

John Ruskin: for and against

Francis King chaired our meeting on John Ruskin and reports on what took place.

The reputation of the nineteenth-century art critic, social thinker and all-round polymath John Ruskin was under scrutiny at the October 2019 meeting of the society. The bicentenary of Ruskin's birth in 1819 has refocused attention on his legacy. As a forthright and eloquent critic of industrial capitalism, Ruskin's ideas had considerable influence on many early British socialists and labour activists, not least William Morris. Whether or not this was a baneful influence was debated by SHS secretary David Morgan, and SHS co-chair Duncan Bowie. Making the case for Ruskin, David pointed to his anti-capitalism, his criticisms of alienated labour and concern that work should be joyous, and his encouragement of working-class education and culture for the masses. David further noted Ruskin's involvement with the Working Men's College, and his philanthropy and generosity in spending his own resources on the causes he espoused. Ruskin's thought, he argued, not only chimed with that of Marx on alienation under capitalism, but also anticipated aspects of modern environmentalist politics. In particular, David stressed Ruskin's industriousness, the sheer volume and diversity of his oeuvre over his eighty years.

Duncan was unconvinced, arguing that Ruskin was essentially a social romantic, whose critique of the existing order did not go beyond moralism. He pointed to Ruskin's support for the institutions of private property, the hereditary principle and authoritarian forms of governance. Ruskin had no time for trade unionism or the labour movement, and disliked democracy. Duncan agreed that Ruskin had

indeed been one of the influences – although possibly an overstated one – on the early British labour movement. However, given his backward-looking critique of nineteenth-century capitalism and support for various reactionary causes, Ruskin's influence is not something to celebrate.

These presentations provoked a lively discussion among the audience. In particular, Ruskin's defence of Governor Eyre of Jamaica, who in 1865 had suppressed a local rising with such extreme brutality that he was threatened with prosecution in Britain, was cited to show that Ruskin was no friend of progressive causes, especially when they involved the lower orders taking action against their masters. Other contributors pointed to the character flaws of many other figures venerated on the left, arguing that Ruskin did not have to be perfect for his ideas to be useful. David is currently working on a pamphlet on Ruskin for the SHS Occasional Publications series.



Ruskin as a young man

Apartheid is Not a Game

Remembering the Stop The Seventy Tour campaign

By Geoff Brown and Christian Høgsbjerg

With a foreword by Peter Hain

This short pamphlet commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the Stop The Seventy Tour Committee (STST), and includes a foreword by Peter Hain, a leading STST member. The STST formed in 1969 and was the catalyst helping to generate an inspiring mass movement from below of international solidarity which included mass non-violent civil disobedience and militant direct action on a scale in the world of sport that had never been seen before in Britain. Focused mainly on the protests against the South African rugby union tour, it was a campaign that in defiance of police brutality and violent racist intimidation successfully halted the white South African cricket tour of England in 1970 and so represents a famous victory over racism in general and the apartheid nature of South African sport in particular.

The question of apartheid South Africa helped politicise and radicalise a generation of young activists in Britain. These young activists then in turn amid the wider revolutionary tumult of '1968' and workers and student protest internationally helped turn what was a campaign based on a strategy of 'respectability' and appeals to British ideas of 'fair play' by elite figures in the world of politics, sport and civil society into a mass movement from below that inspired further anti-apartheid activism internationally and further anti-racist and anti-fascist activism in Britain.

"The Springboks glorious Rugby World Cup victory has its springboard in those game-changing Stop the Racist Tours of anti-apartheid protest of yesteryear. Now with a black African as captain of an inspirational team the clarion call to eject racism from all sport and wider society is deafening!"

Ronnie Kasrils (former South African government minister and anti-apartheid activist)

A Redwords pamphlet £4

Reading Labour 100

During a twelve month programme of events throughout 2018, the Reading labour movement marked the centenary of the creation of the Reading Labour Party (named the 'Reading Trades Union Council & Labour Party' at its formation) one hundred years earlier. Now known as Reading & District Labour Party (RDLP) and working alongside the Reading Trades Union Council (RTUC) to defend and advance the rights of Reading residents, workers and visitors, the role of the party has grown in leaps and bounds over the century since its birth. Today it is the ruling party on Reading Borough Council and it holds one (Reading East) of the town's two parliamentary seats.

The centenary year did not simply celebrate the history of RDLP; it also demonstrated the party's contemporary power and organisation across the town: in the council chamber, through its Member of Parliament (Matt Rodda MP), in partnership with its affiliated trade unions and through grassroots organisation. Also apparent was the importance of the historical link between RDLP and the RTUC as political and industrial wings of the local labour movement.



