of Party veterans grew accustomed to their ruling positions which also meant certain material and social benefits to them and the members of their families. The fact that the position of the Party was uncontested led them to believe that they were destined to remain in ruling positions for an indefinite period. At the 17th Congress Stalin compared those Party functionaries with "aristocrats, who consider that Party decisions and the laws issued by the Soviet government are not written for them, but for fools."[22]

The disregard of laws by Party big bosses became chronic. The deputy chairman of the Party's Central Control Commission N G Shkuratov complained to the delegates at the 12th Congress in 1923 that it was practically impossible to start legal proceedings against a Party member as the legal bodies would be subjected to political pressure.

The position of those Party functionaries who joined Stalin's side in the ideological and political conflicts of the 1920s was pretty strong. Stalin and other Politburo members relied upon their support and in turn did not interfere actively in the affairs of the provinces and republics. The cult of Stalin (as well as smaller cults of Molotov, Voroshilov, Kalinin, Kaganovich and other Politburo members), which was fostered by provincial and republican leaders, allowed them to establish their own forms of adulation. In provinces and republics portraits of local Party leaders were used for decorating official buildings. Local poets composed poems and songs in their honour. Official speeches ended up with cheers for the local leaders.

In this artificial atmosphere of adulation it was easy for local Party leaders to surround themselves with groups of sycophants. In order to safeguard their positions many local Party leaders relied upon the support of cliques and groups of communists devoted to them personally. On 5 March 1937 Stalin exposed this practice and spoke about Party functionaries who took with them dozens of their supporters whenever they were appointed to new posts.[23]

At the same time these cliques and groups were engaged in mutual rivalries. In his report to the 12th Party Congress Stalin had named dozens of provinces where Party organisations were turned into veritable battlefields of different cliques.[24]

Since most of these people began their careers as politicians and statesmen during the Civil War they grew accustomed to tackling extraordinary situations. At the same time simplistic thinking in dichotomist terms was habitual for them. They hardly resorted to profound and dialectical analysis. They used commands rather than persuasion. Their faults became evident during the collectivisation which they turned into a competition of trying to make their republic or province fully collectivised before others. Many Party secretaries (E Bauman in Moscow province, I Vareikis in the Central Black Soils province, S Kosior in the Ukraine, M Khataevich in the Middle Volga province, Sheboladev in the Lower Volga province, R Eikhe in the Western Siberian province) tried to complete collectivisation in their provinces as quickly as possible, disregarding the attitude of the peasants. As a result they resorted to military coercion.

Many a time Stalin and other Politburo members intervened in order to stop the brutal methods of regional secretaries. Thus on January 31 1930 Stalin, Molotov and Kaganovich sent a cable to Khataevich: "Your haste regarding kulaks has nothing to do with the Party policy". On 2 March 1930, in an article *Giddy with Success*, Stalin attacked the methods which regional and local Party leaders used in order to make peasants join collective farms.[25] After this article was published many peasants left collective farms, which they had been made to join by threats of brutal force.

These negative features of many Party functionaries, and the contradictions inside the Party, were totally ignored by Khrushchev for a simple reason: he was a typical representative of those Party functionaries who did not want the changes urged by Stalin and his supporters in the Politburo. Mentioning contradictions between Stalin and some Party leaders, modern text-books and propaganda distort their respective positions. Without bringing a single fact they assert that the resistance of some communists to Stalin's policy inside the Party was motivated by their desire to strengthen democratic principles.

In the second part of this article I shall go on to deal with plots against Stalin's reforms.

Notes and References

1 N S Khrushchev, *Speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU*, at http://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm.
2 N V Zagladin, S I Kozlenko, S T Minakov and Yu A Petrov, *Istoriya Rossii: XX-nachalo XXI veka*, 8th edn, Moscow, Russkoye Slovo, 2008.
3 A A Levandovsky, Y A Shchetinov and S V Mironenko, *Istoriya Rossii: XX-nachalo XXI veka,* Moscow, Prosveshcheniye, 2009.
4 A I Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*, HarperCollins, 2002.
5 R A Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989.
6 *The History of the Fatherland*, R Degtyareva and S Poltarak, Eds.
7 A S Orlov, V A Georgiev, A Yu Polunov, Yu Ya Tereshchenko, *Osnovy Kursa Istorii Rossii*, Moscow, 2006.
8 V Kuzhinov, *Pravda Stalinskikh Repressiy ili Komu Nuzhny Bolshie Zhertvy (The Truth of Stalin's Repressions, or Who Needs Big Sacrifices)*, Algoritm, Moscow, 2010.
9 D Lyskov, *Stalin's Repressions: Great Lie of the 20th Century*, Yuaza, Eksmo, Moscow, 2009.
10 R A Medvedev, *On Stalin and Stalinism*, OUP, 1979.
11 I Deutscher, *Stalin; A Political Biography*, OUP, 1967, p 351 ff.
12 J V Stalin, *Concluding Words at the Plenum of the CC of the CPSU, 5 March 1937*, in *Sweep Away Obstacles in the Path of Soviet Democracy*, Friends of the Soviet Union (World Committee), London, 1937, p 38.
13 L D Trotsky, quoted in I Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky 1929-1940,* OUP, 1987, pp 167-8.
14 J V Stalin, *The Tasks of Business Executives,* in *Leninism*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1940, p 366.
15 J V Stalin, *Report to the 17th Congress of the CPSU (B)*, in *Leninism*, op cit, p 505.
16 F Engels, *Socialism in Germany*, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 27, p 244.
17 *The Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal: The History of its Construction*, M Gorky, L Auerbach and S G Firin, Eds, Moscow, 1934.
18 I Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*, Pelican Books, 1966, p 349.
19 J V Stalin, *Interview with Roy Howard*, at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1936/03/01.htm
20 Stalin, *Report to the 17th Congress of the CPSU (B)*, *op cit*, p 517.
21 J V Stalin, *Concluding Words at the Plenum of the CC of the CPSU, 5 March 1937* (unedited version), in *Collected Works (Russian edn)*, Vol 14, Yaroslavl, 2007, p 252.
22 Stalin, *Report to the 17th Congress of the CPSU (B)*, *op cit*, p 531.
23 Stalin, *Concluding Words at the Plenum of the CC of the CPSU, 5 March 1937*, *op cit*, p 30.
24 J V Stalin, *CC Report to the 12th Congress of the Russian Communist Party(B), in Dvenadtsatii Syezd RKP(B)*, 17-25 aprelya 1923 goda, stenograficheskii otchyot (*12th Congress of the RCP(B), Stenographic Proceedings*), Moscow, 1963, pp 797-9.
25 Stalin, *Leninism*, *op cit*, p 333.

The Asiatic Mode of Production

Controversies within Historical Materialism

Part 1: An Unfinished Concept in Classical Marxism

By Kenny Coyle

INTRODUCTION

In the Communist Party pamphlet *Asia: Imperialism and Resistance,* I attempted to summarise the historical development of East Asia. But even in a rather long pamphlet it was impossible to deal adequately with Asia's pre-colonial societies. I was forced to refer to them generically as "feudal" or "semi-feudal" with little in the way of qualification.

The question is not merely of historical interest since today there are pressing reasons for socialists in the West to improve our understanding of Asia. China's rapid development will make it the world's largest economy before the end of this decade, yet less than a century ago such a transformation appeared inconceivable. China seemed stuck in a time warp, trapped in almost medieval backwardness. It was China's *inability* to make progress that intrigued Marxists. Chinese civilisation had produced stunning achievements centuries before their discovery or adoption in Europe yet, despite China's history of trade and commerce as well as its huge domestic market and technical expertise, it failed to develop an indigenous capitalism.

The same was true of the Indian subcontinent and the civilisations of south-east Asia as well as the areas of the Middle East covered by the Turkish Ottoman Empire. All had rich cultural legacies, substantial historical achievements and were on par or in advance of their Western counterparts for long periods but seemed frozen at the very moment that Western colonialism was expanding vibrantly.

One school of thought was that in northern Europe the feudal mode of production had acted as a womb within which embryonic capitalism could develop, while China and most of Asia were not feudal societies but instead were examples of a barren 'Asiatic Mode of Production' (AMP) that was unable to conceive more advanced forms.

Marx referred to the AMP in the *Preface* to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*:

> "In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society."[1]

Yet despite its origins in the writings of Marx, the concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production and the term itself became subject to a temporary taboo within the communist movement. Some critics claim that the AMP was suppressed during the 1930s because it conflicted with the 'Stalinist' agenda of the Soviet state and the Communist International.

Paul Blackledge has argued that as a consequence of the "Stalinist counter-revolution" in the Soviet Union the concept of the Asiatic mode was dropped "as part of the fall-out from the Comintern debate on its Chinese policy in the 1920s".[2] Certainly Stalin omitted the concept from the five-stage formula outlined in his 1938 work *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (part of *The History of the CPSU (B) Short Course)* where he wrote:

> "Five *main* types of relations of production are known to history: primitive communal, slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist."[3] [emphasis in original –*KC*]

Nonetheless many Marxists outside the communist movement have also rejected the AMP, believing that Marx's concept was essentially incoherent, historically invalid and long overdue for "the decent burial it deserves".[4]

But despite official disapproval on the one hand and rigorous intellectual critiques on the other, the AMP discussion has persisted. There seem to be several reasons for this resilience.

First, advances in historical research provide a far clearer picture of pre-capitalist societies, especially those outside Europe. These do not always fit neatly into categories of primitive communist, ancient/slave or feudal modes of production.

Historian Neil Davidson asks:

> "Why do we need the concept of the Asiatic mode of production? Can we not simply declare that the entire pre-capitalist world, with the exception of the Greek and Roman slave societies, was feudal? In fact, with the exception of few remaining Stalinists, virtually everyone who is interested in this question recognises that the differences between the societies involved are so vast that this position is impossible to maintain."[5]

We'll see, however, that Davidson's answer to this pertinent question is as confused as his anti-Stalinism.

The second reason for the AMP clinging to life is that Marx's ambiguous definitions of the AMP have allowed endless reinterpretations. Michael Curtis noted that these ranged from:

> "a genuine socioeconomic formation unique to the Orient; primitive society geographically widespread before the period of slavery; a variant of slavery or feudalism; an 'archaic formation'; a specific form of property ownership or relations of production; a pseudo-concept really about the hypothetical origins of modern bourgeois society; a society with a state but without private property; the most general form of the evolution of primitive communist society; a concept that could define pre-colonial black African systems; an imaginative sketch to help analyse capitalism; the only Marxist non-Western type of society; a political structure without a class system; a transitory formation between a class society; a stagnant variant of the ancient mode of production; an important vehicle for the Aesopian criticism of the despotic powers of rulers.[6]

And thirdly, the controversies highlight broader theoretical questions than merely categorising specific social formations or slicing history into clear historical periods. These debates go to the heart of the materialist conception of history. Are modes of production universal or can they be regionally specific? How did primitive classless societies become exploitative class societies? Does history follow a single direction or are there many different paths to progress? Can a society have more than one mode of production at a time? Do human societies have to follow a pre-determined set of successive stages or can they 'skip' stages? Exactly how many stages are there? and so on.

Two Themes

These are only some of the questions that the debate surrounding the AMP has generated. Yet we can, with a certain oversimplification, separate the AMP debate into two dominant themes, one considered chronological and the other geographical.

The first is concerned with Marx's placing of the AMP immediately after

primitive communism and before the slave and feudal formations in chronological order. It has been applied to simple settlements or village networks organised by clan or tribe such as was found, at least until very recently, in remoter parts of Africa and Asia, as well as the early settled civilisations of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt, among others. For some theorists, the Asiatic Mode of Production is a fully formed class society with its own distinctive mode of production, while for others it is a transitional social form marking the point at which primitive communism is being broken up but where communal property continues to predominate and where class structures have not yet hardened.

The second theme focuses on the divergent path taken by non-European societies right up to the modern era, such as India and China before the arrival of European colonialists. In this sense, *Asiatic* was seen as describing the alternative paths to the one taken in Europe, where classical slave societies gave way to feudalism and subsequently capitalism in succession.

Debates regarding both the 'chronological' and 'geographical' interpretations of the AMP took place within the communist movement at various times with different outcomes. Separating historical issues from political ones is always difficult but is essential here. It is important to dispel many misconceptions about these debates since they not only inhibit free enquiry into historical materialism but they have also been used to reinforce sectarian and dogmatic positions on issues of current interest to the left.

In these two articles, I want to look at how the debate on the AMP was treated within the communist movement. First, I'll argue that the status of the AMP within classical Marxism was much more tenuous than is often presented. Second, while the 1930s debate on the AMP became linked to wider questions of communist political strategy this was due to reasons different from those usually claimed. Third, I'll show that it was largely from within the communist movement that new and fresh approaches to the AMP emerged in the post-Stalin era and that therefore the pros and cons of the AMP debate need to be separated from the issue of 'Stalinism'. Fourth, I'll argue that refreshing the debates from the 1960s onward can help shed light not only on the distant past but on some contemporary issues too.

I: MARX, ENGELS AND THE AMP

We first need to establish the importance of the concept of modes of production to Marxism. Then we need to see how fundamental, or marginal, the AMP was within the Marxist classics, by which I mean the main theoretical works of Marx and Engels that were published in their lifetime. Finally we should look at key unpublished manuscripts and try to identify the essential features of the AMP.

Historical Laws And Stages

For Marx, the mode of production determined other aspects of life in any given society. This was not an argument for mechanical cause and effect but an insistence that the economic activities of society provide the physical foundation and boundaries for other facets of everyday life. The conflict between rising productive forces and established relations of production was seen as the motor of social development. Marx gave this explanation:

> "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution …. No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself."[1]

In the earlier passage quoted from Marx's *Preface,* he listed four successive social stages "Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois" yet there was no mention of the initial stage of humanity – primitive communism. Earlier still, in

A major interest for Marx was Russia where he analysed peasant communes called the Mir. Communal land ownership of the Mir predated serfdom, surviving emancipation and even the Russian Revolution.
Painting: On Mir by Sergey Korovin, 1893

1848, Marx and Engels had written in the *Communist Manifesto* of three stages: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."[7] They then proceeded to describe ancient/slave society, feudalism and capitalism. Here they left out both primitive communism and the Asiatic mode.

