

# weekly **worker**

**What was that about 'western values'? Paul Demarty looks at the Shamima Begum case**

- Letters and debate
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Towards a mass Communist Party

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**As feds take to streets of Portland, is America spiralling into authoritarianism?**

# LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

## Interference

*The Guardian* is going downhill. That may seem like a strange statement to make - after all, how much 'hill' is left? But it is important because for many years now *The Guardian* has been the main daily newspaper that the 'left' - liberals and socialists - read. It's a form of lesser evilism - what else is there?

However, I noted two front-page, main-headline stories in the last week or so. On July 16 we had: 'Labour offers to end anti-Semitism legal action'. This is a well-known and shameful move - not a capitulation, but a notice that the Labour leadership is well and truly on side, so don't worry Trump, Pompeo, Johnson: we're right behind you!

So what about *The Guardian*? They had three reporters on the job and they give 'the facts': "The whistleblowers sued". "They claimed senior figures had issued statements ... suggesting they had ulterior political and personal motives to undermine the party". No judgment on the truth or otherwise of claims or motives. 'Not me, guv' is *The Guardian*'s position: we didn't lead the witch-hunt, Corbyn lost - nothing to do with us. The article goes on to state: "Ofcom rejected 28 complaints against the [Panorama] programme for alleged bias." So was there bias? *The Guardian* has no position on that: they are just reporting the news.

After this front-page news story, on page 13 we have: 'Labour pain. How crisis came to engulf party'. Under a picture of Sam Matthews, looking almost in tears, we have the background. Several claims are made, all of them vigorously disputed by socialists in the party, but barely a whiff of that here. The usual 'tropes' are trotted out: John Mann accuses Ken Livingstone, high-profile resignations over 'anti-Semitism', Chris Williamson, Seumas Milne, Jennie Formby - it's all here (well, some of it is).

There is a pattern. An assertion is made, quickly followed by another one and then another. Any doubt over the first assertion is drowned by new assertions - so many that they must be true. We have a whole world created and it must be true: we don't need to examine evidence.

The other story, on the following day (July 17) was: 'Russia tried to steal virus research and interfere in election, says UK'. Well, "the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) said Russian state-sponsored hackers were targeting UK, US and Canadian organisations [regarding] Covid-19 vaccine". First off, why would they need to? Surely any civilised country managing to develop a vaccine would immediately share it with the world to overcome the pandemic. It would appear that the Russians feel that they might be left out - who would have thought it?

The other accusation is that, according to Dominic Raab, "Russian actors had 'sought to interfere' in last winter's election by amplifying an illicitly acquired NHS dossier that was seized upon by Labour during the campaign." It's a bit reminiscent of the original 'Russiagate' accusation, though in this case they are not claiming that Russia did the hacking: merely that they "sought to interfere" by "amplifying".

A different tack is taken regarding the US though: according to the Democrats, the Russians were working for Trump! But over here, never mind that the Tories are willing to sell off what's left of the NHS to US companies - the Russians were working for Corbyn!

That Putin is a nasty piece of work cannot be denied - he showed that in Chechnya and continues to show it day by day - but interfering in US elections?

At every new stage of the Russiagate assertions there have been different theories put forward and, for every serious and honest observer, there have been doubts about the source of said assertions. After all, if you can't trust the authors of Saddam Hussein's 'weapons of mass destruction', who can you trust?

There is also the little matter of 'interference in elections'. Perhaps a coup doesn't count? Obviously the US government had nothing to do with 'interfering' in events - to take a couple of recent examples, how about Honduras and Bolivia? Perhaps pigs can fly!

But back to *The Guardian*. They're only reporting, of course, including the statement that "Labour stands ready to work cross-party to protect our nation's security". So that's all right then - good on you, Sir Keir. In an opinion piece on an adjacent page Luke Harding says: "Dominic Raab confirmed yesterday what everybody already knew: Vladimir Putin's spies are busy trying to interfere in British democracy."

I thought that the main thing that everybody 'knew' was that Russian oligarchs have been pouring money into Tory coffers, as well as using the UK's incredibly weak financial laws to launder their money into dodgy fake companies and London mansions. Trying to break the news that the Tories want to let the US companies have the NHS doesn't come into it.

The attack on the Labour left is serious and is part of a long campaign by *The Guardian* to support Israel, and thereby US-led foreign policy, at all costs. The attack on Russia is perhaps even more serious. It is difficult, reading reports coming from the US, to decide which war the Democrats especially - along with the 'intelligence community' and the GOP - want to wage most. Russia, China? Or perhaps a little warm-up with Iran or Venezuela.

In any case, we clearly live in dangerous times and the need for working class newspapers to tell the truth and to do a bit of investigating gets ever more urgent.

**Jim Nelson**  
email

## Pointless

The 'equal opportunity' principle is based on the presumed possession of equal skill. For example, in universities people with social learning disabilities are disadvantaged by there being no social safety net, which disempowers their academic learning.

The equal opportunity system, because it is so universal in its application, does not possess the financial resources or the selective power of individual action to admit that individuals have been let down by the institution, which should use budgetary means to finance a second chance at academic opportunity from within the university budget. The equal opportunity principle, like so many shibboleths of society, may sound fair in a discussion on the principles of theoretical justice, but in practical application, lacking the means to correct the failures through voluntary or compulsory retrospective action on the part of institutions, it is simply a pointless exercise.

In reforming the university system, those people who possess technical and naturally encyclopaedic skill should be prioritised over those social mixers who do possess the ability to obtain employment in the normal run-of-the-mill occupations. The idea that everybody should have the practical opportunity of a university education is wrong, because it diverts money and support away from those individuals - many with social disabilities - who find it tough enough already, without policymakers flooding the country with degree-holding graduates and depriving those academically minded but socially awkward people, who failed at university through no fault of their

own, of the opportunity to keep trying until they reach the desired outcome of rewarding employment.

Quite often these undergraduates come from working class backgrounds and are marginalised by the gown-wearing academic professionals, who have such a fanatical hatred to changing institutional policy that, when polite and well-argued challenges are made to their shibboleth of equal opportunities, they refuse to change the system and enable individuals who didn't do well to try again with the support that they needed.

It is too often overlooked by the left that in universities the socially awkward individual is not at the mercy of a sink-or-swim, laissez-faire, rightwing administration, but a supposedly tolerant and fairness-loving liberal or leftwing one. It is so wedded to the idea of universal opportunity that by its own intellectual design the system is compelled to ration funding and presume that individuals can succeed at the first attempt - a proposition that you would expect from the libertarian right, not the liberal left.

The 'sink or swim' ethics of the economic market can often be tackled, but those of social institutions such as universities cannot without the individual or institutional desire to provide provision for the redress of failure often brought about by the insistence, even when challenged, on maintaining the equal opportunity principle in practice. In universities this does nothing but rig the system against those who have next to no alternative for meaningful endeavour other than writing and living on social security payments.

I do not expect many *Weekly Worker* readers will agree, but at least you are prepared to publish challenges to the philosophical addictions of the equal opportunity-loving egalitarians of the liberal left. I shall pose a question that should stir some contributions: "Is it time to lay equal opportunities to rest in the graveyard of ideas?" I welcome the articulate correspondence that will surely come from readers.

**Oliver Healey**  
Leicester

## Blinkered

It's really difficult responding to someone like Maren Clarke, who is so confused and blinkered that she simply translates black as white. She begins her latest maelstrom of mistakes and misconceptions by accusing me of being confused, and of being guilty of the very thing I had accused her of doing. But just reading what she then says shows that is ludicrous, and that she clearly had not read or understood what I said - just as she seems not to have read or understood what Marx wrote.

She says that I claim that workers have no ownership rights as "associated producers" over socialised capital, but that it is the way the bourgeoisie have developed laws of corporate governance that gives them such rights. That is the direct opposite of what I said! What I said, following Marx, in *Capital* volume 3, chapter 27, is that, in relation to socialised capital, no individual has ownership rights, because it represents the abolition of capital as private property - or, as Marx puts it in *Capital* volume 1, chapter 32, "the expropriation of the expropriators". This socialised capital belongs to the company itself, which, as Marx points out, can only logically consist of the "associated producers" within it, at any time: ie, its workers and managers. What I then went on to say is that this collective ownership by the "associated producers", which is apparent in the cooperative, as they exercise control over it, is denied to workers in joint stock companies, precisely because the bourgeoisie have given control over that capital to shareholders! In other words, the direct

opposite to what Maren claims I said. With someone so confused, and unable to understand simple statements set down in black and white, it makes further discussion a bit futile, but I will try to persist.

The argument she is disagreeing with is not my argument, but that of Marx and Engels. It is Marx who in *Capital* volume 1, chapter 32, in discussing the natural process of accumulation of capital, and its consequent concentration and centralisation, describes how it results in this "expropriation of the expropriators", as the monopoly of private capital is burst asunder, and replaced by the domination of this large-scale socialised capital (that he describes in greater detail in *Capital* volume 3, and along with Engels in *Anti-Dihring*).

It is Marx who sets out that the joint stock companies as much as the cooperatives represent such socialised capital, and as such represent the transitional form of property. Nor is that something he discusses just in chapter 27. The whole discussion of the development of interest as a separate form of revenue to profit, as a deduction from profit, like rent, of the division of the capitalist class into productive-capitalists and money-lending capitalists, from chapter 21 onwards, leads to this conclusion.

Maren also does not seem to have read or understood any of those chapters, because she says: "The shareholders receive a share of the profits, created by the labour of others" - which shows that she has absolutely no idea what form of revenue the dividends the shareholders receive are, as distinguished from profit or rent, or profit of enterprise! The landlord, who charges rent to the capitalist, after all, obtains revenue, which is a "share of the profits created by the labour of others". The whole basis of Marx's analysis is completely lost on Maren, who appears to have gone back to a Smithian or Ricardian view, in which surplus value and profit are synonymous. She seems to have no idea that dividends are simply a form of interest payable on the money-capital loaned to the firm by the shareholder, just as the coupon on a bond is interest, no different to the interest paid to a bank for a loan! To quote Marx from chapter 14, in relation to stock companies, they "yield only large or small amounts of interest, so-called dividends after all costs have been deducted".

The whole point here, set out by Marx, is that not only is interest/dividends a separate form of revenue to profit, and to profit of enterprise, which is the return to the productive capital: the shareholder is also not the owner of the productive capital of the business, but is only the owner of the money-capital they have loaned to it, just as a bondholder or bank is the owner of the money-capital they loan to businesses, and on which they too obtain interest. In fact, Marx makes clear, in chapter 23, that such lenders of money-capital, including shareholders, stand in no relation to labour whatsoever, but only in an antagonistic relation to the productive capital itself, and to the functioning capitalists that are its personification. He makes clear that that is true, whether the socialised capital takes the form of a cooperative or corporation.

A share certificate is merely a debt instrument, the same as a bond, or a loan agreement with a bank. The shareholders are merely owners of those certificates - not of the company's capital, which belongs to the company itself. And, it's not just Marx and me who say that. As I pointed out, bourgeois theorists like John Kay and Aubrey Silbertson also admit that. It is only Maren who wants to persist in defending the shareholders' right to claim ownership and control over productive capital they do not own.

Maren's statement that she believes

that workers have to seize the means of production is then an indication that she simply has not understood Marx's theory, or his application of it in *Capital*, because what Marx demonstrates is that, objectively, the workers already do own the main means of production, because they now consist of this socialised capital. What they do not have, other than in relation to the worker cooperatives, is control over that capital. It is that which they must obtain, and it's true that that can only be done on a class-wide basis, because, at the very least, it requires a workers' government to repeal the existing laws on corporate governance that give control to shareholders over capital they do not own.

Because Maren does not understand or rejects this aspect of Marx's theory, she is left denying Marx's comments about it representing a transitional form of property, and claiming that the whole thing was made up by Engels and Kautsky after Marx's death - which leaves us wondering why Eleanor Marx did not protest, and why all of the researchers who have examined Marx's notebooks since have themselves not brought to attention this bowdlerisation on the part of Engels and Kautsky. And, that, of course, deals with Maren's further pathetic attempt to draw back from her ridiculous statement, by claiming that what she really meant was that something had "got lost in translation"

The person guilty of misrepresentation here has been Maren Clarke, not me, as the above illustrates, and what is lost in translation seems to be what Marx and Engels and I write down in black and white, and what Maren reads and understands - or at least what she claims to understand, when formulating her responses.

**Arthur Bough**  
email

## House prices

With London rents falling by eight percent since February, we are about to witness the long-predicted collapse in house prices in the capital and further afield. In 2005, both *The Economist* and the Warwick University Business School predicted a collapse in house prices. *The Economist* even had a 12-page supplement on it.

The reasons the collapse has been postponed until now are threefold: first, the arrival of three million migrants from eastern Europe into the UK has buoyed up demand for rented accommodation; second, the bailing out of the banks by the Bank of England following the 2008 credit crunch prevented large-scale default by mortgage payers; third, the nearly zero interest rates have led to a boom in buy-to-let purchases as an alternative pension plan.

Because no government would allow a collapse in house prices, what we are going to see is an invisible crash, until it becomes obvious to everyone. As house prices fall, we will see estate agents saying, 'Get in quick before house prices rise again'. With very few sales, property-owners will have no option but to rent them out. This will lead to a further fall in rents. Despite the low interest rates, it will be cheaper to rent property than to rent money in the form of a mortgage.

The collapse in rents and house prices in London will temporarily boost rents and house prices outside London, as hundreds of thousands of people move out of London. However, the collapse in London will eventually lead to a collapse in rents and house prices in the rest of the UK.

Houses will again be seen as a place to live rather than a tax shelter and alternative pension plan. As with all financial bubbles, house prices and therefore rents could decline by 80% over the next five years.

