

Introduction

Isaac Deutscher and the Biographer's Dilemma¹

In the third volume of his epic study of Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher turned to the role of the *Prophet Outcast* as historian. Discussing Trotsky's interpretation of the October Revolution, Deutscher is faced with a dilemma concerning the role of "great men" in history. In a letter written to Preobrazhensky in 1928 from his exile in Alma Ata (today Almaty, Kazakhstan), Trotsky reminds a fellow Marxist: "You know better than I do that had Lenin not managed to come to Petrograd in April 1917, the October Revolution would not have taken place."² Confronted with newly available sources in Harvard University's Trotsky Archive, Deutscher concedes that this was only the most forthright statement on the "irreplaceable" role of Lenin during 1917 which can be read, if in a more qualified way, in Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. He then sets out to explain this "startling conclusion" for a Marxist historian in terms of Trotsky's ongoing political fight against Stalin, the "cult of personality" which was being constructed around him by the end of the 1920s and the need to show that Stalinism was a "betrayal" of Leninism and the "true path" of the Bolshevik Revolution.³

Even if few historians today would share Deutscher's approach to Trotsky, and the contemporary context of the Cold War has gone, his dilemma remains that of all working historians. Firstly, there is the need to maintain a critical distance between biographer and biographical subject, avoiding the type over-identification that leads to emphasising the individual in the biographer's spotlight at the expense of other human and structural factors – especially when the personal becomes as politicised as Deutscher's Trotsky. Secondly, like Deutscher sitting with his wife cum research assistant in the Trotsky Archives being given access to previously unseen sources,⁴ historians – notably those working on communism since the collapse of 1989/91 – have had to collect, collate and interpret a vast array of "new" documentation as well as returning to "old" documentation with a fresh methodological eye. Thirdly, although Deutscher did not use the vocabulary of present day historians, he is dealing with the issues surrounding the political uses of history and memory and how Trotsky was faced with the power of the "cult of personality" as a potent means of communicating a political message, both nationally and interna-

1 The author would like to thank Professor Gavin Edwards for reading this introduction and offering valuable comments.

2 Isaac Deutscher: *The Profit Outcast: Trotsky 1929–40*, first edition 1963, London 2003, p. 196.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 196–97, 200.

4 Deutscher discusses this in the preface of *The Prophet Outcast*, see *ibid.*, vi–xii.

tionally.⁵ Finally, and not only for historians engaged in writing traditional biography, the balance between human agency and impersonal social and economic structures keeps shifting, producing methodological debates as the common ground moves.⁶ The historiography never took only one direction, with research in Britain and America tending to maintain a wider interest in biography – usually of a traditional type – than in France and, in particular, Germany. Yet the scholarly climate after 1945 did facilitate the rise to prominence of a social-science model of historical causation, which emphasised political, social and economic structures; even in the newer field of social history, structure, statistics and the “masses” trumped human agency and the individual.⁷

The academic climate in Germany before the 1990s meant that biography endured a fallow period, perhaps most notably in communist studies. One doctoral student even noted how the focus of a dissertation on an individual could have been “academic suicide” as it risked failing to demonstrate the depth of theoretical rigour expected by the examiners.⁸ Since the 1990s, however, this has no longer been the case. Even if new biographical – and prosopographical or collective biographical – studies of the Nazi Party and movement outpace those addressing the political left in quantity and theoretical reflection,⁹ from the

- 5 For an extended review of the reissue of all three volumes of Deutscher’s biography of Trotsky, which discusses how Deutscher’s study influenced the wider memory of Trotsky as the “conscience of the revolution”, see Neal Ascherson: *Victory in Defeat*, in: *London Review of Books* 26:23, 2 December 2004 (online archive). For a valuable introduction to the “cult of leadership”, see Balázs Apor/Jan Behrends/Polly Jones/E. A. Rees (eds.): *The Leadership Cult in Communist Dictatorship: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, Basingstoke 2005.
- 6 For a recent debate on structure and agency in communist history, see Ad Knotter: *Little Moscow’s revisited. What we can learn from French and German cases*, in: *Twentieth Century Communism: a journal of international history* 5 (2013), pp. 175–192; Kevin Morgan: *Bas-tions, black spots and other variations: in and beyond the specificities of the Little Moscow*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 193–209.
- 7 For a valuable summary of these trends and important qualifications, see Alexander Gallus: *Biographik und Zeitgeschichte*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 1–2 (2005), pp. 40–41; Paul Erker: *Zeitgeschichte als Sozialgeschichte: Forschungsstand und Forschungsdefizit*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 19 (1993), pp. 207f.
- 8 Florian Wilde: *Ernst Meyer (1887–1930): Vergessene Führungsfigur des deutschen Kommunismus: Eine politische Biographie*, PhD Hamburg, 2011, p. 19
- 9 The literature here is extensive; for an introduction to it see, for example, Thomas Etzemüller: *Die Form “Biographie” als Modus der Geschichtsschreibung: Überlegungen zum Thema Biographie und Nationalsozialismus*, in: Michael Ruck/Karl Heinrich Pohl (eds.): *Regionen im Nationalsozialismus*, Bielefeld 2003, pp. 71–90. For what is now regarded as a classic prosopographical study, see Michael Wildt: *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*, Hamburg, 2002; for an example of biography at perhaps its most innovative, see Ulrich Herber: *Best. Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft 1903–1989*, Bonn 2001.

1990s the rising tide of cultural history and its renewed concern with human agency and motivation also swept over labour history.¹⁰

The aim of this issue is to present the reader with a number of biographical essays, some of which include reflections on methodological approaches, based around the theme and title *Lives on the Left*. The left is defined to span from communism through left-wing social democracy to anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism, even although the centre of gravity is the communist movement. The left is also largely – although not exclusively – seen in the articles in political terms, with culture and gender relations having less attention than would have been ideal – even if the labour movement fought and looked like a man into the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. Our topic is, of course, vast. But we can at least aspire to give some insights into why human beings made choices leading them in one political direction rather than another. The period covered is from the later nineteenth century until the post-1945 world, but the main area of convergence in the contributions is the period surrounding the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The following introductory discussion will review how newer methodologies informing biographical research have contributed to the historiography as well as considering new directions offered by more culturalist approaches. Last, but not least, it is hoped that by including non-communist lives on the left the focus of communist studies will become sharper as the extent – and perceived limitations – of political choices beyond Soviet Russia and Bolshevism complicates the world of radical anti-capitalists in the short twentieth century.

Writing Biographies from the Russian Periphery to the Soviet Centre

For a significant number of historians of Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany the focus on the dictator at the centre risks reducing the complexity of causation in vast and complex societies to the whims of human agency, however dominant the leading figure was.¹¹ Almost all biographies of Stalin, who is the first of the biographical studies in this issue, remind us that he remains an enigma, even if we now know more about his life and political evolution from Georgia and the Orthodox seminary in Tiflis to the Kremlin

10 For a full discussion of this with particular reference to German Social Democracy, see Jürgen Mittag: *Biographische-Forschung und Arbeiterbewegung: Einleitende Anmerkungen*, in: *Mitteilungsblatt* 45 (2011), pp. 5–20.

11 See, for example, Richard Overy: *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia*, London 2004, p. xxvii; for a wider discussion from this perspective, see also Ian Kershaw: *Personality and Power: The individual's role in the History of Twentieth-Century Europe*, in: *The Historian* 83 (2004), pp. 8–19.

than the Cold War world allowed.¹² The same documentary basis informs a multitude of interpretations, which themselves are often full of caveats when it comes to delineating the motivations for Stalinism in all its brutality.¹³ If it is hard to dispute Stalin's revolutionary beginnings, then – for example – historians debate whether the Soviet dictator was a life-long Marxist thinker or became a pragmatic politician – even a Russian nationalist aspiring to the status of “Red Tsar” – who was only interested in holding power.¹⁴ Yet for biographers as well as specialists in Soviet studies more widely, Stalin's personality, despite its ultimately illusive quality, took on a crucial importance. According to Moshe Lewin, Stalin “actually *became the system* and his personality thus acquired a *systemic dimension*”.¹⁵ It also led to psychohistory approaches to biography of which Robert Tucker's influential *Stalin as Revolutionary* was the most highly regarded. In crude summary, Tucker argued that Bolshevism's extremism offered Stalin a psychological home that dovetailed with the needs of his militant rebel personality.¹⁶ Yet the degree of speculation involved in psychohistory takes us back to Isaac Deutscher's dilemma of how to interpret conflicting documentation.