Forty years later Engels corrected this when he noted that the *Communist Manifesto* passage should have read "all *written* history", since the authors were

then ignorant of "primitive communistic society" that existed "everywhere from India to Ireland".[8] Here again Engels did not include the AMP. Nor does it appear in his most important work on classless and early class society, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.* The AMP is only mentioned in short passages in Volumes 1 and 3 of *Capital* and referred to in a few other scattered writings on India and China, which we shall come to later.

Within the major published work of Marx and Engels, the inclusion of the AMP as a major historical stage was inconsistent. What of the unpublished materials?

The *Grundrisse* And Later Writings

In preparation for *Capital*, Marx committed a number of his ideas and insights into a series of notebooks written in 1857-8. These were only published decades after his death under the title *Outlines for the Critique of Political Economy*, normally referred to as the *Grundrisse* from the German title. The first selection from the *Grundrisse* was published in Moscow in 1939 and a second in 1941.[9] In 1953, the first full German edition was published in the German Democratic Republic, while the first English selections appeared in 1965.

The *Grundrisse* reflect Marx's interest in pre-capitalist society, where he mentions not only Asiatic but Germanic and Slavic modes, though his main aim was in understanding the genesis of capitalism.[10] In his last years, roughly from 1879 to 1882, Marx returned to his study of pre-capitalist societies, such as Ancient Rome and Egypt, Indonesia, Central and South America, and even early cave-dwellers in pre-historic Britain. Another major interest was Russia where he analysed peasant communes called the *mir*.[11]

It is from all these disparate sources scattered across several decades, and which include journalistic articles, letters, notebooks, footnotes as well as sections of published works, that the characteristics of the AMP have to be reconstructed.

Features of the AMP

Taking these disparate sources, one recent academic survey of the debate summarised three general features found in Marx and Engels' references to the AMP.

> "In broad outline, Marx found the socio-economic essence of the Asiatic Mode of Production to lie in the following:
>
> 1. A network of rural communities, mainly agrarian communes, self-sufficient in food and handicraft and supplying some economic surplus to the central authorities. They were often asked to supply, when needed, *corvée* labour to build dams, water storage and other public works …. The division of labour within villages was limited, as was generalised production for market ('commodity exchange') – the 'natural economy' or production-for-use was dominant. In the earlier phases of the commune, there was no inner drive in the system to accumulate private property.
>
> The dominance of collective working of the land was ensured by the system under which property was owned by the state – by the supreme commune personified by the Ruler. The other communes in AMP were essentially working the lands they had been allotted by the state. In Europe, at a higher stage of the development of communes, as in the German 'Mark' or commune, common property existed only as a supplement to private land. Something similar could be seen in 19th Century Russia.
>
> 2. Despotism: A ruling Sovereign, bureaucratic Court or caste using centralised power and force to impose political and military goals. Hegel had said that under Oriental Despotism only one man is free.
>
> Marx added that in societies of the Asiatic Mode of Production type, two major sources of power were the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Finance.
>
> 3. State of collective ownership of land, productive property, and 'hydraulic' works rather than private ownership of such assets. In his letter to Engels in 1853, Marx made much of this point - that the absence of a generalised system of private ownership of the means of production was 'the "key" to the Oriental Heaven.' Later scholars, including some Marxists or those strongly influenced by him, have disputed the accuracy of the implications of this striking remark."[12]

The next challenge is finding real societies where these features, or even the majority of them, actually existed. Can we identify specific examples of the AMP in history, specifically what of India and China? Here we can begin to connect Marx's own analysis with the debates of the modern communist movement.

II: LENIN, STALIN AND THE AMP

In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 Russia's communists faced many complex questions. One was integrating the formerly Tsarist territories with widely differing levels of development, from Petrograd's modern industries to pre-capitalist communities existing among non-Russian nationalities in Central Asia and the Soviet Far East. In a 1921 article *The Tax in Kind*, Lenin listed the different types of socio-economic structures that intermingled on Soviet territory:

> "(1) patriarchal, *ie* to a considerable extent natural, peasant farming; (2) small commodity production (this includes the majority of those peasants who sell their grain); (3) private capitalism; (4) state capitalism; (5) socialism."[13]

Another factor was that, as the revolutionary tide ebbed in the advanced capitalist countries of the West, it seemed to strengthen in the 'backward' East. The Communist International (Comintern) in 1922 noted:

> "The great diversity of national revolutionary movements against imperialism reflects the backwardness of the colonies and the different stages reached in the transition from feudal and feudal-patriarchal relations to capitalism. Capitalism in the colonial countries usually originates and develops from its feudal base in mixed, incomplete and transitional forms, with commercial capital predominating; this means that the differentiation of bourgeois democracy from feudal-bureaucratic and feudal-agrarian elements frequently proceeds in a lengthy and roundabout manner."[14]

Yet in his writings and speeches Lenin mentions the AMP in passing only once and even then he is paraphrasing his Menshevik opponent Plekhanov's argument in relation to Russian history. In his most detailed discussion of historical stages, the 1919 lecture *The State*, Lenin refers several times to the primitive communist and later "periods in the history of mankind, slave-owning, feudal and capitalist" but he ignores the AMP entirely. He does, however, specifically mention "quite backward Asiatic countries (where feudalism prevails to this day)".[15] Here Lenin quite clearly advocates a five-stage formula, one that excluded the AMP and which designated Asian countries as feudal, almost two decades before Stalin is accused of fabricating it.

Paradoxically, the programme adopted at the Comintern's 6th congress in July 1928, held one year after the defeat of the Chinese communists, does refer to the Asiatic mode. The programme was drafted mainly by Bukharin with Stalin's approval. As far as I am aware, this is the first and only time the term appears in official Comintern programmes or manifestos.

> "Colonial and semi-colonial countries (China, India, etc) and dependent countries (Argentina, Brazil, etc), have the rudiments of and in some cases a considerably developed industry – in the majority of cases inadequate for independent socialist construction – with feudal medieval relationships, or 'Asiatic mode of production' relationships prevailing in their economies and in their political superstructures …. The principal task in such countries is, on the one hand, to fight against the feudal and pre-capitalist forms of exploitation, and to develop systematically the peasant agrarian revolution; on the other hand, to fight against foreign imperialism for national independence."[16]

The use of quotation marks suggests that the AMP was considered ambiguous, yet clearly the Stalin-Bukharin leadership did not see it as inherently heretical or embarrassing in the face of the Chinese events. In any case, the Comintern programme sets out identical strategies for communists grappling with either feudalism or with the AMP – the peasant agrarian revolution and anti-imperialist struggle.

Let's now turn to the impact of the AMP debate on two Asian communist movements, the Indian and Chinese, the latter being critical to the political aspect of the controversy.

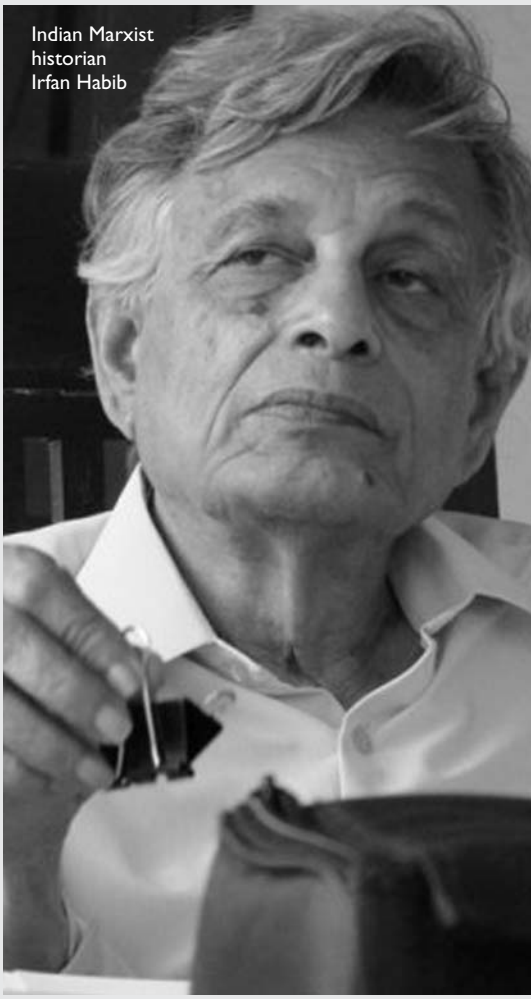
India

In Marx and Engels' initial thoughts on the AMP, India played the predominant part. They were heavily influenced by Hegel, who had written of "Oriental despotism" in backward Asian societies. In the early 1850s, Marx drew on the work of the French doctor Francois Bernier's book *Travels in the Mogul Empire: 1656-1668*. This provided Marx with what he believed was a key insight into Asiatic societies – the absence of private land ownership. In a note to Engels, he wrote:

> "Bernier rightly sees all the manifestations of the East – he mentions Turkey, Persia and Hindustan – as having a common basis, namely the absence of private landed property. This is the real clef, even to the eastern heaven."[17]

Engels agreed, adding the importance of irrigation to civilisation in the East:

> "The absence of landed property is indeed the key to the whole of the East. Therein lies its political and religious history. But how to explain the fact that orientals never reached the stage of landed property, not even the feudal kind? This is, I think, largely due to the climate, combined with the



Indian Marxist historian Irfan Habib

> nature of the land, more especially the great stretches of desert extending from the Sahara right across Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary to the highest of the Asiatic uplands. Here artificial irrigation is the first prerequisite for agriculture, and this is the responsibility either of the communes, the provinces or the central government."[18]

Temporarily Marx appeared to see a progressive side to the intrusion of colonial capitalism into these 'stagnant societies' by providing an external impetus for economic development that was internally absent:

> "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society.
> The question, therefore, is not whether the English had a right to conquer India, but whether we are to prefer India conquered by the Turk, by the Persian, by the Russian, to India conquered by the Briton.
>
> England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia."[19]

Thankfully, Marx soon pulled back from this approach as he realised that British rule was impoverishing India rather than revitalising it. He also recognised that at least some of his early assumptions on pre-colonial India were too simplistic.

Nonetheless, Marx was mistaken in this construction of the AMP, largely due to the inadequate and often biased nature of the materials on India that he had to hand. These were written mostly by Western explorers, adventurers, merchants, missionaries and the like and not by Asians themselves. Lumping together such very different societies as Turkey, Persia, India and China on the basis of irrigation works and climate was misleading, presenting 'the East' as an undifferentiated mass. In Marx's view only Japan had experienced a "purely feudal organisation of landed property".[20]

Within the pre-split Communist Party of India (CPI), the AMP had a chequered history. In 1949 S A Dange wrote *From Primitive Communism to Slavery* in which all the complexities of ancient Indian history were squeezed into an ill-fitting framework largely influenced by Engels' *Origins* and the five-stage formula. India's foremost Marxist historian D D Kosambi judged Dange's work a "painfully disappointing book".[21] Yet in 1952, the south Indian communist leader E M S Namboodiripad used the AMP as a central part of his work *The National Question in Kerala,* only abandoning it much later.[22]

In a later work Kosambi refuted some of Marx's descriptions of India that underpinned the AMP, such as endless stagnation, village self-sufficiency and the supposed absence of commodity production, but he also argued that Stalin's *Historical Materialism* had limited relevance to India since:

> "India showed a series of parallel forms which cannot be put into the precise categories, for the mode based on slavery is absent, feudalism [is] greatly different from the European type with serfdom and the manorial economy."[23]

Writing in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) theoretical magazine, one of India's foremost historians Irfan Habib noted:

> "For those who joined the Communist movement in the 1940s or 1950s or even later, the major introduction to the main principles of Marxist historiography was usually obtained from J V Stalin's essay, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, written in September 1938 for the *History of CPSU (B), Short Course*, and reprinted in the various editions of his *Problems of Leninism.* While this essay with its rich selection of quotations and logical organization summed up the essence of Marxist world-outlook, yet because it was, after all, a summary, it tended to overlook many complexities, variations and nuances. This was especially true of its treatment of the historical part and especially of 'modes of production'."[24]

Since the 1950s, Indian Marxist historians have delved into those aspects of the AMP that are relevant but few have adopted it wholesale. Instead there appears to be a consensus that not only the AMP but also the notion of successive slave and feudal modes of production cannot simply be applied wholesale. In particular, the connection between India's caste system and exploitation is one that demands an extension of the core Marxist analysis rather than blind repetition from the classics.

China

During the 1920s, China was in constant revolutionary turmoil. Here the AMP became entangled in a wider debate between Stalin and Bukharin on the one hand and Trotsky and Zinoviev on the other over the strategy of the Communist Party of China (CPC). These conflicts became particularly acute in the aftermath of the defeat inflicted on the CPC by Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang in 1927.

One of the chief problems within the Comintern was the generally poor knowledge of Chinese society and history, and the tendency on both sides of the debate to view the Chinese revolution through the prism of Russian experience. The debate among historians inside China was naturally better informed. There was a variety of Marxist trends: those in or close to the CPC, Trotskyists, non-aligned leftists and even currents within the Guomindang. Generally speaking, supporters of the idea that China was or had been an example of the AMP were in a minority although there were many suggested permutations of the successive historical stages that China had passed through. Given China's long continuous history, much of the debate centred on how far back feudalism or slavery could be traced – the suggestion being that in both cases it was a thousand or so years earlier than in Europe.[25]

Leningrad Conference

Ignored by Lenin and only half-heartedly used by Stalin and Bukharin, the AMP's ambiguous status was ended in 1931. A high-level conference of Soviet historians and Asia specialists, meeting in Leningrad, came down decisively against the validity of the AMP. Unfortunately for sober-minded debate, the discussion took place in the context of the aftermath of factional conflict within the Soviet Communist Party and the Communist International, against both Trotsky's Left Opposition and Bukharin's so-called Right Opposition. According to the Stalin leadership, Trotsky had continued

to underestimate the revolutionary potential of the peasantry as Lenin had first accused him, while Bukharin's group were charged with underestimating the importance of class conflict between rich and poor peasants.