**John Smith**  
Cambridgeshire

USA

# What will remain of democracy?

With Trump now employing paramilitary forces, writes Daniel Lazare, the signs are not good

“It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” So saith the legendary baseball coach, Yogi Berra (supposedly). But, with Donald Trump sending paramilitary forces into Portland, Oregon, in order to snatch protestors off the street and bundle them into unmarked vehicles, here is a prediction that seems quite easy: the US is heading for straight-out authoritarianism.

Authoritarianism does not mean some minor *contretemps* about a congressional appropriation for the Ukraine, but something more serious: ie, a descent into strong-man rule, in which elections become little more than formalities. Although Trump is now talking about imposing martial law in New York, Chicago and elsewhere, his real target is the November elections, which may well turn into a chaotic mess, tailor-made for the sort of strong-arm tactics he now favours.

At the first sign of trouble, Portland will provide a precedent for sending in federal police to ‘rescue’ ballot boxes from Democratic clutches. Instead of leaving it to poll workers, the upshot will be an opportunity to count the ballots ‘correctly’ so as to yield a certain desired outcome. If so, it will be the third stolen presidency in two decades, and this time the theft will be the most brazen of all.

Not long ago, a scenario like this would have been dismissed as a paranoid fantasy. Post Portland, however, it is no longer so easy. Indeed, the vital signs are all pointing in that direction. One is a decrepit 233-year-old constitution that is a driving force behind America’s growing instability. Another is political polarisation - not only in Washington, but out in the hinterlands, where in a growing number of incidents Black Lives Matter demonstrators in small towns are being met with cursing, shoving and Confederate flags. While some Americans are shocked by unidentified federal police whisking people into unmarked cars, others are delighted to see BLM supporters, Antifa streetfighters and big-city liberals getting their come-uppance - and their numbers may be larger than polls indicate.

A third vital sign is Trump’s response to Covid-19, which has been so staggeringly incompetent that the only weapon he has left in his arsenal is whipping up a backlash against Antifa and BLM. The more the virus surges, consequently, the more he can be counted on to play the Antifa card to the hilt. This means more riots, more polarisation and more martial law.

## Elections

There is a fourth factor as well: an electoral system that is breaking down under the strain. Thanks to the pandemic, estimates are that as many as 100 million Americans will vote by mail in November - triple the number in 2016. If so, the upshot will be an avalanche that buries poll workers under more paper than they can possibly handle.

The signs so far are not promising. Last summer, a small election in Queens, New York, ground to a halt for six weeks, as attorneys for the two leading candidates scrutinised mail-in ballots for flaws that would render them invalid. Hundreds were tossed, before a Democrat named Melinda Katz squeaked through by a mere 55 votes.<sup>1</sup> This June, a primary in Georgia turned into “a hot, flaming, fucking mess”, to quote one election observer, when a brand new \$107



Antifa activists: powerless against power of the state

million electronic polling system malfunctioned, leaving thousands of would-be voters stranded for hours in the midday sun.<sup>2</sup> Weeks later, two New York congressional primary elections are still up in the air due to yet more wrangling over mail-ins. After three weeks, poll workers in one contest had succeeded in counting just 800 ballots out of some 65,000, while as many as 25% have been invalidated overall due to technical infractions like sealing an envelope with tape instead of licking it shut.<sup>3</sup>

There are no federal elections in America’s fragmented system - only a series of state elections under the control of local officials, who range from hopeless to semi-competent. Predictions of disaster are therefore impossible to dismiss. If so, the result could be another ‘Battle of Florida’, but on a far grander scale. In that November 2000 episode, a battle over ‘hanging chads’ - punched holes in poorly-designed paper ballots that did not go all the way through - led a Republican-controlled Supreme Court to decide the election in George W Bush’s favour, even though he was trailing by more than 500,000 popular votes. If the battle this time around stretches across multiple state lines, then the struggle for power could be even more chaotic and explosive.

Based on a recent interview with Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News, that seems to be what Trump is thinking: “I think mail-in voting is going to rig the election, I really do,” he said. Asked if he would go peacefully if the results don’t go his way, he replied: “I have to see. No, I’m not going to just say yes. I’m not going to say, and I didn’t the last time [in 2016] either.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Trump regards an election with tens of millions of mail-in ballots as suspect before it even begins, and he refuses to say what he will do if the count does not go his way. Given the martial law he has imposed in Portland, it would be a perfect opportunity to charge Democrats with trying to steal the election - something he clearly expects them to do - and then send in the paramilitaries to seize ballot boxes and count them ‘right’.

Trump is pursuing a classic strategy of tension because he thinks polarisation will help him more than

it hurts. Where Democrats are trying to appeal to everyone from ‘never Trump’ neocons to BLM, his goal is to empty out the centre by accusing Dems of going soft on crime and radicalism and phrasing the problem in such a way that voters will have no choice but to opt for either martial law on the one hand, or runaway street violence on the other. And even if they do not opt for martial law, that is what they will wind up with regardless.

## Political players

Finally, there are the police themselves to consider. In other advanced economies, cops are an instrument of national policy. But in America’s hyper-federal system the country’s 18,000 state and local police departments are political players in their own right - people who sometimes do what politicians tell them and sometimes do not. The growth of police unions since the 1960s has intensified the gamesmanship by permitting rank-and-file cops to play state and local officials off against one another across municipal lines. It permits them to appeal more effectively to middle-class home owners for support and to establish alliances with right-wing politicians.

There is no question that the strategy has worked, which is why recent polls show Americans opposing BLM calls to “defund the police” by nearly two to one and support for stepped-up policing runs high, even in minority neighbourhoods.<sup>5</sup>

This is what puts the wind in Trump’s sails: “The respect we have for law enforcement is unbounded,” he told a 2019 rally in Minneapolis, before calling a police lieutenant named Bob Kroll up to the podium. President of the local police officers’ union, Kroll is a notorious ultra-rightist who allegedly wears a white power patch on his motorcycle jacket, sells ‘Cops for Trump’ T-shirts and once denounced BLM as a “terrorist organisation”. He has been accused of repeated instances of misconduct throughout his career, including using excessive force during a no-knock drug raid and punching a pedestrian who made the mistake of bumping up against his car. When Jacob Frey, Minneapolis’s liberal Democratic mayor, tried to prevent local cops

from undergoing “warrior-style” training, Kroll told him to back off, declaring that the union would pay for it instead.<sup>6</sup>

“He knows I’ve been good to law enforcement,” Trump said of Kroll. “He knows I’ve been good to ... the police. He knows I love the cops.” To which Kroll replied:

The Obama administration and [its] handcuffing and oppression of police was despicable. The first thing president Trump did when he took office was ... [to] put the handcuffs on the criminals instead of us.

This is America, as it careens toward disaster: a country in which mayors cannot control their own cops and police are taught a strategy known as ‘killology’, in which the goal is to fight criminal violence with “superior violence, righteous violence”, as one “warrior” instructor puts it.<sup>7</sup> It is a perfect atmosphere for a Bonapartist who not only believes in unleashing

the police, but who now wants to up the ante by imposing martial law. The question is whether Americans will go along with Trump’s bid for strong-man rule and what will remain of American democracy if they do ●

## Notes

1. nytimes.com/2019/08/06/nyregion/tiffany-caban-queens-da-concedes.html.
2. See my article, ‘Trump: three questions’ *Weekly Worker* June 18.
3. nytimes.com/2020/07/17/nyregion/election-absentee-ballots-primary.html.
4. Quote starts at around 37:15 at youtube.com/watch?v=W6XdpDOH1JA.
5. N Rakich, ‘How Americans feel about “defunding the police”’ *FiveThirtyEight* June 19 2020: fivethirtyeight.com/features/americans-like-the-ideas-behind-defunding-the-police-more-than-the-slogan-itself; AR Coleman, ‘How black people really feel about the police, explained’ *Vox* June 17 2020: vox.com/2020/6/17/21292046/black-people-abolish-defund-dismantle-police-george-floyd-breonna-taylor-black-lives-matter-protest.
6. startribune.com/minneapolis-police-union-offers-free-warrior-training-in-defiance-of-mayors-ban/509025622.
7. B Schatz, “‘Are you prepared to kill somebody?’ A day with one of America’s most popular police trainers” *Mother Jones* March 2017: motherjones.com/politics/2017/02/dave-grossman-training-police-militarization.

## Online Communist Forum



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**FREE SPEECH****Without it we can't breathe**

Anne McShane explains why the 'cancel culture' is so badly misdirected



**H**arper's Magazine recently published a letter signed by 153 writers and academics decrying 'cancel culture', which has provoked a storm across social media.

The signatories, who include Margaret Atwood, JK Rowling, Salman Rushdie and Noam Chomsky, say they feel obliged to speak out because: "The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal democracy, is daily becoming more constricted." While applauding the "powerful protests for racial and social justice", along with "wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society", they deplore some of the methods being used to tackle inequality and challenge institutions. A culture of "censoriousness" is spreading.

The letter cites the suppression of freedoms, including books being withdrawn from publication, punitive measures against academics, and the sackings of editors and heads of organisations for "what are sometimes clumsy mistakes". The letter concludes: "The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away." The inclusion of people with distinctly opposing views on issues like Palestine and transgender rights was clearly aimed at illustrating that the concern about censorship was not confined to a particular viewpoint.

A response came on July 10 from over 160 journalists and writers in a letter published by *The Objective* - a media platform with the stated aim of campaigning for equality within the journalistic profession.<sup>1</sup> This was initiated by "journalists of color with contributions from the larger journalism, academic, and publishing community". Their objection to the Harper's letter is

that it sought to defend freedom of speech mainly for the liberal elite, while providing a cover for structural inequality.

The fundamental problem was that the Harper's letter "does not deal with the problem of power: who has it and who has not". Indeed, the fact that it was authored by a group of mainly white cis writers in a magazine with a reputation for elitism, meant that it should be considered a rebuke to those who seek to challenge the establishment. The Harper's signatories "use seductive but nebulous concepts and coded language to obscure the actual meaning behind their words, in what seems like an attempt to control and derail the ongoing debate about who gets to have a platform".

Interestingly, *The Objective* letter stated: "Many of the signatories have co-workers in their own newsrooms who are deeply concerned with the letter, some of whom feel comfortable speaking out and others who do not". It also stated: "Many signatories on our list noted their institutional affiliation but not their name, fearful of professional retaliation. It is a sad fact, and in part why we wrote the letter."

Thus by their own admission the signatories to this letter confirm that there is a problem: writers fear the consequences of being controversial or 'offensive'.

**Cancel**

Although the term 'cancel culture' did not appear in the Harper's letter, it is widely used to describe the "intolerance of opposing views,

**For the pre-revolution Lenin, social democracy could only survive and thrive under conditions of complete political liberty. For the Bolsheviks there was simply no other way of winning working class power. Therefore Lenin passionately believed in freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of the press**



a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty".

In a Facebook exchange I was informed by a number of comrades from the Socialist Workers Party tradition that the term 'cancel culture' is used by the right to deride challenges to its supremacy from the Black Lives Matter and identity rights movement. One comrade even went so far as to say that I should be ashamed to use the term.

I had a quick look on Google to check its origins and usage. 'Cancel culture' is defined by *Urban Dictionary* as "A desire to cancel a person or community out from social media platforms". *Wikipedia* describes it as having a number of meanings, with online shaming, comprising harassment, mocking and bullying, while 'cancel culture' also includes boycotts of well-known individuals who are deemed to have transgressed in some fashion, along with the use of online review sites to publicly shame individual writers. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* states that the origins of the term 'cancel culture' lie in the #MeToo movement - "The term has been credited to black users of Twitter, where it has been used as a hashtag." *Vox* states: "Cancel culture can be seen as an extension of call-out culture: the natural escalation from pointing out a problem to calling for the head of the person who caused it."

It has, of course, been utilised as a protest against powerful people - a way of taking revenge by those who do not have the power to really challenge the system which those individuals represent and dominate. But those

targeted are often able to ride out the public shaming - the most obvious example being Donald Trump. Indeed, *The Objective* letter makes the very valid point that, while some of the Harper's signatories have faced attacks on social media and in their professional lives as a result of their pronouncements, they have most certainly not seen their lives destroyed:

It's ironic that the letter gives highly sought-out space to some of the most well-paid and visible people in media, academia and publishing. These are the same people who possess the money and prestige to have their ideas shared in just about any elite publication, outlet or journal. There will always be a place for them to have their voices heard.

And, while those who claim 'cancel culture' is an invention of the right are wrong, there is no doubt that it has been used very effectively by the right. One of the best examples is the attacks on those who support the cause of the Palestinian people. A July 12 article in *Jacobin* by Leigh Phillips makes some important points about the danger of the very same methods being used to muzzle the left. The Israeli state is a case in point:

In 2014, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign withdrew an offer of employment to English professor Steven Salaita after some faculty students and donors asserted that his tweets critical of the Netanyahu administration during the Gaza war were anti-Semitic. Due to the controversy, he's been driven out of academic employment and now works as a bus driver. Political scientist

Norman Finkelstein - another critic of the Israeli occupation - was denied tenure at DePaul University in 2007 after a successful campaign by the Anti-Defamation League and lawyer Alan Dershowitz. He likewise has difficulty finding employment and says he struggles to pay the rent.<sup>2</sup>

There are numerous other examples from the witch-hunt against the left in the Labour Party, which has seen the 'cancellation' of Ken Livingstone, Chris Williamson, Jackie Walker, Stan Keable and the recent sacking of Rebecca Long-Bailey as shadow education secretary. And, while it is unclear whether the fact that cartoonist Steve Bell will not have his contract with *The Guardian* renewed has anything to do with him offending sensibilities, it must be a relief for the editors that they will not have to defend the claims that he has exhibited anti-Hindu racism by depicting Priti Patel as a bull, and anti-Semitism because of his relentless exposure of the Labour witch-hunt. *The Jewish Chronicle* was delighted to report his sacking.<sup>3</sup>

## Identity

Perhaps the most controversial *Harper's* signatory is JK Rowling. Antagonism towards her mainly stems from her criticism of the movement for transgender recognition and rights. *The Objective* letter states that she has:

spouted transphobic and transmisogynist rhetoric, mocking the idea that trans men could exist, and likening transition-related medical care such as hormone replacement therapy to conversion therapy. She directly interacts with fans on Twitter, publishes letters littered with transphobic rhetoric, and gets away with platforming violent anti-trans speakers to her 14 million followers.

