

# The end of history? The historiography of the British Communist Party and the death of communism

Jeremy Tranmer

## Introduction

The Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.) was founded in 1920 and ceased to exist in 1991. It was without doubt a minor party but was not completely insignificant as it had a strong presence in the trade unions and in extra-parliamentary movements, and at times it had a certain intellectual influence over the rest of the British left. For the past fifteen years or so the history of the C.P. has been quite a booming area, the standard joke among historians being that there are more people studying it now than it had members during its existence! This situation has led some people to wonder, in the words of the title of an article published in *Labour History Review*, 'Is CPGB History Important?'<sup>1</sup>.

Whether the history of the party is of real importance or not, the historiography of the C.P. is fascinating. The party had within its ranks a number of leading historians who revolutionised the study of history between the 1940s and the 1970s. Moreover, although the party was always legal, it did often have a semi-clandestine and secretive side to it, and it was organically linked to an international movement. As a result, there was for many years a

---

<sup>1</sup> Harriet Jones, 'Is CPGB History Important?' *Labour History Review*, vol. 67, number 3, December 2002, pp. 347-354. The extent and nature of the party's precise influence are obviously beyond the remit of this article, but the party has sometimes been described as the longest footnote in British history. As well as being interesting in itself, the footnote may also reveal a great deal about the main text. In addition to the intrinsic interest of a political party whose history spread over 70 years, it must not be forgotten that areas such as the causes of its inability to make a substantial breakthrough, the strength of anti-communism, and its disproportionately strong presence in Wales and Scotland compared to England may shed new light on aspects of British history and culture.

dearth of reliable information about it. However, the collapse of Communism as a world movement from the late 1980s, the disappearance of the C.P., and the opening of archives in Britain and the Soviet Union radically changed the situation facing historians both quantitatively and qualitatively. Suddenly huge quantities of material were available, including documents which had previously only been intended for the eyes of high-ranking party members. This article aims to examine the impact of these changes on the historiography of the C.P. I shall begin by looking at the state of the party's historiography before the late 1980s before analysing the influence of the new situation on how the history of the C.P. is studied. Finally, I shall examine the uneven impact of the changes, linking it to the study of contemporary history in general and the specificities of the history of Communism.

### **1. C.P. historiography before the late 1980s**

Until the late 1980s there were relatively few serious studies of the history of the C.P. In the words of the historian Nina Fishman, work consisted “largely of minimal superficial narrative from academics, hagiographic anecdotes and witness statements from veteran Communist heroes and dogmatic denunciations and impassioned *mea culpas* from ex-members who had seen the anti-communist light”<sup>2</sup>. Although a little simplistic, this evaluation is quite accurate. The historiography of British Communism had two basic characteristics: its highly political content and its very limited, conservative methodology.

Politically, most pieces of work were either highly anti-communist or very pro-communist. Anti-communism work can be further divided into two categories: right-wing anti-communism and left-wing anti-communism. The former, which includes Henry Pelling's 1958 *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile*, posits that the C.P. was a revolutionary organisation whose aim was the destruction of democracy and its replacement by tyranny. The theme of the Communist threat was extremely present, particularly in autobiographies by former members, such as Douglas Hyde's *I Believed*, published in 1951. The second category consists mainly of books written by Trotskyists, who denounced the C.P. for being a counter-revolutionary organisation intent on blunting the class struggle and for being as such a threat to the labour movement and the working class, for example Robert Black's *Stalinism in Britain* (1970). Despite the obvious political differences between the

---

<sup>2</sup> Nina Fishman, 'The British Road is Resurfaced for New Times: From the British Communist Party to the Democratic Left', in M.J. Bull and P. Heywood (ed), *Western European Communist Parties after the Revolutions of 1989*, London: St Martins Press, 1994, p. 174.

categories, there were a number of remarkable similarities. The party was seen as a monolithic party, members of which were united in all matters, partly out of conviction and partly because divergences were not permitted. It was portrayed as unchanging in both its ideology and its organisational structures, suggesting a dogmatic, sectarian approach to politics. It was presented as little more than a Soviet front, in that it obediently applied whatever line was adopted in Moscow, not hesitating to change positions when necessary. In fact, members of both categories were clearly pushing a particular political line, resulting in hysterical denunciation of the C.P. rather than detached analysis.