Psychohistory was, to all intents and purposes, a subgenre in the “great men” (there were very few leading women in Soviet history) make history school of thought, albeit with considerable emphasis on the dark side of the “great man”.¹⁷ One post-Soviet biography even began by noting how Stalin was able to project his persona into the minds of Soviet citizens, stating that: “Every day the largest country in the world wakes up

- 12 Although there is no detailed historiographical overview of the biographies of Stalin, for a useful summary see Alter Litvin/John Keep: *Stalinism: Russian and Western Views at the Turn of the Millennium*, New York 2005, pp. 32 ff.
- 13 For a discussion of this after the availability of new documentation, see Kevin McDermott: *Stalin: Revolutionary in an Era of War*, Basingstoke 2006, p. 2.
- 14 For Stalin's adoption of Leninism in Menshevik-dominated Georgia, see Christopher Read: *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life*, London 2005, pp. 52–59. For a useful summary of these issues, see Hiroaki Kuromiya: *Stalin and His Era*, in: *Historical Journal* 50:3 (2007), p. 717. The metaphor of becoming a “Red Tsar” is famously, if not exclusively, offered in Simon S. Montefiore: *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, London 2003.
- 15 Moshe Lewin: *Stalin in the Mirror of the Other*, in: Ian Kershaw/Moshe Lewin (eds.): *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*, Cambridge 1997, p. 120.
- 16 Robert Tucker: *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929*, New York 1974, pp. 115–121. One biographer aimed to explain Stalin's political motivation by emphasising that Stalin “lived by politics alone” in a manner allowing him to accept the “need” to “liquidate” individuals and entire social groups when he thought it necessary, see Hiroaki Kuromiya: *Stalin and his Era*, p. ix.
- 17 For examples of biographies focusing Stalin's alleged “insanity”, see, for example, Martin Amis: *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*, New York 2002; Edvard Radzinski: *Stalin*, London 1997.

with his name on its lips".¹⁸ Yet from E. H. Carr's biographical sketch in the later 1950s to Robert Service's recent impressively-researched biography, Stalin's ability to exercise "total" dictatorial rule fell short of omnipotence. For Service, it was the limitations of the "machinery of the system of power" constructed by Bolshevism that came between the dictator and the absolute imposition of his political will.¹⁹ For E. H. Carr, Stalin was unlike other "great men" in history in that he "illustrates the thesis that circumstances make the man, not the man the circumstances".²⁰

The issues raised above illustrate the complexity of biographical research, which by its nature sets out to define the role of the individual in history, from the "ordinary" activist to individuals, like Stalin, who changed the course of history. However, the methodological approach which informs the contributions to this issue – admittedly to varying degrees – departs from those sketched above in that they tend to follow what Suny has termed a "culture and context" approach to biography. Suny's extensive research since the 1970s shows how the dictator's formative family, social, cultural and political experiences merged to create the composite which became Stalin in power beyond any de-contextualised attempt to reduce the adult dictator to an incarnation of the traumatised child.²¹ These wider influences included not least the labour movement, in which Stalin rose to local prominence as a political organiser and agitator among the Baku oil workers.²²

The article below details Stalin's formative experiences as a revolutionary in the illegal underground during the later years of Tsarism, and the lengthy periods in prison and in Siberian exile as a consequence of his political activism. Although Stalin was a well-known Leninist in the Menshevik-dominated Georgian labour movement, we are acquainted with a "true believer", but not a puppet; someone who was prepared to dismiss Lenin's feud with Bogdanov in 1909 as a "tempest in a glass of water", preferring practical political work locally to the *émigrés'* often narrow philosophising in a context far removed from their homeland.

It is also notable that Stalin, as a man from the social and ethnic periphery was able, in the context of the collapse of empire and the demise of the authority of the old elites, to dominate the post-revolutionary centre of power. In explaining this "unusual trajectory", Alfred Rieber has shown to what extent Stalin was the product of his background but also proactively used his biographical resources to construct a widely-disseminated self-representation based on the "cultural" (Georgian), the "social" (proletarian) and the

18 Edvard Radzinski, *Stalin*, p. 3.

19 Robert Service: *Stalin: A Biography*, London 2004, pp. 8–9

20 E. H. Carr: *Socialism in One Country 1924–26*, vol. 1, London 1958, pp. 176–177

21 Ronald Suny: *Beyond Psychohistory: The Young Stalin in Georgia*, in: *Slavic Review* 50 (1991), pp. 48–58.

22 Ronald Suny: *A Journeyman for the Revolution: Stalin and the Labour Movement in Baku, June 1907–May 1908*, in: *Soviet Studies* 23:3 (1972), pp. 373–394.

“political” (Russian predominance) to win majority support in the party. This political acumen allowed him to come closer than any of his rivals in the 1920s and ’30s to representing the diversity of interests within the Bolshevik party in power. He appeared to represent the aspirations of the “lower class” rank-and-file and the seemingly conflicting interests of Russophile centralisers and supporters of regional autonomy.²³

Geoffrey Roberts’ discussion of Marshal Zhukov’s autobiography, which is the second of the studies below, also highlights how Stalin and his adjutants belonged to a common political culture, which included not least a belief in the need for brutal means to achieve what they understood to be necessary ends. Drawing on his recent biography of Zhukov, Roberts’ sketches his rise through the ranks of the Red Army from humble pre-revolutionary beginnings.²⁴ However, the main body of the article – explicitly following a similar conceptual framework to Jochen Hellbeck – shows how the autobiographer maintained a pact with the reader which promised to reflect on the actual past while also functioning as an act of *becoming*.²⁵ In the process of writing his memoirs, Zhukov *became* a key military figure and close associate of Stalin during the war, yet someone who retained their independence; he cautioned against folly, but was not always listened to. Roberts also illustrates the elaborate process of Soviet censorship, which moderated Zhukov’s reminiscences of the purges of the Soviet military in the 1930s. Here, too, we see autobiography as an act of *becoming* in which Zhukov, who almost certainly benefited in career terms from the purges, distanced himself from Stalin’s excesses.

Tauno Saarela’s biographical sketch of the Finnish labour activist, Yrjö Mäkelin, highlights how the Tsarist Empire was not only multinational but also that the questions concerning independence were important for the Finnish labour movement.²⁶ Saarela’s article engages with...; yet he joined the Socialist Workers’ Party which worked closely together with the Communist Party of Finland and accepted the Communist International’s 21 Conditions of membership. Saarela finds explanation for this in the localised

23 Alfred J. Rieber: Stalin, Man of the Borderlands, in: *American Historical Review* 106:5 (2001), esp. pp. 1651–55, 1689–91.

24 Geoffrey Roberts: *Stalin’s General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov*, London 2013.

25 Jochen Hellbeck: *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin*, Cambridge, Mass. 2006; for a useful account of the radical constructions of Communists using autobiographies from the Spanish Civil War, see Gina Hermann: *Written in Red: The Communist Memoir in Spain*, Illinois 2010, esp. pp. 1–24.

26 In English valuable accounts of Finland and its relations with Soviet Russia include, Anthony Upton: *The Finish Revolution 1917–18*, Cambridge, Mass. 1988; Risto Alapuro: *State and Revolution in Finland*, Berkley 1988. For a useful introduction to Finland from Empire to independence, see Ronald Suny: *The Soviet Experiment: Russian, the USSR and the Successor States*, Oxford 1998, esp. 110–112; for a review article dealing with Finnish and, more widely, Baltic communism, see Tauno Saarela: *Communism in Scandinavia*, in: *Twentieth Century Communism* 8 (2015 forthcoming).

impact of the experience of civil war in Finland; regional patterns of employment and industrialisation, which informed workers' activism; and the regionalism that punctuated relations between the "northern periphery" and Helsinki. Last, but in Mäkelin's mind not least, he followed the political path already taken by his wife when he sat in prison during the civil war in 1918.

