

SOCIALIST HISTORY SOCIETY

Newsletter

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New Series

The Last Bastion Is Falling

The 1945 Labour government whatever its shortcomings on the diplomatic front did achieve a measure of real social progress. Chief among these was the creation of the NHS. The jewel in the crown of the Welfare State still exists almost 70 years after its formation. But how much longer can it last?

The NHS by all comparisons remains one of the cheapest health services in the world, and has one of the best health outcomes. It is far less expensive and bureaucratic than the private American system. Yet for all that it is under concerted attack. Not directly, as no party would dare make an assault on this most cherished of institutions, but indirectly and in many invidious ways.

The service has been denied adequate funding during the years of the Tory government so much so that even the media are beginning to focus attention on the service's appalling state. As always the intention is to divert the public away from the real issues and find instead scapegoats, be they immigrants, or the number of people erroneously turning up at A&E.

Failing Market

There are real problems with the NHS and with wastage. But the biggest cause of waste is never mentioned and anyone who highlights it is studiously side-lined.

The big failing at the heart of the NHS is the market. Introduced as Margaret Thatcher's brainchild in 1990, the service was divided into two: the purchasers and providers. GPs were to be the purchasers and hospitals the providers.

Instead of all parts of the service working together they were now put in competition. A whole infrastructure to service the market had to be created and bureaucracy in the NHS has flourished. Estimates vary but as much as 20% of the budget could now be spent on servicing the market.

In addition, millions more has been spent on servicing the debt of the Private Finance Initiative contracts-now widely accepted as providing a very bad deal for the tax payer.

Yet none of this is mentioned when any discussions



of the NHS take place in the media.

Even when Labour was in the grip of the ideological right under Blair made a commitment to abolish the market in the NHS. It never

happened and the health service is still paralysed by this conflict at its heart.

Can the Tories be trusted with the NHS? The answer is an unequivocal no. They are committed to the idea that private is better. Private companies operating services do it better. Therefore why shouldn't private companies like Richard Branson's Virgin Group run the NHS? They daren't come out and say it openly because it wouldn't go down too well with the public.

Caring and Committed Staff

The experience of the British people since 1948 has been that the NHS works well. It is staffed by caring and committed staff and within the service there is no incentive to make money out of people's illness.

This last bastion of 20th century social reform is under its most sustained attack ever. The Tories, no matter what they say to the contrary, would like it replaced by a system of insurance. The NHS will remain but not as the comprehensive service it still is today. There will be a bare bones service like Medicare in the United States and anything else will have to be paid for. The rich will have their expensive insurance schemes, as they already do, but the poor will have nothing. Make no mistake that is the game plan of the present government.

The NHS has been seriously underfunded and is now at breaking point. The next move will be to introduce charges. A health service that was once the envy of the world is being destroyed before our very eyes. We must fight back.

For more information on the campaign to save the NHS Contact **Keep Our NHS Public**

<https://keepournhspublic.com/>

Mike Squires

This is drawn from a speech given by UCU London Retired Members branch Vice Chair, Marilyn Moos, at a Holocaust Memorial Day event.

May's government are not Nazis but...

Although we are all horrified by what Donald Trump is (predictably) doing and comparisons with Nazism abound, I want here to concentrate on the xenophobia and racism of the British government because we need to organise here. I first want to compare the present government with the British state's attitudes towards refugees from Nazism in the 1930s. The government did not welcome refugees from Nazism (especially if Communists), yet they admitted 10,000 children from the *Kindertransport* over a few months in late 1938, early 1939 and somewhere between 50-70,000 refugees altogether, many of whom arrived in the 12 months before the outbreak of war. The Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, actually agreed to provide group, not individual, visas for the *Kindertransports*, which one can only wish had also been government policy for the children from the Jungle. There was even an appeal on the BBC, initiated by Parliament, for foster homes for these children. But the National Government was certainly not generous towards refugees: it only admitted about 1:10 of the people attempting to escape the Nazis to Britain. One can only imagine what happened to the rest.