The final similarity between right-wing and left-wing anti-communist literature concerns methodology. Most pieces of work tended to concentrate on the leadership of the party to the detriment of ordinary members, whose importance was downgraded. To a certain extent, this was unavoidable given the centralized and hierarchical nature of the C.P. However, it led to the hopes, expectations and difficulties of ordinary members not being portrayed, giving the impression that the C.P. was a head without a body.

Most of the work on British Communism tended to be carried out by Communists. In fact, the party had a number of gifted historians in its ranks. Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, A.L. Morton, Christopher Hill, Raphael Samuel, John Saville, George Rudé, Rodney Hilton and Raymond Williams were all, at some point, members of the C.P. and of its Historians Group; some, including Thompson and Saville, left in the aftermath of 1956, but others such as Hobsbawm and Morton remained. All were well-known names among academic historians, while the reputation of some went far beyond the confines of academia. They were particularly famous for pioneering ‘people’s history’ or ‘history from the bottom up’. In other words, they were associated with attempts to reinterpret British history by giving a voice to ordinary people rather than their rulers and by rescuing some of those who ended up on the losing sides from what E.P. Thompson famously called ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’. Examples of this approach include Morton’s *A People’s History of England*, Hobsbawm’s work on social movements in the nineteenth century, and Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*.

However, none of them produced any serious studies of the C.P. itself. This was mainly owing to the attitude of the leadership of the party and to the specificities of Communism. For while it is true that history is potentially dangerous and damaging for leaders of any party (revelations about the past of a party can obviously have a negative impact on it and on

its leaders), those in charge of the C.P. had more reasons than most to be wary. Firstly, the party's hierarchical and centralised structures had prevented major changes in the leadership from taking place. Consequently, many figures remained active in leading bodies for several decades, while others owed their rise in the hierarchy to patronage. Embarrassing revelations about any period of the party's past would inevitably dent the legitimacy of the leadership, as would recognising past errors. The second problem facing leaders of the party was its relations with the Soviet Union and international Communism. Revelations about the C.P. did not simply concern its own history as they also had ramifications for the Soviet Union as well as for other communist parties. Consequently, the C.P. had to try to toe the Moscow line on historical matters, developing narratives based on the current Soviet orthodoxy. The secret Soviet funding the party received between 1957 and 1979 no doubt reduced even further its room for manoeuvre. Finally, the C.P. had a very instrumental view of its history. The latter was expected not simply to avoid references to potentially embarrassing matters in the past but also to justify the party's current orientation and even its continued existence.

Bearing in mind these factors, it is hardly surprising that in 1956 the party leadership turned down an offer made by Eric Hobsbawm on behalf of the Historians Group to produce a history of the party. In the following years the leadership successfully pressurised members not to become involved in potentially damaging projects. Hobsbawm himself admitted that his decision to concentrate on the nineteenth century came from a desire not to enter into conflict with the party leadership and not to damage it in any way. In the early 1960s members were instructed not to cooperate with Kenneth Newton on his *Sociology of British Communism*. In 1979 the leadership was prepared to organise a conference on the Second World War which included a debate about the C.P.'s changes of line (it initially supported the war before changing its mind under Soviet pressure, only to support it again once the Soviet Union was attacked in 1941). However, the same year it prevented the publication of a collection of essays written by Communist and non-communist historians, a collection that it had asked for in the first place. The leadership suffered from a severe case of what would now be called control freakery! It was only in the 1980s when a new reform-minded generation came to dominate the leadership and a more favourable international climate emerged that serious changes began to take place. In 1990, for example, Lawrence & Wishart, the C.P.'s

publishing house, made available the verbatim records of the meetings held prior to the changes in line during World War Two<sup>3</sup>.