The Communist International and Biographical Studies

Before the opening of the archives in the 1990s, the study of communism and, above all, the Communist International, was strongly influenced by a number of studies produced by former "insiders" who had broken with their political pasts. Although this literature was presented at the time as scholarly, the authors' analysis was strongly stamped by their own experiences of communism and, subsequently, having become cold-war anti-communists as wartime exiles in America. Some of this literature, such as Franz Borkenau's *World Communism* (1938) and Ossip Flechtheim's *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik* were informed by a perceptiveness which made them into enduring classic studies. However, the majority of this canon can now be classified as part of the historiography of cold-war Kremlinology, with a strong emphasis on totalitarianism and the threat from the communist East which differed little if at all from fascism.²⁷ In the case of the former German communist leader, Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism* focussed on her role as anti-Stalinist from the 1920s, while choosing to forget the role of her faction in purging so-called Rightists and Trotskyists from the party in their enthusiasm for Bolshevisation.²⁸

- 27 For a discussion of the key German figures in communist studies, see Mario Kessler: *Wissenschaft und biographische Erfahrung: Franz Borkenau, Richard Löwenthal und Ossip K. Flechtheim – Mitbegründer der westdeutschen Kommunismusforschung*, in: *Jahrbuch Historische Kommunismusforschung* (2013), pp. 169–182. For a positive post-archival assessment of Borkenau's *World Communism*, see Kevin McDermott/Jeremy Agnew: *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, Basingstoke 1996, p. xxii. For an earlier study of the Stalinist "degeneration" of the Comintern and world communist movement by a former German Communist and academic historian, see Arthur Rosenberg: *A History of Bolshevism: From Marx to the First Five Year Plan*, Oxford 1967 (original 1932)
- 28 Ruth Fischer: *Stalin and German Communism: A Study in the Origins of the State Party*, Cambridge 1948. For an interesting contemporary review of her book, see E. H. Carr: *Russian and German Communism*, in: *Soviet Studies* 1 (1950), pp. 347–353. For a case study of Ruth Fischer role in defying Stalin while purging "Trotskyists" from the KPD, see Norman LaPorte: *The KPD in Saxony: Factionalism, Fratricide and Political Failure*, Oxford 2003, pp. 79–131.

There were sufficient numbers of these insider accounts to form a genre during and beyond the Cold War. Notable among these authors internationally were the former Spanish Communist Fernando Claudin's *From Comintern to Cominform* (1965), which again reflected the path from communist to anti-Stalinism.²⁹ A similar political path was trodden by the acclaimed historian of the French Revolution and onetime French Communist (from 1949 until 1956) Francois Furet, who aimed to analyse the seductive power of the idea of communism, which he likened to a "religious faith".³⁰

Archival-based studies after the fall of Soviet communism have shown that the centrality of Stalin in these insider accounts was not wrong. Indeed, summarising the findings of post-Soviet Russian research Kevin McDermott informed his readers that there could no longer be any question of Stalin's increasingly dominant position in the Comintern's policy-making process from 1923/24 onwards.³¹ The centrality of Stalin and Stalinism is also confirmed in biographical studies of leading actors in the Comintern.³² However, what biographical research also does is to remind us of the human motivations for joining the communist movement, not just what went so abhorrently wrong. Summarising the findings of an extensive Comintern project, which collected over a million pages of prosopographical data, Michael Buckmiller informs us that to revolutionaries internationally October 1917 appeared to be the first rays of a new socialist dawn. In its radical break with the past, there would be no return to "Kaiser-socialism" and "reformism", and the revolution was legitimised in terms of its export beyond Russia's borders.³³

The Comintern project at Hannover University and its partners in the Moscow-based Comintern Archives used EKKI cadre files and other personnel files to identify some 20,000 *apparatchiks* in a global organisation whose officials and their *modus operandi* remain relatively unknown. The scale of their archival findings was beyond what could

29 Fernando Claudin: *From Comintern to Cominform*, New York 1975; for a discussion of the books reception, see Thomas Hammond's review in: *Russian Review* 37:2 (1978), pp. 241–42.

30 Francois Furet: *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, London 1999, p. ix–xi. Furet was a party member from 1949 until 1956.

31 Kevin McDermott: *Recent Literature in the Comintern: Problems of Interpretation*, in Narinsky/Rojahn (eds.): *Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents*, Amsterdam 1996, pp. 25–32; see also Tim Rees/Andrew Thorpe (eds.): *International Communism and the Communist International 1919–43*, Manchester 1998; Norman LaPorte/Kevin Morgan/Matthew Worley (eds.): *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization: 1917–53*, Basingstoke 2008.

32 See, for example, Jean-François Fayet: *Karl Radek (1885–1939): Biographie Politique*, Bern 2004; Wolf-Dietrich Gutjahr: "Revolution muss sein": *Karl Radek – Die Biographie*, Cologne 2012. Marrietta Stankova: *Georgi Dimitrov: A Biography*, London 2010.

33 Michael Buckmiller: *Bilanz eines russisch-deutschen Forschungsprojekt*, in: Michael Buckmiller/Klaus Meschkat (eds.): *Biographisches Handbuch zur Geschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Berlin 2007, pp. 19–20.

be reasonably collated by their relatively small team; instead a CD-Rom was issued with the publication in the hope that the prosopographical study of the Comintern would find its historians. What the project did present readers with was a typology of the Comintern's cadres in its early years. The majority were from the Baltic region and Galicia and had experienced their political socialisation in Switzerland or Germany; the technical staff came predominantly from the regions of the former Russian empire and, from the 1930s, "Great Russians" took their place; the "travel cadre" were dominated by individuals from the German speaking areas of central Europe and German speaking minorities in Western Europe.³⁴

Mario Kessler's biographical sketch below of the Polish communist Joseph Berger is almost an exact fit with the Hannover project's "ideal type" Comintern cadre. And, like the accounts by former insiders discussed above, he also wrote *Shipwreck of a Generation* in order to reflect on why communism for its inner core of "true believers" – even those who shared his fate in Stalin's Gulags – was a worldview that was so difficult to break with. This study and others made him a key figure in post-1945 communist studies internationally. Born in Cracow in 1904 to Jewish parent, Berger left for Palestine in 1920 with a youth group; it was a move that led to his conversion to communism.³⁵ Not only did Berger play a prominent role in the foundation of the Palestinian Communist Party and its early development; he also accepted the Comintern's policy of Arabisation and played an important role in the formation of communist parties in the Middle East. The objective, as Radek explained to him, was to put opposition to British colonialism at the centre of the Comintern strategy.³⁶ By 1929 Berger was one of the key figures informing Soviet policy in this part of the world, as symbolised by his five-hour long meeting with Stalin to discuss the Palestinian Question.³⁷

In the mid-1920s, Berger underwent political training in Moscow, probably in the International Lenin School and, in 1931, was assigned to the International Secretariat of Willi Münzenberg's Berlin-based League against Imperialism – one of the few communist "front organisations" to have support among Social Democrats and non-party "fellow travellers", especially intellectuals.³⁸ In July 1932, he was at a meeting attended

34 Michael Buckmiller: Bilanz eines russisch-deutschen Forschungsprojekt, p. 31.

35 A vivid biographical note is given in Joseph Berger: *Shipwreck of a Generation*, London 1971, pp. 7–10.

36 For a discussion of these events, see Johan Franzen: *Communism Versus Zionism: The Comintern, Yishuvism, and the Palestinian Communist Party*, in: *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 36:2 (2007), pp. 7–9.

37 Joseph Berger: *Shipwreck of a Generation*, p. 7.

38 Fredrik Petersson: *We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers: Willi Münzenberg, the League Against Imperialism and the Comintern, 1925–1933*, PhD Åbo Akademi University 2013, pp. 451–2, 468–69, 490.

by Dimitrov and Ernst Thälmann in Berlin at which the implications of the possible collapse of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was discussed.³⁹ After the Nazi “seizure of power” and the destruction of the League’s Berlin headquarters, Berger was placed in charge of the Comintern’s Near-East Department. It was his last senior position: in 1934 he was ousted from the Comintern and the party and, in 1935 charged with being a Trotskyist; until 1951 he was one of many former leading Communists languishing in the Gulags and then, until 1956, in exile in Siberia. As Kessler’s article details, Berger became an Orthodox Jew and, after his release from exile, moved to Israel where he took up an academic career reflecting on the false prophet of Soviet communism.

Biographical Research and the KPD

The seductive idea of communism is also a theme in biographical approaches to the KPD. In the years immediately following the First World War, radicalised workers and intellectuals rejected their own bourgeois society and were attracted to communism by the notion of a world without exploitation, classes and war. Yet, by the end of the 1920s communism and its values had changed: the KPD leadership had become a Stalinist “party of a new type” whose primary task was to loyally defend the Soviet Union.⁴⁰ The process of the KPD’s transformation from its original Luxemburgist roots, which extend back into the pre-war Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and its democratic traditions, into a *Diktatorpartei* dominated by Moscow was presented in compelling detail in Hermann Weber’s *magnum opus* *Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus* (1969).⁴¹ In what was then a highly innovative approach, Weber drew on the methodology of prosopography to anatomise the process of Stalinisation in the party’s leadership corps, giving a strongly human dimension to the structural processes at work. Using oral history interviews and private papers (*Nachlässe*), he identified how Luxemburgism – together with a diversity of other anti-Stalinist tendencies – was uprooted in a series of “purges”, which culminated in the later 1920s and left the party elite in the hands of

39 Ibid., pp. 468 f.

40 Hermann Weber/Andreas Herbst: *Deutsche Kommunisten: Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945*, Berlin 2004, pp. 29–30. For an interesting account of German Communist belief in the imminence of revolution between 1918 and 1921, see Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, Frankfurt/New York 1986, pp. 13 f.