Reading Labour 100

The Centenary of the Labour Party in Reading, 1918-2018

John S. Partington



The booklet is written by SHS member,
John Partington

El Norte

The Epic and Forgotten Story of Hispanic North America by Carrie Gibson

Atlantic Monthly Press

When I was at school in the 1950s, we were told in geography lessons that the United States of America had no colonies. Even if one accepts the 13 original British colonies, this neglects the remaining 37 states, no one ever seemed to wonder about the origins of names like Nevada, Arizona, Montana, Florida etc., which had originally been Spanish, then Mexican, before being seized by the US government. This book looks at the history of North America from the point of view of its Spanish speaking inhabitants (*El Norte* is Spanish for "The North"). It makes a useful counterbalance to the normal Anglo-centric historiography.

The origins of Texas were particularly myth-laden to those of us who got the story of the Alamo from Walt Disney, Fess Parker and John Wayne. There is no contemporary evidence that Davy Crockett ever wore a coonskin hat with a fur tail at the back. The reality is much more prosaic. If you look at a historical atlas, you will see that Texas was a state with a very high proportion of slaves. Mexico, of which Texas was the northern province, abolished slavery in 1829, much to the disgust of the Anglo settlers who had emigrated from the USA with their slaves. The freedom that these settlers wanted, and fought for at the Alamo and subsequent battles, was the freedom to own slaves.

The book clearly links the growth of the USA to the Caribbean and sees the colonisation of the Mississippi Valley as the growth of the slave system of the British West Indies. Similarly, slavery was key to the various attempts by the US government to grab Cuba from Spain and explains why, after the abolition of slavery, they lost interest for 50 years.

The section on the musical influences of Cuba and Puerto Rico on US popular music is particularly well written and I spent a

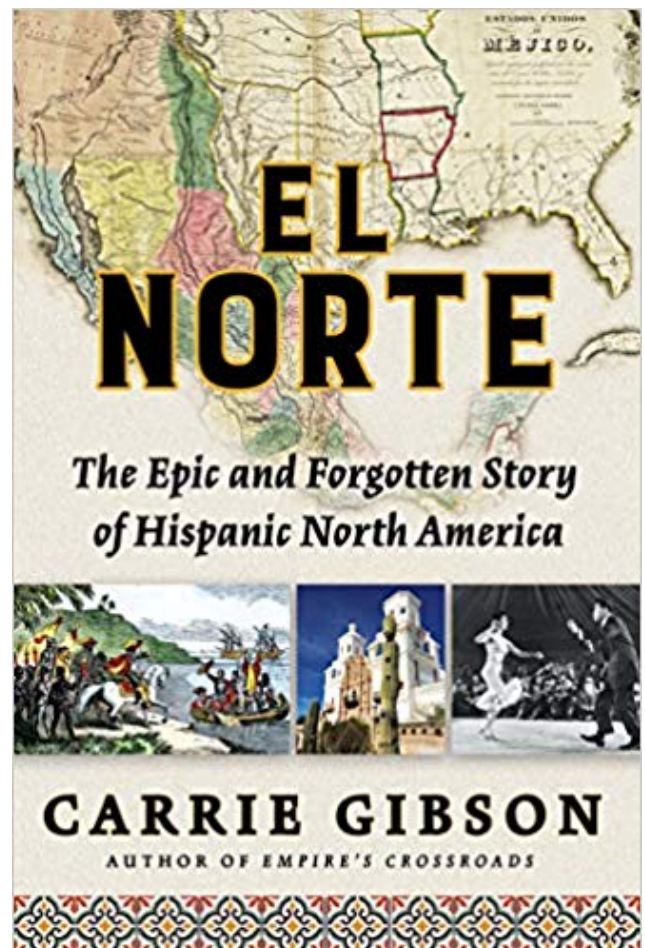
very enjoyable evening on Spotify and YouTube tracking down many of the songs of which the book speaks.

There is the little-known story of the Puerto Rican fight for independence involving a protracted urban guerilla struggle to add context to the resentment felt when President Trump's contribution to the recent hurricane relief was to throw toilet rolls.

But, above all, given the importance of Latino labour to the USA, the book demonstrates how illogical it is to divide the continent in the way it is and provides the background to the chorus of Tom Russell's song, "If Uncle Sam sends all the illegals home, who is gonna build your wall".

The book has an attention to detail without getting bogged down, making it both useful to the specialist and a good general read.