Ideological Cover

In fact, the *Kindertransport* provides today's government with ideological cover: while it only admits a few hundred children from the jungle in France, it exhorts us about how the *Kindertransport* reveals how generous Britain has been towards refugees. Moreover, the extolling of the *Kindertransport* suggests a false-distinction between the 'innocence' of the child and the less deserving adult. It is impossible to know exactly how many refugees would like to come to Britain today.

A few figures: last year, 2016, only about 41,000 people, 3% of asylum claims in Europe, applied for asylum in Britain. Of all the countries in Europe, Britain took in the lowest number by head of population: less than 0.1% compared to, for example, Sweden with almost 2% and Austria with 1%. Last year, Britain was refusing asylum to 71% of applicants. Out of the 4.8 m Syrian refugees, less than 4,000 adults have so far been accepted out of the meagre 20,000 promised by the government over 5 years. There are 2000 refugees stuck in camps in Serbia. Only about 140 adults have been accepted from the Greek camps, although there are about 25,000 child refugees there, and about 65,000 adults. This barbarism is a product of the European agreement in March, nominally to stop drownings

at sea, but which now means refugees have to go through an endless and deadly bureaucratic nightmare. In fact in 2016 more people have drowned: about 4,700. But to continue the comparison with the *Kindertransport*, contrast with how the government has responded to the children in the jungle. Children in need tug at the heart-strings and their proximity and desperation gave the government grounds to present them as 'exceptional cases', as was the case with the *Kindertransport*.

Stranded

Yet of the 1,500 unaccompanied children left stranded after the Jungle was demolished, only about 150 have been accepted over the last 5 months. Remember the media storm about whether they were children or not, with David Davies wanting their teeth checked. Only a handful have been let in since October. About 1:3 of the children who were in the jungle have gone missing. This government actively tries to stop any refugee from coming here: Dubs, who got out of Czechoslovakia on the *Kindertransport*, and was to become a Labour MP, before accepting a seat in the Lords, put a motion to the Lords to allow in up to 3,000 unaccompanied children, but was persuaded to remove the number of 3,000 on the illusory assurance that desperate children would be accepted. The government is tightening up on all the criteria.

Right to Work

Even for the few who get here, only a tiny percentage of refugees are given the right to work. 'Illegal' refugees are regularly threatened with expulsion. In 2016, about 4,000 'illegals' were expelled or 'encouraged' to leave. About 3,000 asylum seekers were in detention in the third quarter of 2016. In October, the government talked of sending home foreign doctors once enough 'British' doctors were available. Just last week, it emerged that that the Home Office had made 8,127 requests to the NHS for patient details in the first 11 months of 2016, leading to 5,854 people being traced by immigration enforcement. It must make UKIP proud.

Undesirables

While I am not equating the May government with the Nazis, the present Home Secretary, Amber Rudd's suggestion at the 2016 Tory Conference that firms should declare the percentage of foreign workers they employ is reminiscent of the Nazis' constant and deadly talk of 'Undesirables'. This government are not Nazis but there are dangerous similarities: the growing legitimisation of the refugee

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"May's government" continued...

as the outsider and non-person. As in Nazi Germany, they become 'the other' or, to use Trump's resonant phrase, 'undesirables'. As in the 1930s, the hysteria of the Daily Mail and other media outlets and the UKIP-lite talk from the government about an immigration crisis overwhelming Britain is legitimating xenophobia, and a fear and hostility towards refugees.

Welcome

Let us also remember that Nazism blended together an extreme racialised form of nationalism with an apparent appeal to the working man: an attack on big business and an assurance that the state would see to the creation of jobs. Women of course were consigned to motherhood and church. (Trump's attacks on abortion rights resonate with just such an ideology). And while, May has not – yet - constructed the 'Muslim' as equivalent to the terrorist, what this and previous governments have done is turn being Muslim - a religion - into the person's major qualifying characteristic. In the past, migrants and refugees were thought of in terms of their previous nationality. This represents a major ideological shift. Because history is taught in terms of great men (sic), the level of tyranny by the Nazi thugs in the early 1930s (and earlier) of left wing activists, community centres and other working class organisations is often not properly recognised. This time we must not be divided. We need to resist together all forms of racism whenever and however possible and state loud and clear that refugees are welcome here.