Rowling has recently published a lengthy piece on her blog where she sets out her views and experiences. She states initially she entered the fray to support Maya Forstater - a tax specialist who had lost her job because she had made allegedly 'transphobic' remarks online. Rowling also supported Magdalen Berns, who "was a great believer in the importance of biological sex, and didn't believe lesbians should be called bigots for not dating trans women with penises. Dots were joined in the heads of twitter trans activists, and the level of social

media abuse increased".

Rowling claims that transgender activists had accused her of "literally killing trans people" with her hate, had been "called cunt and bitch" and told that her books were being burned.<sup>4</sup> Rowling sets out her concerns about transitioning as an answer to the complexities of gender identity and stereotypes in an unequal world. She also explains how her own past experience of abuse has made her very sensitive to the notion of sharing toilets and other women-only spaces with transgender women. It is true that she is antagonistic to the transgender project and I believe that she is wrong to present transgender women as a threat to cisgender women, but I do not think she is a transphobe.

Following the publication of the above piece, two official Harry Potter fan clubs, The Leaky Cauldron and Mugglenet, announced that they would remove her picture from their websites and no longer link to her site. They stated: "Transgender women are women. Transgender men are men. Non-binary people are non-binary."<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically Rowling, who has been accused of 'disappearing' trans people, had herself been disappeared.

The use of the term 'Terf' (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) by transgender activists and their supporters to describe cisgender women who oppose or question their claims has been effective in silencing many. However, having followed some of the online disputes, I would say there is intolerance and irrationality on both sides. In opposing the evidently factually incorrect claims that transgender people are 'literally women' or 'literally men', some become unnecessarily derogatory, refusing to respect the right of transgender people to describe themselves as such. And it is faintly amusing to witness some leftwing men becoming extremely exercised about protecting 'women's spaces' from transgender women. It is as if they have become chivalrous knights intent on defending a maiden's honour against an interloper. I have witnessed also the 'doxing' of a transgender woman - with details of her workplace openly circulated for complaints to be made to her employer about somewhat intemperate utterances on social media. The backlash against this reprehensible act was a wave of bullying and intimidation against those who tried to defend the perpetrator. An almighty shitstorm and one within which it was impossible to arrive at any rationality.

There are other examples - some of which are alluded to in the *Harper's* letter - of the irrationality of 'cancel culture'. One is the investigation of academic and poet Laurie Sheck at the New School following a complaint by a white student that she had repeated the N-word from a James Baldwin essay, in which he challenged the intellectual inheritance of slavery. *The Objective* letter dismisses this abysmal treatment of Sheck with the assertion that she ultimately has not lost her job, so it is not really that serious, particularly in comparison to the treatment that minorities have endured for expressing their views: "Black, brown and trans professors have been harassed by conservative websites, threatened, and had careers ruined for speaking about our own experiences or confronting systemic racism."<sup>6</sup>

## Left

As I mentioned above, there has been a strong reaction from the left to the *Harper's* letter. Noam Chomsky has been derided for putting himself among the likes of Bari Weiss, who is said to have a history of harassment of supporters of Palestinian rights and has claimed that criticism of Israel amounts to anti-Semitism. Jonathan Cook has argued that, with the notable exception of Chomsky, "many of those who signed the letter are defending not free speech, but their right to continue dominating the public square - and their right to do so without being held accountable."<sup>6</sup> He goes on:

despite their professions of concern, the evidence suggests that some of those signing the letter have been intensifying their own contribution to cancel culture in relation to Israel, rather than contesting it.

In other words, according to Cook, those who have been using identity politics for years to further their own careers have now found themselves on the receiving end of it. The BLM and the boycott, divestment and sanctions movements have put these individuals under such pressure that they now feel the need to defend themselves with pseudo claims of support for free speech.

Cook makes some telling points about freedom of speech being used as a weapon by the pro-Israel lobby. And he is correct that many of the signatories are high-ranking, well paid members of the academic, writing and journalistic professions, who undoubtedly want to jealously guard their *own* rights to say what they want, without fear of book cancellations or social media tirades. And he is right about the hypocrisy of many, with Rowling providing an example with her mocking attacks on Corbyn in 2018 at the height of the witch-hunt and her enthusiastic backing for claims that there was a genuine anti-Semitic problem in the Labour Party that had to be rooted out. There is no doubt that she and Weiss are in no sense to be considered true defenders of free speech. They are defending their own rights.

But where does that leave the left? As Cook says, it is essential that we stand for freedom of speech. We must utilise the weapon of ideological struggle in order to take on and defeat reactionary ideas and win over the working class. But that must mean freedom to express all points of view, *including* those we passionately oppose. It is of concern to see self-proclaimed socialists responding to the *Harper's* letter by proclaiming that there can be no such thing as absolute freedom of speech - not when it comes to the oppressor classes or their liberal allies in any

case. The complaints about 'cancel culture' are simply the whinges of an elite who find themselves the target of unwelcome criticism.

Yet the cancellation of books and articles, and the investigation of university staff for reading examples of 'offensive' language without giving 'trigger warnings' is not criticism. Nor is personal harassment on social media or complaints to employers about things said on Facebook or Twitter. That is not a culture that should be defended or alibied in any form.

Some of these comrades have enlisted Vladimir Lenin to shore up their opposition to freedom of speech for liberals. He is described as being utterly disparaging about such freedoms. But this is clearly wrong. As the historian, Lars T Lih, has shown in his comprehensive and critical studies of Lenin, at the core of the Bolshevik leader's project lay the necessity of political freedom. Lih quotes from *Iskra* in 1903, where Lenin argued that "without political freedom, all forms of worker representation will remain pitiful frauds; the proletariat will remain as before in prison, without the light, air and space needed to conduct the struggle for its full liberation".

As Lih argues, the logic of the demand for political freedom is the fact that the proletariat has a historical mission to overthrow the state and introduce socialism, and in order to do that it needs to have the freedom to organise and enlighten itself.<sup>7</sup>

Political freedom meant freedom of assembly, freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Lenin inherited his commitment to political freedom from Marx and Engels, who argued that it was essential for the proletariat. Lih quotes from Engels on the need for the working class to insist on these freedoms, as without them "it will be unable to move freely itself; in this struggle it is fighting to establish the environment necessary for its existence, for the air it needs to breathe".

The history of the Bolsheviks under Lenin up to the 1917 revolution was one of open ideological struggle. Of course, Lenin mocked the liberals

for their pseudo-democracy. But I do not know of any call from him to suppress their views, let alone to support their sacking or investigation by employers. Instead he and his comrades attacked their cowardice, their seeking after compromises, their fear of worker-peasant power in countless polemical articles.

There is no doubt that after the revolution there was suppression of free speech. Lih's article referred to above shows the change in emphasis in Lenin's approach in 1919, when he was in a position of defending an isolated and embattled regime. The quotations used in the social media debates to portray Lenin as an opponent of free speech are entirely located in that desperate period. They do not reflect the consistent democratic approach of the Bolsheviks when they were a party of extreme opposition. The closing of papers, fixing elections and banning opposition parties is not a legacy that we should seek to emulate, but an aberration we should seek to avoid.

Today we are not in a position of challenging for state power - far from it, unfortunately. We are in a time when we are fighting for the working class to become conscious of its own historical tasks. We are in a time when our class needs to fight for openness and for ruthless and trenchant criticism of its opponents; to expose the liberal intelligentsia as the hypocrites they are. To do that we must fight for full freedom of expression for all viewpoints, including those of our opponents, not join in with shrill calls for their suppression.

Only in that way will we be able to defeat them ●

## Notes

1. theobjective.substack.com/p/a-more-specific-letter-on-justice.
2. jacobinmag.com/2020/07/cancel-culture-harpers-letter-free-speech.
3. thejc.com/news/uk/controversial-cartoonist-steve-bell-to-leave-the-guardian-1.501690.
4. jkrowling.com/opinions/j-k-rowling-writes-about-her-reasons-for-speaking-out-on-sex-and-gender-issues.
5. bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53276007.
6. mondoweiss.net/2020/07/cancel-culture-letter-is-about-stifling-free-speech-not-protecting-it.
7. 'Light and air of political freedom' *Weekly Worker* September 15 2010.

## Fighting fund

### More like it

What a contrast! Last week I reported that our fighting fund was standing at just £689 towards the target of £2,000, with half the month gone. But over the last seven days no less than £745 has come our way, taking the running total up to £1,434, with just over a week to go. That's more like it!

One of the main reasons for that change of fortune can be found in the fact that we've just gone through the best time of the month in one particular sense - I mean, when it comes to standing orders. This week they included regular three-figure donations from SK, KB and PM, plus £75 from MM, £50 from GB, £40 from TR and £20 from GS. Comrades GB and GS have been very recent additions to our list of monthly donors, by the way.

On top of that, we got a very handy £50 from LC via PayPal, who says he meant to pay only £25, but - never mind - he's happy for us to keep the lot this time! Two other PayPal contributors were BO and AL (£5 each). Both had set up a monthly subscription, but, when our editor asked them if they knew we weren't printing at the moment,

they both said they did, but wanted to make a small regular donation in any case.

In AL's words, "I want to provide financial support to the *Weekly Worker*." She said she was previously paying for "a range of other left publications", but then realised she always read the *Weekly Worker* online, so she thought she'd "contribute something".

She concludes by saying: "We really need to build an alternative media. I remember so many left publications (too many splinter-of-splinter groups, I fear)." But "We desperately need to build a true left media - one that tells the truth." Well spoken, comrade! It's certainly the aim of this paper to encourage genuine debate - which must mean accurately presenting the views of those we're polemicising against.

Anyway, now we're back on course, can you help us get over the line? We need another £566 in eight days ●

Robbie Rix

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to *Weekly Worker*

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Please register your interest by emailing office@cpgb.org.uk



Bordiga did battle against this approach, with its implicit focus on 'the wrong people in charge', as opposed to a recognition of how capital in fact thrives on decay and destruction. He stood far from ultra-left currents that rejected the need to seize power, but so, too, from the idea of producing a layer of 'better' or more 'democratic' administrators of capitalism. Capitalism did not produce misery and catastrophe because it was somehow incomplete or badly run. Such a stance was apparent right from his first battles in his native Naples, and indeed in his rejection of any 'culturalist' focus on raising workers in bourgeois culture.<sup>12</sup> As against the various attempts in the Socialist Party to declare the south's backwardness cause for alliances with do-gooder social reformers, moralist 'anti-corruption' forces or secularists (often meaning Freemasons), Bordiga portrayed a more complicated relationship between his city's poverty and its islands of industry - its conditions also being inseparable from those of Italian capitalism as a whole.

If such an analysis did bear even a passing resemblance with Trotsky's "combined and uneven development", Bordiga did not share the Russian's positive view of industrialisation - as expressed in his 1936 judgement that in Stalin's Soviet Union "socialism ... confront[ed] capitalism in tons of steel and concrete".<sup>13</sup> For Bordiga, this was capital accumulation, even if the capital was nationalised. But, as Goldner highlights, the Bordiga of the 1950s-60s was also centrally concerned with the countryside - considering capitalism "first of all the agrarian revolution, the capitalisation of agriculture" and the dominant trait of the Soviet *kolkhoz* the development of a petty-producer capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

This in no way contradicted his positive view of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the positions of Nikolai Bukharin, it in any case being impossible to 'build socialism' through shock industrialisation; for Bordiga, where Lenin "sacrificed" elements of socialism through the NEP in order to defend the bridgehead of the world revolution, "With Stalinism it was the international revolution that was sacrificed, intensifying the transition to large-scale industrialism" (p270).

Hence Bordiga rejected both the idea (as per Karl Korsch) that October 1917 was a merely bourgeois revolution *and* the idea that it was possible to 'build socialism' by growing a nationalised, industrial economy. Rather, the proletarian revolution at the political level had been accompanied by a bourgeois social revolution in the rural economy; the decisive thing in allowing the growth of socialist 'elements' would not be the relative weight of state or private property in Russia, but rather the progress of the socialist revolution worldwide. Even the nationalised firm built up constant capital, extracted surplus-value and, decisively, created webs of managers at the interface between firm and (global) market. This evidenced not 'state capitalism' in the sense of a final, centralised phase of rationalisation, but rather a society *in transition toward* capitalism, as both inherited feudal relations and all remaining vestiges of proletarian political power were overcome by the slow rise of an incipient, interstitial capitalism.

## Against indifferentism

Bordiga was forthright about the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism as a political force. Not only did the Comintern's Moscow-based leadership rapidly move to subvert its internationalist character - turning it into a foreign-policy organ of the Russian state and then dissolving it completely - but Stalin's

industrialisation policy was a spur to capitalist development. Yet Bordiga's position was not focused, as in the Trotskyist approach, on a critique of 'bureaucracy' (and defence of democracy) nor especially targeted against Stalin, the individual. Rather, in the developments in the USSR, Bordiga focused on the underlying economic rationale which explained the evolution of this social formation, recognising its 'revolutionary' aspect not in the existence of nationalised property, but precisely in its bourgeois character - building far more than had ever been possible under the tsarist *ancien régime*. As he explained in an extensive 1951 lecture on the Russian social formation,

Lenin glimpsed the possibility for his party to be the carrier of the proletarian political revolution throughout the world and, in the meantime, also of the capitalist social revolution in Russia: only with victories on both fronts could Russia become economically socialist. Stalin says that his party implements economic socialism in only one country (Russia); in fact, his state - and party - has been reduced to being the carrier of the only capitalist social revolution in Russia and Asia. Nevertheless, over the heads of individual men these historical forces work for the world socialist revolution.