41 Hermann Weber: *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus: Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, 2 vols., Frankfurt a. M. 1969. The 2008 issue of *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* was a special issue marking Hermann Weber’s 80th birthday and includes a wide range of articles engaging with his “Stalinisation” model. Weber’s own contribution to the issue is also in English, see idem: *The Stalinization of the KPD: Old and New Views*, in: LaPorte/Morgan/Worley (eds.): *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization: 1917–53*, pp. 22–44.

Moscow's placemen. After the opening of the archives in 1989, Weber was able to add significantly to the number of biographies provided in the second volume of his study. At present his collaboration with Andreas Herbst has produced over 1,400 biographical sketches of party officials.⁴² Their research details the strength of conviction of the party nucleus: of these 1,400 Communists, 400 met a violent death; 178 of them in the Great Terror that swept Soviet Russia in the mid-1930s; of the 821 surviving beyond 1945, two-thirds (517) remained Communists – 418 in the Socialist Unity Party and 99 in the West German KPD.⁴³

In contrast to the cold-war era's disinclination for biographical research in communist studies, the opening of the archive provided the source-basis for an upsurge of new research. There are now full biographical studies of several party leaders,⁴⁴ as well as a wider number of biographical sketches addressing aspects of key figures' political lives.⁴⁵

42 The original number of biographies was 504 in 1969, see Hermann Weber/Andreas Herbst: *Deutsche Kommunisten: Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945*, p. 8.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

44 Since 1989, the key biographies of KPD leaders are: Jens Becker: *Heinrich Brandler: Eine Politische Biographie*, Hamburg 2001; Eberhard Czichon/Heinz Marohn: *Thälmann: Ein Report*, Berlin 2010; Arnim Fuhrer: *Ernst Thälmann: Soldat des Proletariats*, Munich 2011; Sabine Hering/Kurt Schilde: *Kampfname Ruth Fischer. Wandlung einer deutsche Kommunistin*, Frankfurt a. M. 1995; Ralf Hoffrogge: *Werner Scholem*, PhD Potsdam 2013; Mario Kessler: *Arthur Rosenberg: Ein Historiker in Zeichen der Katastrophen (1889–1943)*, Cologne 2003; Mario Kessler: *Ruth Fischer: Ein Leben mit und gegen Kommunisten*, Cologne 2013; Annelies Laschitzka: *Im Lebensrausch, trotz alledem. Rosa Luxemburg: Eine Biographie*, Berlin 1996; Frederik Petersson: "We are neither Visionaries nor Utopian Dreamers": Willi Münzenberg, the League Against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925–1933, PhD, Abo Akademi University, 2013; Tania Puschnerat: *Clara Zetkin: Bürgerlichkeit und Marxismus*, Essen 2003; Florian Wilde: *Ernst Meyer (1887–1930) – vergessene Führungsfigur des deutschen Kommunismus: Eine politische Biographie*, PhD Hamburg, 2011; Ralf Hoffrogge: *Werner Scholem – eine politische Biographie (1895–1940)*, PhD Potsdam 2013.

45 The numbers are now too large to list. Among the most important of these studies are: Jens Becker: *August Thalheimer: Früher Kritiker der Stalinisierung*, in: Theodor Bergmann/Mario Kessler (eds.): *Ketzer im Kommunismus: 23 Biographische Essays*, Hamburg 2000, pp. 75–100; Jean-Francois Fayet: *Paul Levi and the Turning Point of 1921: Bolshevik Emissaries and International Discipline in the Time of Lenin*, in: LaPorte/Morgan/Worley (eds.): *Perspectives Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization: 1917–53*, pp. 105–123; Jack Jacobs: *Rosa Luxemburg: Den eigenen Weg gehen und die Leute reden lassen*, in: Theodor Bergmann/Mario Kessler (eds.): *Ketzer im Kommunismus*, pp. 22–35; Tania Ünlüdag-Puschnerat: *A German Communist: Clara Zetkin (1857–1933)*, in: Kevin Morgan/Gidon Cohen/Andrew Flinn (eds.): *Agents of Revolution: New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford, 2005, pp. 93–110; Gerd Schäfer: *Arthur Rosenberg: Verfechter revolutionärer Real-*

In often extensively researched and nuanced studies, the authors engage with the debates on the KPD's Stalinisation, its agents and opponents, as well as what made certain individuals receptive to Bolshevism. This ongoing engagement with the research agenda set out by Hermann Weber in the late 1960s has reaffirmed that "Made-in-Mannheim" (his University) remains the hallmark of communist studies half a century later.

The first debate which included a significant biographical dimension concerned the extent to which we can usefully speak of an early democratic communism, which Weber termed Luxemburgism. Initially the focus of new archival-based studies was on the KPD's own (that is inherently German) undemocratic practices in these years (1919–21), in particular Paul Levi's purge of the ultra-radical groupings at the Heidelberg Congress of October 1919 to moderate the party's policies in order to bring about a merger with the mass-based Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD).⁴⁶ However, an explicitly biographical approach to the role of Ernst Meyer as party chairman in 1921/22 has qualified our understanding of this period. Florian Wilde's study of Meyer, a former member of the Luxemburgist *Spartakusbund*, details how under his *de facto* leadership in 1921/22 a far-reaching attempt was made to integrate the KPD's feuding wings by ensuring open debate and freedom of opinion. The party's rival tendencies were even able to publish articles in the communist press challenging official policy.⁴⁷ There were, however, limits to this early "internal-party democracy", as Fayet's biographical approach to the KPD's relationship with the Comintern in 1920/21 shows. Paul Levi, the newly

politik, in: Theodor Bergmann/Mario Kessler (eds.): *Ketzer im Kommunismus*, pp. 101–122; Annelie Schlalm: Ruth Fischer – eine Frau im Umbruch des internationalen Kommunismus, in: Michael Buckmiller/Klaus Meschkat (eds.): *Biographisches Handbuch zur Geschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale: Eine deutsch-russisches Forschungsprojekt*, Berlin 2007, pp. 129–147; Jörn Schüttrumpf: Paul Levi unter den "Doppelzünglern", in: *Utopie kreativ* 209 (2008), pp. 222–333.

46 The undemocratic nature of the early KPD was common to both Andreas Wirsching and Klaus-Michael Mallmann, despite their other differences, see Andreas Wirsching: "Stalinisierung" oder entideologisierte "Nischengesellschaft"?: Alte Einsichten und neue Thesen zum Charakter der KPD in der Weimarer Republik, in: *Vierteljahresheft für Zeitgeschichte* 45 (1997), pp. 449–466; Klaus-Michael Mallmann: Gehorsame Parteisoldaten oder eigensinnige Akteure?: Weimarer Kommunisten in der Kontroverse – Eine Erwiderung, in: *Vierteljahresheft für Zeitgeschichte* 47 (1999), pp. 401–415. For a case refuting Levi's authoritarianism as a model for the development of the KPD, see Marcel Bois/Florian Wilde: Model für den künftigen Umgang mit innerparteilicher Diskussion?: Der Heidelberger Parteitag der KPD 1919, in: *Jahrbuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* (2007), pp. 33–46.