Merilyn Moos



Stop Press

The Government has just closed down the Dubs scheme to admit unaccompanied vulnerable child refugees (8.2 17). Only approx 350 children out of the original 3000 mooted have been accepted under this scheme. There is also talk that no more refugee children will be accepted under the Dublin agreement (joining relatives in the UK). How to explain such barbarity except in terms of Islamaphobia and 'Britain first'?

Book review

The Holocaust- a new history

by Lawrence Rees (Viking £25, 2016)

There is already a vast literature on the Holocaust: can anything new be added to justify the publication of yet another book? Lawrence Rees answers the question in the affirmative with the publication of his new history of the Holocaust. Rees, who worked for the BBC, spent twenty-five years collecting fresh testimonies from both Holocaust survivors and those who implemented the Nazi policy of extermination, and he skilfully works this into his account of the evolution of Hitler's anti-Semitic policies. Rees is in no doubt that it was Hitler who drove these policies forward.

Zig-zag

However, historians can be divided into 'intentionalists', who point to Hitler's key role in the making of Nazi policy and that he always intended 'so oder so' (a favourite phrase of Hitler's, roughly translated as 'one way or another') to exterminate European Jewry. On the other hand the 'functionalists' see a Hitler, no less resolved to annihilate the Jews, but whose policies were shaped by events. Most Holocaust historians are functionalists and Rees shares their position. As he shows Nazi policy zig-zagged over the years: ranging from the expulsion of Jews from Germany in the 1930s to the extermination programmes of the 1940s. It is fanciful to believe that when Hitler wrote Mein Kampf in Landsberg prison in 1924 he foresaw the creation of death camps and gas chambers, although he made his hostility to the Jews very clear. Throughout his political career Hitler, whatever his long-term aims, was an opportunist who seized his chances when they arose. His early successes- political, diplomatic and military-owed much to his acute sense of timing.

Ruthless Efficiency

The emphasis on Hitler as chief policy-maker does not absolve his henchmen, notably Himmler and Heinrich from guilt. They carried out their task with ruthless efficiency, as did many others in the lower ranks of the SS and police, and Rees probes the motivations of the desk murderers and those who did the dirty work on site.

Given its subject matter, Lawrence Rees book is hardly bedside reading although it is well written and thoroughly researched, containing much new material. Perhaps its main strength lies in the insights Rees provides on the greatest crime of the twentieth century. The Holocaust is not a 'cold case', investigations need to continue. I have always believed that gathering dust in some German attic or filed away in an obscure archive there is more evidence waiting to be discovered.

Archie Potts

Trump and the left – a case of mass hysteria?

The success of Donald J Trump in the US presidential elections is a reflection of a deep crisis in the two-party political system as well as divisions in the American ruling class. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats were able to muster a credible candidate from among mainstream politics who could command the loyalties of the party membership let alone convince the great mass of the American public that they had what it takes to be president. The rise of the “Democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders neatly paralleled the rise of the populist “anti-politician” Donald Trump.

But while Sanders arguably destroyed his entire credibility by endorsing Hillary Clinton so fulsomely Trump has continued to be an insurgent inside the White House to the dismay and anger of large swathes of the left and the media, many of whose star pundits have been exposed by WikiLeaks as being close allies of the Clinton campaign. CNN and others have infamously been taunted by Trump as “fake news” and “very fake news”.

A media desperate to dig for dirt and prepared to invent no-holds barred stories designed simply to discredit Trump largely for his alleged Russian connections also provides much fuel for angry protests which have frequently turned violent. The irony is that this vehement opposition works in favour of Trump's populist ideology as expressed in key campaign pledges about "draining the swamp" of vested interest groups and standing up for hard working Americans against the remote "liberal elite" in Washington. More important is how the billionaire Trump has been able to succeed in portraying himself as a “man of the people” because his rise is an indication of the left's failure to put up a credible candidate or develop a programme to inspire the people, notwithstanding the example of the brief glory of Sanders.