A number of writers from the Trotskyist tradition have concluded that the 1931 conference decisions were dictated by Stalin's need for a theoretical cover to justify his alliance with the Guomindang (GMD). Neil Davidson's explanation is that:

> "The [Trotskyist] Left Opposition had argued that the bourgeoisie were too weak to carry out the 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution in China and that, as the theory of permanent revolution suggested, the working class would have to lead the revolutionary process all the way to socialism. Since Stalin had been allied with what he imagined was the revolutionary bourgeoisie in the shape of the Kuomintang, and he took it as axiomatic that the bourgeoisie could only emerge out of feudalism, any attempt to declare that China was not feudal, but 'Asiatic' undermined these assumptions and was obviously a Trotskyist attempt to criticise the alliance."[5]

Davidson's first error is a simple anachronism. From Lenin's time until 1927, the Comintern had urged the communists to ally with the Guomindang. During this period, communists believed that the national bourgeoisie could be won over as an ally of the working class, peasantry and urban petty bourgeoisie against feudalism and imperialism and that the GMD was a political expression of this. However, as a result of the 1927 defeat, the Comintern concluded that the mainstream Guomindang had become an enemy, not an ally. By the time of the Leningrad conference in February 1931, the Chinese Red Army had been in armed struggle against the Guomindang for almost four years, seeking to lead a workers' and peasants' revolution to overthrow the GMD's 'bourgeois-landlord' dictatorship.

Davidson's second error is more glaring: he forgets the existence of imperialism. The communists divided the Chinese capitalist class into two: the national bourgeoisie which clashed with imperialism; and a comprador bourgeoisie that collaborated with it. The origins of the Chinese bourgeoisie, whether growing out of home-grown feudalism, generated by imperialism or a mixture of both, were secondary to the question of its political role. By 1931, in any case, the national bourgeoisie was judged by the Comintern to have exhausted its revolutionary potential.

Third, the communists generally designated China as 'semi-colonial and semi-feudal', not simply 'feudal', which is a more complex picture than Davidson's one-sided snapshot.

If China was semi-feudal then it meant that the masses of Chinese peasants could be mobilised for an agrarian revolution that would complement the struggles of the working class. The communists believed that imperialism had a mutually parasitic relationship with China's feudal elements as well as with the comprador bourgeoisie. Denial of feudalism might be seen as undermining the necessity for peasant agrarian revolution and denial of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry was considered to be a classically Trotskyist error.

Proponents of the AMP were accused of obscuring the nature of class struggle in the countryside. One of the participants in the Leningrad conference, Evgenii Iolk, warned that at a time of sharpened agrarian conflict in China adoption of the AMP would be harmful since it would mean that:

> "the Chinese comrades are presented with a theory that the gentry are not an example, a survival, of the feudal order, that in China there were certain peculiar 'Asiatic' relations, and so on, this of course can disorient and confuse the ideology of the proletarian avant-garde."[26]

The Chinese Trotskyists and Trotsky himself never argued for the validity of the AMP in their programme for China. The Chinese Trotskyists pretty much accepted the feudal character of pre-capitalist China, and their differences with the communists centred on the issue of how far capitalism predominated during the 1920s and '30s. One Trotskyist writer called it "a travesty to identify the Left Opposition's standpoint with an adherence to the 'Asiatic mode'."[27]

During the Leningrad Conference, it was insinuated that some supporters of the AMP were closet Trotskyists, which they countered by saying that it was they who were upholding the Comintern's 1928 programme. The Chinese specialist M D Kokin, himself a supporter of the AMP, attacked "widespread attempts to connect the Asiatic mode of production with Trotskyism". He said:

> "Trotskyism denies the presence of feudalism in China at present, which we do not do, and which absolutely does not follow from the Asiatic mode of production …. [T]he chieftain of Trotskyism on the Chinese question … Radek … denied and still denies the existence of the Asiatic Mode of Production in the historical past in China."[28]

Proponents of the AMP did not necessarily see it as being a contemporary political issue or even share the same definition of it. Some, like Kokin, argued that the AMP had existed in China's past but that it had been replaced subsequently by feudalism, while others such as Ludwig Mad'iar argued that remnants of *both* feudalism and the AMP co-existed with capitalism.[29]

There is no evidence of direct involvement of Stalin or his immediate circle in the Leningrad conference and there was no formal edict or recantations, according to the comprehensive study by American Marxist anthropologist Stephen P Dunn. Nonetheless the highly charged nature of the times had the effect of limiting further debate after 1931; and open discussion of the AMP *under that name* largely disappeared from Soviet social science debate for more than two decades.[30] This leads Davidson to claim that "The rejection of the Asiatic mode remained an article of faith in the USSR virtually down to the end of the Stalinist regime." He caricatures Soviet intellectual life from the early 1930s to the 1980s as a permafrost.[31]

As Dunn showed, even during the Stalin era, debates on pre-capitalist societies continued. And, contrary to Davidson's belief, it was the slave-holding and not the feudal mode of production that appears to have been most over-extended by Soviet writers, a point noted by at least one British communist historian. Unfortunately Davidson's cavalier dismissal of 'Stalinism' ignores a second much more fruitful round of debates about the Asiatic Mode of Production conducted by communist scholars both within the socialist countries and outside. We shall turn our attention to this next.

Notes and References

1 K Marx, *Preface* to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm .
2 P Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History*, Manchester University Press, 2006, p 110.
3 J V Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938), at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1938/09.htm .
4 P Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, Verso, London, 1974, p 548
5 N Davidson, *Asiatic, Tributary or Absolutist? A Comment on Chris Harman's 'The rise of Capitalism'*, published online (November 2004) on the website of *International Socialism Journal*, the theoretical quarterly of the British Socialist Workers Party at http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=20 .
6 M Curtis, *The Asiatic Mode of Production and Oriental Despotism*, in *Marxism: The Inner Dialogues*, M Curtis, Ed, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, 1997, pp 326-7.
7 K Marx and F Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Ch 1, at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#ab1 .
8 F Engels, footnote added to the 1888 English edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#a2 .
9 The timing of the publication in the Soviet Union is interesting given the implication that Stalin was determined to suppress anything that would undermine his *Historical Materialism* orthodoxy.
10 The relevant section of the *Grundrisse* is "Forms which precede capitalist production", see http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch09.htm#p471 .
11 See K B.Anderson, *Marx's Late Writings on Non-Western and Precapitalist Societies and Gender*, at http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/anderson-article-marx-late-writings.pdf .
12 B McFarlane, S Cooper and M Jaksic, *The Asiatic Mode of Production: A New Phoenix?* (Part 1), in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, August 2005.
13 V I Lenin, *The Tax in Kind* (1921), at http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/apr/21.htm .
14 4th Congress of the Communist International, *Theses on the Eastern Question*, II. The Conditions of Struggle, 5 December 1922, at http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/eastern-question.htm .
15 V I Lenin, *The State* (1919), at http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jul/11.htm .
16 6th Congress of the Communist International, *The Programme of the Communist International*, 1929, at http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/6th-congress/ch04.htm .
17 K Marx, *Letter to F Engels*, 2 June 1853, at http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/letters/53_06_02.htm .
18 F Engels, *Letter to K Marx*, June 6, 1853, at http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/letters/53_06_06.htm .
19 K Marx, *The Future Results of British Rule in India* (1853), at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm . In response, one pioneering Marxist historian, Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi, countered that "In fact, the greatest periods of Indian history, the Mauryan, Satavahana, Gupta owed nothing to intruders." See D D Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 2008, p 12.
20 This is not to accept the charge of 'Eurocentrism' sometimes levelled against Marx and Engels. Their sympathies for the struggles of India against British rule and for China against colonial pillage are evidence enough. Here it is also worth noting that Marx regarded Japan as an archetypal feudal society. For the debate among Japanese communists on the AMP, see Germaine Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan*, Princeton University Press, 1986. Ironically it was among pro-Comintern Japanese Marxists, rather than their opponents, that the AMP was most sympathetically discussed.
21 Cited in K M Shrimali, *The Making of an Indologist*, in *Frontline,* Vol 19, Issue 18, 2002; online at http://www.hindu.com/fline/fl1918/19180720.htm .
22 Prabhat Patnaik, *E M S Namboodiripad's Perception of History*, in *The Marxist,* Vol XXV, Parts 3-4, July-September 2009; online at http://www.cpim.org/marxist/200902-ems-prabhat.pdf .
23 D D Kosambi, *op cit*, p 16 .
24 I Habib, *Note Towards a Marxist Perception of Indian History*, in *The Marxist*, Vol XXVI, Part 4, October–December 2010; online at http://www.cpim.org/marxist/201004-maixist-indian%20history-Habib.pdf .
25 See A Dirlik, *Revolution and History, Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937*, University of California Press, 1989.
26 E S Iolk, *The AMP and the Class Struggle*, in *The Asiatic Mode of Production, Science and Politics*, A M Bailey and J R Llobera, Eds, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1981, p 98.
27 C Slaughter, *Marxism and the Class Struggle*, New Park, London, 1975, p 60.
28 Cited in Bailey and Llobera, *op cit*, p 33. Kokin was not entirely correct; Chinese Trotskyists largely accepted the existence of feudal remnants in Chinese society but these were seen as subordinate and marginal to the predominance of capitalism.
29 L I Madi'ar, *The Legitimacy of the AMP*, in Bailey and Llobera, *op cit*, p 76.
30 S P Dunn, *The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982, pp 35-6.
31 For a contrary view see, for example: R D Markwick, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia: The Politics of Revisionist Historiography 1956-1974*, Palgrave, 2001; J P Scanlan, *Marxism in the USSR: A Critical Survey of Current Soviet Thought,* Cornell University Press, 1985; E Gellner, *State and Society in Soviet Thought,* Blackwell, 1988.

Philosopher of the Universal

On the death of Hans Heinz Holz (26.02.1927-11.12.2011)

By Andreas Hüllinghorst

He developed the philosophical and political-theoretical foundations for a renewed revolution in social and economic relations.

As Lenin wrote:

> "A general who withdraws the remnants of his army into the heart of the country when it has been beaten … performs his duty … by taking advantage of *any and every* respite … in which to muster his forces and allow his army to rest or recover, if it is affected by disintegration and demoralisation".[1]

From 1989 onwards Hans Heinz Holz took up this task to an exceptional degree, in the field of political-philosophical practice.

In 1991 Holz and Domenico Losurdo brought together Marxist philosophers in order to reach understanding over the "Future of Marxism".[2] In the same year Holz's *The Downfall and Future of Socialism* was published; and in 1995 his *Communists Today* followed. Until sustaining a fall in 2006, which largely restricted him to his home thereafter, he spoke at countless events, and co-operated on drawing up the programme of the German Communist Party, the DKP. In 2010 and 2011 his *Transcendence and Realisation of Philosophy* was published by Aurora-Verlag in Berlin. Up to the end, he co-edited the 6-monthly philosophical journal *Topos*, orienting it towards philosophical problems arising in the class struggle, while at the same time writing important works on the history of dialectics and its logical structure, not to mention many articles for *Junge Welt*. From 1989 onwards his entire efforts were directed towards preserving and developing the revolutionary consciousness of the Communist Party, through insights into the totality of connections of the (capitalist) world, as well as orienting the Party towards its main task: revolutionising capitalist relations into socialist relations.

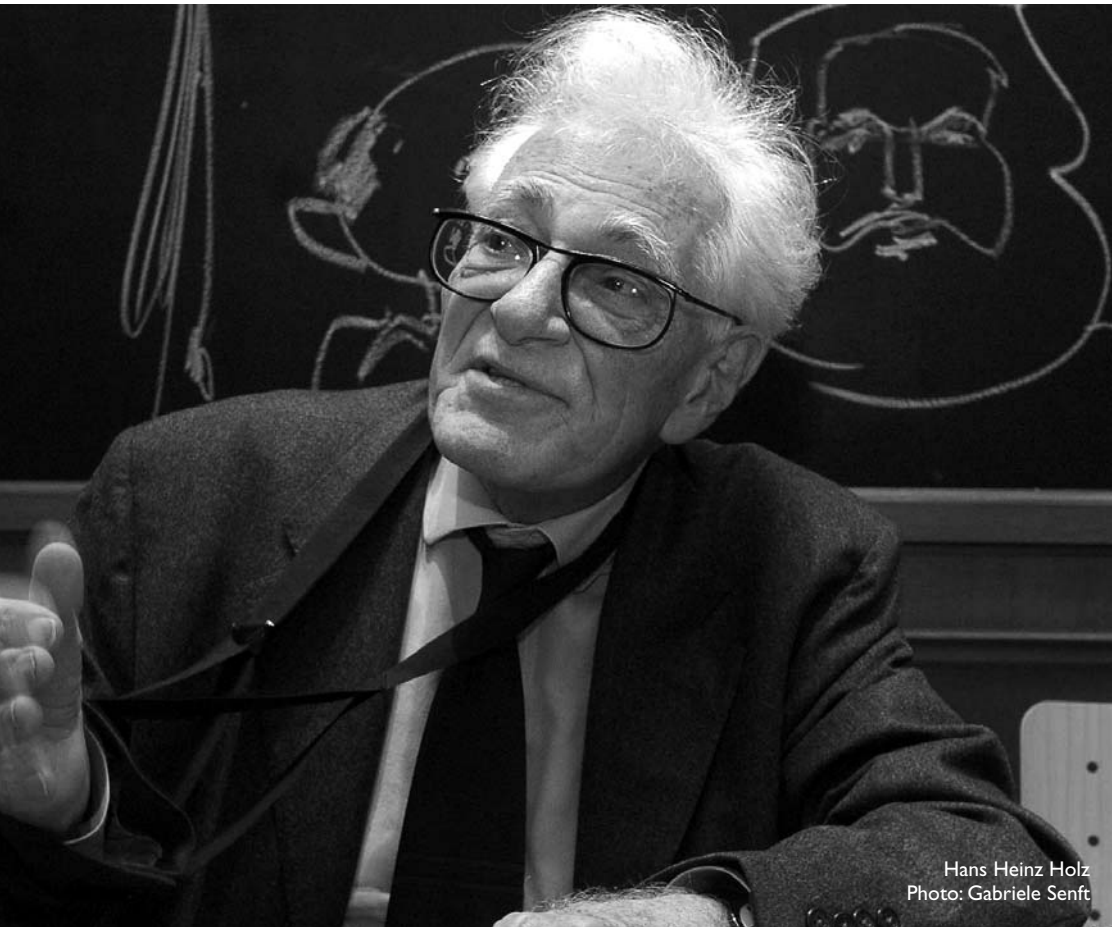
Many years ago, in the period before the catastrophe of 1989, Holz had made a name for himself as a Marxist theoretician. His systematic philosophical considerations were mature, and demonstrated their strength immediately after the victory of the class enemy. He systematically penetrated the social reality and the consequences arising from it for the communist movement, especially for the German Communist Party (DKP) and its members. For this reason Holz may be regarded essentially as a thinker of the 'second attempt'.

Mirror Relations

The heartland of Marxism, into which General Holz leads us, is Marxist philosophy – which, like Engels, he understands as the "science of universal interconnection"[3] and not perhaps some Kantian-reformist pseudomaterialism, which denies the concept of the universal.