47 Florian Wilde: Diskussionsfreiheit ist innerhalb unserer Partei absolut notwendig: Das Verhältnis des KPD-Vorsitzenden Ernst Meyer zur innerparteilichen Demokratie 1921/22, in: *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* (2006), pp. 168–184.

elected chairman of the KPD following its merger with the USPD at the end of 1920, was himself purged from the party for what amounted to challenging Moscow's authority during and after the ill-fated putsch of 1921, the so-called March Action.⁴⁸

Yet, if we are to see Stalinisation as a process, then it seems clear that compared to the period after the mid-1920s this was a period of *relative* internal-party democracy, which facilitated the expression of opposing views, however much other party leaders – as the discussion of Ernst Thälmann below illustrates – wanted to resolve debates by recourse to expulsions. Other recent political biographies confirm Weber's transformation (*Wandlung*) thesis while also providing the nuances that access to "new" documentation in Berlin and Moscow has facilitated. Studies of Ruth Fischer and Werner Scholem, who had both joined the KPD in 1920 from the USPD and took the leadership after the impact of the 'abortive October' of 1923, detail how the leadership of the party's (ultra-) left depended both on Soviet patronage and mass support among the KPD membership in Germany. The party's Political Secretariat in 1924/25, which comprised Fischer, Arkadi Maslow and Werner Scholem, and their supporters in the leadership enthusiastically Bolshevised the party, installing Moscow's model of strict organisational centralisation and "iron discipline". The opportunity was seized to purge the party's so-called Rightists around Heinrich Brandler who became scapegoats for the "failed October" of 1923. For these policies, and treating the SPD as the "main enemy", the Fischer leadership won the support of the overwhelming support of party members. However, the Comintern's intervention on 1 September 1925 ended the Fischer leadership's ability to act independently of Moscow and represented the victory of Stalin over Zinoviev – Ruth Fischer's supporter – in the Soviet politburo. In Germany, the ultra-loyal Thälmann faction was now installed to pursue the policies approved by Moscow – including the replacement of intellectual leaders by those with strong proletarian credentials.⁴⁹

If Klaus-Michael Mallmann's controversial claim that "it did not take Stalin to Stalinise the KPD" is somewhat hyperbolic,⁵⁰ then the socio-cultural context shaping the affinities between German and Soviet communism do require attention. A more culturalist approach to this question is adopted by Tania Ünlüdag-Puschnerat in her biography of Clara Zetkin. She argues that Zetkin's upbringing in Wilhelmine Germany in a middle class, Lutheran family combined with her understanding of education in a

48 Jean-Francois Fayet: Paul Levi and the Turning Point of 1921: Bolshevik Emissaries and International Discipline in the Time of Lenin, in LaPorte/Morgan/Worley (eds.): Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization: 1917–53, pp. 105–23.

49 Ralf Hoffrogge: Werner Scholem – eine politische Biographie (1895–1940) (I am grateful to the author for discussing the findings of his unpublished thesis with me); Mario Kessler: Ruth Fischer: Ein Leben mit und gegen Kommunisten, esp. pp. 196 ff., 245 ff.

50 Klaus-Michael Mallmann: Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik: Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung, Darmstadt 1996, p. 54.

manner disposing her to authoritarian, hierarchical party structures. She was, initially, a party soldier in the SPD, before transferring her loyalties to the communist movement. Disappointed with the masses' enthusiasm for war in 1914, she identified with the role of the Leninist vanguard party as a corrective to this. Rather than being the champion of a manifesto of democratic communism in the face of a triumphant Stalin at the end of the 1920s, she had been an architect of building the party structures than now allowed Stalin's dominance, despite her personal antipathy towards him and hostility towards the Third Period policies forced on the Comintern and its national sections.⁵¹

An attempt to locate Ernst Thälmann in his social-cultural milieu is also what informs Norman LaPorte's contribution to this issue. Thälmann's political socialisation in the pre-war workers' movement was in the highly specific milieu of the Hamburg docks. It was this local experience, compounded by war, revolution and localised civil war, which informed his version of communist politics. Thälmann's early attraction to Moscow went with an already existing predisposition towards achieving political objectives by using military-style discipline and resolving political differences by purging opponents. In effect, he was a proto-Stalinist who knew how to use his proletarian credential to gain influence and rise up through the KPD hierarchy from the local to the national and international levels – as he had already begun to do in the pre-war workers' movement.

Between the Fronts (I): Communists and the Trade Unions

Reiner Tosstorff's biographical essay on Robert Dißmann's rise on the pre-war left of the SPD and the German Metal Workers' Union (DMV) illustrates the complexity of human choices motivating a wide variety of radicalisms from the beginnings of the twentieth century into the early years of the Weimar Republic.⁵² In the SPD and his trade union, Dißmann rose from being a local-level official to regional prominence by the outbreak of the First World War. He positioned himself on the left of the party and had worked together with Rosa Luxemburg and Paul Levi. Dißmann's role in the anti-war opposition and hostility toward the SPD's policy of civil peace informed his decision to join the USPD at its foundation in 1917; but, unlike Luxemburg and Levi, he did not

51 For a summary in English, see Tania Ünlüdag-Puschnerat: *A German Communist: Clara Zetkin (1857–1933)*, in: Kevin Morgan/Gidon Cohen/Andrew Flinn (eds.): *Agents of Revolution: New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Bern 2005, pp. 93–110; idem: *Clara Zetkin: Bürgerlichkeit und Marxismus: Eine Biographie*, Essen 2003, esp. 279 ff., 359 ff.

52 The wide range of regional differences in the "council movement" during the German Revolution comes out in the classic studies of the period; see, for example, Eberhard Kolb: *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918–1919*, Berlin 1978.

gravitate towards the nascent communist movement. Instead, he chose a political life between the KPD and Majority-SPD (*Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*), not only in the USPD – where he remained until its fusion with the MSPD in 1922 – but, as Tosstorff stresses, in the DMV where he became its chairman and dominant figure in the autumn of 1919.⁵³ However, if the union – unlike the SPD and USPD – never split into rival organisations, there were directional struggles within it and Dißmann and Richard Müller were the foremost personalities.⁵⁴ While Dißmann’s subsequently remained open to united front actions with the communist movement in the first half of the 1920s, he rejected it ideologically and opposed the foundation of Red International of Labour Unions (or Profintern) as an affiliate of the Comintern.⁵⁵ By contrast, Richard Müller engaged with Moscow and the founding of the Profintern in early 1921, marking a departure from his more mainstream politics in the union before 1914. Radicalised by the war, he rose to become a leader of the strikes in Berlin – and, subsequently, nationally – which were organised by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and their expanding network of factory-based contacts.⁵⁶ During the German Revolution, he was elected chairman of the Executive Committee of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council and, although defeated at the first congress of the council in December 1918, remained a resolute proponent of the council system and opponent of the “bourgeois parliamentary democracy” the congress had endorsed. For Müller, the councils were not only organisations of struggle under capitalism but were vehicles for the transition to socialism.⁵⁷

In the DMV, the directional feud ended in Müller’s defeat by Dißmann and removal from the editorial board of the union’s press in June 1920.⁵⁸ After joining the *Vereinigte Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (VKPD) at the end of 1920, a move he made together with several other radical trade unionists, he found the industrial and union strategy he supported side-lined.⁵⁹ In the course of 1921/22, the impact of the party’s *putsch* – the so-called March Action – led to the communist movement losing most

53 See also Reiner Tosstorff: In-Between Majority SPD and KPD: the USPD and the Metal Workers’ Union Leader Robert Dißmann’, unpublished paper, Historical Materialism conference 2012.

54 Ralf Hoffrogge: Richard Müller: Der Mann hinter der Novemberrevolution, Berlin 2008.

55 Rainer Tosstorff: Profintern: die Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale, 1920–1937, Lübeck 2004, pp. 216f.

56 Ralf Hoffrogge: Richard Müller: Der Mann hinter der Novemberrevolution, pp. 21f., 30.

57 Hoffrogge: Richard Müller, pp. 130–31.

58 Ibid., pp. 137.

59 For biographical sketches of Ernst Däumig, Adolf Hoffmann and Otto Brass, see Hermann Weber/Andreas Herbst: Deutsche Kommunisten: Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945, pp. 120–21 (Brass), 140–41 (Däumig), 322–23 (Hoffmann).

of the skilled trade union official who had only recently opted to join the party.⁶⁰ For Müller, unlike most of the other leading trade union Communists, leaving the party also involved a decision to leave party politics.⁶¹ To generalise somewhat, the political choices made by these union officials personifies German communism's lack of attraction to skilled workers during the Weimar Republic. While the SPD dominated the trade unionism of skilled, employed workers the KPD became a vehicle for articulating the often spontaneous protests of the rising numbers of unemployed and unskilled workers who were thrown out of the factories and onto the streets from the mid-1920s in the process of economic modernisation – or rationalisation – which had been championed by leading Social Democrats.⁶² Case studies of communist electoral support and the party's presence in the factories have shown that the party increasingly found support among unskilled workers to an extent giving a sociological basis to the political division in the workers' movement.⁶³ If there are any differences in the political careers of Dißmann and Müller which help us to explain these choices, then it is perhaps the former's earlier and deeper integration into the pre-war SPD which ultimately cemented his continued position on its left-wing.⁶⁴