Steve Cushion



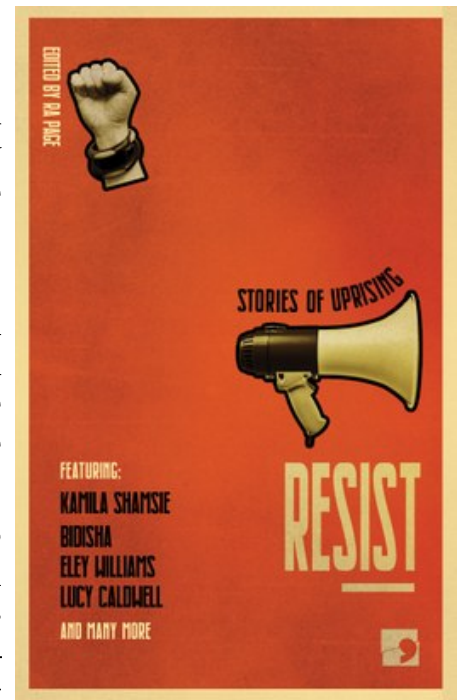
Resist: Stories of Uprising

Edited by Ra Page

At a time that feels unprecedented in British politics – with unlawful prorogations of Parliament, casual race-baiting by senior politicians, and a climate crisis that continues to be ignored – it's easy to think these are uncharted waters for us, as a democracy.

But Britain has seen political crises and far-right extremism before, just as it has witnessed regressive, heavy-handed governments. Much worse has been done, or allowed to be done, in the name of the people and eventually, those same people have called it out, stood up, resisted.

In this new collection of fictions and essays, spanning two millennia of British protest, writers, historians and political activists re-imagine twenty acts of defiance from key moments in British history: campaigns, protests, uprisings – from Boudica to Blair Peach, from the Battle of Cable Street to Grenfell Tower. Britain might not be universally noted for its revolutionary spirit, but its people know when to draw the line, and say, '¡No pasarán!'



Contents:

- Bidisha with Prof Richard Hingley on BOUDICA's RISING, 60 AD
SJ Bradley with Prof John Walter on the OXFORDSHIRE RISING, 1596
Martin Edwards with Prof Robert Poole on PETERLOO, 1819
Kamila Shamsie with Prof Malcolm Chase on the CATO STREET CONSPIRACY, 1820
Anna Lewis with Dr Richard C. Allen on MERTHYR RISING, 1831
Kim Squirrell with Dr Marcus Morris on the TOLPUDDLE MARTYRS, 1834
Eley Williams with Rhian E. Jones on the REBECCA RIOTS, 1839
Lucy Caldwell with Dr Ben Griffin on CAROLINE NORTON, 1839
Uschi Gatward with Dave Steele on the GREAT CHARTIST MEETING, 1848
Jude Brown with Dr Mark O'Brien on the LIVERPOOL TRANSPORT STRIKE, 1911
Donny O'Rourke with Dr Jim Phillips on the BATTLE OF GEORGE SQUARE, 1919
Steve Chambers with David Rosenberg on the BATTLE OF CABLE STREET, 1936
Karline Smith with Dr Kenny Monroe on the NOTTING HILL RIOTS, 1958
Luan Goldie with Dr Jonathan Moss on the FORD DAGENHAM WOMEN'S STRIKE, 1968
Irfan Master with David Renton on BLAIR PEACH, 1979
Lucas Stewart with Mike Carden on the LIVERPOOL DOCKERS DISPUTE, 1995
Gaia Holmes with Dr Chris Cocking on the NEWBURY BYPASS PROTEST, 1996
Zoe Lambert with Jo Blackman on SEEDS OF HOPE, 1996
Nikita Lalwani with Dr Roger Ball on the TOTTENHAM RIOT, 2011
Julia Bell with Daniel Renwick on GRENFELL, 2017

All this amounts to an imaginative combination of fiction and history.
Available from publisher, Comma Press - <https://commapress.co.uk/>

Andy Willimott: Living the Revolution

Duncan Bowie reports on our meeting held on 18 May 2019.

Andy Willimott gave a fascinating talk based on his book: *Living the Revolution: urban communes and soviet socialism 1917-1932*. His interest was in history as the lived experience of ordinary people, rather than as something imposed on the populace by elites. The study was of groups of revolutionaries, mainly Bolshevik students who established communes in the early years of the revolution. These were visionary experiments in collective living, sharing space and property either in dormitories or flats. Andy stressed that Bolshevism was urban based – ‘more hammer than sickle’. He referred to the revolutionary cultural component of the communes, within the context of Alexandra Kollontai’s critique of traditional family life and Mayakovsky’s rejection of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in his 1912 manifesto- a Slap in the Face of Public Taste and Chernyshevsky’s 1863 novel *What Is to be Done?*, an inspiration for Lenin, whose main characters established a commune. The communes were emancipatory and participatory.

