
Editorial: Our History

This forty-seventh issue of *Socialist History* is the first with our new publisher, Lawrence and Wishart. It marks a new phase in the journal's history, with simultaneous online publication via EBSCO. Lawrence and Wishart will be our third publisher since the journal was founded on the initiative of Willie Thompson in 1993. For our first five years we were published by Pluto Press. Rivers Oram Press took over at short notice in 1998, inaugurating seventeen years of close and very fruitful collaboration. The development of *Socialist History* into an attractively-designed and high-quality product owes a great deal to the creativity, professionalism and commitment of Elizabeth Fidlon at Rivers Oram. But times change, and it is now essential for any publication which sells in the academic market to be available online, and with that in mind, we have moved the journal to Lawrence and Wishart.

An occasion like this is a good opportunity to look back at the history of this journal's parent organisation, the Socialist History Society, and of its more famous predecessor, the Communist Party Historians' (later: History) Group (CPHG).

The first ten years of the CPHG, from 1946 to 1956, has received quite a lot of scholarly attention over the years.¹ Indeed, in a note to me written shortly before she died in early 2011, Dorothy Thompson remarked, 'I am continually being asked questions about my lifetime, especially about "the CP historians' group" which has become something of a mythical monster'. Interest in figures like Eric Hobsbawm, John Saville, E.P. and Dorothy Thompson, Christopher Hill, Victor Kiernan and others, with their subsequent high-profile careers as historians, have kept the early CPHG in the historiographical spotlight. However, the fact that many of these historians left the CPGB in the aftermath of the 1956 events has meant that the subsequent story of the CPHG itself, as distinct from its more illustrious early members, has been largely overlooked.² In an attempt to redress the balance a little, this short survey looks mainly at the evolution of the CPHG after 1956, in the very different circumstances which prevailed in British communism after that year. It also examines how the group responded to the demise of the USSR and the CPGB itself at the end of 1991, when, in contrast to

1956, a far more profound crisis in British communism led to the renaissance of the history group as a much broader Socialist History Society.

Before 1956

From the 1930s onwards the CPGB had been keen to present itself as the rightful heir to the long British radical tradition, and a key moment in this had been the first publication of A.L. Morton's *A People's History of England* in 1938. Indeed, an important impetus for forming a distinct CP Historians' Group in 1946 had been the perceived need to produce an updated edition of Morton's classic work.³ The group as initially constituted comprised several specialist sections, of which 'the 16th/17th century section was the most dynamic and productive', as David Parker noted in his book presenting their debates on absolutism.⁴ These are highly illuminating about the intellectual atmosphere of the group in its early years. On the one hand, these discussions were on a very high level of erudition. The participants knew their history, and their Marxism. On the other hand, there was a tacit assumption that there must be a 'correct' line on major historical questions, at which they needed to arrive. This is particularly illustrated by the polemic between Christopher Hill and Victor Kiernan in 1947 over the nature of the Tudor monarchy. Hill was not content merely to disagree with Kiernan over the latter's contention that the Tudor monarchy had ceased to be 'feudal'. Hill characterised Kiernan's view as 'dangerous', in that it 'plays into the hands of ... bourgeois economists and historians ...'. More tellingly still, at the end of the discussion, Kiernan 'withdrew his main contentions'.⁵

The 1956 crisis

The story of the ferment that the events of 1956 – Khrushchev's 'secret speech', the risings in Poland and Hungary and so on – caused in the CPGB has been told many times. The part played by members of the CPHG, particularly John Saville and E.P. Thompson, in questioning the old orthodoxies is well known.⁶ In 2006, the journal *Revolutionary History*, marking the year which gave British Trotskyism its first significant cohort of recruits, reproduced the correspondence in 1956 and 1957 between the CPGB, the CPHG and Brian Pearce, probably the only CPHG member to conclude that Trotskyism represented a coherent alternative to Stalinism.⁷ Although this was almost certainly not the compiler's intention, Pearce's correspondence shows how much more tolerant the CPGB's internal regime had become even as early as 1957: in January that year Pearce had

begun collaborating closely with the Trotskyist leader Gerry Healy; it took almost twelve months for the party finally to expel him.⁸

In the aftermath of 1956 the CPHG lost some of its best-known members, including E.P. Thompson, John Saville, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton and Victor Kiernan. Those who remained in the party and the CPHG included Eric Hobsbawm, A.L. Morton and Maurice Dobb. Although those who left generally did so because they did not feel the CPGB had changed sufficiently, or that it was capable of change, in fact both the party and the CPHG were undergoing a slow, but profound transformation.