Our evaluation of the Chinese revolution is no different. In China too, workers and peasants have struggled for a bourgeois revolution, in various phases, and they can go no farther. The alliance of the four classes - workers, peasants, intellectuals and industrialists - reproduces the alliances (fully in line with Marxism in doctrine and in tactics) in France 1789 and Germany 1848. Nevertheless, the destruction of the age-old oriental feudal structure will be an accelerator of the world proletarian revolution, on the condition that it spreads to the European and American metropolises.<sup>15</sup>

Such a statement may seem surprising from a figure best known for his strict opposition to class compromises - indeed as an ultra-left critic of the communist parties' 'popular fronts'. Indeed, we often hear from Bordiga's detractors that his intransigence was primarily of a *moral* character, at odds with real-world events and able only to proclaim its own 'purism'. Such an approach would appear to shine through in his rejection of democracy.

This owes partly, as Basso notes, to Bordiga's failure to distinguish between (a) the greater power of bourgeois democracy to build consensus and even exert repressive force, relative to tsarist or despotic regimes and (b) the need to defend the workers' movement's democratic space to organise. Bordiga moreover posited an identitarian view of the Communist Party as a force defined by its opposition to the world of bourgeois democracy - a notion radicalised by his 1960s indulgence of Jacques Camatte's notion of the party as the true human community (*Gemeinwesen*) in formation.

Yet, writing in the 1950s, Bordiga guarded against the idea that the world situation was reducible to a direct contest between socialism and capitalism, and still less that this could be identified in any given national context: any claim that there was a 'choice' between building the one or the other in Russia or China would have been thoroughly idealist. These were not countries in a 'final stage' of capitalism, as if about to turn the page to the socialist tomorrow. If anything, the formally invoked political legacy of 1917 provided a remaining 'fetter' - eventually to be cast off - on the

development of nakedly capitalist social relations. Russia had once had a 'state feudalism' and now a short-circuited 'state capitalism';<sup>16</sup> but this latter was neither unprecedented nor outside of global capitalism. It was the rising capitalist social relations which were bound to impose themselves over the state bureaucracy, rather than the other way around.

In this same vein, Bordiga resisted what he called the political "indifferentism" among his own comrades, including with reference to the "gigantic movement of emancipation" in the colonial world. At the Comintern Second Congress back in 1920 he had doubted the significance which Lenin attributed to the colonial world, yet this increasingly became part of his understanding of the Russian Revolution's own global role. He had been appalled by the demagoguery of the Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in Baku, in which Grigory Zinoviev had declared "holy war against the English and French capitalists" in a bid to seek out colonial-nationalist allies for the Russian state.

Yet, even while he maintained his critique of third-worldist ideology and Stalinised socialism, Bordiga could recognise the anti-colonial revolutions of the post-1945 period as precisely that - revolutions. It would be no more possible to build socialism in Ghana or the Congo in the 1960s than it had been in Russia in 1917. Yet these revolutions expanded the field for capitalism and the rise of the working class, and complicated the advance of US capitalism's global hegemony. For Basso, whereas in the 1950s

the link-up that the Second Comintern Congress in Moscow and Baku [in 1920] had projected between the workers of the world and the oppressed peoples was a long way off, Bordiga pointed to the extraordinary emancipatory value of the anti-colonial revolutions and uprisings for the worldwide proletarian movement. The advent of neo-colonialism ... and the current rise of former ex-colonial countries, above all China, to the rank of major capitalist powers, in no way contradict this grand internationalist strategic vision.

As Bordiga expected, the potential strength of the international proletariat has continued to increase, acquiring greatest specific weight precisely where the national-popular revolution went furthest. This has created *objectively* more favourable social-economic conditions for a new cycle of proletarian uprisings even more effectively internationalised than in 1917-1927 (p94).

Bordiga contended that even non-proletarian revolutions in the 'orient' could help create the conditions for proletarian revolutions in the west, in a unitary and global process. Already in 1926, he had insisted that Soviet state policy on even 'internal' questions should be determined by the whole Comintern, for it was but one bridgehead of revolution.

In 1953, his outlook on the necessary interconnectedness of the world revolution was further developed in 'The factors of race and nation in Marxist theory', alongside 'The multiple revolutions'. For Bordiga, it was clear that Stalin had inverted Lenin's internationalism, denying the unitary character of world capitalism and postulating the peaceful coexistence of different centres of capitalism and constituted military power. He saw this as no different from the "petty bourgeois theory on the juridical equality of nations in a capitalist regime" condemned by Lenin back in his 1920

theses on the national and colonial questions (p397).

Bordiga rejected the "metaphysical" error of seeing only a "duel pitting the pure forces of modern capital against industrial workers"; only falsely could the communist left be accused of "denying and ignoring the influence of every other class and every other factor on the social struggle". Rather, the anti-colonial revolutions were such a factor, *even* when their bourgeois character was fully recognised. Hence,

For those countries of Asia where an agrarian local economy of a patriarchal and feudal type is still predominant, the - also political - struggle of the 'four classes' must be considered an element of victory in the communist international struggle, when national and bourgeois powers arise as an immediate result, both because new areas are formed that are suitable for further socialist demands, and because of the blows struck by these insurrections and revolts against European-American imperialism.<sup>17</sup>

But, just as Lenin's strategy in 1917 was decisively premised on victory also in the west, the fate of the anti-colonial revolutions would also depend on this. Only then could the proletarians seize the means of production and

share them with the economies of the backward countries with a 'plan' that, like the one already offered by the capitalism of today, is unitary, but, unlike that one, does not seek conquest, oppression, exploitation and extermination (p401).

## Conclusion

This book is an anthology (if a necessarily incomplete one) of a life's work; and, as I have mentioned, here we chose to make minimal reference to Bordiga's most directly political activity in Italy between 1912 and 1926, favouring a focus on his post-war writings. Without doubt, connections could usefully be established between these two periods, including with regard to the role of the peasants, artisans and the majority of the members of the early PCd'I who did not work in large centres of industry.

There are also further important themes in this collection which point to Bordiga's great role as an anticipator: for instance, his writings (over 60 years ago!) on the rising importance of personal debt in sustaining the welfare of US proletarians/consumers, or indeed his text on the Watts Riots in Los Angeles in 1965, recirculated online and given a fresh lease of life by the events of recent weeks.

I ought to fully disclose my own interest in this volume: I am an editor of the Historical Materialism book series which published it. Bordiga would, as Basso readily admits, have hated to be praised for his originality; and nor would he have liked to be treated as an object of biography (I can also disclose that I am writing a biography of Bordiga). He had no time for "scholarship"; despite his own vast erudition and his *Programma Comunista* research group's *en masse* collection of data on the Soviet economy, his writings were devoid of any signals of academic propriety - even to the point that he cited "a children's comic I saw" in order to poke fun at that Marxism which courted respectability in the universities.

Sieving his works for his utterly minimal references to his own inner life or personal biography, we get the sense of a militant wracked by an

epochal defeat, yet entirely at ease with his exclusion from polite society. Even back in 1924, asked to stand for parliament after a first spell in prison, he replied that he was not interested in "cashing in" his role as a "victim".

Bordiga will never be sainted in the manner of Antonio Gramsci; and what Basso aptly calls his role as an "anticipator" of great questions posed to Marxists today (notably on automation, the reduction of working time and ecology) is perhaps rather marred by the poor circulation of these ideas at the time he was studying them. For Sandro Saggiore and Arturo Peregalli, authors of a work on the "dark [or obscure] years" between 1926 and 1945, Bordiga's retreat from political activity could be compared to Marx's own periodic turns to study in moments of defeat. Yet, whereas Marx would forever pursue a deep interest in the political developments of the workers' movement, for Bordiga nothing could be done but study the fundamental defeat that had been suffered.

For many decades, even the results of this research have had a tiny readership - and even with this collection, most comrades without library access will be waiting for the much cheaper paperback edition in 2021. But, when you do get your hands on a copy, you will be in no doubt that Bordiga is a wrongly overlooked thinker ●

David Broder

## Notes

1. It was renamed the Italian Communist Party (PCI) upon the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943; for left communists this name change illustrates the shift from the world communist party path in Italy to the formation of a 'national-popular' and patriotic Communist Party - though in truth the 'Italian' name is sporadically present throughout the party press even in the 1920s.
2. 'Bordiga and the fate of Bordigism' *Weekly Worker* December 19 2013.
3. See A Peregalli and S Saggiore *Amadeo Bordiga: la sconfitta e gli anni oscuri: 1926-1945* Milan 1998.
4. In preparation for a 1951 special issue of the PCI journal *Rinascita*, marking "Thirty years of life and struggles of the PCI", Togliatti instructed his comrades that there should be no mention of Bordiga's ideas, "even to attack them".
5. As Luigi Gerosa notes, Bordiga did not extend this principle of anonymity to writings connected to his professional work as a civil engineer, even though these did concern political questions related to urban policy. See Gerosa's *L'ingegnere fuori uso. Vent'anni di battaglie urbanistiche di Amadeo Bordiga, Napoli 1946-1966* Formia 1996.
6. See, in this collection, "Considerations on the party's organic activity when the general situation is historically unfavourable".
7. As per the title of 'Tavole immutabili della teoria comunista del partito' (Programma Comunista, 1959), the piece considered the "key" to the communist theory of the party to be the abolition of the role of the individual.
8. Luigi Gerosa, editor of Bordiga's collected *Scritti* from 1912 to 1926 (a still unfinished work), masterfully reconstructs the order in which Bordiga lay his hands on Marx's works: see his introduction to *Archivio della Fondazione Amadeo Bordiga* (Formia 2013). Gerosa also refers charmingly to the portly Bordiga heaving around a suitcase full of books and papers, which was sadly lost during a return train journey to Turin in 1951.
9. International Communist Current *Communism: not a 'nice idea' but a material necessity* London 2007.
10. Roman Rosdolsky's famous reading was published in German only in 1968 and in English a further nine years later: *The making of Marx's 'Capital'* London 1977.
11. L. Goldner, 'Amadeo Bordiga, the agrarian question and the international revolutionary movement' *Critique* No23, 1995. The version available at [cominsitu.wordpress.com/2019/01/18/communism-is-the-material-human-community-amadeo-bordiga-today-goldner-1995](http://cominsitu.wordpress.com/2019/01/18/communism-is-the-material-human-community-amadeo-bordiga-today-goldner-1995) features an interesting preface by Goldner, written for the 2002 Swedish edition - albeit one overoptimistic in growing interest in Bordiga.
12. Indeed, in the Socialist Youth before World War I, Bordiga flatly opposed the notion, derived from German Social Democracy, that the party's role lay in the cultural elevation of the masses, rather simplistically insisting that the working class would learn its own viewpoint from direct involvement in class struggles; this also set him against the ideas of Antonio Gramsci's *L'Ordine Nuovo* after 1919.
13. Cited by L Goldner *op cit*.
14. *Ibid*.
15. *Ibid* p277.
16. Bordiga does at times use the expression 'state capitalism', but in order to deride its explanatory power; he insists that state capitalism is fully capitalism, not a transition away from it or a final stage.
17. See 'The multiple revolutions' (May 1953) on p406 of this book.

## USSR

# Stalin as historian

David Brandenberger has painstakingly studied the writing and editing of the famous *Short course*. Khrushchev's account of Stalin simply wanting to feed his own personality cult is badly misleading

The 1938 *Short course on the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* was the central catechism of the Stalin-era ideological canon in the USSR and a textbook designed for mass consumption and indoctrination.<sup>1</sup> Compulsory reading for Soviet citizens of all walks of life, it was ubiquitous in the USSR between 1938 and 1956. Over 40 million copies of the book circulated in over a dozen languages, with hundreds of thousands more appearing in places as far-flung as Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Beijing, Paris, London and Rome.<sup>2</sup>

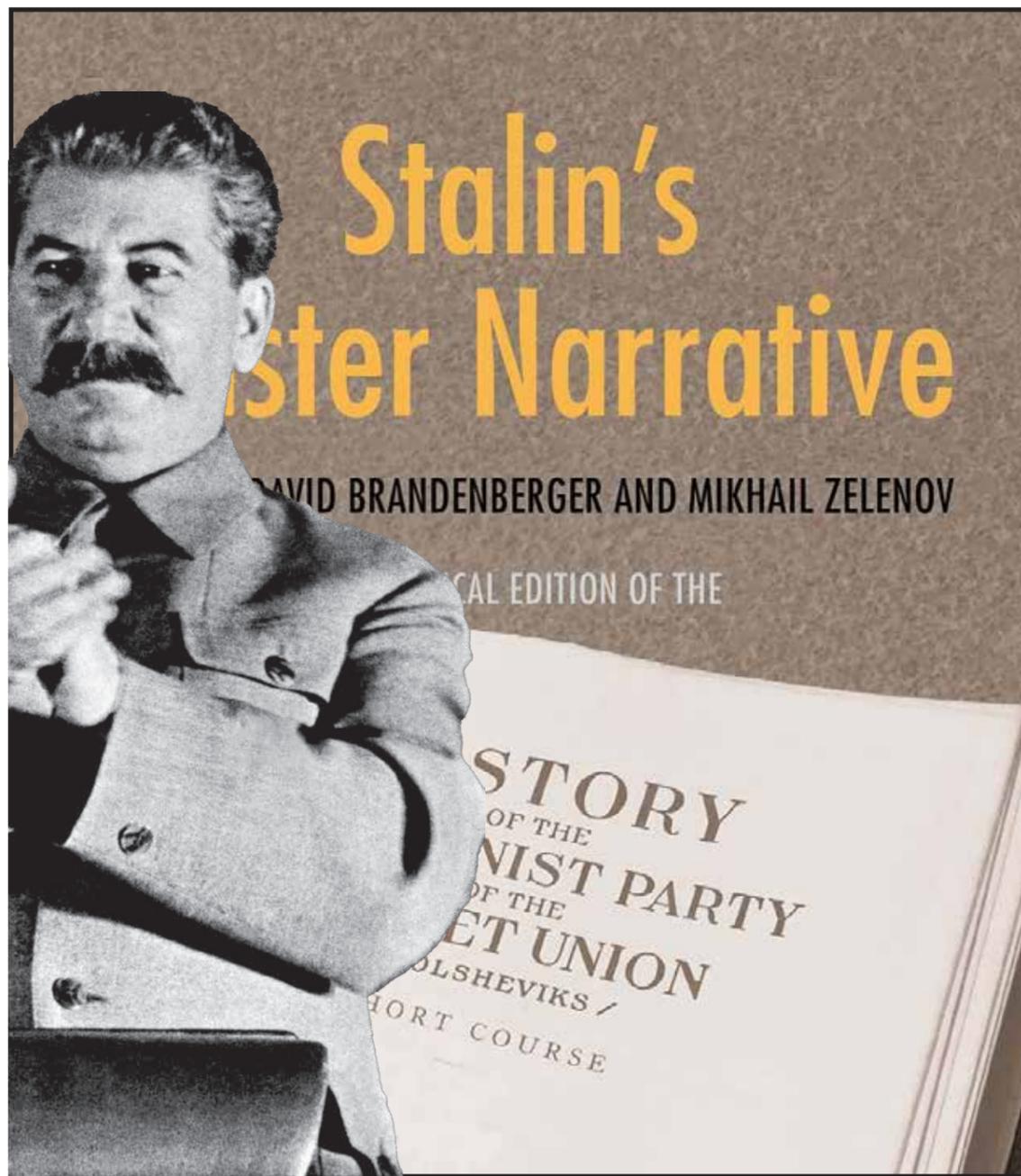
When the *Short course* first appeared in print in September 1938, it was rumoured that it had been written by Joseph Stalin himself, despite the fact that it was officially attributed to an anonymous central committee editing commission. Such an imprimatur meant that the text immediately became the centrepiece of the Bolshevik canon. Thereafter, the *Short course* remained at the centre of party ideology and propaganda until Nikita Khrushchev denounced it in his 'secret speech' to the 20th Party Congress in 1956.