Traitor

Particularly appalling has been the grotesque anti-Russian tirades in an attempt to brand Trump as a “traitor” ripe for impeachment. For the record, all Trump has ever stated is an intention to improve relations with Moscow expressing the view that the two powerful nations should “get along together”, and work, for example, to eliminate ISIS and secure a lasting peace in Syria. Possibly the real reasons that Trump might want to improve US relations with Russia have less to do with personal financial connections, as his critics allege, but part of a calculated response to Russia's “Eurasian turn” in recent years and designed to detach Mo-



scow from its strengthening strategic and economic alliance with China and Iran; based on an understanding that they would one day form a mighty bloc capable of challenging US supremacy on the world stage not least with regards to the role of the dollar as the main global currency for pegging exchange rates. Regrettably,

such considerations are rarely considered by Trump's overexcited critics who largely eschew political analysis.

Most disgracefully of all, the left has willingly joined in the anti-Russian feeding frenzy. Michael Moore, showing no scruples about employing the language of Senator McCarthy, called Trump a “Russian traitor...squatting in our oval office” and demanded his immediate impeachment.

Mildly Détente

Trump has been derided as a "traitor" simply for enunciating mildly détente sounding sympathies, while his opponents' arguments have become ever more incoherent, irrational and downright dangerous. It is as if they'd be ready to risk war with Russia if it meant getting rid of Trump. It is unsurprising that the likes of Senator John McCain and Hillary Clinton, who share a worldview where Cold War is a permanent fixture, would seek to taint Trump with a “stooge of Putin” tag, but to witness celebrated leftists like Moore trying to outdo the neocons in venom is surely quite sickening. Trump has demonstrated a degree of tenacity in resisting the climate of fear that the left and liberals alike have concocted around alleged Russian links. The fabricated stories about Moscow manipulation and infiltration of this, that and the other are simply incredible. They are carrying on as if Russia was still the Soviet Union and a Communist country when in truth it poses no tangible threat to anyone; but why is it that much of the left can't ever admit this?

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Trump and the left - continued

Lost its way

The stark truth is that the left has long ago lost its way politically and the near mass hysteria that has greeted Trump's victory is just the latest symptom of a sick and enfeebled politics. Much of the left seems to have long given up on serious politics well before the Soviet collapse in 1991 which marked the final end of the 20th century's most ambitious socialist experiment, "actually existing socialism" as it was called. Rather than expending our precious energies in futile and pointless protests, let's ask the question why the left seems bereft of genuinely radical ideas these days and totally incapable of developing a credible programme when it is most urgently needed? The people deserve to be offered a choice of an alternative to neoliberal austerity and heartless globalisation. Why leave it to Trump to fill the vacuum?

Sadly those left fractions, whose kneejerk political solution is to organise an obligatory protest action where slogans, such as "Dump Trump", are chanted ad nauseum, have become an obstacle to the advance of socialism. They are denying the necessary discussion needed to find socialist solutions to meet the many dilemmas and challenges that confront us today whether they are homelessness, low pay, urban decay, environmental pollution, the health crisis or the rising costs of education. The mass rallies held in the UK against Trump's election and the proposed state visit seem simply self-indulgent.

Displacement

The Freudian term "displacement" describes an unconscious defence mechanism whereby the human mind substitutes an aim or a subject for a reality that it is too afraid to confront because it is perceived as too dangerous or too destabilising to address openly.

Displacement precisely explains the political reaction to Trump's victory. Constant protest has become a great displacement exercise adopted by people to avoid contemplating the real reasons why the left has been eclipsed by a resurgent populist right seen in America with Trump, and now occurring across Europe in different hues and in places as far afield as India.

This anti-Trump hysteria has become a kind of collective psychosis like tulip fever or cases like the 19th century railway mania or the South Sea Bubble as described in the classic 1841 book, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* written by Charles Mackay, who cited several examples of public hysteria as evidence of how people will believe the oddest things and frequently behave entirely irrationally especially when acting in groups.

David Morgan

Same meat different gravy

Donald Trump is a racist, sexist, extreme right-wing bigot. How much that makes him different from most other Presidents of the United States is, of course, open to question. When does a quantitative change become qualitative?