Having rejected the Historians Group's offer, the leadership decided to publish its own 'official' history and asked the trusted party intellectual James Klugman to write it. He made slow progress, publishing two volumes in ten years and covering only seven years of the party's existence. Although they were not without interest, both volumes were extremely bland. In the introduction to the first volume, Klugman stated that his work would be "openly partisan" and would show "the need for and role of a Communist party in Britain"<sup>4</sup>. This statement clearly showed that the ideological underpinnings of official history were incompatible with serious historical research. It set the tone for what was to follow as he concentrated on portraying Communists, especially leaders of the party, as heroic, altruistic members of the working class who participated in numerous struggles and were persecuted for their activities. Moreover, the C.P. was seen as a monolithic organisation whose thinking showed a rare degree of continuity (on this point Communist and anti-communist work were surprisingly similar). All controversial aspects, such as the role of the international Communist movement in the foundation of the party, were carefully avoided. There was nothing that could embarrass present or future leaders. Klugman died before having to deal with the change in line in 1928 and the consequent ultra-sectarian 'Class against Class' period. The next volume written by Noreen Branson, another C.P. member, and published in the more open context of the 1980s gave a more frank appraisal of the late 1920s and 1930s. However, like the previous volumes and most anti-communist work, it concentrated mainly on the leadership, granting only secondary importance to ordinary members. This resulted not only from the party's organizational structures but also from the importance given to leadership within the Leninist tradition. Official work thus contrasted quite sharply with much of the cutting edge research carried out by Marxist historians, who emphasised the importance of ordinary people and their experiences.

The historiography of the C.P. was still in a rather sorry state at the end of the 1980s. Research was still hampered by political, methodological and material constraints. Although the party was considerably less pro-Soviet than in the past, residual loyalty still existed, particularly among older members, some of whom were still influential. Potentially damaging

---

<sup>3</sup> Francis King and George Matthews (eds), *About Turn: The Communist Party and the Outbreak of the Second World War*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> James Klugman, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain. 1919-1924*, p. 11.

revelations were still discouraged. The distinct preference for a top-down mode of analysis continued to dominate most work. In addition, many historians complained about the lack of access to the party's archives. Material dating from the years between 1920 and 1943 had been sent directly to the Soviet Union at the same to prevent it from being seized by the police in Britain, and it had never been returned. Documents for the years after 1943 was kept by the C.P. librarian and access was only granted to trusted individuals such as Klugman, in other words individuals who would ignore awkward documents. It was widely held that the closed archives prevented or, at the very least, limited serious research into the party and that they held the answers to some of the mysteries concerning the party's history<sup>5</sup>. Historians were therefore extremely optimistic about future research when the C.P., in one its final acts before ceasing to exist, promised to make its archives available to the general public and when Russia decided to facilitate access to the material it still held. It was thought that this, combined with the end of Communism as a world movement, would transform the study of the C.P. In 1995 Eric Hobsbawm thus wrote that, "the affairs of the C.P. are no longer discussed on what was essentially a political and ideological battlefield. It can now be seen in some kind of historical perspective, even by many of those with very strong political commitments for or against it"<sup>6</sup>.

## **2. The impact of the events of the late 1980s / early 1990s.**

It is important to explain briefly what the archives actually consist of. They are basically composed of minutes, notes and documents relating to the activities of the political committee, the executive committee, national congresses, specialist committees and commissions, the Young Communist League, the London District, some other district committees and some local branches, as well as the papers of some leading figures. This constitutes a huge amount of material. The political committee, for example, met every week and dealt with the day-to-day running of the party. The archives were sent to the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester and are now held at the Labour History Archive and Study Centre.

It was hoped that the events of 1989/91, that is the collapse of Communism as a world movement, the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the demise of the C.P., would

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Perry Anderson, 'Communist Party History'.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Hobsbawm in Geoff Andrews et al, *Opening the Books*, pp. 251-252.

depoliticise the study of British Communism, open up new areas of study and lead to new methodological approaches. To what extent has that been the case? As the C.P. no longer officially exists, its history is not linked to the fortunes of a particular party<sup>7</sup>. However, Trotskyist historians have continued to cling to their traditional analyses and attitudes. At one seminar in London last year, Trotskyist historians handed out leaflets denouncing a speaker who claimed that relations between the C.P. and the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s were much more complex than previously thought. Anti-communism is therefore still alive and kicking in some quarters. As is pro-communism.