In retrospect, it is hard to exaggerate the importance of the *Short course* to the 20th century history of the international, Moscow-aligned communist movement. In the USSR, the *Short course* was not only omnipresent, but it was allowed to govern all references to the Soviet historical experience in official mass culture. This was true not only in school history textbooks and academic scholarship, but in the *belles lettres* as well as on the theatrical stage and silver screen. Even the display cases of Soviet museums were arranged in conformity with the text's new storyline. The *Short course* was, in other words, the USSR's master narrative - a hegemonic statement on history, philosophy and ideology that scripted Soviet society for the better part of a generation.

Once published in the USSR, the *Short course* was then distributed elsewhere in the world by Comintern during the last years before the start of World War II.<sup>3</sup> Between 1941 and 1945, copies of the text went into battle with Red Army soldiers and Yugoslav partisans. After the war, the *Short course* came to serve as a blueprint for the building of socialist societies abroad, first in the new people's democracies of eastern Europe and then the People's Republic of China.<sup>4</sup>

Withdrawn from circulation in 1956, the *Short course* nevertheless enjoyed quite an afterlife. Even after the book disappeared from library shelves and party history syllabi, the *Short course's* structuring of Bolshevik Party and Soviet state history remained central to the ideological canon in the USSR well into the Gorbachev period. Outside the USSR, the *Short course* continued to explicitly shape party- and state-building priorities in China into the 1970s. Beyond the communist bloc, the *Short course* also enjoyed a long afterlife, playing a central role in many communist and anti-communist critiques of Stalinism. Even today, it serves in some quarters as a symbol of dogmatism and closed-minded orthodoxy.

This article surveys the findings of a new critical edition of the *Short course* entitled *Stalin's master narrative*.<sup>5</sup> A 700-page book issued by Yale University Press in 2019, it represents the results of my 12-year research collaboration with Mikhail Zelenov, a leading Russian researcher. In this article, I will



Stalin: cut, cut and cut again

provide a sketch of the *Short course's* historical and historiographical context, describe the methodology behind this new critical edition and then outline a series of key findings that allow us to identify Stalin as one of the 20th century's most influential historians of the Russian revolutionary movement, the Bolsheviks' 1917 seizure of power and the ensuing two decades of Soviet state-building.

## Secret speech

Referred to by Soviet authorities during Stalin's reign as an "encyclopaedia of Bolshevism", the *Short course* enjoyed an unchallenged ideological monopoly in the USSR between 1938 and 1956.

Although Lev Trotsky was quick to denounce the book in 1939 after its publication, perhaps the most influential critic of the *Short course* was Khrushchev, who famously assailed it, as he denounced his former mentor in his 1956 'secret speech'. Using the *Short course* to demonstrate Stalin's immodesty, Khrushchev connected many of the book's idiosyncrasies to his predecessor's ostensibly craven need for recognition and self-aggrandisement. The *Short course*, for Khrushchev, was a central element of Stalin's cult of personality, which he considered responsible for the worst excesses of the Stalin period.

Khrushchev's speech proved

formative in nearly all subsequent assessments of the book, both at home and abroad. In the USSR, Boris Ponomarev and other members of the Khrushchev-era party establishment denounced the *Short course* for the way it had ossified party history and Marxist-Leninist theory.<sup>6</sup>

Outside of the communist bloc, anti-communist Sovietologists, such as Leonard Shapiro, Paul Avrich, Sydney Ploss and Robert C Tucker, published analyses that closely followed Khrushchev's criticisms of the text in their indictment of Stalinism.<sup>7</sup> Intellectual historians such as Leszek Kołakowski and Andrzej Walicki went further, using Khrushchev's criticism to denounce the *Short course* as epitomising the totalitarian nature of Stalinist thought.<sup>8</sup>

After Khrushchev's fall from grace in 1964, Soviet historians observed an unofficial taboo in regard to critical commentary on the *Short course* for over 20 years. When this taboo was lifted after the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* programme, party historians with access to the archives - Nikolai Maslov, Dmitry Volkogonov, etc - reiterated Khrushchev's denunciation of the text as a cornerstone of Stalin's cult of personality.<sup>9</sup> Few specialists have challenged this point of view in the scholarly literature since 1991.

The brief historiographic survey

above demonstrates two things. First, it testifies to the long afterlife that the *Short course* enjoyed after 1956. Second, it reveals that much of the existing criticism of it is rather methodologically suspect, insofar as it uncritically accepts at face value Khrushchev's hyperbolic, politicised denunciation of Stalin.<sup>10</sup>

The *Short course's* problematic historiography explains part of the reason why I joined forces some 12 years ago with Mikhail Zelenov, a researcher at Moscow's former Central Party Archive, in order to write a definitive study of the book. Our second justification for this work was essentially a corollary of the first: if the *Short course* was known to have played a massive role in both the writing of Stalinist party history and in its anti-communist and anti-Stalinist critique, relatively little was known about its actual genealogy and evolution.

Zelenov and I, therefore, developed *Stalin's master narrative* as a critical edition of the *Short course* that would first contextualise the text within the Stalinist 1930s and then quantify and classify Stalin's editorial interventions into the history itself. In so doing, it would resolve once and for all precisely what Stalin had interpolated into and excised from this all-important book. Successful analysis of the *Short course*, in turn, would allow *Stalin's master narrative* to characterise with

## Editor-in-chief

The archival record demonstrates that the *Short course's* origins date back to the late 1920s, when the party leadership expressed frustration over the lack of a single, official line on party history. Stalin spurred this 'search for a usable past' forward in 1931 with his famous letter to the party's ideological journal *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia* [*Proletarian Revolution*], in which he complained about the "scholastic" nature of existing party histories and called for a new, more approachable catechism for mass indoctrination and mobilisation.

Despite Stalin's personal involvement in this 'search for a usable past', it took party historians the better part of six years to develop an even minimally acceptable party history. And even then, when party historians Yemelian Yaroslavsky and Petr Pospelov finally delivered to Stalin the page proofs of their prototype *Short course* in April 1938, the general secretary declared the text to be unsatisfactory. Refusing to authorise the book's release or return it to its authors for further revision, Stalin instead decided to personally rewrite vast stretches of the *Short course* that summer before its publication in September 1938.

Stalin's editorial revisions to the text concern both style and content. His stylistic interventions are best thought of as consisting of several different categories. First, it is important to note that Stalin was a compulsive editor who read reports, draft legislation and even published books with a pencil or chemical crayon in hand, proofing as he went. He was pedantic about terminology and preferred formal, sober writing. He disliked flowery language, as well as literary devices like foreshadowing.

Second, Stalin was a propagandist and populariser at heart and was perennially concerned about the clarity of writing intended for a mass readership. In regard to the *Short course*, he demanded not only that the book be clearly written, but also that it be tightly structured around a handful of key themes. This led him to strike huge amounts of detail, lengthy digressions and even entire subsections from Yaroslavsky's and Pospelov's prototype, in order to foreground what he felt were the most important priorities of party history.

Third, if Stalin was concerned about the clarity and agenda of the *Short course*, he was even more concerned about its central theme - its red thread, as it were. When Yaroslavsky and Pospelov delivered their prototype to him in April 1938, they had structured the text around themes that he had sanctioned earlier in 1937 - particularly the party leadership's alliance with the worker-peasant masses against the enemies of the revolution. When Stalin rewrote the *Short course*, he deprioritised the struggle with the opposition in order to highlight other themes. Stressing the vanguard nature of the Bolshevik Party, he reduced the movement's reliance on the worker-peasant masses.

Equally important to Stalin in 1938 was the party's struggle to build 'socialism in one country' and unify Soviet society. Although this ideological priority had been present in Yaroslavsky's and Pospelov's prototype text, Stalin now made socialism in one country such a central element in the text that it subordinated the struggle with the opposition and the revolution itself.

Finally and most surprisingly, Stalin was so committed to celebrating the vanguard nature of the party and the primacy of Soviet state-building that he even reduced his own role in the historical narrative - something I will return to below.

## Case studies

Due to space limitations, my survey of Stalin's content-oriented editorial revisions focuses on six major case studies rather than a comprehensive accounting of the entire volume.

### 1. October 1917

Stalin's understanding of 1917 underwent a profound transformation over time. During the early years of the Soviet experiment in the 1920s, Stalin espoused a conventionally Leninist view of the revolution, in which domestic events were contextualised within internationalist ideals and a focus on party leadership was complemented by grassroots worker-peasant voluntarism. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Stalin's early analysis was his insistence that nationality be considered alongside class as a key source of revolutionary consciousness. Yaroslavsky and Pospelov described the history of 1917 in pretty much this way, when they developed their *Short course* prototype in 1937-38.

When Stalin turned to editing the book that summer, however, he rewrote the narrative, transforming this revolution of the workers of the world into an almost exclusively Russian revolution - realised from above by the central Bolshevik command. Activism - whether on the part of workers, soldiers, peasants, women, youth or the non-Russian minorities - was downgraded or deleted. Local party organisations were likewise left to languish. Proletarian internationalism and the larger global context of 1917 gave way to the autarky of socialism in one country and the vanguard of the central party apparatus.<sup>11</sup>

### 2. Soviet internationalism

Internationalism was a core element of early Bolshevik propaganda and, despite the leadership's growing pragmatism after the October 1917 revolution, the concept remained key to party self-representation. The prototype *Short course* prepared by Yaroslavsky and Pospelov for Stalin's vetting contained many of the traditional hallmarks of Soviet internationalism and spent a considerable amount of time detailing the global context for the October 1917 revolution and socialist construction that followed. The international revolutionary movement received considerable attention as well, as did the Comintern and its leadership of foreign communist parties. Finally, the conspiracies that threatened the survival of the Bolshevik Party and Soviet state were given a global

dimension by linking them to the international agents of imperialism and the world capitalist system.

Stalin rejected this internationalist narrative and reframed much of the history of the party and state in *sui generis* terms, stressing the 'Russianness' of the revolution and the autarchic nature of socialist construction that followed, in line with his doctrine of socialism in one country.<sup>12</sup> This turn away from the global nature of the revolutionary movement was matched by a radical reduction in the amount of attention cast toward the Comintern. Even the international dimensions of the struggle with the opposition, which had been one of the defining characteristics of party history in the prototype text, were revised by Stalin's red pen. Although Stalin did not entirely eliminate the connection of domestic anti-party conspiracies to foreign imperialists abroad, he reduced the level of this international coordination - something that rendered the oppositionists more home-grown, isolated and disorganised, and the nature of the party's struggle more domestic than international.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. National question

Nationality policy and inter-ethnic relations were considered Stalin's forte in the early Bolshevik movement and he regularly asserted in public after 1917 that the revolution was emancipatory not just in class terms, but in ethnolnational terms as well.

In 1938, however, a combination of factors led Stalin to downgrade the historical priority of the national question. More important, in Stalin's eyes, was the construction of a streamlined, unified historical narrative that would reinforce the authority and agency of the central party apparatus. In other words, Stalin had decided that the *Short course* was not meant to tell the story of a multicultural struggle for a diverse, egalitarian society. Instead, it was to celebrate the determination of a monolithic, vanguard party to overthrow the old regime and build socialism in one country.<sup>14</sup>

### 4. Great Terror

The period in which Yaroslavsky and Pospelov developed their prototype *Short course* for Stalin, between 1937 and 1938, was the height of the purges. As such, the prototype narrative turned out to be an absolutely paranoid, claustrophobic vision, in which domestic oppositionists and capitalist holdovers colluded with foreign imperialists to undermine the construction of socialism in the USSR. Plots and dirty dealing abounded from 1917 forward. According to Yaroslavsky and Pospelov, by 1937-38 a massive omnipresent conspiracy united an unlikely alliance of leftists, rightists, domestic nationalists and foreign imperialists against the USSR.