The evolution of the CPGB, from a party which in 1956 had supported the suppression of the Hungarian rising, into a party that by the late 1980s would throw out almost all the ideology which underpinned its very existence, is a story for another article. The evolution of its Historians' Group was less dramatic and more constructive.

In 1956, the group had adopted a format that remained largely unchanged for over three decades: it devoted its main efforts to publishing a quarterly pamphlet series called *Our History* and to organising a series of public lectures and seminars. The specific period sections were gone, and so, significantly, was the search for a single correct line on historical questions.

Our History

The very title of the CPHG's pamphlet series reflected the party's continuing claim on the British radical tradition. Of the first 51 (stencil-duplicated) issues of the quarterly *Our History*, only one title was concerned primarily with the CPGB,⁹ while a further three or four discussed the immediate pre-history of the party or touched on its history as part of a wider discussion.¹⁰ Rather more than half of the pamphlets dealt with questions of labour history, broadly defined, with a strong emphasis on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The previous emphasis on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was much reduced, although there was a pamphlet on the tercentenary of Cromwell's death, two by A.L. Morton, on 'Shakespeare's Idea of History' and 'Leveller Democracy – Fact or Myth?', and one from Maurice Dobb on 'The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism'. Other pamphlets dealt with subjects as diverse as 'Africa in World History', 'The World of Homer' and 'The Organisation of Science – Science as social activity'. At first, the pamphlets were mainly unsigned, but from about 1960 onwards, most of them were issued under the name of their author(s), which represented a further shift away from the notion

of a 'party line' on historical questions. Moreover, for the most part the pamphlets were not propagandistic in content or tone – they followed the conventions of academic scholarship. At the end of 1958 Betty Grant, the group's secretary, could proudly list some of the major libraries around the world which subscribed to *Our History*.¹¹

Around 1962 the CPHG changed its designation from 'Historians' Group' to 'History Group', clearly in order to attract members and subscribers who were not working historians but simply interested in history. That same year, Dona Torr's 'Tom Mann 1890-92' (*Our History* 26/27) appeared, containing editorial input from E.P. Thompson. This marked the beginning of a process of broadening the group, reaching out to former members of the CPGB and other people from quite different left traditions. By the end of 1967, the group was pleased to publish 'Alexander MacDonald and the Miners' (*Our History* 48) by Raymond Challinor, a member of the International Socialists.¹²

Although it organised occasional conferences and seminars, the CPHG after 1956 did not have a research agenda of its own, and the material it published in *Our History* by and large reflected the research interests of its individual members. In the 1970s and 1980s, this led to a shift towards more contemporary British history, with only five forays into the early modern period out of more than thirty pamphlets. There was also less on European and world history, and little of the sort of 'broad-sweep' analysis of historical epochs in which Marxism had tended to specialise.¹³ The reticence about discussing the CPGB's own history had dissipated – several issues of *Our History* dealt with aspects of the party's role. In 1990-91, just as world communism and the CPGB were imploding, the CPHG brought out 3 volumes of documents on 'Labour-Communist Relations' in a presentation which treated the CPGB record rather uncritically.¹⁴ One important area that the CPHG neglected almost completely in its publications was Soviet history. This was partly because of the political sensitivity of the question, but largely because there were few members with any specialist knowledge in that area.¹⁵

Decline of the party

From the mid-1970s onwards, the CPGB was in inexorable decline, from a membership of around 24,000 in 1974 to just over 10,000 in 1987 and around 5000 in 1991, when the party dissolved itself. The CPHG could not fail to be affected by this, but its membership followed a somewhat different trajectory. According to David Parker, membership grew from

around 100 in 1970 to almost 200 in 1980. Publications became more professional-looking, and an initially attractively-produced discussion bulletin, *Our History Journal*, was launched in 1977. In the 1980s, membership sank back about by one third, and the production of pamphlets became more infrequent and erratic. This was not helped by the expulsion of John Foster, the editor of *Our History*, from the CPGB during an orgy of factional infighting in 1985. But just as the CPGB was entering its terminal crisis in 1989, the CPHG began to grow again, by opening itself up to non-CPGB 'associate' members.¹⁶ This broadening out provided the basis for the CPHG's transformation into the Socialist History Society once its parent party had evaporated.