For several years after 1945 Holz devoted himself particularly to the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), whose lesser philosophical writings he later published for the first time in German translation. "Leibniz", he said, "initiated … a philosophical development which was carried further by Hegel and which flowed from him onwards into dialectical materialism."[4] Leribniz's *Monadology* provided Holz with insights into the dialectics of the universal – touched upon by the classical authors of Marxism, whose works repeatedly refer to "reflection". Indeed, in Lenin's case the universe is conceived as a gigantic mirror relation:

> "But it is logical to assert that all matter possesses a property



Hans Heinz Holz
Photo: Gabriele Senft

> which is essentially akin to sensation, the property of reflection."[5]

As so often happened, our forebears wrote down thoughts, which were simply germs allowing others to work out the dialectical materialist concept. Holz followed Lenin's summons and developed – with Engels in the background – the logical basis for the dialectics of the universal, say for a dialectics of nature.

What Lenin designated as a property of matter is to be grasped as a relation. The relation that every entity enters into, in order to be an entity, is that it must be active, in some way or other. In a model way, being active can be regarded as reflecting. With nothing to act upon, nothing to reflect, the entity would be nothing. We can therefore abstractly imagine every individual thing – whether a constituent part of an atom or a galaxy, a simple grain of sand or something more complicated like human self-confidence – as a spherical mirror, which reflects, as all others, the Universe.

Every mirror reflects not only the mirrors around it; but rather – because those mirrors reflect others around them, and so on – it reflects everything in a more or less mediated way, thus the whole world. To that extent no mirror, *ie* no entity, has any other content than the unending Universe in space and time (of all mirrors). Every entity is nothing other than the unending Universe in its reflected form. Thereby the essence of matter is not the individual, but rather the universal interconnection of all entities.

Since every entity has only the Universe for content, it is identical with every other entity. However, since every entity reflects the Universe from a different location, the world totality appears differently in its mirror view from that in others'. To the extent that every entity has identical content, it also differs in the reflection of the world totality, so that every entity appears different and is distinct from every other entity. Thus there is nothing in the Universe identical with anything else. The Universe, nature, is proved to be a universal interconnection, which is permanently both identical and not identical with itself – and thereby is in movement.

Considering Contradiction

The heartland of 'philosophy' itself has a heartland - the dialectical materialist consideration of contradiction, its source. Holz first concentrated on this in a paper in the 1961 *Hegel Yearbook*. In 1983, after 10 years as a reporter on light literature and a decade as a university professor in Marburg, he took up the post of 'crown university lecturer' in Groningen in the Netherlands. There, in his highly important systematic work, *Dialectics and Reflection*, he deepened his considerations of the fundamental form of Marxist thought. In 2005, impelled by the failure of the first attempt at socialism, he expressed himself further in *World Concept and Reflection*.

In comprehending the dialectical materialist form of contradiction, Holz followed Karl Marx's insight, according to which dialectical materialism is logically grounded in Hegelian philosophy,[6] and equally Lenin's deepening of the Marxian comment that among other things, Hegel's philosophy is a 'source and component part' of Marxism.[7] He also agreed with the second step of the founders of Marxism, that Hegel's method of considering contradiction was "mystical", "on its head" and had therefore to be "turned right side up";[6] and indeed he agreed with Lenin, that where Hegel is most idealist, he is at the same time at his most materialist.[8]

Holz's considerations, that contradiction should be considered in a dialectical materialist way, come together in his Reflection Theorem. This cannot be highly enough regarded for the development of dialectical materialism. His inherent deduction of what constitutes a contradiction springs from Hegel's philosophy, which grasps it as a form of movement, but of the "World Spirit"[9] and not of matter.

Dialectical materialism does not arise just anywhere in the Hegelian system, but specifically in the chapter on "The Absolute Idea" in *The Science of Logic*, where Hegel lays out his own thought method. By reversing this process, Holz's Reflection Theorem becomes the thought method of dialectical materialists. Furthermore, as Hegel's method coincides with

the idealist determination of the relation of thinking and being – the basic question posed by Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach*[10] – Holz's Reflection Theorem is the dialectical materialist answer to that. The form of contradiction, the method of thought and the basic question – all three factors necessarily come together in the Reflection Theorem.

Holz's answer to Hegel's concept of contradiction is a sensuous thing, a clarification of the contradictory relation of being and consciousness which cannot be physically experienced. We can consider this relation in a materialist way as a reflection process: a mirror (consciousness) is a special object (entity), since it has – in opposition to all other objects – no appearance of its own (disregarding its frame). It appears as the object which is reflected in it. The mirror does nothing at all: it is not up to the mirror, whether this or that object is reflected; but rather up to the objects which are placed in front of it. The mirror image is an image of the object; the object is 'in' the mirror. To that extent the object or thing 'encroaches on' the mirror (materialist standpoint in the basic question of philosophy); the materiality of the object[11] is the unity of object, mirror and mirror image.

However, the last mentioned is also an image of the mirror. The object only appears as an image within the mirror because the mirror reflects. It is not truly in the mirror, but rather only virtually so; it does not exist there in all its aspects but rather only from the perspective of the mirror. Reversed, thus seen from the mirror outwards, the mirror image is the result of an activity of the mirror, and the object is a manifestation of the mirror image. Thereby the mirror 'encroaches upon' the object (idealist standpoint in the basic question); the virtuality of the mirror image establishes the unity of mirror, mirror image and its likeness in reality, the object.

But because the mirror is in the first place an object, the materiality encroaches upon it, and only for that reason does the mirror encroach upon the object. This is the complete mirror process and thus also the dialectical standpoint in the basic question. Hence, according to Holz, Marxist philosophy does not stand simply in opposition to idealism – if it did, it would only be pre-Marxist undialectical materialism, and Lenin's thesis that Hegel's system is a component part of Marxism would be invalid. In Holz's Reflection Theorem the idealist standpoint is drawn into Marxism and is a necessary element of our revolutionary theory.

The presentation of the relation of thinking and being as a mirror allows the form of contradiction also to be conceived. In the process dialectical materialist thought reconstructs the *movement of being*; it is thought in motion. Contradiction is not simply an opposition, as Kantian Marxists make out, rather it is the form of movement in which the direct unity, in order to be itself, places its own essence as its converse within itself. This converse is as much part of the original unity and thereby identical with it, as it is also not part of the original unity and thereby not identical with it. This converse dissolves the original unity and its opposite into itself and is thereby a new direct unity. For example, by creating the working class, capital places its essence into its opposite, and is also only able to exist this way – without it, capital cannot accumulate. However, the working class, capital's opposite, is thereby placed in a position to break up capital as the original unity of society, to free itself from the relation of opposition and to found a new society.

With the reflection concept in mind, the comment of the classical Marxist authors about turning Hegel's system "right side up" is an expression of contradiction; and, for the first time, the answer to the basic question of philosophy and the Marxist method of thought has been comprehensibly given.

Objective Activity

Dialectical materialism as the science of universal interconnection and of contradiction also develops a different conception of society. This originates through labour which, as a "process between man and Nature",[12] must be grasped in universal interconnection and as a (contradictory) form of movement. On the basis of the Marxist term "objective activity"[13] Holz developed the logical structure, and thereby the structure of being, of the human species.

Consider this issue: people work with tools on natural objects. The bourgeois interpretation, from Descartes and Kant onwards, is that working is an act directed with purpose and is thereby essentially of intellectual nature. On the other hand, a few undialectical Marxists present the tool as the essence of human activity. As pointed out by Holz,[14] they ignore Marx's critique that we need to consider human activity as the unity of subject and object, otherwise we end up comprehending labour "only in the form of the *object*, or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*".[13] These undialectical 'Marxists' are thus merely on the move analytically and no longer have universal interconnection in view.

Along with Marx, Holz regards both explanations – the bourgeois and the undialectical – as contrary to the concept of being human, which proceeds from the totality of human activity. Labouring people are conscious of their labour. They can set themselves aims, because other people communicate, reify (reflect) their activity to them. We therefore talk of society:

> "if at least two subjects have reference to each other and then the subject [the labourer –*AH*] looks not only in the mirror of nature [the natural materials to work upon –*AH*] but rather at the same time in the second mirror [other communicating people –*AH*] which once more reflects this mirror relation."[15]

Labouring people are then in a two-sided situation: as elemental beings engaged in activity, they experience both tools and natural materials to be worked on (to this extent their knowledge is empirical); as members of the human species, communicating with others at the same time, they provide practical experience about their activity (to this extent their knowledge is theoretical). Labouring people are thus – and this makes them first of all *people* – in a situation which they actively experience as elemental beings, and which at the same time they can in imaginary terms leave behind as social beings, *ie* they can mentally abstract from it. While all other elemental beings remain trapped in their natural state, people can escape from it in thought. They reflect the universal reciprocal effect of nature from this (historical) position, *ie* they contemplate (historically) the totality. In labour they grasp their own place in nature and in the world created and changed by them.

Radical Thought

Marxist philosophy as the conscious reflection of objective activity (on the basis of a dialectics of nature) is therefore indeed practical. Its theoretical starting point is by no means that of a deity above everything, but rather

that of the proletariat, engaged in the production process and representing human progress.

For Hegel – as for all preceding philosophers – philosophy was the truth of social reality. According to Marx's criticism, it had merely interpreted the world.[16] In contrast, dialectical materialism understands itself as a part of practice and is therefore a concept changed by practice, one which dissolves into action and realises itself in that. Accordingly the realisation of philosophy is not a bourgeois educational study, but rather consciously led class struggle, with theory translated into practice. The realisation of class struggle is the elimination of capitalist production relations by the proletariat, which indeed realises itself through liberation from capital and at the same time thereby starts its own abolition on the road to a classless society.[17]

In this respect General Holz leads Marxists again out of the 'heartland' of Marxism – to the 'second attempt'. As he wrote when contemplating Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction*:

> "The transcendence of philosophy in its political realisation is not the liquidation of philosophy but rather its conscious establishment in its status as highest … form of reflection …; it is the status of philosophy as the necessary reflection of the totality for every orientation in practice."[18]

Without a scientific worldview which takes into account the totality there can be no orientation in the class struggle; and the working class, rather than being an autonomous subject, is simply the object of capital – it is not *for itself*, but merely *in itself*.[19] That is why Holz interceded so decisively against every form of Kantianism in proletarian thought. This philosophy of the class enemy rejects the concept of the totality as a mere self-contradictory semblance of reality, impedes the orientation of the working class and reduces its political activity to aimless reforms under capitalism, preventing it from developing class consciousness for itself.

Such consciousness does not arise spontaneously. Marxist philosophy is indeed transmitted into reality, but this transmission is at the same time a practical criticism, which – if Marxists remain alert – impacts back on the theory. Equally, class consciousness is not just systematic Marxist philosophy, not just a collection of the individual experiences of struggle of the class in itself, but in essence the two sides – practical and theoretical – of the activity of a communist party connected to the class struggle.[20] It alone is the self-confidence of the working class (however miserable its theoretical level also may be).

Theoretical Community of Struggle

Communist activity was for Holz so organised and partisan, that he – unfortunately – formed no school for his ideas. That didn't bother him. He was so preoccupied with the totality, having thoughts about everything which he met philosophically – collecting, scrutinising and integrating them both positively and negatively into his conceptions. He conducted a one-sided conversation with most philosophers of the last 2700 years of European culture – with excursions into the writings of Asiatic and Arabic classical thinkers.

This one-sided conversation becomes clear in his life's work from the numerous examples and thought suggestions which he presents from the history of philosophy. However his work also hides something, which I need to make explicit here: Holz's incentive was always the classical Marxist authors. There were so many times that Marx, Engels and Lenin just made inferences, like "turn upside down", "direct opposite of Hegelian philosophy", "portray" "the science of total connectedness" etc. These words of theirs were certainly circumspect and by no means obligatory formulations for the facts of the case, which might have been expressed differently in Marxist terms. Like Holz, we must take the classical Marxist authors at their word, and regard these concepts as invitations to those who follow, further to develop dialectical materialism, and to make it what it is: a dynamical orientation towards the overthrow of capitalism.

Today in communist circles there should be discussion about the founding of a theoretical community of struggle. The justification for such an association lies not only in the necessary widening and further development of dialectical materialism on the basis laid by Holz, as well as its critical adoption, but also in the fact that the fundamentals of communist political activity – dialectical thinking as the dialectics of contradiction, universal interconnection and history – are in many communist parties once again under attack and being eliminated as outmoded, or in certain respects are under the control of Kantian 'Marxists'. This attack must be countered argumentatively; and that at the same time will put the forces for the 'second attempt' in good order.

Originally published in German in Junge Welt on 13.12.11. Translation by Martin Levy.

Notes and References

1 V I Lenin, *The Chief Task of Our Day*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 27, p 161.
2 *Zukunft des Marxismus: Kolloquium der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Dialektische Philosophie – Societas Hegeliana*, Forio d'Ischia, 19-21 September 1991, D Losurdo ed., Dinter, Köln 1995.
3 F Engels, *Dialectics of Nature: Plan Outlines*, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 25, p 313.
4 H H Holz, *Leibniz*, Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart 1958, p 68.
5 V I Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 14, p 92.
6 K Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, *Afterword to the Second German Edition*; in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 35, p 19.
7 V I Lenin, *The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 19, p 21.
8 V I Lenin, *Conspectus of Hegel's Science of Logic*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 38, p 234.
9 G W F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977.
10 F Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy,* Ch 2, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 26, p 365.
11 Hüllinghorst uses the term *Dingsein* (= being a thing), a philosophical term also employed, notably, by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) –*Ed.*
12 K Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Ch 16; in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 35, p 509.
13 K Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 5, p 3.
14 H H Holz, *Dialektik und Widerspiegelung (Dialectics and Reflection)*, Pahl Rugenstein, Köln, 1983, p 39.
15 H H Holz, *Weltentwurf und Reflexion (World Concept and Reflection)*, J B Metzler, Stuttgart, 2005, p 385
16 Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach, op cit*, p 15.
17 K Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction*, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 3, p 187.
18 H H Holz, *Aufhebung und Verwirklichung der Philosophie (Transcendence and Realisation of Philosophy)*, in *Dialektik* 18, Köln 1989, p 253.
19 A reference to Engels' criticism of Kant's "thing-in-itself" as something unknowable: "The chemical substances produced in the bodies of plants and animals remained just such 'things-in themselves' until organic chemistry began to produce them one after another, whereupon the 'thing-in-itself' became a thing for us"; see F Engels, *op cit*, pp 367-8 –*Ed.*
20 See H H Holz, *Thesen über die Zukunft des Marxismus (Theses on the Future of Marxism)*, These 5, in Losurdo, *op cit.*

REMINISCENCES

Witness to Revolution,

By Mina Boromand

Gradually the spectre of revolution was coming; strikes at the oil refinery were a huge political development and protests everywhere weakened the Shah's regime.