Although Stalin had supervised the construction of this narrative, he rejected it during the summer of 1938 - something that I think indicates that he was beginning to have second thoughts about the Great Terror. As Stalin edited the *Short course*, he reduced the attention that the text afforded to this omnipresent conspiracy. He disentangled domestic oppositionists from domestic capitalist holdovers, denying opponents like Nikolai Bukharin and Alexei Rykov direct influence over groups like the kulaks. At the same time, Stalin reduced the level of contact and coordination between domestic oppositionists and foreign imperialists abroad - changes that reduced the coherence of their overall conspiracy.

In the end, these changes transformed the prototype's threat of an all-powerful, imminent, existential, omnipresent conspiracy into a less concrete, more abstract menace. Stalin also rolled back the immediacy of the conspiracy by decoupling it from specific crises that the USSR was facing and by asserting that any terroristic plans already in motion had been arrested by the purges. In so doing, Stalin reduced the primacy

of the party's struggle with its enemies and reoriented the narrative around efforts to build socialism and unify Soviet society.<sup>15</sup>

### 5. Winds of war

Stalin's revisions to the text regarding the impending threat of war during the late 1930s were similarly consequential. Yaroslavsky and Pospelov had designed their prototype party history to reflect an existential sense of danger to the USSR and the world socialist movement. The great depression was said to have panicked the capitalist countries into brutally suppressing working class activists at home, while plotting a new imperialist war against the USSR.

Stalin reversed this argument, as he revised the *Short course*. Stressing the USSR's commitment to peace and national defence, he argued that Soviet society was much less subject to the threat of impending invasion than Yaroslavsky and Pospelov had suggested. According to Stalin, although a second world war *had already begun*, this was a war between capitalist powers that did not pose an imminent, existential threat to the USSR. This assessment - likely informed by the Spanish civil war, the Austrian *Anschluss* and the Sudetenland crisis - probably left Stalin feeling ambivalent about the need for a collective security agreement with Great Britain and France and laid the groundwork for a non-aggression treaty with Nazi Germany a year later.

### 6. Personality cult

When Khrushchev denounced Stalin during the 20th Party Congress in 1956, he noted that his predecessor had had the *Short course* written in such a way as to exaggerate his personal role in the text. This contention quickly became popular both at home in the USSR and abroad, as it seemed to confirm all the egotistical excesses of the personality cult.<sup>16</sup>

Yaroslavsky and Pospelov's prototype textbook generally conformed to Khrushchev's characterisation of party history under Stalin, insofar as it attributed a vast amount of historical agency to the general secretary. Particularly after Lenin's death in 1924, the general secretary is credited with almost everything of any significance in the affairs of party and state.

When Stalin turned to vetting the prototype *Short course*, however, he objected to the centrality of his biography within the text. Evidence suggests that Stalin regarded his personality cult - as well as the one celebrating Lenin - to be a necessary evil of sorts: a concession to an ill-educated Soviet population that was unable to make sense of unadulterated Marxism-Leninism on its own. Indeed, Stalin believed that his role in Soviet mass propaganda was to personify the party vanguard that was to lead the USSR forward to socialism. In other words, it was not meant to be a *personality cult* at all - his role in history was to embody the wisdom of the party leadership.<sup>17</sup>

For that reason, during his editing of the *Short course*, Stalin repeatedly reassigned the historical agency that Yaroslavsky and Pospelov had given him in their prototype text to either Lenin or the central party apparatus, elevating particularly the latter institution at his own expense. These editorial interventions resulted in the excision of passages, paragraphs and entire pages from the manuscript. Ultimately, Stalin removed so much about himself from the *Short course* that Pospelov wrote to him in August 1938 in order to protest at the scale of the deletions.

This is not to say, of course, that when the *Short course* appeared in print, it had been entirely purged of its hagiographic commentary on Stalin. Even after such extensive editing, the text remained a component within the general secretary's personality cult. But Stalin's editing of the book reveals that he intended his cult to do more than merely indulge his ego. It was intended to serve an instrumental, mobilisational purpose by deploying the general

secretary as the personification of the Soviet experiment.

## Conclusions

Stalin's revisions discussed in the six case studies above demonstrate the scale and magnitude of his work as editor-in-chief. By extension, they reveal the *Short course* to have served as Stalin's master narrative for understanding party history, the revolution, the origins of the Soviet state and the construction of socialism in one country.

It is important to note here that many other historical junctures and thematic priorities affected by Stalin's editing remain to be analysed by other scholars and activists. Much of the early revolutionary period - from the 1912 Prague conference to the confusion within Bolshevik ranks in March 1917 - has yet to be fully investigated and integrated into the literature. So too does a proper assessment of issues concerning the *Short course*'s treatment of broader subjects, such as class, gender, nationality, youth, ethnicity, regionalism and international affairs.

This article contends that Stalin's editing of the *Short course* reveals the general secretary circa 1938 to have thought of party history in almost exclusively domestic, autarchic, vanguardist terms. Under the influence of Stalin's red pen, earlier historical emphases on class and worker-peasant activism, national liberation, socialist internationalism and the struggle with the opposition gave way to the all-important struggle to build socialism in one country.

This article has also contended that, although Stalin ought to be regarded as one of the most influential historians of the Russian revolutionary movement and the origins of Soviet power, he did not - as Khrushchev, Tucker and others have alleged - rewrite party history as his own autobiography. This is not to deny, of course, that Stalin was a shameless narcissist. Indeed, he may well have enjoyed many of the hallelujahs sung in his name. But in his editing of this all-important text he intentionally reassigned some of the agency given to him in Yaroslavsky's and Pospelov's prototype in order to make the *Short course* more of a history of the Bolshevik Party and Soviet state than an autobiography of himself.

Controversy remains about what Stalin's editing of the *Short course* suggests about his identity as a Marxist and a follower of Lenin. This is not a new debate - scholars and activists have long differed over whether Stalinism should be considered an extension of Leninism, characterised by ideological continuity, or whether it should be considered to represent a break with Marxist-Leninist traditions.

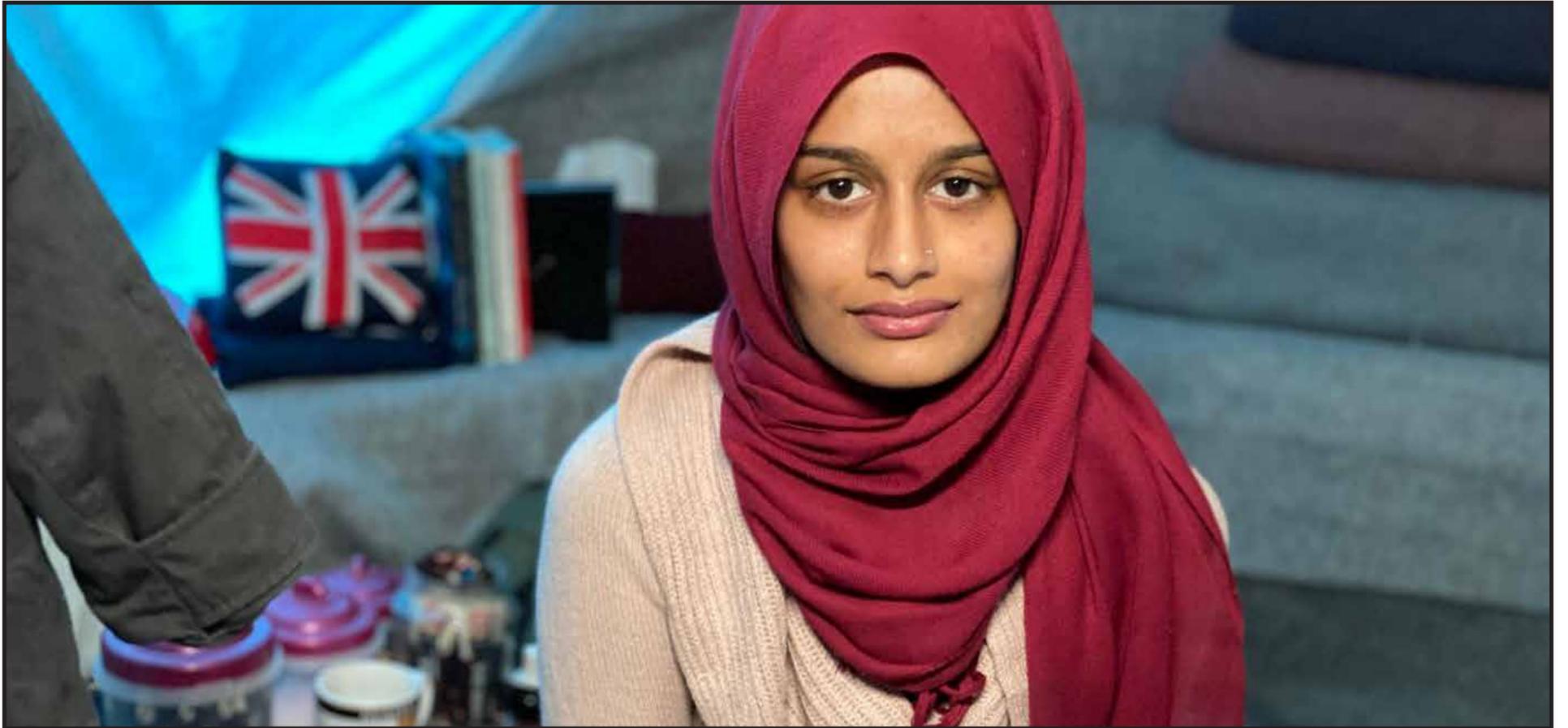
I think the *Short course* demonstrates Stalin to have been a Marxist true believer and to have considered himself to be operating in conformity with the precepts of Leninism. Stalin's revisions to the *Short course* reveal him to have used the book to essentialise Marxism-Leninism's broad and diverse tradition of thought into a handful of key concepts - vanguardism, socialism in one country, the struggle with the opposition - that he believed were necessary to unify and mobilise Soviet society.<sup>18</sup> In the process of this editing, Stalin at least temporarily subordinated key themes - most notably proletarian internationalism - to the more statist priorities of state. At the same time, he probably also exaggerated other elements of Leninism, particularly concerning the party vanguard as an agent of revolutionary change. In my view, the general secretary's essentialisation of key Marxist-Leninist principles rendered Stalinism more dogmatic, rigid and schematic than other elements of the broader tradition, but it did not justify his expulsion from the canon entirely.

That said, as noted above, there is much left to do in order to fully appreciate Stalin's ideological interventions into the *Short course*.

Zelenov and I chose to publish our research as a critical edition rather than a more narrow, monographic study, in order to enable the book's readership to interact directly with the historical record itself.<sup>19</sup> In so doing, we hope to return ideology to centre stage in the ongoing study of Stalinism ●

## Notes

1. *Istoriia Vsesoiuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii (bol'shevikov): Kratkii kurs* Moscow 1938.
2. The most famous English-language edition of the *Short course* - published in Moscow in 1939 and then in London, New York, San Francisco, etc., was assembled by a team of translators, including CPGB members John Evans and JR Campbell - the latter a correspondent and later editor of the CPGB's *Daily Worker*.
3. See, for example, 'Preparations for the mass distribution of the *Short course* on the history of the CPSU (B) in the USA' (co-edited with MV Zelenov) *Istoricheskiy arkhiv* (Historical archive) 5 (2013), pp137-46.
4. H Li, 'Instilling Stalinism in Chinese Party members: absorbing Stalin's *Short course* in the 1950s' in T Bernstein and H Li (eds) *China learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-present* Plymouth 2010, pp107-30.
5. D Brandenberger and M Zelenov (eds) *Stalin's master narrative: a critical edition of the Short course on the history of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks)* New Haven 2019.
6. BN Ponomarev et al (eds) *Istoriia KPSS* (History of the CPSU) Moscow 1962, p506.
7. L Shapiro, 'A new history - a new mythology' *Problems of communism* Vol 9, No1 (1960), pp58-61; L Shapiro *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* New York 1960, pp471-72; P Avrich, 'The *Short course* and Soviet historiography' *Political Science Quarterly* Vol 75, No4 (1960), pp541-43; SI Ploss, 'The Bolshevik past as the first secretary likes it' *World Politics* Vol 13, No1 (1960-61), p79; SI Ploss, 'Soviet party history: the Stalinist legacy' *Problems of communism* Vol 21, No4 (1972), pp35-36; R Tucker *Stalin in power: the revolution from above* New York 1990, pp532-37; see also R Tucker *Stalin as revolutionary: a study in history and personality, 1879-1929* New York 1973.
8. L Kolakowski *Main currents of Marxism* Oxford 2005, p863 (the first edition of this book was published in English and Polish in 1978); A Walicki *Marxism and the leap to the kingdom of freedom: the rise and fall of the communist utopia* Stanford 1995, pp431-43.
9. NN Maslov, 'The *Short course* on the history of the ACP(B) - an encyclopaedia of Stalin's cult of personality', *Questions in CPSU History* Vol 11 (1988), pp51-67; DA Volkogonov *Triumph and tragedy: a political portrait of IV Stalin* Moscow 1989, Vol 1, pp216-17; Vol 2, pp143-48.
10. Until now, only a handful of scholars have looked carefully at the archival documents associated with the *Short course* since their declassification in the 1990s. See F Bettanin *The myth factory: history and politics in the Stalinist USSR* Naples 1996, pp151-78; E van Ree *The political thought of Joseph Stalin: a study in twentieth century revolutionary patriotism* London 2002, pp165, 309-10; R Service *Stalin: a political biography* Cambridge Mass 2004, p361; S Davies, 'Stalin and the making of the leader cult in the 1930s' in B Apor et al (eds) *The leader cult in communist dictatorship: Stalin and the eastern bloc* Basingstoke 2005, pp29-46; D Brandenberger *Propaganda state in crisis: Soviet ideology, indoctrination and terror under Stalin, 1928-1941* New Haven 2011.
11. D Brandenberger, 'Stalin's rewriting of 1917' *Russian Review* Vol 76, No4 (2017), pp667-89.
12. It is worth mentioning that Stalin's shift to a more particularistic, 'Russian' revolutionary paradigm should be understood as representing a more statist, statist set of priorities rather than a national-Bolshevik, Russian-nationalist agenda. Stalin did not allow the *Short course* to traffic in ethnocentric, nationalist sloganeering in 1938 despite the presence of Russo-centrism elsewhere in pre-war Soviet mass mobilisational propaganda.
13. D Brandenberger, 'The fate of inter-war Soviet internationalism: a case study of the editing of Stalin's 1938 *Short course* on the history of the ACP(B)' *Revolutionary Russia* Vol 29, No1 (2016), pp1-27.
14. D Brandenberger and MV Zelenov, 'Stalin's answer to the nationality question: a case study in the editing of the 1938 *Short course*', *Slavic Review* Vol 73, No4 (2014), pp859-80.
15. D Brandenberger, 'Ideological zig zag: official explanations for the Great Terror, 1936-1938' in J Harris (ed) *The anatomy of terror: political violence under Stalin* Oxford 2013, pp143-60.
16. D Brandenberger, 'Stalin and the muse of history: the dictator and his critics on the editing of the 1938 *Short course*' in V Tismaneanu and B Iacob (eds) *Ideological storms: intellectuals and the totalitarian temptation* Budapest 2019, pp41-61.
17. D Brandenberger, 'Stalin as symbol: a case study of the cult of personality and its construction' in S Davies and J Harris (eds) *Stalin: a new history* Cambridge 2005, pp249-70.
18. Several key elements of Marxism-Leninism associated with Stalin - particularly his thesis of 'socialism in one country' - turn out to stem from Lenin and other earlier authors within the Marxist canon. See E van Ree *Boundaries of utopia, imagining communism from Plato to Stalin* New York 2015.
19. Zelenov and I have also published a volume of documents on the assembly and editing of the *Short course*: MV Zelenov and D Brandenberger (eds) *Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(B): Teksti ego istoriia* (The 'Short course' on the history of the ACP(B): the text and its history), Moscow 2014, Vol 1.