What is clear is that there is a reactionary offensive taking place in the USA which is emboldening the extreme right worldwide. We see the rise of the *Front National* in France and Geert Wilders in Holland, while Turkish President Recep Erdoğan and Israeli Prime Minister "Bibi" Netanyahu are consolidating their power. Meanwhile Vladimir Putin goes from strength to strength. All are using extreme nationalism and racism to blunt opposition and pursue policies aimed at enriching the oligarchies they represent.

Enemy at Home

In particular we need to remember that the main enemy is at home, so let us not forget our own Theresa May who completes the set of reactionary leaders. The present British government's policies do not differ very much from Trump's, it is just that May has better manners. He wants to build a wall, she already has the Channel, their anti-immigrant stance is the same, the deportations are the same. May is currently even refusing to recognise the right to stay of EU citizens who have made their lives here perfectly legally. Trump denies the existence of Climate Change and signs off the Dakota Access pipeline, while the British government promotes fracking. Trump repeals the Affordable Care Act and May starves the NHS of finance. Both are stoking islamophobia, both are war-mongers - the list of comparisons go on, but essentially it involves the use of nationalist rhetoric to cover economic policies that enrich the already wealthy at the expense of working class living standards.

Internationalism

But the working class movement can defeat this. Let us take the small example during the last election in Britain. The Thanet *Stand Up to UKIP* collective, who campaigned solidly for a year and more before the election, stopped Nigel Farage winning what he thought would be a shoe-in. By campaigning on specific policies that unite the maximum number of people in opposition to the present government's agenda, we can start to rebuild a movement for socialism. By organising international solidarity with the victims of Trump, Putin, Netanyahu and Erdoğan we can strive to make that movement Internationalist rather than National Socialism.

Steve Cushion

Letters to Czechoslovakia

On the 14 July 1968, a month before the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia, Paul Zalud, a distinguished Czech doctor, wrote to *The Times* pointing out that the '*ideologists of the communist parties of the Soviet Union and of East Germany*' were not as the newspaper had alleged '*prisoners of Marxist doctrine*' but of a '*conspiracy theory... which saw recent developments in Czechoslovakia*' as the work of '*powerful and sinister imperialist groups*'. My father, Leslie, a veteran communist, almost inexplicably, given his own disdain for Stalinist vulgarisations of Marxism, took great exception to Paul Zalud's letter and wrote to him in intemperate terms. He must have been astounded when his '*almost gratuitous abuse*', for which he later apologised, elicited a courteous response. The completely unforeseen result was an extraordinary epistolary saga and a deepening friendship. It produced a remarkable set of over 100 letters which, if nothing else, are worth reading as fine examples of a dying literary form, all the more remarkable given that Paul Zalud wrote in English and Leslie's sight was so bad that he was increasingly unable to check his own prose.

This did not prevent him turning out an almost continuous stream of typewritten letters, interrupted in September 1969 – when he suffered two heart attacks – and again by the strike of British postal workers from 20 January to 8 March 1971. For much of 1970, Leslie wrote once or even twice a week in a prolonged effort to help his friend to grapple with his feelings of isolation and despair. He also dispatched items either unavailable or unaffordable as Czechoslovakia turned inwards: some quality knitting wool for Paul's wife, a saxophone reed for his son, a little cash to spend in the foreign currency shop on their grandson and even a suit length of good Yorkshire cloth for Paul himself. Paul, who had onerous work and family commitments, replied at somewhat longer intervals; but the only significant gaps occurred during the spring and summer of 1969 when the Soviet imposed policy of 'normalisation' began to bite'.

Censor

'As your last letter,' he wrote to Leslie on 10 May, '*was defiled by the hands of the censor I felt disinclined to continue in our exchange of news and views. Now I am using a holiday in Yugoslavia to give some news about us and Czechoslovakia.*' Both men were in an almost continuous state of anxiety, frustration or anger about the surveillance of their letters and the difficulties of sending newspapers and books from England which, if selected unwisely, might well not reach their destination.