Students put more energy and effort into their political activities. At the University, they were organising an exhibition of revolutionary posters on the political history of a radical group called Fadaian Khalgh. We decided to go and help; they were very friendly and polite towards us. The left-wing students, with their enthusiasm and confidence, were able to attract lots of youngsters towards them. During those memorable and important days, we spent our time in a heady atmosphere of discussion at the University.

On 19 Bahman 1357 (8 February 1979), students organised a march from the University to a main city square. At first we were few in number but little by little we got bigger and bigger. On every street corner people exchanged exciting news. The atmosphere became intense and electric with expectation and hope.

There were rumours that protestors had attacked army bases and other government buildings. News passed through the excited crowds. Suddenly, between all the slogans and talk, a few bikers with Kalashnikovs in their hands appeared. A communist, speaking by megaphone said, "Please make way for our brave guerrillas who are going to help the people capture the army base!" This news injected more adrenalin into the excited crowd. I tried to make my way to the front. The bikers passed by in rising clouds of dust. Their revolutionary faces were covered with bright Palestinian scarves. At the sight of them everybody shouted loudly, "Dorood bar Fadai! Dorood bar Fadai!" (Long live Fadai Freedom Fighters!)

As we ran after them we became breathless. Half way down the road we heard that lots of people had been injured by police. We collected bandages for the wounded people and some others helped to fill sacks with sand for barricades.

We knew that the police had been ordered to shoot at protestors. You could sense the fear and excitement combined with passion for our freedom. The crowd had an incredible sense of unity and solidarity as we headed towards the army base. The sound of gunfire and the smell of tear gas was coming from every direction. It was amazing to see how ordinary people got involved, to change their lives in hope of freedom.

Before we reached the base we heard the thrilling news that people had entered the buildings there.

Iran 1979

Crowds swarmed outside the buildings. The soldiers put down their guns after an intense fight. At that moment we didn't know what to do. Then we heard that in the fight lots of comrades had been injured. There was chaos and absolute fear and confusion! I lost contact with my friends and sister and didn't know what had happened to them.

The students and other protestors formed a street rally. The crowds chanted "Daneshjoo karegar payvandetan mubarak!" (Students, workers celebrate our unity!) Then as one we chanted "Esteghlal, azadi, hokomate karegari!" (Freedom, democracy, workers power!) Our hearts leapt with joy and a feeling of elation.

As the crowd chanted, one student held a red flag aloft and our cheers filled the sky. Then suddenly soldiers appeared at the fringes of the rally, threatening the crowds. There was a wave of panic and everyone ran.

In the nearby streets people left the doors of their houses open so that the protestors could hide there. We entered my uncle's house. Many protestors had come there to evade the police squads. The entrance was full of different shoes hurriedly placed by the doorway.

I rang my mum and told her not to be worried, then went back into the streets. It was inspiring to see lots of cars passing by, with people hanging out, waving flags. Some held guns to show their bravery and somehow to spread the good news that people had emptied the army base of weapons. Everybody had some sort of weapon! At every street corner groups of people had gathered to talk about different political tactics. Everybody had an opinion on how to take the revolution to the next stage.

At night we heard that the army was coming to attack the University. After some discussion we divided into groups. Each one had a leader, and those leaders were in touch with each other. Every group was delegated to protect one part of the University. We learned how to use weapons. An experienced communist showed us how to use a Kalashnikov. We hoped that the Soviet Union would somehow help the revolution against its natural enemy, the United States.

In turn, we guarded the entrances to the University. It was the most horrific night of my life. I thought, "What if the soldiers attack us through the small windows?" Very few of the comrades had any experience of violence or military tactics. We knew that the army was ruthless and well-trained. Yet, though we were afraid, we also knew in a very straightforward way that there was no other way but to stand and fight.

We slept in turn, and in the morning people brought tea and bread for us. It was a wonderful atmosphere, despite our fear. We were full of love and care for each other. Somehow we believed, against all odds, that our humanity, unity and power would prevail against the army.

Until that day we had not understood in a real sense that we could use our power to incredible effect if we were united. Our collective power could destroy the regime and build another world.

The army had been defeated, so far. In a street meeting people were discussing the policies of different left parties, as well as Khomeini's viewpoint. There were many different approaches and perspectives, but they were expressed with respect and in a spirit of solidarity.

We were unsure whether the revolutionary mood would convince the majority of the country. We worried that America would intervene if we were able to establish a socialist government. Many of us were concerned that the pace of change left the people's movement open to other groups such as the Islamic fundamentalists. This was our greatest tragedy. The revolution, started and inspired by selfless idealists, was undermined by Islamic fundamentalists.

REMINISCENCES

Mina and her sister in Iran

The bravery of the communist students and the oil refinery workers was one of the most crucial elements in the revolutionary process. In ideological terms the revolution was made by a fusion of socialist and liberal demands. Yet the conservative and traditional impact of Islam outside Tehran allowed the growth of a Muslim movement that swept aside democratic concerns.

The Tudeh (communist) Party argued for social democratic and liberal reforms. They made the case for social justice and progress in a way that connected with student radicals and many workers. The longing for independent trade unions, free health and education, as well as a more open and progressive society, lay at the heart of the revolutionary movement. This agenda found a deep resonance in the demands of urban workers. However, Khomeini and others took control because they enjoyed the support of the rural poor. Of course, America and Israel did everything they possibly could to deflect the revolution from reaching a socialist goal.

It was sad, but we had no choice other than to go along with the strongest political current. We hoped we could force Khomeini to keep his progressive promises to the people. We aimed to maintain the integrity and independence of the socialist movement. We lacked political know-how, and our own movement was in some ways too fragmented.

Khomeini came home from exile and the Shah left the country. The departure of the hated ruler was a moment of genuine celebration in a new Iran. The streets of Tehran erupted in a festival of liberation and hope. A sense of freedom and solidarity replaced repression and fear.

Our fears of Khomeini's innate conservatism were balanced by a sense of elation at defeating a corrupt and despotic Shah. Many believed that the unity between workers and students that we had experienced would be too strong and dynamic for the Muslims to overcome.

Khomeini returned to establish a new dictatorship, which had always been his goal. The universities, which had been a focus for free debate and the evolution of genuine popular movement, were closed by him. There were rumours that new laws would enforce the wearing of the *hijab* at work, but at first women resisted that. Step by step, the new regime turned on the socialist and progressive forces.

The cruelty and brutality of Khomeini and his followers knew no limit. With relentless and destructive vigour, he ruined the opportunity for a democratic, modern Iran. This tragedy is like a national wound that progressive Iranians have to live with. A socialist Iran could have played a progressive role in support of a secular Palestinian state. As a democratic regional power, Iran could have assisted other developing countries and acted as a balance to the imperialism of America and its allies.

Our movement had an essential idealism, but it was combined with a range of organisational problems. We lacked a dynamic leader like Nelson Mandela or Fidel Castro, whose personality could inspire unity and a focus on political goals. We had no long-term plan or careful programme of ideas. Much of the movement had an honest spontaneity about it that drew in ordinary people; but those who wanted revolutionary change lacked a clear political vision. We were inspired by socialism in a general sense, and believed that the October Revolution in Russia was similar in many ways to our own revolution. We were admirers of Cuba and the Soviet Union but we did not fully understand how to overcome backward religious ideas.

We women demanded equality, and broadly achieved it in the process of the revolution. Within communist groups there was practical and meaningful equality between men and women. However, the force of tradition (farhang aghab mandeh), particularly in rural communities, was simply too deep to be displaced rapidly by progressive or left-wing thinking. The Muslims circulated damaging propaganda against our movement. They feared and hated socialist ideology, and we could not compete with their appeals to restore Muslim values to Iranian society. Their damage to the hope of a democratic, secular and free Iran will never be forgiven or forgotten by my generation.

One day our heroes and comrades will see their hopes realised in a free, democratic and socialist Iran. Tomorrow belongs to the people's movement.

■ *Mina Boromand escaped from Iran in 1980. This extract is part of a longer book on her experiences of the Iranian Revolution which she is planning to publish later in 2012.*

Discussion: Labour and Art

By Jimmy Jancovich

HAVING ONLY just received all the 2011 issues of *Communist Review*, and having thus for the first time had an opportunity of reading them, I was struck by two articles as being particularly convergent in subject matter, although I feel this was accidental. These were Martin Levy's review of Timothy Taylor's *The Artificial Ape*[1] and Phil Katz's article on William Morris and Morris's views on the nature of labour and art.[2]

I was particularly pleased to see the latter, as I regard Morris not only as one of the founders of our Party but someone whose contributions to our thinking and practice have helped British communist practice generally to avoid some of the top-down defects of many continental parties.

Common to both articles is a very important point made by Engels that the development of human intelligence (and sociability) begins when primitive pre-human beings moved from merely using sticks and stones as tools for getting food (which chimpanzees and orang-utans already do) to beginning to make the tools themselves. Making tools, however primitive, requires a degree of coordination of hand and brain that, with time, must increase the skills of both. The increase in brain size that Taylor refers to as a handicap to the erect posture came later and very gradually over more than a million years. The tools made became increasingly sophisticated over the same period. The use of fire to cook food so that the digestive system provided more energy and consumed less, which he quite rightly stresses as essential to brain growth, probably developed over a similar length of time, though the first proof we have of its use is only half a million years old.

However, Taylor is wrong in thinking that this contradicts Darwin. 'Social Darwinism' was a socio-political distortion, one could almost say a deliberate one, of Darwin's findings on evolution and is in complete contradiction to the views he expressed in *The Descent of Man*. Darwin made the particular point that man's capacity to survive was his social way of living and the way in which the group looked after its members. This not only applied to looking after small children, which all animals do (though human children are dependent for much longer periods) but also their old, sick or injured members. Many skeletons of prehistoric humans show that they suffered from the debilitating effects of old age, sickness or injuries – and broken bones that had healed! Their individual survival was solely due to the support and assistance they received from the group as a whole – which was also a factor in the whole group's survival.

Darwin expressly stated the view that human evolution was essentially social and not physical. Since Darwin's views are often expressed in conventional Christian terms, the word he uses to describe this form of social solidarity is altruism. But the meaning is still the same – that our sociability is what makes us human.

This brings us on to the point made in a number of different ways by Marx, Engels and Morris about the intimate interconnection between manual and cultural skills. Morris is particularly insistent on the unity of art and craft.

One thing that puzzles me about Phil Katz's excellent article is that it does not follow on from Martin Levy's. Indeed it seems to start with, and to some extent hinge on, a remark I made, in a completely different context, about automation and deskilling.[3] I am, to a large extent, responsible for any misunderstanding on this point by not being sufficiently explicit.

Implicit to it was the fundamental difference between mechanisation and automation – a difference that was clear to me as an engineer but not necessarily clear to everyone. The 19th century was one of large-scale *mechanisation* – the last 40-odd years of an equally large-scale switch to automation – that is, to replacing *human control* of equipment by *automatic controls*.

Mechanisation rarely involves deskilling though frequently requires the learning of new skills or adaptation of existing skills to new tools. I have supervised and trained West African and North African workers operating fairly complex physicochemical processes. This has always involved *learning* skills, not losing them. Some of them had never done any skilled work before (except agricultural), while others had some experience of other kinds of process plant. All learned how to *supervise and control* their equipment to get the best results – *and took pride in doing so*. When I started making my daily plant-operating reports available to them, as well as to the management, the shift foremen and chargehands were always keen to see them and compare their performances.

All manual work includes operating and *controlling* tools or equipment, which requires a degree of skill – Phil's example of the paper-making workers is very much to the point. The problem with automation is that the *control* of the process, that part of a worker's skill that involves *judgement and precision*, is taken completely out of their hands and confined to the software. The result is a complete *qualitative flattening* of the output. There is no room, in such a system for good or bad work – the *average* is God.

While the design and setting up of automated plant obviously demands a very high degree of skill and, to that extent, is also stored-up labour, the effect of automation on the productive worker is inevitably humiliating. Workers take pride in their skill and their work; this is lacking for those attending to fully automated processes.

Any workers worth their salt like to produce *good work*, work they can be proud of and boast about. Software does not bother about such details.

Notes and References

1 M Levy, *Human Evolution: Did Darwin get it Wrong?* in *CR*59, Winter 2011, p 28.
2 P Katz, *William Morris – The Search for Useful Work, Not Useless Toil*, in *CR*62, Winter 2011/12, p 16.
3 J Jancovich, *The Crisis and the Regression of Our Times*, in *CR*60, Spring/Summer 2011, pp 21-3.

THEATRE REVIEW

LIVES IN ART

Sheffield People's Theatre: Sheffield Crucible Theatre, 12 November 2011

Review by Joe Clark

SO MANY PLAUDITS! A local amateur theatre company getting a rave review and four stars in the *Guardian* newspaper. A huge cast expertly orchestrated. Involvement of young and old – not merely amateur, but largely untried – yet successful. Terrific enthusiasm. A receptive audience.

And yet … so many episodes in the struggles of Sheffield people could have put this play into an historical perspective and, in drawing on our past, illuminated our path to the future. Instead the conflict chosen to be explored was between philistines and the people. As if the threat to community involvement in the arts comes from the likes of Malcom Battesby, the grumpy caretaker of the play, rather than from the capital/financial/political elites who are running the knife through our arts budgets, as they slash our health, education, social budgets.

1971, the date the Crucible opened, probably marked the high point of Sheffield's popular advance – the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire'! In the immediately preceding generation Sheffield had dragged itself out from the rubble of the WW2 bombing and the long years of neglect of housing, schools and hospitals.

Where had the impetus for these advances come from? From the wave of change demanded by returning service personnel and their families, whose eyes had been opened. Throughout the 'hungry thirties', we had been told (as now!) that full employment, social planning and public concern for health was 'economically impossible' – but suddenly they had become possible, even during the war! The Attlee government came in and, in the cities and boroughs likewise, new forces came to the fore determined to build the council houses, the schools and surgeries that we needed – and to challenge the naysayers: 'the country can't afford it ….'