Reconstitution as the SHS

As Eric Hobsbawm observed in 1978, 'friendship and comradeship' persisted in relations between the historians who left the CPGB after 1956 and those who remained with the party.¹⁷ Even before the demise of the CPGB, some of those who had left, such as Rodney Hilton, had been renewing their association with the group. At the time the CPGB dissolved itself, the CPHG had a thriving committee and programme of talks, and a substantial reservoir of goodwill among left-wing historians. The feeling among the members was that the end of the party should be used as an opportunity, and in early 1992 the society reconstituted itself as the Socialist History Society. Although it initially retained a loose and largely meaningless association with the CPGB's legal successor, Democratic Left, SHS membership was open to everyone, with no party privileges. Before long, the SHS could count John Saville, Victor Kiernan and Dorothy Thompson among its members, re-establishing the links to the heyday of the CPHG. Until his death in 2009, Saville was particularly active in the society, as one of its vice-presidents, contributing articles and a regular piece in *Socialist History* on 'books to be remembered'.

Since 1992, the SHS has undergone a considerable further evolution. Politically, this has meant a growing distance between the SHS and its CPGB origins. This has not been a repudiation of the society's roots, but more of a process of dilution as old members have left or died and new ones have joined, and as the memory of the party recedes into the past. The history of British communism has remained an important area for the SHS, but it is generally now discussed with a greater degree of critical distance.¹⁸ The society's committee, which now contains people from a variety of political backgrounds, has also generally been committed to

maintaining a non-partisan stance with regard to disagreements within the left.

Assisted by recent advances in printing technology, the SHS has done much to professionalise its publications. Willie Thompson, as editor of this journal in its first decade, oversaw its transformation from a typewritten pamphlet called *Our History Journal* in 1988 into the 128-page, professionally-published *Socialist History* by 1998. The evolution of the society's *Occasional Publications* series of pamphlets has been less dramatic, but certain titles, most notably David Duncan's *Mutiny in the RAF* (1998) and the three titles on the Caribbean by the late Richard Hart, have attracted attention way beyond the core readership of SHS members.¹⁹ Overall, the SHS is now publishing more material than ever before. Beside the historical journal and pamphlets, the society produces a members' newsletter and runs two websites and a blog.²⁰ This is in addition to its traditional business of organising talks, seminars and conferences.

Making the society's published output more professional carries with it the danger of an exclusive orientation towards the academic world, ignoring its movement and activist roots. The structure of the SHS itself can help guard against this – it is a membership organisation composed mainly of people outside of academia, and it constitutes the bulk of the market for its own publications. In general, the aim has been to publish material which meets academic standards, but which is accessible to an intelligent non-specialist.

Every historical society and its publications occupies a certain niche, but rarely an exclusive one, and the SHS is no exception in this. There is certainly an overlap with the Society for the Study of Labour History, which was founded in 1960 on the initiative of, amongst others, former and current CPHG members. Eric Hobsbawm was the president of both the SHS and the SSLH up to his death in 2012. Yet the SHS's remit is generally broader than that of the SSLH, in that it is not only concerned with 'labour history', while both its title and its origins show its continuing attachment to politically-engaged approaches to history. That said, the SHS is not wedded to any specific interpretation of socialism or Marxism, which distinguishes it from various other groups and publications.

Socialist History

This present issue continues the international orientation of recent issues. Ehud Manor looks at the high point of US socialism, the 1917 mayoral elections in New York, in which the Socialist Party of America candidate Morris Hillquit gained a creditable 22 per cent of the poll. Manor focuses

in particular on the role of Jewish voters and their papers and organisations in mobilising Hillquit's electors. Kevin Morgan considers Walter Citrine's delegation to Finland in 1940. At that time Finland enjoyed some sympathy in the British labour movement as a victim of Soviet aggression, sympathy it forfeited soon thereafter by joining the war against the USSR on Germany's side. Lawrence Parker examines the controversy around the works of Christopher Caudwell, waged in the CPGB's journals between 1948 and 1951, offering an interpretation which does not see it as merely a British reflection of Soviet cultural politics. Finally, Tobias Abse explores two contradictory urges within Italian communism – to be a party of protest or one which aspires to government – and traces how these urges have played out within Rifondazione Comunista.