- 60 On the impact of the March Action on these trade union leaders, see Lore Heer-Kleinert: *Die Gewerkschaftspolitik der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt a. M. 1983; Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, pp. 322 ff.
- 61 For an overview of communist weakness in the trade unions and some local exceptions, see Heinrich Potthoff: *Gewerkschaften und Politik zwischen Revolution und Inflation*, Düsseldorf 1979, pp. 368–371.
- 62 On the role of SPD prominent leaders and “rationalisation”, see Kevin Morgan/Norman LaPorte: *Learning from the Future?: Begegnungen deutscher und britischer Gewerkschafter mit Amerika in den Zwanzigerjahren*, in: *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* (2012), pp. 129–144.
- 63 For a case study of the communist vote in Halle and the correlation with unskilled and unemployed workers, see Eric Weitz: *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990: From Popular Protest to Socialist State*, Princeton 1997, pp. 246–249; The pioneering studies on the KPD and rationalisation are, Uta Stolle: *Arbeiterpolitik im Betreib*, Cologne 1980; Eva Schöck: *Arbeitslosigkeit und Rationalisierung*, Frankfurt a. M. 1977, Lore Heer-Kleinert: *Die Gewerkschaftspolitik der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt a. M. 1983.
- 64 We do, however, have an ideal type of SPD ministers at the national and regional level during the Weimar Republic, which stresses lengthy integration into the parliamentary party before 1914, see Wilhelm Heinz Schröder: *Genosse Herr Minister: Sozialdemokraten in den Reichs- und Länderregierungen der Weimarer Republik 1918/19–1933*, in: *Historical Social Research* 26:4 (2001), p. 79.

Between the Fronts (II): Communists and Syndicalist, Anarchosyndicalists, Industrialists and Unionists

The biographies of Dißmann and Müller illustrate communism's lack of attraction for skilled trade-union officials in Germany. Yet, this was only one fracture – if the most important one – in the German labour movement in the immediate post war period. In the course of the war a number of revolutionary groupings with roots of varying depths in the pre-war workers' movement formed what has been called a “left communist” or syndicalist tendency.⁶⁵ After joining the KPD(S) at the turn of 1918/19, tensions between the Spartacus-dominated leadership and the syndicalist dominated membership soon came to a head and resulted in a purge of those rejecting parliamentarianism and the traditional trade unions.⁶⁶ After exiting the official (that is Moscow sanctioned) communist movement, a process of differentiation soon saw these groupings fragment into Industrialists, Unionists and Syndicalists – and subsequently Anarchosyndicalists.⁶⁷ While the first two of these tendencies initially held out hopes that their negotiations with the Comintern and its moves to set up the Red International of Labour Unions (RILA, or Profintern) would be fruitful, the latter retained its commitment to ‘revolution from below’ in opposition to the dominant role of the party and the repression of non-communist revolutionaries in Russia.⁶⁸

In their contribution to the history of the German syndicalist organisation, the Free Workers Union of Germany (FAUD) in this issue, Dieter Nelles and Hartmut Rübner combine biographical insights and prosopography. One of their central arguments is that, at moments of decisive change, individual personalities can influence the alignment of social movements. In general, they draw on Max Weber's typology of “charismatic leadership” to show how a “militant minority” could have influence beyond their immediate ranks. More specifically, a seminal role is attributed to Rudolf Rocker, who played a leading role in the FAUD's rejection of Bolshevism at its founding congress in December 1919.⁶⁹ Rocker – a bookbinder and impressive autodidact – had joined the SPD in

65 The classic study remains Hans-Manfred Bock: *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus von 1918 bis 1923: Ein Beitrag zur Sozial- und Ideengeschichte der frühen Weimarer Republik*, Darmstadt 1967; for a valuable discussion of these “left communist” groupings, see also Riccardo Bavaj: *Von Links gegen Weimar: Links antiparlamentarisches denken in der Weimarer Republik*, Bonn 2005, pp. 135–182.

66 On the composition of the KPD at its foundation, see Hermann Weber: *Der Gründungsparteitag der KPD: Protokoll und Materialien*, Frankfurt a. M. 1969.

67 Reiner Tosstorff: *The Syndicalist Encounter with Bolshevism*, in: *Anarchist Studies* 17:2 (2009), p. 12.

68 Rainer Tosstorff: *Profintern: die Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale, 1920–1937*, pp. 220 ff.

69 For a similar biographical approach to the role of Anton Pannekoek in Bremen, *Left Radicals and then the Unionists*, see John Gerber: *From Left Radicalism to Council Communism:*

1890, but soon sided with Anarchism against the party's bureaucracy and centralism; in his political development an enduring influence was his study of Kropotkin. After being forced into exile in Paris and London because of his political activities, Rocker returned to Berlin during the November Revolution and put his stamp on the grouping that crystallised into the FAUD. By 1920, when it was possible for foreign delegations to visit Soviet Russia, his hostility towards Moscow was reinforced by the Bolsheviks' persecution of Anarchists as alleged "counter-revolutionaries", which increased after the Kronstadt Rising of early 1921.⁷⁰ Rather than joining the RILU with a wide range of Syndicalists internationally, the FAUD together with the Swedish Syndicalists formed an alternative international, the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) at a congress in Berlin in December 1922.⁷¹ With the end of the radicalism of the immediate post-war years, however, those remaining outside the communist movement found themselves on the fringes of the revolutionary movement internationally.⁷²

The prosopographical approach in Nelles and Rübner's contribution identifies four generations of German Syndicalists, from the pioneer generation born in the middle of the nineteenth century to the immediate post-1945 world. The social basis of these activists was among skilled workers, with regional strongholds – notably in the Rhine-Ruhr area; they were also autodidacts within a political culture which valued literature. Although only a mass movement in the period 1918/20, they did – however fleetingly – represent an alternative to Bolshevism on the revolutionary left.

If we step across the border from Germany to France,⁷³ a very different political culture informed the development of the twentieth-century left – even if communism

Anton Pannekoek and German Revolutionary Marxism, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 23:2 (1988), pp. 182–186.

70 For an interesting biographical overview, see Margaret Vallance: Rudolf Rocker – a biographical sketch: in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 8:3 (1973), pp. 75–95; see also Paul Avrich (ed.): *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, Cornell 1973.

71 The most detailed study remains, Wayne Thorpe: *The Workers Themselves: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923*, Dordrecht 1989; see also Marcel van der Linden/Wayne Thorpe (eds.): *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective*, Aldershot 1990.

72 Eric Hobsbawm: *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, London 1994, p. 74; this is central to the argument of a recent comparative study of syndicalism, see Ralf Darlington: *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis*, Aldershot 2008.

73 For a valuable introduction to more recent literature on transnational approaches to Anarchism and Syndicalism, see Constance Bantman/David Berry: *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism: The Individual, the National and the Transnational*, in: idem (eds.): *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism*, Newcastle 2010, pp. 1–15.

proved a seductive ideology to many on the French left too.⁷⁴ Andreas Wirsching's comparative study of communism in France and Germany has shown that, if the process of Bolshevisation and Stalinisation was almost identical, then its "extent" differed. In France the depth of the syndicalist current within the General Confederation of Trade Unions (UGCT) and the commitment of French Communists within its individual trade unions ensured a lasting commitment to prioritising trade-union autonomy. The sociological basis of the French Communist Party (PCF) – unlike in Germany – among skilled workers ensured that the syndicalist heritage could not be removed.⁷⁵

Politically too, France produced specific traditions, which drew on Anarchism as a seminal influence on the later Syndicalist – and Anarchosyndicalist – movement.⁷⁶ From 1789 until 1917, it was France that was the country of revolution in repeated upheavals. And it was the French Red Flag, which was used first in the 1790s and again during the Paris Commune of 1871, that became the symbol of proletarian internationalism as opposed to the Tricolour's middle-class, Republican associations.⁷⁷ Yet, if Marx defined France's revolution in terms of modes of production and class struggle from the bourgeois 1789 to the proletarian 1871 and understood history in linear terms, Anarchism had a greater sense of human agency and belief in the possibilities of political action.⁷⁸

Sharif Gemie's biographical sketch of Octave Mirbeau's political journey from the populist right to the libertarian left can serve as a reminder that the historian should