This thrust for change did not fall out of the sky: it came from a real flowering of democracy – real democracy, not the 'cast your vote every five years and wait' type of democracy. A grass roots democracy which saw a rapid advance of workplace representation with strong and effective trade unions which could defend their members; the growth of tenants' associations which could negotiate with councils on repairs; a democracy which gave scope for progressive teachers to seize the chance to enrich the content of education in the new comprehensive schools, and to end the siphoning off of the privileged few to private or grammar schools while the rest were relegated into sub-standard schools. This thrust was associated with progressive developments in the arts too, with subsidised theatre, integration of theatre with schools, new social content, etc.

In short, these developments sprang from a new way of thinking – a community-based thinking, a recognition that nothing would be presented on a plate, that every advance had to be fought for. And the fight would only come from people of a generation who had become convinced that their kids deserved a better future than they had had.

And what of the 40 years since? We have seen a concerted attempt to belittle and denigrate the achievements of those years. Trade unions have been bound into ineffectiveness by anti-trade union laws; our council house stock has been sold off without replacement, forcing people into mortgage debt or insecure rented accommodation; our youth are embarking on adulthood with 'a monkey on their backs' from the abolition of student grants, from mortgages, or worse from long-term unemployment – and then they are told, 'The country can't afford your public pensions – you must save and invest for your own'!

Of course, this reversal couldn't have been achieved democratically. An ideological offensive had to be mounted in the media – and what are the media? The media which attacked our representatives are the media owned by Robert Maxwell (*Daily Mirror*) who swindled his employees out of their pensions, by Rupert Murdoch (*Sun*, *The Times*) who lied about his massive phone hacking illegality, by Conrad Black (*Daily Telegraph*) who was gaoled for swindling his shareholders.

The media mounted a character assassination against everyone who resisted the rolling back of our post-war achievements. Trade unionists who didn't bend the knee were 'holding the country to ransom'. Councils which resisted privatisation and cuts, and which wanted to extend public participation to sectors previously by-passed or discriminated against, such as women, ethic minorities, or gays, were damned as 'loony lefts'. Locally, when Chesterfield Constituency Labour Party selected Tony Benn to stand for Parliament, the press descended on the town in force – picking over his every mannerism, presenting them to fake psychiatrists to warn us of his mental instability! (He won the election.)

Is this an exaggeration? When Ed Milband called for a public inquiry into the role of the press, the *Guardian* headlined it a "risky strategy". The risk? He had had the temerity to suggest that there should be an inquiry into the role of the press in a democracy – not for its anti-Labour bias, note, but because of the phone-hacking scandal.

Sheffield People's Theatre in action

The great regret is we failed to defend ourselves. History will judge whether our representatives merely succumbed to this media barrage, keeping their heads down in the hope that it would go away – or at least leave themselves unscathed – or whether they had become so embedded in the capital/financial/media elites that they forgot whom they represented, and positively lent their authority to these slanders.

Does it matter if we neglect our history? Well, yes – if we fail to draw on our historical experiences and achievements, we are destined to submit when those forces of capital/finance/establishment, which never wanted those advances anyway, exploit our weakness to destroy them or reverse them.

It matters because we have a Tory government accelerating the Blair/Brown private finance initiative (PFI) 'reforms'. We have an opposition whose front bench is packed with Blair/Brown ideologues whose every response to the tentative moves by Ed Miliband, to open up possibilities for challenging Labour's enemies, is to accuse him of being 'in the pockets of the unions'.

It was the unity of the industrial and municipal wings of the labour movement, coupled with a strong popular mandate for change, which achieved our advances. The Tory press is desperate to break that unity and to undermine our faith in progressive social change. 'Public' is portrayed as a dirty word.

A fight-back is beginning. The huge demonstration of public sector workers on March 26 last year was the fore-runner to the massive November 30 strike and demonstrations. A new mood is taking hold. To this muscle we need to add new ideas for a renewed social advance, which involves us all across the board – in all professions, in sport, the arts, leisure and culture – dealing with the urgent economic and social questions.

You will by now be asking, "What has this to do with the play, *Lives in Art*?" Well, I regard the establishment of the Crucible Theatre, and its record of work, no less than Sheffield's social and economic programmes – the South Yorkshire low-fares policy for public transport, etc – as a magnificent achievement. That history needs to be known to new generations, so that nothing is taken for granted, everything is used for further advance.

Which is why I welcomed the 40th anniversary celebration – but felt that, in the portrayal of the struggle for the arts as a battle against the likes of a caretaker (since when have the powers-that-be given caretakers scope to influence policy?), a great opportunity was missed to portray the real battles that our movement had to fight.

Who is slashing arts funding – in many cases to zero? The Tory government. Who so starves the arts of funding that they are driven to plead for sponsorship? The Tory government. Whose sponsorship leads to a back-door censorship as theatres and the arts sense which productions would attract, and which would be denied, sponsorship – putting the content of our art in the hands of capital/financial elites, instead being determined democratically by the people? Answer – those self same financial elites.

It was that choice of a fairly easy target, Battesby and backward culture, which led to the play lacking development. The struggle was just a yo-yo, good/evil, cultured/banality. Real life is a much more profound struggle – to develop new ideas, to win conviction for those ideas, to mobilise for activities in support of those ideas. Struggles involve identifying who will try to frustrate those ideas, and how to neutralise or defeat those forces. The Sheffield labour movement is rich in experiences of those kinds. It was that experience which triumphed in the establishment of the Crucible Theatre. It was that experience which failed to be articulated in the play.

Perhaps the derivation of the play followed the concept of starting with a plain sheet of paper, and brain-storming to build up a concept. That would have been an attractive method for such a theme and with such a cast, given the evident desire to incorporate as many inputs as possible. It would certainly combat elitism, and promote constructive participation rather than obedient enactments of the author's texts. The play evidenced such an approach. Yet this technique can have its own drawbacks. Content has to be developed as well as form. The limitation of such an approach can be that nothing gets included beyond what is already known – which could lead to a portrayal which has no development. To restrict content to what is thrown up in such sessions can devalue intellectual leadership which might have provided a context in the background of Sheffield's real struggles.

It is unfashionable to consider what the function of

THEATRE REVIEW

art is. Art has to engage with people's lives, in particular with the way our lives are changing. Our reality is the breakdown of the old patterns of social organisation – patterns based on collective security in the workplace, a sizeable slice of community-funded housing, with local authorities which had responsibility for and control over the main aspects of our social provisions. These patterns are being replaced by insecurity of work tenure, individual housing, and council services being privatised and moved three steps away from democracy. Our lives, relatively, are being atomised, separated from one another – the antithesis of 'Unity is Strength'.

Having said all this, nothing detracts from the real achievement of this collective, the Sheffield People's Theatre. To the appreciation with which I opened these remarks, I can only add the poignant and touching comments of some of the older participants themselves at the conclusion of the play, where they express what art means, and has meant, to them and their development. My comments, therefore are not to put down the play, but to provide some context which, whilst self-evident to me, clearly was not self-evident to the generation which produced this celebration.

To me (to my generation?) a celebration of the Crucible which does not recognise the role of the people, and the people's organisations, which made it possible, risks disrespect to earlier generations. It appears neglectful of our own achievements, and it foregoes a wonderful opportunity to illustrate real conflicts, real struggles and real experiences which could prepare today's generations for the struggles we face tomorrow. Permit the reiteration: the Sheffield labour movement is rich in experiences of those kinds.

The struggle continues. Necessarily so.

It was, after all, the noted German playwright, Bertolt Brecht who ended his anti-fascist play *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui* with the words, "For though the world stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again."

BOOK REVIEW

Not Simply a Definitive History

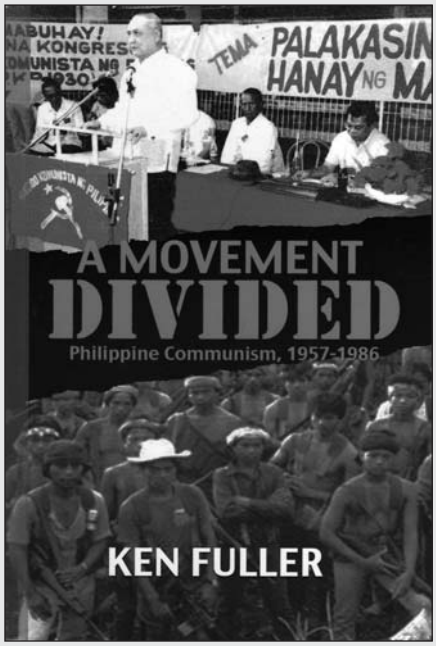
Review by Kenny Coyle

KEN FULLER'S second volume in his exhaustive trilogy on the history of communism in the Philippines is as impressive as the first. Using personal interviews with key participants, unpublished diaries and documents as well as published materials, Ken has amassed a wealth of evidence on one of Asia's most perplexing political movements.

The book picks up where his first on the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), *Forcing the Pace*, left off. *A Movement Divided* covers the years 1957-1986, from the defeat of the communist-led Huk resistance movement to the fall of the Marcos regime. This period encompasses the Sino-Soviet split in the international communist movement and in the PKP, leading to the creation of the pro-Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its New People's Army (NPA).

The Philippine communist experience during the period covered by Ken's book is unique. Elsewhere in southeast Asia, the once vibrant CPs of Burma, Thailand, Malaya and Indonesia were seen as firmly in the pro-Beijing camp, and those critical of Maoism were unable to gain a hearing. Today only the Burmese CP remains, after suffering crippling losses in the late 1980s. The others have dissolved or were bloodily crushed. Yet in the Philippines today both the PKP (using the title PKP-1930) and the CPP continue to exist, although admittedly both are much smaller than before.

Aside from the solid documentary aspect, Ken has also brought two



A Movement Divided: Philippine Communism 1957-1986

By KEN FULLER
(University of the Philippines Press, Manila, 2011, 475 pp, pbk, 600 Php. ISBN: 978-971-542-662-6)

elements to his analysis that are frequently missing from most academic histories of the communist movement. The first is his sympathy for the subject matter, although this does not prevent him from making very sharp criticisms of Filipino communists and their movement. Secondly, he underpins his discussion of debates within the PKP and the CPP with the relevant theoretical background from Marx, Lenin or Mao that framed these disputes.

The book traces the very uneven recovery of the PKP after the Huk defeat and the negative impact of its underground status on inner-party democracy during that late '50s and most of the '60s.

Ken outlines the PKP's radically shifting attitudes towards Ferdinand Marcos, a name now solely linked with dictatorship and corruption, but whose domestic populism gave him a mass base throughout the 1970s. The PKP negotiated with the Marcos government in 1974 for an amnesty for former Huk prisoners, and secured the Party's legal existence. Marcos's land reform programme drastically altered the character of the Philippine rural areas, benefiting hundreds of thousands of rural Filipinos; and his attempts to support the modernisation of indigenous capitalism, from which he personally expected generous kickbacks, ran counter to the traditional dominance of the Philippine economy by US transnationals. Marcos gave support to the Palestinian cause and expanded trade and diplomatic relations with the socialist countries; and his support for native industrialisation seemed to offer the potential to break the country's dependence on the US. Even so, the PKP's "critical support" for some of Marcos's "New Society" programmes today appears naïve; and by 1980 the PKP, in reassessing the political situation, had largely abandoned these illusions. Nonetheless Ken frames the debate and provides an insight into the underlying logic of the PKP's dilemmas during these years.

Ken argues persuasively that, aside from general doctrinal differences, the PKP's perspective was largely dominated by its anti-imperialism while the Maoist CPP's horizons were anti-Marcos. This led to sharply differing attitudes on the role of opposition groups. The PKP was suspicious of bourgeois opponents of Marcos for their links to the US or to the Catholic Church, while the CPP often courted them and in turn was courted by them.

I would have only two critical points to make. The first is on Ken's handling of the nature of 'Maoism'. I think Ken relies too heavily on Brezhnev-era critiques, where Sino-Soviet relations were at their worst and when Chinese foreign policy was at its most opportunist. The view then was that Mao was essentially a petty-bourgeois nationalist, uninterested in the working class, Marxism or internationalism; and these sins were traced back to his earliest periods in the Chinese Communist Party. I think this is very far from a correct assessment of Mao. This aside, where Ken's analysis scores direct hits are in his criticisms of the concrete form which Maoism took in the Philippines. In particular, he subjects the CPP's concept of the contemporary Philippines as a "semi-feudal" society to a withering critique.

Ken also shows that not all the Maoist weaknesses were imported. The dangers of sectarianism, autocratic leadership, spy paranoia and factional violence had all existed in the pre-split PKP and indeed for a time within the post-split PKP. In the Philippines, with its rampant gun culture, the tendency to settle political arguments by the pistol has never been confined to the left.

My second area of disagreement is with Ken's argument on religious believers within the communist movement, in Chapter 11, "The Armalite and the Crucifix". This factor became hugely important as the CPP intersected with liberation theology currents within the Catholic Church. In the Philippines, religion, and not merely Catholicism, permeates every level of society. Ken suggests that, by not being consistent materialists, believers cannot be true communists since they reject "the Marxist philosophical outlook", dialectical materialism, which is a condition of party membership (p 235). But surely it is acceptance of rules and programme that are conditions for membership in most revolutionary parties, not philosophy? Ken's very useful chapter even includes Lenin suggesting precisely that. In any case, Ken's treatment of the disputes is thorough and insightful.

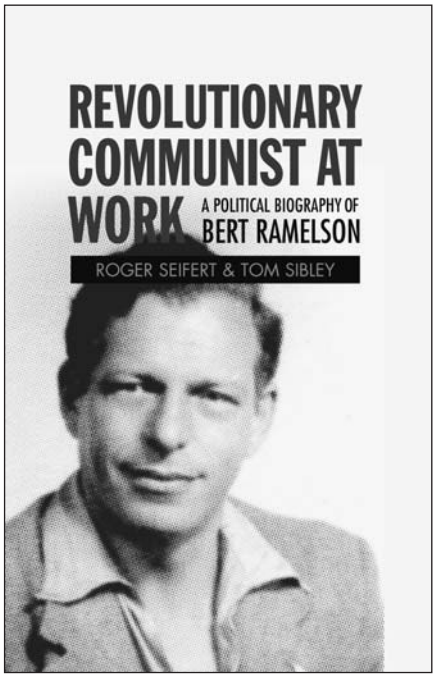
It is difficult to do full justice to Ken's achievement. This is not simply a definitive history of Philippine communism, which would in itself be a worthy objective, but he also sheds light on a variety of important political debates that have much wider importance, especially in the weakly developed capitalist countries of Asia. Those interested in Asian politics or specifically the international communist movement can look forward to the publication of the third volume with a great deal of confidence and anticipation.