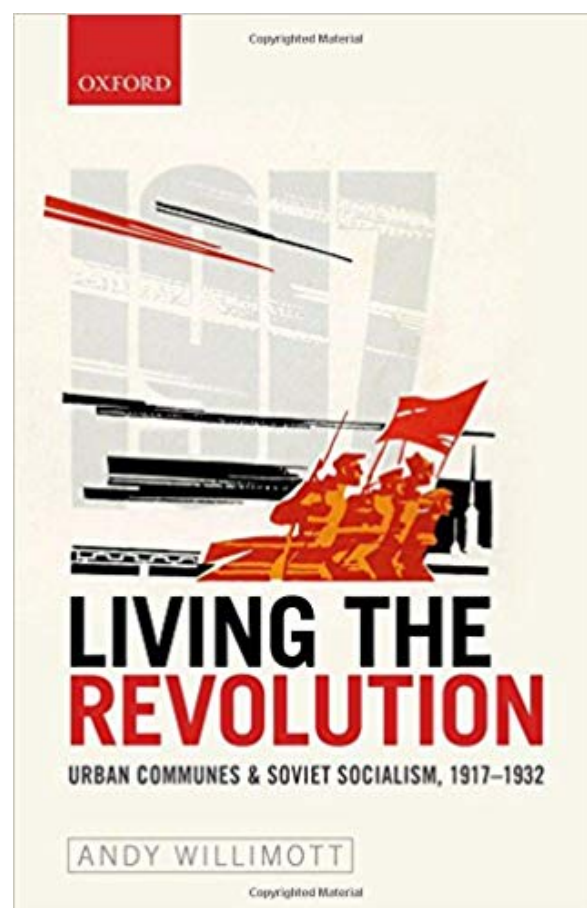
Collective eating

The communes introduced collective cooking and eating, with meals at the centre of communal socialisation and revolutionary discussion. Budgets and property were shared – in some circumstances, even underwear was communal. Internal walls were torn down and replaced by open plan living. Communes had a red corner, with revolutionary literature and symbols. Communal living rejected convention – for example revolutionaries tended to throw coats on the floor – a ‘revolt against coat-hooks’. Leisure time was communal with group visits to the theatre and concerts.

There were different views on language- for example Trotsky saw swearing as a symbol of exploitation, while Stalin viewed expletives as evidence of working class self-assertion. Andy noted the interest of

communists in the scientific management of time and production - there was enthusiasm for the concept of ‘Taylorism’ imported from the US. There was a commitment to hard work – laziness was seen as a feature of the aristocracy. The notion of the egotistical ‘I’ was replaced by the collective ‘We’. Commune dwellers kept diaries, which were then discussed collectively to develop ways of improving the commune’s efficiency. They established sub-committees, for example in relation to hygiene, cleaning, clothing, budget and political activity – a commune of 10 people could have 5 committees! Communes monitored their own performance in relation to national statistics on factors such as bathing and teeth cleaning. They also did not support exclusive relationships – mixed communes supported sexual equality and used contraception. If by accident children appeared, they were adopted by the entire commune. Men were required to do the ironing, though they were

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Living the Revolution

continued

generally not very competent. Communards also disregarded ornamentation within the communal home -for example rejecting net curtains which were seen as supporting bourgeois individualistic notions of privacy.

Scientific Socialism

In response to questions, Andy stressed that the communes were based on scientific socialism not romantic utopianism. There was a discussion on dissidence within communes, the role of confession, public critiques and the process of expulsion. Andy also discussed the decline of the urban communes as with the first 5-year plan, communards were dispersed across the country in work brigades and some communards became more involved within the disciplined Komsomol organisation. He pointed to the continuation of communal living in tent cities in pioneer settlements such as Magnitogorsk. He also noted that communards were critical of the New Economic Policy (NEP), seeing the introduction of apprenticeships as representing a return to capitalism. There was also a discussion of the attitude of communards to children, given the Soviet state's need for a new generation of revolutionary workers.

Andy was warmly thanked for a fascinating talk, which brought a sense of everyday life to a discussion of revolutionary politics.