- 74 For the variety of Anarchist responses in France to the Bolshevik Revolution, see David Berry: *A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917–1945*, London 2002, pp. 22–72. For a seminal study of the receptivity of the French left to Bolshevism at the same time as taking roots in the French left's conception of the nation, see David Caute: *Communism and the French Intellectuals 1914–1960*, London 1964, pp. 11–19 and passim; Tony Judt: *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–56*, Oxford 1992, pp. 1–12 and passim.
- 75 Andreas Wirsching: *The Impact of "Bolshevization" and "Stalinization" on French and German Communism: A Comparative View*, in LaPorte/Morgan/Worley (eds.): *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization*, pp. 89–104; see also, Thomas Beaumont: *Communists and French railway workers: the Parisian leadership of the Cheminots Unitaires*, in: *Twentieth Century Communism* 5 (2012), pp. 65–84.
- 76 The extent of anarchist influence on revolutionary syndicalism varied nationally, see Ralf Darlington: *Syndicalism and the influence of anarchism in France, Italy and Spain*, in: *Anarchist Studies* 17 (2009), pp. 29–30.
- 77 Pamela Pilbeam: *Chasing Rainbows: the Nineteenth-Century Revolutionary Legacy*, in: Moira Donald/Tim Rees: *Reinterpreting Revolution in Twentieth-Century Europe*, New York 2001, pp. 19–21, 24; see also: Tony Judt: *Marxism and the French Left: Studies on Labour and Politics in France 1830–1981*, Oxford 1986, pp. 24–114.
- 78 For a detailed discussion of the differences between French Anarchism and Marxism, see Sharif Gemie: *Counter-Community: An Aspect of Anarchist Political Culture*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 29:2 (1994), pp. 349–351.

not have the language and terms of revolution defined by one set of revolutionaries against another. Mirbeau, a writer and journalist, did not conceptualise politics in Marxist terms: born into a middle-class family, he defined being bourgeois not in terms of class but morality – an attitude. Similarly, his conversion to the libertarian left was not the result of integration within or the study of the labour movement, but the cultural influence of the Impressionist movement in art.

Many of the attributes David Berry describes in his portrait of Daniel Guérin (1904–88) also appear specifically French when compared to the other biographies discussed in this issue. Following his highly eclectic reading on a journey by sea to Vietnam in 1930, Guérin's political philosophy crystallised around some enduring values, notably a syndicalist-style commitment to the autonomy of working-class organisations; anti-parliamentarism; and – informed by personal experience – hostility towards nationalism and war and a rejection of colonialism and imperialism. Yet, this did not cement lasting membership of any political organisation of the left. As Berry describes, Guérin was an individual who could meet Trotsky in exile and join the Fourth International, yet feel no compulsion to abandon his own libertarian views in favour of Trotsky's variant of Leninism. Unlike any of the communist figures we have discussed, Guérin was also a campaigner for issues of sexuality. In the 1960s he became a pioneer of the gay liberation movement. Guérin also opposed consumerism and was a proponent of the quasi-Maoist belief in experiencing the life of the workers at first hand – a move he first made in 1930 when he renounced the privileges of his *grande bourgeois* family, if not the liberal humanism which (perhaps unknowingly) he also inherited from them.

The Strange Case of an Island Nation? Biographies of the British Left

In the first contribution addressing the uses of biographical research on the British labour movement, Kevin Morgan illuminates a theme in common with German scholarship: the lack of biographies of interwar trade union leaders.⁷⁹ Morgan's explanation for this omission details how labour history has been conceptualised by contemporaries and later academics, as well as in archivists' filing systems, as "institutional history". According to this way of seeing the labour movement, a trade-union career was dismissed as a little more than stepping stone to a political career. By contrast, Morgan argues for a biographically-informed methodology which permits reflection on human agency as well as acting as a lens through which to view the wider political culture of the labour movement – and not least including trade unionism as a crucial component.

79 Jürgen Mittag: Biographische-Forschung und Arbeiterbewegung: Einleitende Anmerkungen, in: *Mitteilungsblatt* 45 (2011), pp. 11–12.

The article presented here is the tip of an academic iceberg, which has grown over the past quarter-century from an early biographical exploration of Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) leader Harry Pollitt into a wide-ranging examination of the relationship between the British left and Bolshevism using a diversity of biographical and prosopographical methodologies.⁸⁰ Like Reiner Tosstorff's study of Robert Dißmann above, Morgan's study of A. A. Purcell has identified a forgotten figure and, more importantly, a lost world in which it was possible to inhabit a political milieu between Bolshevism and social democracy – at least until the later 1920s. It was a peculiarly British story. Purcell was a pre-war syndicalist and organiser in the Furniture Trades union who rose to be a protagonist in the post-war Trade Union Council left, which culminated in his position as chair of the central strike organising committee during the general strike of 1926. In 1920 he had been elected as the MP for the Forrest of Dean, yet was also an honorary member of the Moscow Soviet and had moved the amendment facilitating the foundation of the CPGB. As chairman of the reformist IFTU for a period of three years, Purcell had opened his arms to the overtures of the Profintern, alarming the German Social Democrats, and been a key figure in international delegations of trade unionists visiting Soviet Russia.⁸¹

As the lead researcher in a project based at the University of Manchester, Morgan has also used prosopography in order to challenge the more orthodox view that British political culture facilitated the formation of a monolithic communist party which became morally as well as politically tarnished by its lack of criticism of Soviet tyranny.⁸² The monograph *Communists and British Society* set out to counter the view that communism was a “complete social identity” (Samuel) in which “devotees” were motivated by a form of “political religion” (Linehan).⁸³ While conceding that there were “total party people”

80 Kevin Morgan: Harry Pollitt, Manchester 1994.

81 Kevin Morgan: Bolshevism, Syndicalism and the General Strike: The Lost Internationalist World of A. A. Purcell, London 2013, esp. pp. 10–22.

82 This debate is at the centre of the historiography of the CPGB in similar manner to the KPD and is directly addressed in a review of more recent literature in John Newsinger: Recent Controversies in the History of British Communism, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 41:3 (2006), pp. 557–572; see also John Callaghan: National and International Dimension of British Communist History, in: *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24:3 (2008), pp. 456–472; for an introduction in German to the historiography of the CPGB, see Matthew Worley: Aus dem Schatten: Ein Überblick über die aktuelle Forschung zur Kommunistischen Partei Großbritanniens, in: *Jahrbuch Historische Kommunismusforschung* (2009), pp. 349–358.

83 Raphael Samuel: *The Lost World of British Communism*, London 2006; Thomas Linehan: *Communism in Britain 1920–1939: From the Cradle to the Grave*, Manchester 2007, pp. 1–2, 102–103 and passim.

in the CPGB – notably William Rust and Rajani Palme Dutt⁸⁴ – the project broke down the dichotomy between the “inner core” of “real” communists and “ordinary” (often transient) members in order to analyse the party’s interaction with British society. In place of a complete social identity of exclusive loyalties, a prosopographical approach identified competing forms of identity from ethnicity and the experience of migration to, above all, competing occupational and trade-union identities. The difference with other national variants of communism was striking, as the authors’ accepted.⁸⁵

This approach to the history of the CPGB was able to identify specifically British factors accounting for the CPGB’s inability – or limited ability – to construct a closed world. These included not only the party’s diminutive size, but also in the political culture of the domestic labour movement. Relatively few British Communists – especially if compared to the KPD – understood their political choice in terms of a rebirth and disavowal of their political past; instead, oral history interviews as well as cadre files and autobiographies, brought out a continuity narrative. Indeed, no less prominent a figure than Harry Pollitt understood his own role as a communist leader in terms of the further development of his political life in the pre-war socialist movement.⁸⁶ For British communism at least, the “totalitarian conception” was “inadequate” and in its place stood a “relatively high level of interaction with a variety of radical and labour movement milieu”.⁸⁷ The ability of the “ecumenical” British labour movement to accommodate pro-Soviet opinion also informed Morgan’s study of a diversity of figures in the Labourite-dominated British left.⁸⁸ It was not only radical trade unionists like Purcell who identified with the Bolsheviks; but also intellectual socialists of whom Sydney and Beatrice Webb were perhaps best known.

It was the fluidity of British political culture which also gave shape to the political life of the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970). John Callaghan’s biographical portrait covers the entire span of Russell’s career, from his birth into the Whig aristocracy to his liaison with the post-1956 New Left. Russell began his political evolution as a Liberal, shifting his affiliation to the Labour Party after the First World War. Like Purcell and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) delegations, Russell also visited Soviet Russia and, in

84 Kevin Morgan: *Parts of the People and Communist Lives*, in: John McIlroy/Kevin Morgan/Alan Campbell (eds.): *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in Biography*, London 2001, p. 17.