The C.P.'s Historians Group renamed itself the Socialist History Society in 1991 and has managed to attract a broader membership. Nevertheless, some of the work published by its members is still in the old pro-communist mould. This partly derives from the objectives of the Socialist History Society which include not only promoting research into the C.P. but also perpetuating its memory. The somewhat ambiguous nature of this project has led it to publish pieces of work such as the pamphlet *Comrades on the Kwai* by John Henderson, which clearly glorifies the role and activities of Communists, and is similar to work published thirty or forty years ago. Some of the more serious studies published by members of the Socialist History Society suffer from the same drawbacks. The most obvious example is the fourth volume of the official history of the party written by Noreen Branson and published in 1997. The book attempts to minimise the role played by the Soviet Union in the C.P.'s affairs. For instance, the only reference to the fact that Stalin himself actually wrote part of the first version of the party's long-term programme, entitled ironically the *British Road to Socialism*, is a short footnote tucked away at the end of the book<sup>8</sup>. Paradoxically, Branson's work was more orthodox than the previous volume which she herself had written in the mid-1980s. In fact, the desire to give a more positive image of the C.P. has become a common theme for much of the work of the members of the Socialist History Society. In the introduction to Branson's book, she declares, "I aim to set the record straight"<sup>9</sup>. 'Setting the record straight' was also the title of a Socialist History Society conference in 1996.

---

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, several very small organisations still lay claim to the communist mantle. The Communist Party of Britain, for example, continues to publish the daily *Morning Star*.

<sup>8</sup> Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain. 1941-1951*, p. 251. This partial omission is particularly important. For many years the C.P. had claimed that it developed the *British Road to Socialism* itself and had used this as proof of its independence from Moscow. The revelations concerning Stalin's role in the drafting and adoption of the programme destroyed part of the C.P.'s legitimacy.

<sup>9</sup> Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain. 1941-1951*, p. vii.

This trend is a clear example of the close link between the context in which work is produced and the work itself. Following the events of 1989-1991, some former Communists felt the need to justify their previous commitments by claiming that Communism was not an entirely negative phenomenon and to defend their party's record. In addition, former Communist historians believed that work published on the C.P. since the late 1980s was too negative and ignored the achievements of Communists. Consequently, there was a tendency among some historians, including Branson, to present an uncritical version of the party's history. Although a balanced assessment of Communism is desirable, the approach adopted by some members of the Socialist History Society has led them to produce work which is disappointingly similar to studies written while the party still existed.

However, there is also a clearly a more politically and ideologically detached, post-communist trend, which can be traced back to work carried out in the final years of the existence of the C.P. Kevin Morgan's work on Communists' attitudes to fascism and war in the 1930s and 1940s, his biography of party general secretary Harry Pollitt, and John Callaghan's biography of the leading British Communist Rajani Palme Dutt were all ground-breaking studies in that they clearly attempted to go beyond the pro-communist / anti-communist dichotomy and present a genuinely balanced account of the party. This is particularly visible in their efforts to understand the nature of the C.P.'s relationship with the Soviet Union. Their approach is sophisticated and concludes that, although the C.P. gave verbal support to the Soviet Union and followed its lead by changing lines when asked, it frequently applied the lines in an original way, trying to tailor them to British circumstances and link them to previous positions. Furthermore, they stress the fact that each major change of line was supported, or even demanded, by significant minorities within the party. The new lines were therefore never the clean breaks that they were previously assumed to be, nor were they imposed on a completely reluctant party. A similar approach has been adopted by Nina Fishman, who has worked on Communist trade unionism. She has developed the notion of 'revolutionary pragmatism' to describe the activities of Communist trade unionists in the 1940s and 1950s, going beyond the previous dichotomy according to which Communists were either principled and tireless defenders of their colleagues or wreckers for right-wing anti-communists or unscrupulous class traitors for Trotskyists.

The end of Communism has thus led to some successful attempts to break away from traditional visions of Communism and Communists. There have also been some efforts in



recent years to open up new areas and develop new approaches, although not all of these are solely due to the end of Communism and the opening of the archives. For example, the social and cultural history of the C.P. has been at the centre of several recent studies. Two collections of essays have been published and include such diverse topics as Jewish Communists in the 1930s, West Africans and the C.P. in the 1950s, jazz and Communism in the 1930s and 1940s, and the Edinburgh People's Festival of the early 1950s. However, they are not a direct consequence of the opening of the archives. They result from new historiographical approaches being developed elsewhere and being finally applied to the C.P. The influence of the 'bottom-up' methods pioneered by previous generations of Marxist historians can clearly be felt.