Given the men's shared fears of interference, one might have supposed that their letters would have been cautiously mundane and trivial. Yet, once Paul had recovered from the early loss of confidence, his letters started to provide an eloquent but grim insight into the process of 'normalisation' and its impact on him, his family,

his colleagues and the political regime, lightened here and there by a few anti-regime jokes. At times both men used satire and irony, flavouring their attacks on all things Stalinist and neo-Stalinist with a bitter wit; at other times their criticisms were plain and unconcealed. Leslie did not spare the leaders of the Communist countries from his almost total contempt for the world's leading politicians, and with his letters he regularly dispatched copies of the *Morning Star*, *The Guardian* or *The Guardian Weekly* and extracts from *The Times*, all resolutely opposed to the Soviet invasion.

Human Liberation

There was little between the two men as far as its human and political consequences were concerned. Leslie was in no doubt about the immense damage done by Soviet-style government to the socialist cause. Yet he was also in no doubt that ending capitalism, the iniquities of which he constantly reminded Paul, was the first and essential step on the path to human liberation. It was a conviction which ran headlong into Paul's unhappy experience of socialism in practice which led him to conclude that Marxist theories of human emancipation were fatally flawed. Here the two men parted company in a philosophical tussle terminated only by Leslie's death in December 1971.

Live Commentary

These letters may, then, be read in different ways for different purposes; as a historical source offering 'live' commentary not only on the tragedy in Czechoslovakia but on those unfolding elsewhere – in Vietnam, Northern Ireland, the Middle East and Bangladesh; as a political and philosophical debate; or simply as a testimony to the power of friendship and solidarity in the most difficult times.

David Parker

Book Launch -

Climbing Mount Sinai: Noah Ablett 1883-1935

Venue: Working Class Movement Library

51 Crescent, Salford M5 4WX

Date: 2.00pm, 12th April 2017

Robert Turnbull's *Climbing Mount Sinai: Noah Ablett 1883-1935* (SHS Occasional Paper) is the first full-length biographical study of one of the most controversial personalities to emerge from the South Wales coalfield in the era preceding WW1, an era of unparalleled industrial militancy in which Ablett played a leading role.

South Wales Miners

The book tells the story of Noah Ablett from his early days as a boy preacher in the Rhondda coalfield to his rise to prominence within the tight-knit coalfield communities of South Wales, and his emergence as an agitator, not only against the coal owners but also his own union. His uncompromising brand of revolutionary class warfare brought him into sharp conflict with the moderate consensus politics of William Abraham known as Mabon, a liberal who had led the South Wales miners since 1875.

The Miners' Next Step

The clash with Mabon and what he represented would lead to one of the most famous pamphlets in labour history, namely *The Miners' Next Step* of 1912, which called for workers' control of industry. Although very much a collaborative effort, *The Miners' Next Step* is perhaps the most famous statement of Ablett's repudiation of the parliamentary road to socialism as, "*No better than an ant heap on the way to becoming a dunghill*".

All welcome, admission free, light refreshments afterwards.

See the WCML website for more details:

<http://www.wcml.org.uk/whats-on/events/book-launch-biography-of-noah-ablett/>



A Woman's Life

Under Weimar and Catastrophe

Greta Sykes, who is the Society's co-chair, delivered a reading at the European Bookshop in Gloucester Road, London, on the evening of 16 February to mark the launch of the German language edition of her novel, *Under Charred Skies*.

The book is a powerful account of the life and political awakening of Lene, a young woman growing to adulthood in Germany during the Weimar Republic, and living through the rise and fall of Nazism.

Greta researched in local newspaper archives to obtain details to fill in the backdrop to the story and drew on family memories for their experiences of the tumultuous decades when Germany passed from economic collapse, dictatorship, the catastrophe of world war and eventual reconstruction.

Grandmother

As the audience heard, Greta was inspired to write the book by a wish to know more about the experiences of her grandmother who was active in the art movement and underground resistance during the Hitler period. She also wanted to describe precisely what happened to all the artists who had thrived during the Weimar years but who were to be forced into exile once the Nazis came to power.

During her reading Greta reflected on the experience of living in exile and the process of acquiring a new language. This was relevant because her book was first written in English and afterwards translated into German by herself and a colleague.