■ *The first volume of Ken Fuller's trilogy,* Forcing the Pace*, is also available from the University of the Philippines Press, (price 460 Php + postage), and as an e-book from amazon.co.uk (£3.31) and Flipreads (270 Php).* Communist Review *is investigating the possibility of a bulk shipment of print copies of both titles. Readers interested in obtaining such copies are asked to contact the Editor at the postal or e-mail addresses given on the inside front cover.*

BOOK REVIEW

A Virtual Manual for Conducting Revolutionary Politics

Review by Graham Stevenson



Revolutionary Communist at Work: A Political Biography of Bert Ramelson

By ROGER SEIFERT and TOM SIBLEY
(Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2012,
384 pp, pbk, £25.00.
ISBN: 978-1-907103-41-4)

BORN AS A Ukrainian Jew, young Baruch Rachmilevitch lived through the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. His enduring memory of his Bolshevik elder sister Rosa was not the ribbons in her hair but the pistol tucked into her waistband. Dragged to the fur trade of Canada while still young, he dragged himself back to the revolution, first via Palestine and then the International Brigades. Tank warfare in North Africa, prison camp escapes, alliances with the Italian partisans and leading an Armed Forces Parliament – what is there not to admire in his courage?

Bert put his talents to practical use in a post-war world, first in Yorkshire where he learned much from his first wife, Marian (Jessop) Ramelson – a Communist Party leader in Leeds in her own right – and from comrades from the mining community. Lessons from other mass struggles were also found to be critical: that participation develops skills, confidence and morale, and that working-class people, given the opportunity, have unlimited capacities for personal development. Ramelson always led from the front, if necessary, putting himself in harm's way to advance the cause. Faced with the Cold War, he boomed his oratory out in the market-places, nurturing future leaders of the movement, building new movements.

Bert moved to London in 1965 to take over the Party's trade union work at a challenging moment, taking advantage of the highest point of class struggle since the 1920s to place the communists at the centre of the maelstrom whirling around Britain, as its political and economic system came under massive stress. Communists had not been so powerful and popular here since the Soviet assault on Nazi Germany.

Yet, intriguingly, for so much biography in life, there is little source material. Seifert and Sibley – both authors with a communist heritage – have therefore focused on the political times that made Ramelson, if not a household name, then certainly infamous as the key leader of the British Party in its work amongst trade unions. The core of the book is devoted to this theme and it is sandwiched on either side by an all-too brief account of Bert's life alongside a much needed corrective to all those irritating accounts of the death of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) that we have had to endure ever since. But in relaying the core of the book, the authors provide us with a virtual manual for conducting revolutionary politics on the terrain of the British working class and its movements.

By 1966 Bert was being accused of a too intimate involvement in the seafarers' strike of that year, mentioned in Parliament and splashed over the front pages of the capitalist press. It would be like that for the next decade, as Britain's communists seemed to be at the heart of all union struggles. Under Ramelson's leadership, sectarianism was outlawed – what mattered was advancing the interests of working people. But this was no

transmission belt strategy – changing Labour Party policies was not an alternative to building workplace struggle and activity; whilst the key concept was unity in action of all sections of the movement.

It may be difficult for those who did not live through the 1965-80 period to grasp just how central the trade union question – and the related matter of pay – was to the Establishment's political agenda. For Bert, the issue was clear: state control of wages in the context of a declining Empire was all about boosting otherwise declining profits, and he was having none of it. As far as he could see, it meant weakening the unions, whilst the reforms were predicated upon planned sustainable economic growth, which no government ever succeeded in delivering.

The particular hallmark of much of his work was opposition to all forms of incomes policy, the defence of plant-level collective bargaining (although Bert was suspicious of 'productivity bargaining'), and the prized independence of shop stewards committees. Often this was achieved by the production of the most incisive and hard-hitting pamphlets, which gained enormous readership in workplaces. Moving on from the slogan 'militancy is not enough', Ramelson taught us to think in terms of the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES). It was the centre point of the CPGB Industrial Department's 'Needs of the Hour', put before the 1974 TUC Congress in a motion submitted by the communist-influenced AUEW-TASS.

The Industrial Department was a critical force within the CPGB, being responsible for labour movement questions. But even before the mithering negativity of Eurocommunism, when Party dissolution was but a twinkle in the eyes of a handful of revisionists, an anomaly was that the Central Organisation Department was responsible for the hundred or so workplace branches of the Party. Not only was this a constant source of friction, I think it was a factor that sectioned off active trades unionists from either serious party work or, vice-versa, influence at the top of unions. Possibly, this left a crack for the jemmy-carriers to prise their way in later on. One powerful counter to this was Bert's habit of nurturing future leaders in stages as he progressed. There was always someone whom he could call on for a favour.

Meanwhile, the trade-union wing of the Communist Party saw its heyday, as hundreds of thousands of workers went on political strikes against government policy, or in order to free imprisoned comrades. Under the weight of pressure, even the TUC called a one-day general strike. The Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU) was conceived by Bert and delivered at birth and nurtured by Kevin Halpin in 1966, working alongside the TUC and its affiliates – this conception of dual leadership being central to Ramelson's style.

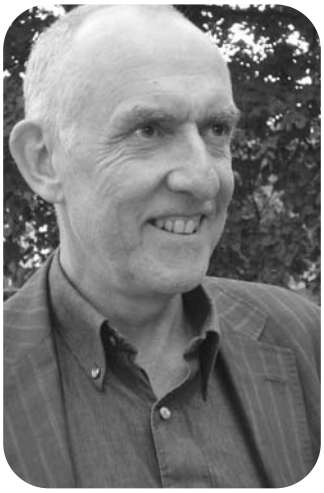
This was the era of the Donovan Report on the future of unions, of the hastily dropped Labour anti-union bill *In Place of Strife*, and above all of the hostile Tory Industrial Relations Act, which Ramelson called "the most vicious piece of … class legislation since the Combination Acts of the 1800s". Ultimately, it was he who orchestrated the fight-back and pronounced the end when he said that the working class had made the Act "inoperable" (a pure-Bert term) long before Labour came back into office and repealed it. Following that, Bert was also central to the struggle against the early phase of Labour's 1970s Social Contract.

Ramelson's "principled pragmatism" enhanced the reputation and influence of the CP, to the extent that Britain's secret police were obsessed with monitoring him: even conversations in pubs were eavesdropped upon. In 1966, it escaped the media that the seafarers' strike – and support for it – was totally lawful, whilst government spies operated outside the law and were used for party-political purposes by the Prime Minister. Undoubtedly, the whole working class movement, including the Labour Party (but not its core leadership) moved solidly to the left in the whole period – and if anyone was most responsible for this, it was Ramelson.

This is an excellent review of Bert's life and times. But, on one or two minor things, I think the authors over-reach themselves a little; it was the use of democratic centralism in the context of a single ruling party in Soviet Russia (and the CPGB!) and its virtual extension to the state that was a problem for him. We should not forget that one of his sisters was a Socialist Revolutionary (one recalls his admiration for some CNT members in Spain). In his later years, Bert was nothing if not direct about his worries over 'real existing socialism'. But he had been more careful in earlier years when standing shoulder to shoulder was hard going but necessary.

Bert retired as Industrial Organiser as far back as 1977, his swansong being an ultimately failed attempt to oversee a compromise settlement on the *British Road to Socialism*. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, already ageing and ill, Ramelson played a significant role behind the scenes in providing support against the bureaucratic disciplining of Marxists inside the CPGB, the outcome of which, two decades on, is that a lively Communist Party of Britain can rely on the heritage forged by people like Bert in a new and challenging world. Thinking that he might be seen as a unifying figure, he bided his time but simply ran out of it as his health failed; he eventually died in 1994, aged 84.

■ *Visit http://bertramelson.wordpress.com/ for moving and still images of Bert, details of how to buy the book and further interesting information.*



SOUL FOOD

A regular literary selection

Selected by Mike Quille

ON THIS OCCASION I am giving the whole column over to reviews of two exciting recent poetry anthologies.

I. ANGEL IN FLAMES

By JAMES SCULLY
(Smokestack Books, 2011, 224 pp, pbk, £8.95. ISBN: 978-0-9564175-8-9)

Poetic Diction

Certain words are not fit
for poetry.

Boss, for instance.
Our better verse
you may observe
has no boss in it.

The best, in fact
the most refined
has eliminated jobs
strikes & lock-outs

not to mention unemployment.

Naturally there are no classes.
Rather, no ruling
and no working.
Just, on occasion, a middle
or an English.

It follows there is
no exploitation
no struggle
no poverty
no racist taunts
or murders, and
no injustice

because there is no
justice –
only psychology
begging questions, and
trees, menstrual blood (it's
OK it's animal nature)
with a few obscenities
classical compositions
dewy or sweaty
love, but not often

mystery, fantasy, myth
an insane asylum,
victims without victimizers
as in slabs of veal,
and a little peace

there is peace
in poetry, the
pie in the sky
of this vocabulary

which you can bet your bottom
dollar does not include
the resilience of the
less than poetic people
nor their intelligence
seeing right through
the culture police.

This is why no one
minds
poetry anymore –

its world is one
nobody lives in, not even
poets who close their eyes
to speak

The last *Soul Food* presented a Marxist approach to understanding and appreciating poetry. It explained its historical origins, and how, as a particularly powerful kind of language, it served the social, collective and co-operative needs and purposes of the human societies in which it evolved. And it showed how the development of class-based societies leads poets (and critics and readers) into a conflicted, sometimes agonised, spectrum of choices about poetry (its purpose, its audience, its meaning) and about where they locate their writing and reading in an oppressive and exploitative society.

Some writers (and readers) tend to reject engagement with history, with the material realities of working class life, and with political action to educate, agitate and change the world. Their writing revolves around a template of individualist lyrics, springing from a self-absorbed, solipsistic aesthetic. Their poems are often framed self-referentially, in their voice and assumed audience, as though they were just speaking to themselves in musing, meditative solitude.

Critics and readers, for their part, also tend to look for these qualities in poetry (and the other arts), and value them. These writers, critics and readers will often ignore, deny or question the value of an engaged, political poetry. This forged consensus (in both senses) is dominant in our culture, and forms part of the ideological apparatus of capitalist societies. In such a spiritually hostile environment, artistic practice and consumption tends to become depoliticised, escapist, and unreal. There is "no boss in it", as Scully says in the poem presented above; it "has eliminated jobs / strikes and lock outs / not to mention unemployment".

The Legislators of the World

However, at the other end of the spectrum, the original, collectively-rooted voice of poetry breaks through in protest, in accusation, in anger at the way true and free human development is cramped by capitalism. The perspectives, themes, tone and techniques of this kind of poetry and literary criticism are alive to history, to materialism, to social responsibilities and political imperatives. These writers believe, like Shelley,[1] that "the most unfailing herald, companion, or follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution is poetry" and, in that famous phrase, that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world".

That doesn't mean to say, of course, that all socialist poetry is good. We have all read attempts at political poetry that may be intellectually correct, but which have little literary value: no interesting, original images, little sense of rhythm or rhyme, no depth or resonance, differing little from discursive prose. And we have all read good poems written from a non-socialist perspective.

Take, for example, *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* by T S Eliot, which expresses brilliantly the anxiety of the petty bourgeois individual (and by implication the poet) in the early twentieth century, in a society riven with class conflict. Or take *Easter 1916*, where W B Yeats attempts to romanticise and mythologise a republican, socialist-led rebellion against English colonial rule, by characterising the uprising as a "terrible beauty". He is expressing the anxieties of the Anglo-Irish ruling class, caught between a measure of support for Irish nationalism, and a half-recognition of a progressive politics, yet terrified by the thought of social revolution. And he is doing it very, very well.

Such poems can be appreciated by anyone, even though our political orientation as communists will always lead us, as writers and readers, to adopt a strategic perspective, a cultural policy if you like, which prefers artistic practices that align themselves with our political project in one way or another, and which eschews individualism, elitism, and pointless obscurity.

Class and Class Struggle

Modern poets are sprinkled all along this 'spectrum of engagement'. And individual poets do of course write the occasional political poem. The Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, is notably willing to write about current events from a broadly left perspective. Some poets move along the spectrum in the course of their writing career, as Auden, Spender, and MacNeice in the 1930s moved away from their commitment to communism. Or the way the contemporary poet Simon Armitage has currently forsaken engaged, realistic writing about modern working class life, to rewriting mediaeval courtly lyrics. Let's hope he comes back to Planet Earth before he becomes the next Poet Laureate!

There are thus not many poets who can claim a consistent commitment to the 'communist poetic'. And fewer still who have been active in revolutionary politics. The American poet James Scully is however one such. Before reading the collection of Scully's poetry under review, I had barely heard of him, had read hardly any of his poetry, and the little I had read I hadn't really understood. Frankly, I had prejudged him, assuming he was part of the dominant strand in modern American poetry, which is apolitical, even anti-political, and which he skewers nicely in the poem with which I started this column.

It took time, too, for the current collection to sink in and detonate its meanings, like a depth charge. Even now, as I write the third and final version of this article, I am seeing new things in some of his poems. I would therefore like to present some from the collection, primed with a few brief comments in the hope that they help you 'see' the poems a bit quicker than I did.

Miguel Enríquez Espinosa a founder of the Chilean political party and former left-wing guerrilla organization Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR)

Biographical details

James Scully was born in 1937 in Connecticut, to a working class family. In the 1960s he was involved in the anti-war movement in the USA. In the '70s he moved to Chile, arriving weeks after the CIA-backed coup that brought a Pinochet-led military junta to power. Scully worked with the MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left) and wrote quietly hair-raising poems about the Chilean experience, like this:

Now Sing

Now sing; the guards howling
beat him with obscenities.
But he did.
His legend is
He was singing
Venceremos
when they shot him.
even for them, it was too much

they killed him,
they couldn't kill him enough.

Victor Jara
sin guitarra
who'd held out with bloody stumps
and sung

Notice the effective use of line-endings – enjambment, as it is technically called. They work to produce a jagged, unsettling effect, making the reader confront the dreadful reality depicted. They are mimetic of political conflict, challenge and struggle, used to explode a language in danger of being manipulated to conceal true meaning or gloss over suffering, and to reveal and expose revolutionary truth. This is a characteristic strength of his poetry, as you can also see from the opening poem, and from the ones which follow.