**LAW**

Smuggled herself to Syria when she was just a schoolgirl

# Woman bites dog

What was that about ‘western values’? Paul Demarty looks at the Shamima Begum case

**W**hen the court of appeal ordered the government to allow Shamima Begum to defend her citizenship in court, it provided one of the only bright spots in this otherwise dismal saga.

Begum was one of three friends who absconded from Bethnal Green in east London to Syria back in 2015, intending to marry some of the “young lions” flocking to Islamic State to fight for the ‘Caliphate’. Last year, after the IS territorial entity was finally wiped out, she identified herself to a journalist in a refugee camp in north-east Syria. She was more than eight months pregnant, and wanted to return to Britain. The government stripped her of citizenship, in an act of - let us say - dubious legality, and has attempted throughout to make it effectively impossible for Begum to mount a challenge.

After the court of appeal’s decision, Maya Foa of the legal charity, Reprieve, wrote:

The government now faces a choice. It can fight for its disintegrating policy against lengthening legal odds, while the camps holding British prisoners edge closer to total collapse. Or it can conduct a much needed reassessment of its approach, in the manner advised by security and law enforcement experts, as well as many of its own MPs.<sup>1</sup>

No prizes for guessing which road the government is taking. The home office immediately applied for leave to appeal, meaning the story will drag on for a lot longer yet (assuming the courts grant its wish). Procedural limbo, in this case, has a real human cost: after all, Begum is still in al-Roj camp, where conditions are as dreadful as you would expect (her baby died of a lung infection weeks after being born), and the danger always exists of a new wave of barbaric warfare, or an outbreak of disease, or some other disaster. Even the Special Immigration Appeals Commission, whose judgment

Begum’s lawyers were appealing against, was forced to concede that life in al-Roj probably violated article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

The legal basis for the government’s stripping of her citizenship has always been dubious. Governments are forbidden under international law from making people stateless, which is the main obstacle to revoking citizenship. The home office argues that, since Begum’s parents hail from Bangladesh, she was in principle a citizen of that country. Of course, the Bangladeshi government protested, and so are hardly riding to the rescue; it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, were the government to *win* in its endless struggle, Begum would in practice have been made stateless.

The balance of legal opinion *seems* to favour Begum, although artificial judgments are always possible. Indeed, there has been something desultory and low-effort about the home office’s approach to all this - a whiff of ‘will this do?’ It is difficult to avoid the impression that the much-trumpeted ‘security risks’ posed by this young woman are not really the point; instead, it offers an opportunity for posturing - against Muslim ‘death cults’ and politically correct judges. Dozens of ex-jihadis have been allowed to return to England, so presumably one more is not going to make that much of a difference or cause the prison system to collapse. Kicking up a fuss about this one in particular is an excellent offering for little-England chauvinists, given the notoriety of Begum and her two friends since the start of their fateful journey five years ago.

## False attraction

That notoriety deserves further scrutiny. There was nothing terribly surprising about young men sneaking off to fight for the Caliphate - after all, we have had domestic Islamist terrorism in this country already, and those who read up on the perpetrators (or merely watch the *Four lions* movie) will know that training abroad

is part of the life cycle for many of these men; the story that hundreds of them were making the trip to Syria, as they might once have done to Chechnya or Afghanistan, was a problem for the spooks but a little bit ‘dog bites man’.

Not so the three girls. These products of a thriving metropolis - born to not especially religious parents and educated in mainstream secular schools - had decided before their 16th birthdays to commit their lives to the exact opposite. They would place themselves in a very carefully designed separate female sphere, in a land ruined by grinding civil war, governed by a theocratic paramilitary organisation that triumphantly advertised its mercilessness.

The girls’ families hoped that they might have gone to retrieve a friend of theirs who had already gone, but nothing of the sort transpired. The girls were naive, perhaps, in their assessments of the chances of success - but not about the nature of the project they were joining. Beheadings were an attraction, not a worry. Here were people *actually fighting back*, unlike the ‘respectable’ imams of east London (or even the more ‘radical’ fundamentalist groupings such as Hizb ut-Tahrir). They were going to build a new Salafist theocracy in the ruins of Ba’athism, and knew very well that a woman’s life would differ markedly from that in the liberal west. (Securocratic leaks to the press claim that Begum herself gained a fearsome reputation as an AK-47-toting enforcer of IS’s purity codes.)

To be sure, in some respects, the story was easy to swallow. Begum did the chauvinist right a favour by having brown skin and a Bengali name, thus allowing the framing of the story in terms of the obedience (or otherwise) of British Muslims to ‘our’ values, along with the related moral panics about Islamist influence in municipal government in east London. Only up to a point, however: we have already noted that the three were part of mainstream society, not

hidden away from it by families at war with ‘our values’. Perhaps those values are part of the problem - or, at least, the obvious hypocrisy of them.

The essence of the mainstream western critique - if that is the right word - of IS is that it openly gloried in gratuitous, spectacular bloodshed; but it is unavoidably true that the full, bloody tally of IS exploits amounts to just a tiny fraction of the death and misery unleashed in Iraq since the 2003 invasion (never mind the carnage of the Syrian civil war, in which the US and UK played a more discreet, but highly destructive, role). It is no surprise that the rightwing media howled with outrage when Begum drew comparisons between the US bombardment of Raqqa and terror attacks in the UK - after all, *our* bombs only kill terrorists, don’t they? ‘Western values’, it seems, include killing people in large numbers only from a suitably polite distance - not to mention spouting rhetoric about liberty and the rule of law, even as our military misadventures push ever greater expanses of the Muslim world into warlordism and anarchy.

The return of Begum is so fiercely resisted because it is the return of the repressed - the evidence of the *non*-evidence of western virtue. She is one index of the collapse of credibility of the governing-elite ideology of the last 40 years - neoliberal ‘internationalism’, whereby barriers to free trade were to be torn down, and liberal-constitutional regimes allowed to grow in tandem, producing cosmopolitan middle classes the world over. This idea is comprehensively discredited among the general population: one result is votes for people like Donald Trump, who dispense with the niceties of spreading democracy and openly avow their thirst for vengeance as a *casus belli* when it comes to that. (“We are not nation-building: we are killing terrorists,” Trump said, when justifying yet another futile troop surge in Afghanistan.)

Between the revanchist

chauvinism of Trump, Boris Johnson and co, and the attraction for some Muslims of the most nihilistic forms of armed struggle for the *ummah*, we have two forms of recognition of this exhaustion. They are both locked into the cycle of failed liberalisation and conservative backlash. That is the tragedy of Begum’s case: despite the stridency and ultra-violent excess of IS’s praxis, it is in the end a *false* alternative to the hypocritical liberal internationalism of the late and post-cold war western bourgeoisie - an Islamist ‘internationalism’ that considers most Muslims to be apostates deserving of death, never mind everyone else.

Though the US and its allies must take primary responsibility for the rise of IS, through its military disasters and its sponsorship of reactionary clericalist regimes in the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, the attraction it had to sections of thinking youth is in small part down to the failings of the left: for abandoning our own explicitly socialist internationalism for various opportunistic, get-rich-quick schemes over the years; and for failing to turn mass sentiment against the Iraq and subsequent wars into lasting parties of extreme opposition to the bourgeois state.

But we have short-term responsibilities in this case too: we demand that Shamima Begum is permitted to contest the revocation of her citizenship, which itself was an abomination; that the British state ceases to use this arbitrary mechanism to leave people stateless (as it has in the case of over 150 others); and that - if Begum is to face trial for any crimes - she does so in an open court before a jury. Otherwise, the next time you hear a Tory MP lecturing Putin or Xi about the rule of law, remember this repellent attempt to make her an unperson ●

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## Notes

1. theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/17/shamima-begum-strip-citizenship-desert-prisons.

## CENTENARY

# Mobilising the unemployed

**T**he boom after World War I was short-lived. In the 12 months from September 1920, unemployment rose from 250,000 to two million. Soon after its foundation at the July 31-August 1 1920 Unity Convention, the CPGB instructed members to participate in and attempt to lead the struggles of the unemployed. The results were to be dramatic and inspiring.

History is a contested arena, however - and not simply between our class and the ruling elite. If we move on a decade or so, for instance, many comrades in our movement opted for the beggar bowl-type, quiescent participants in the 1936 Jarrow Crusade as the iconic manifestation of the unemployed. Too many now accept the establishment's lying narrative and unwittingly assist the attempt to expunge from history the genuinely mass, communist-led actions of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, for instance. In stark contrast, the tiny and dismally ineffectual Jarrow stunt has been embraced, officially lauded and actively manufactured by the establishment as "the epitome of the plight of the depressed areas" in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>



It was not only men who faced unemployment

The organisers of Jarrow unequivocally rejected the offer of Wal Hannington, the communist leader of the NUWM, to merge with the north-east contingent of its sixth national hunger march, partially because of their fears of being

associated with the militant actions of that movement and the 'extreme' political stance of its leaders. Also, the apolitical nature of the Jarrow platform dictated a 'go it alone' stance.

In contrast to NUWM demands,

which were national and addressed the needs of unemployed workers across the country, Jarrow represented a sectional response framed to bring to the attention of the authorities the dire state of the town after the closure of its largest employer, Palmer's shipyard. It was a plea for Jarrow-specific measures of relief and aid.<sup>2</sup> As such, as much as we empathise with the despair and desperation that sparked the protest, the Jarrow demands were narrow, inward-looking and pro-establishment. For instance, as part of their official welcome in London, the Jarrow marchers were placed at an advantageous location opposite the Duke of York steps, when King Edward VIII passed down the Mall: they "showed their enthusiasm by cheering lustily", according to a special branch report.

The contrast with the NUWM - and the reception its marchers routinely received from the ruling class and their thugs in blue - could not have been starker.

But back to the newly formed CPGB. Its weekly paper carried many accounts of the fruits of this inspiring work, including the two below ●

William Sarsfield

## Coventry: a soviet formed

### The Communist October 7 1920

Comrade I Stewart, Communist Party organiser for the Midlands, is doing good work at Coventry. At the request of the Unemployed Workers' Committee he has been addressing huge meetings of unemployed, and his suggestions have already led to practical action which is having a marked effect on the town authorities.

At the head of 2,000 men he marched to the Deasy works and demanded to be allowed to address the men still at work there. Opposition was useless and so, at the head of his army, Stewart marched into the works and held a joint meeting of employed and unemployed. The manager wished to speak first, but the meeting insisted on him waiting until Stewart had finished.

Stewart told them that unemployment could only be finally abolished by the abolition of the capitalist system, but suggested as an immediate step that the men already employed should reduce their hours of labour until all the unemployed were absorbed.

Tom Dingley also spoke,<sup>3</sup> and then

the manager said that the firm would do all in its power to do something for them. Stewart stated, both here and at other factories that were visited, that the men were coming back again and again until they could control the entire factories.

During the weekend, more large meetings have been held at various works. Complete order is being maintained by a police force formed from the workers themselves, and the ordinary police are conspicuous by their absence. The mayor has called a town's meeting to deal with the situation and to consider the method whereby the growing volume of unemployment prevalent in this city may be overcome, and a full living wage be assured to all citizens willing to render service to the community.

The men are in no mood to consider proposals of the usual charity dole order, and their demands are of a practical and far-reaching character, as embodied in the following resolutions:

- Seeing that everyone willing

to render useful service to the community has the right to enjoy all the benefits won by labour from nature, we demand that all workers shall have maintenance, whether working or not.

- We demand, as a practical solution to unemployment, that the civic authorities invite the Russian trade delegation to meet them in order to discover what commodities Russia is prepared to purchase from Coventry.

- We demand that a factory be taken in the interests of the community to produce such commodities, the workers to elect their own management.

- Further, we demand that the civic authority uses its power to prevent private interests hindering the work of the Workers and Soldiers Council.

Comrade Emery has been elected secretary of the local soviet, and comrade Stewart has been instructed to assist the Unemployed Workers Committee to the best of his ability.