Book Burning

The reading consisted of selected episodes from both the English and German editions of the book. A key incident which Greta read was an evocative account of one of the ceremonial book burning outrages carried out by the Nazi German Student Union as they sought to cleanse the nation of the decadent literature of Jewish writers, pacifists and communists whose writings were deemed to be "un-German".

The novel is a powerful affirmation of human resistance to extreme adversity putting the strength and resourcefulness of women as its central preoccupation.

Under Charred Skies can be obtained from the European Bookshop:

<http://www.europeanbookshop.com/languagebooks/9781504990189>

David Morgan

Rethinking 1917 and the Role of the Mensheviks

At the Society's first talk of the year on 21 January Francis King spoke on the topic of *Menshevik (Mis?) interpretations of the Russian Revolution*. The talk was an appropriate start to the centenary year of the 1917 revolution. The speaker covered such topics as the clandestine activities under Czarist oppression, explaining the numerous splits in the Bolshevik and Menshevik groups and the competing theories about the level of economic development in Russia and attitudes towards the peasantry.

Francis explained why it was valid to take a closer look at the careers and arguments of the Mensheviks even though they were the losing side in the power struggle with the Bolsheviks.

The Mensheviks were not a monolithic group and were to contribute to the politics of the period in different ways. They were able to use their expertise as administrators to help build the new socialist economy.

Their criticisms of the suppression of dissent were to prove prophetic and remain timely more than 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union when it is perhaps more relevant to look at the different courses that history might have taken.

In the talk, Francis cited the career of leading Menshevik Fedor Dan, whose book, *Two Years of Wandering*, he had translated.

Published by Lawrence & Wishart, the book is the first translation into any language of the memoir written by Dan when he was forced into exile in 1922. Dan had been active in Russian politics since the 1890s and remained a thorn in the side of the Bolsheviks up to and after their assumption of state power in 1917. He broadly took the view that the Bolsheviks had seized power prematurely.

Fedor Dan was born in St Petersburg in 1870 and died in New York in 1947. His book, published in Berlin, is a political polemic against his adversaries and an attempt to validate the Menshevik position.

Menshevik exiles such as Dan were to influence western attitudes towards Soviet Russia. They opposed the early intervention seeking to overthrow the Bolshevik government at the same time as they condemned Soviet repression of opposition which continued unabated following the 1921 Kronstadt rising.

Sovietology

Francis explained that interpretations contained in books like Dan's memoirs live on in how modern historians approach the Russian revolution. During the cold war, former Mensheviks could influence foreign policy and shape academic views of Soviet communism. Many of the criticisms first levelled by Mensheviks were to be adopted as standard



tropes in western Sovietology.

Dan had personal dealings with many of the revolutionary leaders who feature in his book which gives an authenticity to his account. Francis King points out that Dan's writing is free from the hyperbole and vituperation that characterises much Bolshevik

polemics.

The translator provides a 40 page introduction giving biographical details and the historical context including a full explanation of the political machinations.

Documents

The appendix includes King's translation of various documents including letters, appeals and Cheka papers relating to Dan's case. There is also a scathing contemporary review by the Bolshevik Aleksandr Voronsky, who dismissively states, "*Dan's little book is good in the sense that it clearly shows the depths of the political philistine banality to which the present-day leaders of Menshevism have plunged*".

Clearly the book is much more interesting than Voronsky's highly partisan account suggests. Francis has been working on this translation for several years and the effort has been a worthy endeavour.

The book makes a major contribution to our understanding of the complexities of the revolutionary times and the fate of those who were on the losing side. It amounts to a salutary reminder that apart from being celebrated as a great victory against oppression and obscurantism, the history of revolution is also an experience of defeat.

David Morgan

Public Meeting

Oxford Communist, Indian Nationalist & Tibetan Buddhist

The Unconventional Life of Freda Bedi

Speaker: Andrew Whitehead

2.00pm Saturday 20th May 2017

Marx Memorial Library

This meeting will be preceded by the Socialist History Society AGM, which starts at 1pm.