85 Kevin Morgan: *The same mould or different moulds? Reflections on a prosopography of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, in: Bruno Groppo/Berthold Unfried (eds.): *Geschichte in der Menge: Kollektivbiographische Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung: ITH-Tagungsberichte 40*, Vienna 2006, pp. 59–79.

86 Kevin Morgan: *Communists and British Society 1920–1991*, London 2007, pp. 49–55.

87 *Ibid.*, pp. 272–73.

88 For a succinct discussion of this, see Morgan: *Prosopography*, pp. 76–77.

1920, met Lenin and Trotsky. His politics, however, made him critical of Bolshevism's party dictatorship and the belief in change brought about by force.⁸⁹ After the Second World War (which he spent in America) Russell modified his anti-communism, identifying the United States and the form of industrial capitalism it embodied as the source of international tensions. He was a founding member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), a leading light in the radical Committee of 100 and was active in the anti-Vietnam movement in Britain. If Purcell can be seen as a symbol of the anti-Americanism in the pre-war British left, then Russell can be seen as one of his post-1945 successors.

Why then were there such differences between the British and German responses to Bolshevism and the formation of communist parties. A biographically informed approach to this question – which the present author has been involved in – has used differing styles of leadership to reflect on the character of the different parties. In Germany, Ernst Thälmann was projected in the party's propaganda as a Red Front Fighter, who would smash all of the party's enemies – from the priests in the Catholic Centre Party, through the SPD *Bonzen* to the brown-shirts of the Nazi Party. Harry Pollitt, by contrast, traded on the political capital he had amassed as a skilled boilermaker who was active in his trade union.⁹⁰

Ian Kershaw, who is better known for his studies of Nazism, has also used a comparative approach to explain what produced such different responses to political extremism throughout interwar Europe. His findings, in summary, looked to how the experience of war impacted on existing political cultures. In Britain post-war political stability (at least outside of Ireland and Empire) and continuity under a liberal democratic system of governance, which was now extended to wider sections of society, proved to be arid soil for the growth of communism. In Germany, by contrast, the collapse of the *Kaiserreich* and ensuing sense of national humiliation combined with an inability to integrate diverse economic and cultural needs and desires proved to be a seedbed for extremism. These tensions led, ultimately, to a systemic crisis of legitimacy and high level of political violence in which communism thrived.⁹¹ If there has been a theme running through

89 For an interesting early account of eyewitness publications by visitors to Soviet Russia which includes Russell's book, see Dimitri von Mohrenschildt: *American Observers of the Russian Revolution*, in: *Russian Review* 3 (1943), pp. 64–74.

90 Norman LaPorte/Kevin Morgan: *Der Rote Frontkämpfer und der militante Gewerkschafter*, in: *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* (2008) pp. 68–79.

91 Ian Kershaw: *War and Political Violence in Twentieth Century Europe*, in: *Contemporary British History* 14 (2005), pp. 107–123; see also Norman LaPorte/Matthew Worley: *Towards a Comparative History of Communism: The British and German Communist Parties to 1933*, in: *Contemporary British History* 22:2 (2008), pp. 227–55. For a wider discussion of these

these diverse lives on the left, then it is the formative influence on individuals and their political choices of these structural conditions.

Beyond Biography: Deutscher's Dilemma (Reprise)

Isaac Deutscher's biography was an enduring classic of its kind, which – as we discussed above – used the power of language and argument to influence his readers. His three-volume study even contributed to the underpinning of the belief among generations of anti-Stalinists on the left that Trotsky embodied the “true path” of the October Revolution. Political biography and rediscovering forgotten figures from the communist movement and their anti-Stalinism – however qualified – remains with us, as the subtitles of recent studies of KPD leaders illustrates.⁹² However, one of the most influential studies of Hitler points towards a potential new direction in biographical research in communist studies. Reviewing Ian Kershaw's monumental two-volume biography of Hitler, Richard Evans noted that the author had gone beyond biography, producing a history of Hitler which integrated structure and agency and showed how society and politics acted as much on Hitler as he did on it.⁹³ Yet it was not access to new documentation in previously close Eastern Bloc archives that enabled Kershaw's new insights; it was, rather, his innovative methodological approach.⁹⁴ Theoretically, at least, it is accepted that historians can no longer separate out the individual from the structures framing their political lives.⁹⁵ Yet, perhaps we still know too little about how these structures produced specific communisms and party cultures as products of national, regional and local conditions?

For this reason, it seems worthwhile ending this introduction with a call to further research using comparative biographical methodologies and viewing the Comintern and its national sections as a transnational organisation.⁹⁶ Until the end of the Cold War, the conceptual framework for comparative approaches was the social-science model of totalitarianism, which identified a check-list of common features facilitating the domination

issues see Norman LaPorte: Introduction: local communisms within a global movement, in: *Twentieth Century Communism* 5 (2013), pp. 7–20.

92 See references 43 and 44 above.

93 Richard J. Evans: Review Article: New Perspectives on Hitler, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 37:1 (2002), pp. 145–152.

94 Richard J. Evans: Review Article: New Perspectives on Hitler, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 37:1 (2002), pp. 145–152.

95 See, for example, Thomas Etzemüller: Die Form “Biographie” als Modus der Geschichtsschreibung: Überlegungen zum Thema Biographie und Nationalsozialismus, pp. 73.

96 For a collection of essays applying transnationalism to the study of Anarchism, see Constance Bantman/David Berry: *New Perspective on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism: The Individual, the National and the Transnational*, pp. 1–15. The forthcoming issue 6 of *Twentieth Century Communism* will also address this approach to communist studies.

of Stalinism and Nazism over their respective societies and assumed that both systems were essentially similar – even subspecies of the same political phenomenon. Although this model became more nuanced after the 1950s it remained essentially descriptive, detailing the mechanisms of repression rather than acting as a vehicle for systematic comparison and the explanation of difference.⁹⁷ A pioneering attempt to deploy the insights of comparison beyond the framework of totalitarianism was initiated in the early 1990s by Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, who brought together experts on Soviet Russia and the Third Reich who drew on the historiography of the “other” regime in order to raise new questions in their own field of specialism. Similarity in the collection of essays they published no longer suggested sameness.⁹⁸ More recently another post-totalitarian collection of essays – this time pairing an expert in Stalinism and Nazism as co-authors of each chapter – was edited by Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick. The contributions did not dismiss totalitarianism out of hand. But they did depart from its top-down check-list of similarities, which was superseded by new comparators, such as governance and violence.⁹⁹ The next logical step seems to be to move away from the framework of Communist-Nazi comparisons in favour of comparing lives on the left. If reasonable comparators can be delineated, then surely we could learn more about communism – or communisms – through comparative studies.¹⁰⁰ To end on a perhaps controversial note, if comparison is about explaining difference then surely we could learn more about the political systems in Britain and Soviet Russia by comparing Stalin and Churchill as war-

- 97 The classic model of totalitarianism was developed by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski in the mid-1950s, see *idem*: *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, New York 1956. For a discussion of the relative merits of this approach, see David Wedgwood Benn: *Nazism and Stalinism: Problems of Comparison*, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 51 (1999), pp. 151–59. For a recent study using a more nuanced application of “totalitarianism”, see Tzvetan Todorov: *Hope and Memory: Reflections on the Twentieth Century*, London 2003, pp. 74 ff. For a valuable introduction to “totalitarianism” in a wide range of essays, see Eckhard Jesse (ed.): *Totalitarismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine Bilanz der internationalen Forschung*, Bonn 1999.
- 98 Ian Kershaw/Moshe Lewin: *Introduction: The Regimes and Their Dictators: Perspectives of Comparison*, in: *idem* (eds.): *Stalin and Nazism: Dictatorship in Comparison*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 1–25.
- 99 Michael Geyer/Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds.): *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, Cambridge 2009. For a valuable review essay locating this study within recent historiographical trends, see Matthew Stibbe: *Book Reviews*, in: *Journal of Modern History* 83:2 (2011), pp. 387–394; Anson Rabinbach: *Moments of Totalitarianism*, in *History and Theory* 45:1 (2006), pp. 72–100.
- 100 For a first step in this direction, Norman LaPorte/Kevin Morgan: *Kings Among Their Subjects?: Ernst Thälmann, Harry Pollitt and the Leadership Cult as Stalinisation*, in: LaPorte/Morgan/Worley (eds.): *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization: 1917–53*, pp. 124–145.

time leaders and rulers of vast empires which unravelled in the course of the twentieth century?

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