Nevertheless, the use of archive material has enriched the new approaches. It is now possible, for example, to have relatively precise details of some of the internal debates within the party, to see what possible strategies and courses of action were considered but rejected, to trace the evolution of official documents as they were written, to have a clearer view of the ideas and roles of certain individuals who had been previously hidden by the facade of unity. The combination of new approaches and the use of the archives has enabled the monolithic cover to be blown away, revealing a party in which ideological and political divergences existed and were frequently expressed, and in which differences existed according to gender, ethnicity, generation, occupation and location. In other words, it is now clear that there was a variety of Communist identities and experiences. 'The party' has to a certain extent been deconstructed and replaced by 'the parties'.

In this way, some historians of the C.P. have arrived pragmatically at conclusions that post-modern historians might have arrived at theoretically. In the field of history, as in other areas, post-modernism has led to an assault on all-embracing meta-narratives and essentialism. Under its influence, emphasis has shifted from matters related to social class towards issues of gender and ethnicity. Although it is highly unlikely that many historians of the C.P. would describe their work as post-modern, their efforts to deconstruct a seemingly fixed and unchanging Communist identity correspond to post-modern concerns. The fact that historians of the C.P. have not openly embraced post-modernism can be seen by the lack of importance given to language and discourse, which have scarcely been analysed so far. The linguistic turn has yet to have an impact on the study of British Communism.

In spite of these important advances, the opening of the archives has also had a stifling

effect. Some historians and particularly journalists have been happy to use the archives and the changed situation simply to provide answers to questions asked previously or give more detailed and better documented versions of existing history<sup>10</sup>. The biggest gaps concern, of course, the C.P.'s relations with Soviet Union. Moscow Gold is the equivalent of the Holy Grail for some journalists<sup>11</sup>. Access to the archives has also perpetuated the tendency of many historians to concentrate on the leadership to the detriment to the rest of the party. This is to a certain extent because of the very nature of the archives. In fact, most of the documents in the archives concern the party's leading bodies, relatively few concern local branches or district committees. It is therefore hardly surprising that much work drawing heavily on the archives gives disproportionate importance to the party leadership. The character of the previous studies of the C.P. has also had an impact on current work. Given the political and ideological underpinnings of work carried out in the past, it is almost inevitable that historians have used the archives to counterbalance overt bias and present another vision of British Communism. However, as most of the studies conducted before the late 1980s dealt with the leading circles of the party, new work has mirrored it. The opening of the archives has thus not led systematically away from the approaches used in the past. In fact, use of the archives has in some ways reinforced traditional top-down approaches.

### **3. A limited impact**

The impact of the end of Communism has therefore been more contradictory and less revolutionary than many had expected. This can be explained by two underlying factors linked to the fact that historians of the C.P. are confronted with same problems as other historians working on contemporary history and archives. However, these difficulties are compounded by certain specificities of the party.

Firstly, it has been impossible to depoliticise the study of the C.P. because British Communism is a recent phenomenon. This is a problem faced by many contemporary historians as, by its very nature, contemporary history deals with the recent past. It is frequently controversial due to the lack of historical perspective, the fact that witnesses and actors may still be alive and that the impact of recent events can still be felt in the present. Consequently, personal and political matters are often at stake in contemporary history.

---

<sup>10</sup> See for instance, Keith Laybourne and Dylan Murphy, *Under the Red Flag. A History of Communism in Britain*.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within. The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*.

Communism is especially controversial. As an ideology it dominated much intellectual debate in the twentieth century, and as a form of government it held sway over vast areas. The history of the British C.P., even though it never had the intellectual influence of other communist parties and was never even remotely close to coming to power, is not like that of other British parties. The C.P. was part of an international movement and is judged partly according to the record of fraternal parties, particularly those which held power. What is more, the international Communist movement and Communist regimes were deemed by British governments to be a threat to the country's security. Consequently, British Communists were at times the target of hostile propaganda and repression. The C.P. was also linked to the first attempt to break with capitalism and build an alternative and as such it gave rise to hopes and fears. Given these factors, the history of the C.P. will no doubt remain politically and ideologically charged for the foreseeable future. Aspects of it will be defended by some former Communists and sympathisers, while anti-communists may be tempted to support a certain version of history in order to justify past measures and actions. The history of the C.P. is also of more than passing interest to current supporters and opponents of radical social and political change. The danger of the C.P.'s history being instrumentalised is still present.