As for the future, there are plans for several special issues of the journal, including one next year to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising, another based on our forthcoming Norwich conference 'Before '68: the Left, activism & social movements in the long 1960s', and an issue in 2017 to mark 100 years since the Russian revolution. We continue to receive submissions and proposals for articles from across Britain and around the world. Now, with the higher profile an online presence provides, there is every reason to hope that the journal will go from strength to strength in partnership with our new publisher.

Francis King, editor, *Socialist History*

Notes

1. See, for example, Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party', in Maurice Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and Their Causes. Essays in honour of A. L. Morton*, London 1978; Harvey Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians*, Basingstoke 1995; David Parker, ed., *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution*, London 2008; Bill Schwarz, "'The people" in history: the Communist Party Historians' Group 1946-56', in Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz, David Sutton, *Making Histories. Studies in history-writing and politics*, London 1982, pp44-95. Additionally, many individual former CPHG members have been the subject of more or less extensive scholarly analysis.
2. The notable exception here is David Parker, 'The Communist Party and its Historians, 1946-1989', *Socialist History* 12, 1997.
3. See Schwarz, "'The people" in history', p44.
4. See Parker, ed., *Ideology, Absolutism*, p9.

5. Ibid, pp136-37.
6. See, for example, John Saville, 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party', *Socialist Register* Vol. 13, 1976, pp1-23, and other articles in that volume; John Saville, 'Edward Thompson, the Communist Party and 1956', *Socialist Register*, Vol. 30, 1993, pp20-31.
7. See John McIlroy, 'A Communist Historian in 1956: Brian Pearce and the Crisis of British Stalinism', and 'The Brian Pearce Dossier', in *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 9 No. 3, 2006, pp84-104 and 105-43.
8. Ibid, pp97, 142. It is hard to imagine any of the British Trotskyist groups displaying the same degree of toleration of dissent, either then or later.
9. This was 'Labour-Communist Relations 1920-1939', *Our History* No. 5, Spring 1957.
10. For a full list of titles up to 1990: www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/shs/index.htm. About 40% of the pamphlets have been scanned and put online on that site.
11. These included the House of Commons, Library of Congress, New York Public Library, National Library of New Zealand, Library of Social Sciences, Moscow, and the IISG Amsterdam. CPHG subscription renewal slip for 1959, author's collection.
12. For an obituary of Ray Challinor, who joined the Socialist History Society, the CPHG's successor, after 1992, see www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=23823.
13. A notable exception to all three tendencies was David Parker's 'Europe's 17th Century Crisis – A Marxist Review', *Our History* 56, 1973.
14. Noreen Branson and Bill Moore, eds, 'Labour-Communist Relations parts I-III', *Our History* 82, 83, 84/85, 1990-1991.
15. David Parker makes this point in 'The Communist Party and its Historians, 1946-1989', p47. However, in the 1970s the CPGB did have a journal which discussed these things: *Socialist Europe: Communist Party Journal of Soviet and East European Studies*, so the subject was not taboo.
16. Parker, *ibid*, p36. This also allowed people who had left or been excluded from the CPGB, and those who had joined the breakaway Communist Party of Britain in 1988, to continue their association with the CPHG.
17. See Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group', in Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and Their Causes*, p42.
18. Compare, for example, Reuben Falber's *The 1968 Czechoslovak Crisis: inside the British Communist Party*, SHS Occasional Paper No. 5, 1995, with Gavin Bowd's *Comintern Cadre: The Passion of Allan Eaglesham*, SHS Occasional Paper No. 22, 2006. Falber's account, while revealing and fascinating, is a justification of the CPGB line in 1968. Bowd's pamphlet is a

story of the disillusionment of a communist who went to Moscow for training and became terminally ill through working in Soviet mines.

19. There is no need to list them here – a full list of all titles in the series and links to downloadable files to some of them can be found on www.socialisthistorysociety.co.uk/opmain.htm.
20. See www.socialisthistorysociety.co.uk; www.socialist-history-journal.org.uk; and socialisthistory.wordpress.com