The old features of pre-war

unemployed demonstrations are entirely absent from these manifestations. Here is no cringing body of half-starved men begging for bread or, on the other hand, a crowd of potential rioters out for loot. It is an ordered demonstration by intelligent, organised workers that will not starve at the behest of capitalism; but that, if production cannot be carried on by the present owners of factories and plants without inflicting suffering on large masses of the community, the workers can and will. Other towns, please copy.

Let those workers still in employment resolutely refuse to work a single minute over the time necessary to ensure employment for all. Control production instead of being controlled by it. If a single man in any industry seeks employment and cannot obtain it, it is a reflection on all his fellow workers.

The workers can stop unemployment; it is clear the capitalists cannot. It is up to the workers to make the attempt ●

## London unemployed movement

### The Communist December 9 1920

To the Islington Unemployed Relief Committee is to be given the credit of starting the direct-action campaign of the unemployed, which has now assumed such large proportions in London and the neighbourhood.

The committee, when first formed, found itself faced with the difficulty of obtaining suitable accommodation for holding its meetings, or for storing and distributing the food presented by shopkeepers in the borough.

The South East Library in Essex Road, which during the war had been used by the food ministry for controlled purposes, was empty, and seemed an admirable place for the purpose. So the committee took possession and there the Islington unemployed still remain. Apart from a summons for obstruction by taking a collection with a box, and another for chalking the pavement, there has been no trouble with the police.

The Islington unemployed are well organised. A demonstration recently to

the Guardian was lined up in military formation - ie, platoons of 20 with a sergeant in charge of each. These sergeants were elected from the men themselves, and are ex-servicemen.

In Edmonton, Tottenham, Walthamstow, Hackney, Southwark, Camberwell, Peckham and St Pancras similar movements are now organised. Town halls, public libraries and empty houses have been seized in all these places. A central committee, composed of delegates from the different localities in and around London, now meets at the library in Essex Road, Islington, daily.

All this is not to say that a revolution is in progress. Nevertheless, it is a very good sign that the unemployed have determined to make their discontent open and organised, instead of keeping it secret and shameful. Already local authorities have been compelled to take steps to remedy the existing distress far beyond what they would have taken, had the unemployed remained quiescent. They will be wise if they break through their present

powers entirely and throw the whole blame on the government. They will be lucky if they escape being compelled to do so.

In all these movements the active spirits have been communists, themselves unemployed. They know how impossible it is to solve unemployment while the capitalist system remains, but they realise also the necessity for organised action in order to drive the lesson home, and to ensure that something, at any rate, is done to alleviate immediate distress. Communist branches everywhere should neglect no opportunity of giving support and guidance to the unemployed movement. In most localities they are already doing so.

The day of ragged processions is over. The demands now being made are put forward by men who are resolute to redress their wrongs because they have not lost their self-respect. They are learning by bitter experience the communist lesson that only in a new order of society will unemployment be finally abolished. They are learning,

too, how futile capitalism is to touch even the fringe of the problem ●

## Notes

1. J Stevenson, C Cook *The slump: society and politics during the depression* London 1979, p184. The authors regard this as "rather curious", given that the Jarrow crusade was "one of the smallest hunger marches" to make its way to the capital in the 1930s.
2. The Jarrow petition was presented to the House of Commons by Ellen Wilkinson, who said: "I beg to ask leave to present to this honourable house the petition of Jarrow praying for assistance in the resuscitation of its industry ... The town cannot be left derelict, and therefore your petitioners humbly pray that his majesty's government and this honourable house should realise the urgent need that work should be provided for the town without further delay." There was a measly total of 12,000 signatures.
3. Tom Dingley was a leader of Coventry Socialist Labour Party before the formation of the Communist Party, which he joined 1920. Dingley had also been secretary of the local branch of the Industrial Workers of the World, but now became the driving force behind the formation of the Coventry Shop Stewards and Workers Committee. He worked with Wal Hannington on the 1920s national unemployed marches and he also led the Coventry Unemployed Workers Committee from September 1920, along with several other members of the CPGB.

## What we fight for

- Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.

- There exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

- Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members should have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.

- Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question—ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.

- Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries.

We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'.

- The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.

- Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.

- Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.

- The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote.

- We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.

- Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.

- Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.

- Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.

- Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism—a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

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# weekly worker

**An inept,  
bungling  
government**

## On a wing and a prayer

Like you, **Eddie Ford** is sceptical about things 'returning to normal' by Christmas

**A**lways wanting to be the purveyor of good news, Boris Johnson has reassured us that there would be a "significant return to normality" by Christmas. Of course, that largely depends on your definition of normality - or even its desirability. But the current situation means continued misery for millions and risks completely tanking the economy, leading to greater misery.

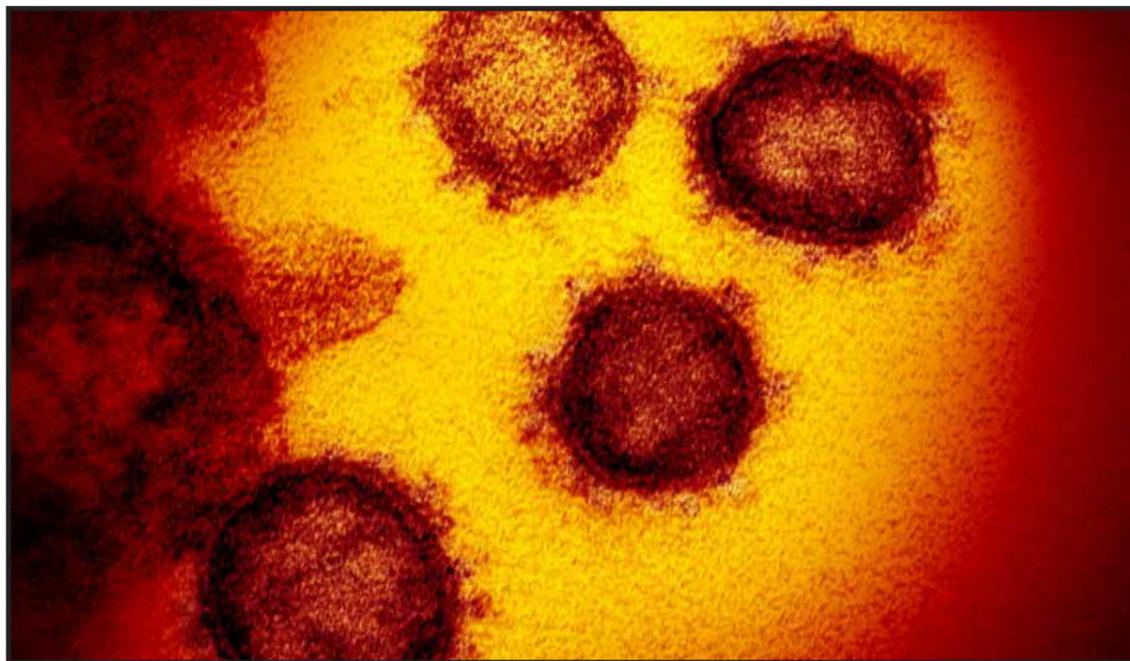
Johnson told us that local authorities would have new powers to close specific premises, shut outdoor spaces and cancel events. Furthermore, central government will be able to intervene in local areas by issuing 'stay at home' orders, limiting the numbers at gatherings and restricting transport. Cheering us up even more, or so he hopes, the prime minister said it might be possible to "move away from the social distancing measures" by November. You will possibly be able to see your grandchildren again.

Boris Johnson also announced that it will be up to bosses to discuss with their workers whether it would be safe to return to work from August 1 - a chat to look forward to no doubt. Most remaining leisure settings and close-contact services such as beauticians will be allowed to reopen from the same date. Nightclubs stay closed, however. And current advice to "avoid" public transport in England is being scrapped - hardly surprising, as it was something near impossible to do anyway, especially in large cities. Indoor performances to live audiences will also resume, subject to pilots - the same goes for larger gatherings in sports stadiums. Wedding receptions for up to 30 people will also be allowed.

Meanwhile, coronavirus testing will apparently be boosted to increase capacity to "at least" half a million a day by the end of October - much better than a mere 100,000 a day - and £3 billion of extra funding will help the national health service prepare for a possible second coronavirus wave. The good times could start returning by the time you put the Christmas tree up, though Johnson claimed he was "hoping for the best and planning for the worst". This is stretching credibility, as "planning" is not a word you associate with the bungling and shambolic Johnson government. Rather, like everything else he does, his hopes are based on a wing and a prayer.

A few days later in an interview for *The Sunday Telegraph*, we learn that the prime minister does not want to impose a second national lockdown - comparing it to a "nuclear deterrent" (though he failed to elaborate on this analogy). Anyway, with £3 billion tucked away just in case he has to make a second strike, Johnson does not think the country "will be in that position again", as authorities and health experts were getting better at identifying and isolating local outbreaks - how the virus works, how it is transmitted, the possibility of different types of segmentation, enhanced shielding for particular groups, and so on.

He went on to say that his agenda for domestic reform and "levelling up" the economy would not be blown off course by the pandemic, nuclear winter or not. "We want to be a transformative



**Expect a winter upsurge**

government, because there's a massive opportunity in this country to do things differently and to do things better," he brightly declared. Whilst the civil service is "absolutely fantastic", it goes without saying, maybe there are ways in which "we can all learn together to do things faster" and "have a real spirit of 'can do'". Sometimes, you know, as Johnson said in the interview, it is just "a question of confidence and belief" - the bulldog spirit. More vacuous boosterism from the prime minister.

### Cycle

Striking a very different tone are the scientists and experts. Sir Patrick Vallance, the UK's chief scientific advisor, has warned that, come winter, the challenges "will be very much greater", with a risk that this could require "national measures as well", local lockdowns being insufficient. He told MPs that, unlike Boris Johnson, he saw "absolutely no reason" for people to stop working from home - which for many companies, after all, "remains a perfectly good option, because it's easy to do". The trouble with very large numbers working from home, of course, is they do not buy sandwiches, doughnuts, pretzels, coffee, shoes, shirts, etc - having an impact on the economy.

Also failing to offer a booster was professor John Edmunds, a member of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage). He told

the BBC's *Today* programme that a return to pre-lockdown normality was "a long way off" - suggesting that the Christmas deadline was a pipedream. Widespread travelling on public transport, going on holiday without restrictions, hugging and shaking hands with friends, parties, festivals - just forget it. "If we return to those sorts of normal behaviours the virus will come back very fast," the professor argued. We will not be able to do any of this stuff "until we are immune to the virus" - which means, Edmunds reminded us, "until we have a vaccine that is proven safe and effective". And, of course, there might not be a vaccine ready for mass immunisation until next year or later, for all of the seemingly hopeful signs coming from Oxford University and elsewhere.

Perhaps a bit more encouragingly, the UK's national statistician, Sir Ian Diamond, has said that so far he has "not noticed any rise in coronavirus cases" since the lockdown measures were eased. When questioned on Sky News as to whether he had expected to see an increase in the number of infections, he replied that it depended on "how the population works". If we stay alert, keep socially distanced, wear masks, regularly wash our hands and are "really super-careful", then there should be "a relative flatline at the moment". Clearly, he added, over the autumn "we will need to be ever vigilant". Coughs and sneezes spread diseases.

Crashing us back to reality, however, was Sir John Bell - regius professor of medicine at Oxford University. He suspects that the pathogen underpinning the novel virus may never be eliminated, meaning that Covid-19 could be "here forever". Giving evidence at a session of the Commons Health and Social Care Committee, Bell said that any potential coronavirus vaccine "is unlikely to have a durable effect that'll last for a very long time" - thus there will be "a continual cycle of vaccinations and then more disease; and more vaccinations and more disease". An extremely uncheery thought that will not please Boris Johnson or *Weekly Worker* readers. The distinguished scientist compared the coronavirus to polio as an example of how difficult it can be to completely suppress a disease, pointing out that the eradication programme has been going on for 15 years. Similarly, according to Bell, Covid-19 is "going to come and go", and "we're going to get winters where we get a lot of this virus back in action".

As for the British government, he continued, it has been "asleep" to the threat of the virus, despite "eight close calls" of emerging infectious diseases since 2000. An assessment shared by Sir Paul Nurse, a Nobel Prize-winning geneticist. Also giving evidence to the same committee, he said that "it's not always been clear" to him and his colleagues "as to who is in charge exactly

and who's been making decisions" - he sensed that "there has been too much 'pass the parcel'". He warned that Britain risks sleepwalking into a "winter of discontent", unless clear governance structures are implemented for the remainder of the pandemic.

Anyhow, the government has secured early access to 90 million Covid-19 vaccine doses through partnerships with the pharmaceutical companies, BioNTech and Pfizer. Researchers at Oxford University have announced that a vaccine being developed in collaboration with AstraZeneca induces a "strong immune response" and "appears" to be safe.

This more optimistic news was offset by a slightly odd dispute within Public Health England, saying it was "pausing" the publication of the daily death figure, while officials investigate claims that the numbers may have been distorted. The current tally stands at 45,501 with 296,377 infections, as of July 22. Matt Hancock, the health secretary - remember him? - is seeking an "urgent review" into possible "data flaws" that have exaggerated the number of fatalities by including every death where a person has previously tested positive for Covid-19. For example, elderly people who recover from coronavirus but die months later of an unrelated illness could still end up being counted as part of the coronavirus official death toll in England (where they would not be in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland). About 80,000 recovered patients in the community are continuing to be monitored by PHE for the daily death statistics, even though many are elderly and may die of something else.

Frankly, it is far more likely that the number of Covid-19 deaths has been *undercounted*, not overcounted. This is especially the case when you consider around 3,500 people in England may die within the next five years of one of the four main cancers - breast, lung, oesophageal or bowel - as a result of delays in being diagnosed because of Covid-19. Many of these will be young or middle-aged people, say researchers in the *Lancet Oncology* journal. Routine cancer screening was suspended during the lockdown, as was routine referral to hospital outpatient departments of people with symptoms that might possibly be cancer. On average, those who die would have lived for 20 more years without the delay caused by the coronavirus pandemic ●

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