Many former Communists are still alive and influence how Communism is studied. Communism may belong to the past, but some Communists are still very much part of the present. For example, many historians of the C.P. are still former members. They may have advantages as a result of their insights into the party and their empathy with Communists, but their position can be problematic. The fact that the Socialist History Society is dominated by former Communists, including many who opposed the disappearance of the C.P., has created a climate of nostalgia which is quite noticeable in some work. Even the final volume of the 'official' history series, which was published last year, was written by a former Communist<sup>12</sup>. Although Geoff Andrews' *Communism* was very different to Klugmann's, and would no doubt have been anathema to him, he shares the basic assumptions of many Communists of his generation. These assumptions obviously colour his vision of the final years of the C.P. For example, many Communists of his persuasion were in favour of C.P. giving less importance to its work in the trade unions. In his book Andrews hardly mentions Communist trade unionists and their activities.

---

<sup>12</sup> Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times*.

Many historians, including Eric Hobsbawm, had a rather naive view of the consequences of the end of Communism. The idea that the end of Communism would lead to the total depoliticisation of C.P. history is reminiscent of rather mechanistic and deterministic forms of Marxism. According to orthodox Marxism, the economic ‘base’ of a society determines its political and social ‘superstructure’, and changes in the base produce corresponding changes in the superstructure. Modifications of the ‘objective conditions’ of a society (material reality) are also thought to lead to alter the ‘subjective’ dimension (people’s consciousness). It can thus be argued that the way some former Communists saw how society functioned and how change came about impacted on their vision of changes of the historiography of the C.P. Although the ‘objective conditions’ for a more balanced, detached approach are in place, their effect on the ‘subjective’ analyses of historians has been limited so far due to the complex nature of the current situation and of the remains of Communism.

The second underlying factor accounting for the uneven impact of the end of Communism concerns the archives themselves. Many historians had developed a rather simplistic view of the archives, what Kevin Morgan has called “archive fetishism”<sup>13</sup>. In other words, they assumed that the archives contained everything relating to the party and held the answers to all the questions about the party. However, the archives were, of course, put together by librarians. One of them, Jo Stanley, has admitted taking out certain documents, particularly when they gave personal details about members which could be damaging if made public. It would be wildly optimistic to imagine that the other librarian, George Matthews a former assistant general secretary of the party, had not removed politically sensitive material or that all the information discussed at meetings was noted down. For example, after the miners strike of 1984/85 the C.P. wanted to publish a pamphlet drawing lessons from the miners’ defeat. The first draft was so critical of the miners’ leaders that it was not made public. It was rewritten and published in a very different form. The first draft cannot be located in the Executive Committee files, despite the fact that it is common knowledge that the Executive Committee discussed the matter.

Jo Stanley has also referred to “the enormous caverns of absence behind one recorded meeting”<sup>14</sup>. Initials were frequently used to prevent the identification of participants in sensitive meetings if the minutes fell into the wrong hands. Moreover, the minutes are

---

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Morgan, ‘The C.P.G.B. and the Comintern Archives’, *Socialist History*, 2, 1993, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Jo Stanley, ‘Sorting the Paper Memories’, *Socialist History*, 12, 1997, p. 59.

sometimes very succinct, giving little information. The minutes of an Executive Committee meeting as late as the mid-1980s contain the following suitably cryptic note: “Pete Carter introduced a discussion on an industrial question”<sup>15</sup>. Other minutes, however, give almost too much information. For example, Jo Stanley mentioned that “I found myself later on the guest list of a secular Jewish Passover supper. So one evening of kosher chicken eating was recorded, but not all the years of working for the paper, the *Morning Star*, nor of branch, union and women’s organisation activities”<sup>16</sup>. In other words, the archives give a clear view of some activities and activists but not of all. This has made problematic even some of the attempts to use the archives to fill in the gaps in the C.P.’s history. Although all historians are faced with the fact that the internal documents produced by an organisation and held in an archive were not intended for researchers, the secretive nature of the C.P. and the semi-clandestine character of some of its activities, particularly in the trade union movement, complicate matters for historians of British Communism.