Unsurprisingly, the combination of powerful political poetry and intense activism made it difficult for Scully to get published in many mainstream poetry journals in the USA in the '80s and '90s. But he continued to write, and the collection under review covers all of his writing from 1967 to 2011.

Here is a poem taken from the collection, about 9/11. In it, Scully references Hokusai's well-known print, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa.* The image of the overpowering wave works both to intensify the horror of the attack, but also creates an avenging, redemptive element to the interpretation of the events.

Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*

Great Wave

we saw the world end
in a ball of fire

two balls of fire
& puffs of dust
outrunning gravity
blowing off
the laws of physics

2 planes took out 3 towers
it was a miracle it meant
anything can happen

in reality
it was the Middle Ages
mind-bending demons &
wonders
mounting a comeback

the Enlightenment
was shockt it decayed
into too many words
with too little to say

brain waves heart rhythms
emanations of the flesh
mirrors of the soul
warped that day
their ashen darkness falling away
like the great wave of Hokusai,
the vast horde of its waters
storming up & over
the little fishermen
in their little boats

Mount Fuji shines
in distance
white & serene

… we woke
to fire & smoke
small bodies on TV
holding hands
walking out of windows

buildings
give up their ghosts
over & over
on TV after TV
spewing toxic dust
haunting down the day
of panicked faces, eyes
running half looking back
at the science fiction
choking their streets …

Hokusai's fishermen cling
to the gunnels
of their slender boats

the Great Wave
the menace
& beauty of it
hanging over them

is as perfect & as still
in its blackness & blueness
as Fuji in the brilliance
of its canopy of snow

it is what it is

here nothing is
we have learned to read
miracles
as the signs of a conspiracy

we have managed to live
with murder & torture
in the name of a homeland
we have never lived in

trapped in a web
of blood-&-soil
fear like a filthy sack
pulled down over our heads –

we will never now *not* see
human beings rendered
walking on air, as though
treading the heaviness of water
feeling for the bottom
for all to see
the dignity the immensity
of their death, & of their
littleness

against the spectacle
of the New American Century
where the world we knew
ended
– floor by screaming floor –
in the first murders of the
terror war

The next poem is another example of the way Scully uses cultural references to strengthen his poetry. The poem is called *Qana*, which is the biblical site of the water-into-wine miracle. The poem is a reaction to the Israeli Defence Force's bombing of sleeping Lebanese women and children in 2006, which Hezbollah countered by camouflaging their rocket launchers as trees. These trees could be moved, like the way Macduff's forces (which like the Great Wave can be seen as both avenging and redemptive) camouflage themselves as trees to advance on Macbeth, in Shakespeare's play.

Qana

where the wedding was
where water turned to wine
where the best was saved
for last
shsh they're trying to sleep
in the dark wood
of dreamless dreaming –
coughing farting snoring sighing
turning over

where the wedding was
the rolling storm
that is not a storm
flies over

it doesn't feel much
to drop a bomb –
a slight bump
under the wing

the thing is done –
their deaths
like little yapping dogs
rush out
into the nerve-endings of the universe

the bodies stay put
impossibly still

so it was said in school
Macbeth doth murder sleep –
with so much life to kill
there's no room for sleep

in Qana
where the wedding was
those who sleep, die

the future of sleep
is buried alive

in Qana where the wedding was
the murdered in their sleep
wake just long enough to die
to become the woods
where the wedding was …

they are on the move now,
which is impossible

these impossible dead
growing out of their deaths
into an army of trees

Next is a poem which references Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. In the poem, the angel is being blown away from an exploding Paradise, and the catastrophes of human history are pinning his wings down, so he cannot use them to help any more.

The Angel of History

"His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread."
(Walter Benjamin)

blown backwards
into the future

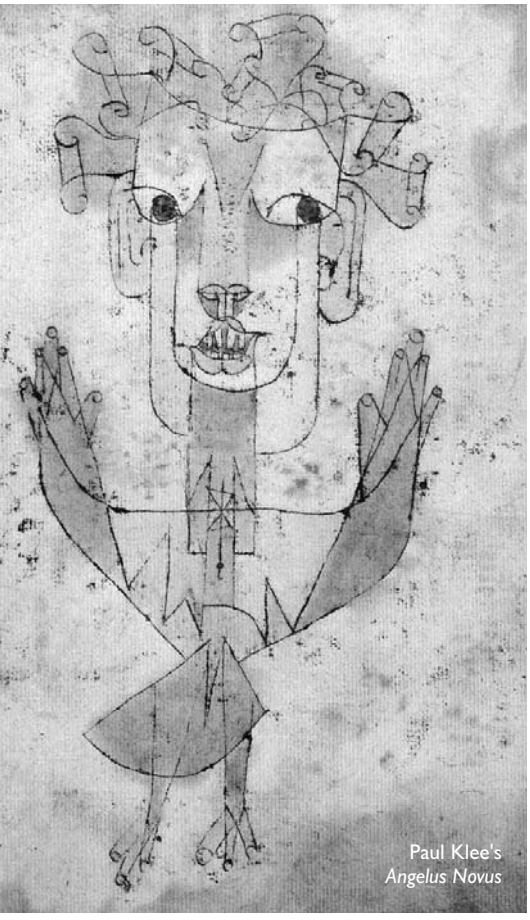
he beholds only
the past
dragging after him

what a catastrophe
the furious wind
hurls at his feet

helpless before it

his wings are spread –
fanned flat
with the sharp snap
of terrified sails

how will he fold them
feather on feather
before the torrent
of shock waves from paradise?



Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*

him
on his wretched wings
helpless to help
anyone
or anything

what he shouts
is spittle
torn from his mouth

himself, ever only
a single breath ahead
of where he has been

where even now

the surge of broken bodies
is breaking over him

filling his eyes, his mouth, his ears
with creaturely whispers

crushing with love the wings
that have caught him up
in so much misery

Although the angel's wings are pinned down, as the poem concludes we see that it is actually human history, collective human action or "creaturely whispers", which is the real redemptive force, which is "crushing with love" the angel's wings. It is a very powerful metaphor, working dialectically as an exposure and critique and complaint about suffering, but also representing real revolutionary transformation in history, the self-emancipation of humanity, moving to take control of our world and our future.

In a sense, the poem itself works as an avenging, liberating angel. Indeed, throughout this fine collection we can sense an urgent, uncompromising, angelic righteousness driving all the poetry forward. Is this not a movement and a spirit which is mimetic of the emergence, struggle through suffering and class conflict, and final victory of the proletariat?

The uncompromising commitment to writing poetry to illuminate and advance a progressive political cause is reminiscent of Shelley. There are similarities too with William Blake. It is hard to read the poem without being reminded of Blake's dramatic, apocalyptic imagery, both in his paintings and in such poems as *The Tyger*, which we looked at in the last column, and which like this poem evokes the sense of an awesome, irresistible historical force. Parallels could also be drawn with the "terrible beauty" of revolutionary forces in Yeats's poem *Easter 1916*, discussed above. Shelley, Blake, Yeats: this may seem like elevated company to place Scully in, but the moral seriousness and intellectual penetration of his vision, expressed with such powerful poetic tools, make such comparisons reasonable.

Here is another short but heavily freighted poem. It manages to express both human solidarity between oppressors and oppressed, and the promise (or is it a threat?) of ultimate justice for the current "gods of the globe". It also has both a sense of real, historical defeat and a glimpse of a future, ultimate victory.

The Long Defeat

and when the gods are gone
into the long, drunken night –
gods of the globe
drunk with blood, drunk with money,
with hatred of life

we will go after them
into the same night

We should not, however, conclude that Scully completely identifies committed political activists with the self-emancipating, justice-seeking masses. Here is the final poem in this selection, again expressing his fiercely uncompromising and critical perspective:

Cold Rags

Where did everyone go?

Enemies depress the air.
Friends have gone home.
What's left
is comrades.

If only *these* were not so
remote, righteous, intimate
as gossip in snow.

If they would stop
lying to themselves.
Or if the lies
warmed, were not
wrinkled
and stiff
flapping at the skin.

II. UNION

By PAUL SUMMERS
(Smokestack Books, 2011, 193 pp, pbk, £7.95. ISBN: 978-0-9564175-9-6)

There is a poem in the Paul Summers collection with a similar theme to Scully's *Cold Rags*, and using some similar imagery, though the treatment is lighter, with more warmth and humour:

the comrades

every season brings change:
more empty seats for overcoats
& greasy caps, to prop up sticks.
their collars grow more loose,
their feet rattle in pristine shoes.

the incredible shrinking men
meet Sundays for dominoes:
their fingers grip the ebony,
like brambles on unkempt graves;
they eye the kitty like preying cats,

faces receding to sharpened bone,
the skin of one-time double chins
hangs paper-thin in breathless flags,
& when they laugh, their straining
necks
like pelicans remembering storms.

union is a selection from across Paul Summers's writing career, including prose and performance pieces as well as poems. There is a similar background perspective to Scully, a common concern with working class experience and some fairly gritty, bleak political issues, but instead of Scully's hurricane of angelic righteousness, Summers presents a more complex mixture (or 'union') of tone and subject in his treatment of political themes. He moves from the affectionately comic (as in the poem above) to the tragic, from the personal to the political, and combines an awareness of class issues and international solidarity with a keen eye for the specifics of particular places.

Most of the poems have been previously published in earlier collections but my favourite section is completely new. It is a sequence called *Broken Land*, with each poem rooted in particular places in the post-industrial landscapes of North-East England, and telling stories of memory, loss and exploitation. Here are two of them:

the sound of it
beanley, Northumberland

a stand-off symphony
of posturing cats, a birthing
ewe, a straining hinge,
a sap-bound knot
resisting the screw.

the lurching groan
of ice-bound ships,
an aria of keening gulls,
the snowflake melting
in a scarecrow's breath.

the vacuum melody
of an empty past,
mourning the death
of loss itself.

acknowledged land
coalburn, eglingham, Northumberland

weep November cold tears,
make this ford impassable.

hide us in the mizzle caul of
ancient fears,
protect us from this reiver dark.

fox cry, plangent grace,
the wearing lines

of history on her face:
the ghost of static mines,

the broken ribs of rusted ships,
of shoulders laden with flaccid chips.

inscribe a legend on your map,
no longer whippet and cloth cap

but totem statuary here and there,
a culture raped, the cupboard bare.

this north, this cold,
acknowledged land
where rule is cheap and underhand

where heritage is all the rage
and all our rage now heritage.

Paul Summers

In the North-East of England – as elsewhere – the current austerity package of the Con-Dem coalition is beginning to bite, even though there has not been enough time to mourn and bury the memories of the mining, shipbuilding and other industries destroyed by the Thatcher government's policies of "managed decline", as Geoffrey Howe called it. Those last two lines are simply great, and will become true of the whole country if the Con-Dems are allowed to persist with their policies.

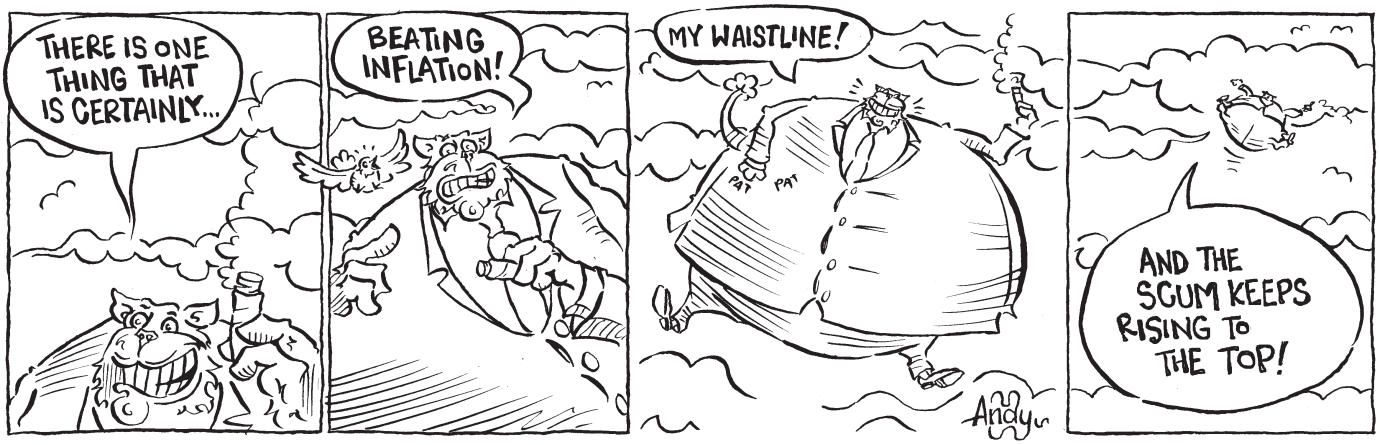
I strongly encourage readers to buy both collections: with so many good poems in each of them, they represent outstanding value for money.

With thanks to Andy Croft at Smokestack Books for permission to reprint the poems.

Notes and References

1 P B Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays*, Dodo Press, Gloucester, 2008.

Junk food: an irregular cartoon strip



RECENT PUBLICATIONS FROM THE COMMUNIST PARTY

- **Britain's Road to Socialism**, New Edition Programme of the Communist Party of Britain
  £3.50 including postage and packing

- **Was Gramsci a Eurocommunist?** by Robert Griffiths
  £2.50 including postage and packing

- **The European Union: For the Monopolies, Against the People** by John Foster
  £2.50 including postage and packing

- **Asia: Imperialism and Resistance** by Kenny Coyle
  £2.50 including postage and packing

Order online at **www.communist-party.org.uk**
or by post to Communist Party of Britain at the address below

JOIN THE COMMUNIST PARTY

Capitalism is in its biggest slump since 1929. Britain's banks have been bailed out to the tune of £1.3 trillion while workers are paying for the crisis with job losses, public spending cuts, frozen pay and home repossessions.
Britain needs socialism!

Return to:
CPB 23 Coombe Road London CR0 1BD

You may also apply directly via the web site www.communist-party.org.uk, by following the link "Join the CP"

I want to join the:

☐ Communist Party ☐ Young Communist League

Name
Address
Postcode
Phone
Email
Industry
Age

Morning Star

NEWS FOR THE MILLIONS NOT THE MILLIONAIRES

The one that's different

£1 daily available from your newsagent

For peace and socialism

www.morningstaronline.co.uk