The idea that the archives hold the answers to all the questions about the party is therefore no longer tenable. In the long term this may turn out to be a positive development. It downgraded the role of the historian, suggesting that the documents would simply speak for themselves without needing to be analysed and that answers to questions would be easily found. However even if, for example, details of the C.P.’s financial links with the Soviet Union were found (which would be highly unlikely), there would still be the important, but much more complicated and analytical question of determining what impact clandestine financing had on the party’s strategy and actions. A more realistic appraisal of the usefulness of the archives has helped to rehabilitate the role of the historian in the study of British Communism. A historian has to know how to use the archives, how to analyse the material in them, how to evaluate its significance and interpret it. A historian also has to try to go beyond the inevitable gaps and limits of the archives. Furthermore, the obsession with the archives is also linked to the desire for a definitive version of the party’s history, a version that would in some ways represent a form of closure, putting an end to further debate and questioning. This is unlike the attitude of some leaders of the C.P. who wanted an official history of the party that would establish once and for all an undisputed version of its past which would preclude future discussion. The inability to construct a definitive, comprehensive version is not

---

<sup>15</sup> CP/CENT/EC/21/09, Labour History and Study Centre.

<sup>16</sup> Op cit.

necessarily a bad thing, since it suggests that research has to be an on-going process, enriched by new material, new approaches and new perspectives.

To conclude, the impact of the end of Communism has been uneven. British Communism, like many contemporary issues, is still fraught with controversy. Even though it has officially ceased to exist, the personal and political ramifications of its history have not disappeared. The opening of the archives has not been a panacea, no matter how exhilarating it can be to work on them. They allow new insights, but they can create new problems. They must not be allowed to replace historians, to limit new approaches or to replace other sources. They have to be used in conjunction with other sources and seen as part of an on-going process rather than the end of a process. The history of the C.P. has come to end, but the historiography of British Communism may only just be beginning.

Université de Nancy 2

## **Bibliography**

- Anderson, Perry. "Communist Party History" in Samuel, Raphael (ed). *People's History and Socialist Theory*. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, pp 145-156.
- Andrews, Geoff. *Endgames and New Times. The Final Years of British Communism 1964-1991*. London : Lawrence & Wishart, 2004.
- Andrews, Geoff ; Fishman, Nina ; and Morgan, Kevin. *Opening the Books. Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party*. London : Pluto Press, 1995.
- Black, Robert. *Stalinism in Britain*, London : New Park, 1970.
- Branson, Noreen. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941*. London : Lawrence and Wishart, 1985.
- Branson, Noreen. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1941-1951*. London : Lawrence and Wishart, 1997.
- Brivati, Brian ; Buxton, Julie ; and Seldon, Anthony, *The Contemporary History Handbook*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Callaghan, John. *Rajani Palme Dutt: a study in British Stalinism*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993.
- Croft, Andy. *A Weapon in the Struggle. The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain*. London: Pluto Press, 1998.
- Gallacher, William. *The Case for Communism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949.
- Henderson, John. *Comrades on the Kwai*. London : Socialist History Society, 1997.
- Hyde, Douglas. *I Believed : The Autobiography of a Former British Communist*. Bungay, Suffolk: Richard Clay and Company Ltd, 1951.
- Jenkins Keith (ed). *The Postmodern History Reader*. London : Routledge, 1997.
- Klugmann, James. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1919-1924*. London : Lawrence and Wishart, 1969.
- Klugmann, James. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1925-1926*. London : Lawrence and Wishart, 1969.
- Laybourne, Keith and Murphy, Dylan. *Under the Red Flag. A History of Communism in Britain*. Stroud : Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999.
- Morgan, Kevin. *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics 1935-1941*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1989.

Morgan, Kevin. *Harry Pollitt*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1993.  
Morton, A.L. *A People's History of England*. London : Lawrence & Wishart, 1938.  
Newton, Kenneth. *The Sociology of British Communism*. London : Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969.  
Pelling, Henry. *The British Communist Party : A Historical Profile*. London : A & C Black, 1958.  
Thompson, Edward. P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London : Victor Gollancz, 1963.  
Thompson, Willie. *The Good Old Cause*. London: Pluto Press, 1992.  
Wolikow, Serge(ed). *Une histoire en révolution ? Du bon usage des archives, de Moscou et d'ailleurs*. Dijon : Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 1996.

### **soustitre**

texte

citation

signature

### **References.**

Bibli