More details about the Socialist History Society can be found on our website:

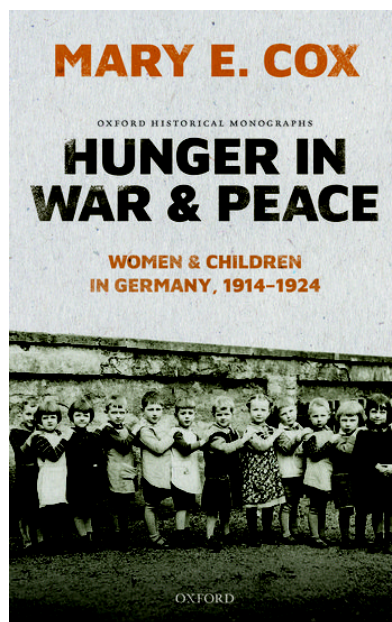
www.socialisthistorysociety.co.uk/

The journal Socialist History also has a website:

www.lwbooks.co.uk/socialist-history

Hunger in War and Peace

Our speaker at the meeting on 16 November 2019, Dr Mary Cox, gave a lively performance and brought the hunger years in Germany between the wars into sharp relief. titled, 'Women in war and peace: Women and children in Germany 1914-1924', Dr Cox's talk illustrated how the British naval blockade which included food-stuff, caused severe hunger to the civilian population. Dr Cox had followed up the records in Berlin, Leipzig and Munich and discovered evidence of intense starvation among children and women. As part of her researches she used height and weight measurements taken at the time, mainly in schools involving over 600,000 children. These indicated the true measure of deprivation that took place at the time.



Starvation

After the ending of the war, the levels of starvation became widely recognised by the foreign powers. They were also mindful that the 1917 Russian Revolution had occurred and that this event had an immense politicising effect on millions of people involved in the war. Socialist

and communist parties were growing in strength day by day.

Letters

Herbert Hoover, the 31st president of the US, a Republican, could see the dangers ahead for the capitalist world, and stated, 'Hungry people are more likely to go for socialism'. He was prompted to launch a Commission for Relief, which was a vast food aid programme to feed the hungry masses. Many children wrote letters to the relief organisation thanking them for their parcels. Dr Cox showed us a sample of such letters, whose poignancy was a very moving experience.

Greta Sykes

Britain and the Creation of the State of Israel

Historian of British colonialism, Gardner Thompson, led a fascinating discussion at our January meeting about Britain's role in the foundation of the State of Israel and the continuing debates surrounding the nature of Zionism. The topic remains an urgent and timely one given recent political controversies.

Gardner began by tracing the origins of Zionism to the 1890s and Theodor Herzl's polemic, *The Jewish State*, which he said performed the same role for the Jewish people in the 19th century as *The Communist Manifesto* had played for revolutionary socialists. Herzl's seminal work appeared at a time when antisemitism was on rise across Europe.

Herzl argued that assimilation would never work and insisted that the only solution was for Jews to have their own exclusive homeland. It was important to stress that the Zionist view of Jewish history was only one perspective and, as such, it never commanded the support of all Jews. Zionism insists that Jews had possessed their own state until the Romans invaded and forced them into exile. Zionists demanded a right of return and looked to a great power to assist them in this ambition. Their opportunity came in 1917 when the British government led by Lloyd George decided to espouse the Zionist cause in the belief that it would help the Allies win the war. The Balfour Declaration marked the first time that a major state had opted to support "a homeland for the Jewish people". Lloyd George retained that commitment after the war ended because he wanted the British Empire to maintain control over Palestine and he determined that only the Jews were capable enough, powerful and sufficiently European to restore Palestine to its ancient glory. It was taken for granted that the existing Arab population would welcome Jewish settlement into their land for their own good.

Gardner questioned the motives of British policy makers who supported the establishment of a Jewish state as a means to solve the problem of the mass influx of poor Jewish refugees fleeing the East European pogroms. These desperate people could be settled in Palestine rather than in Britain, it was concluded. It is not too difficult to understand how the interests of Zionists and anti-Semites coincided at this point because both wanted to see Jews resettled in a Jewish state outside Europe.

There was far more detail in Gardner Thompson's excellent talk which stimulated a fruitful discussion and provoked much thought. For those who missed it, Gardner has written a new book, *Legacy of Empire - Britain, Zionism and the Creation of Israel*, which should be required reading by all those who seek to pronounce on this problematic subject. The talk was an excellent start to this year's programme of meetings and attracted a receptive audience of 25-30 people.

David Morgan

British Labour Movement and Internationalism

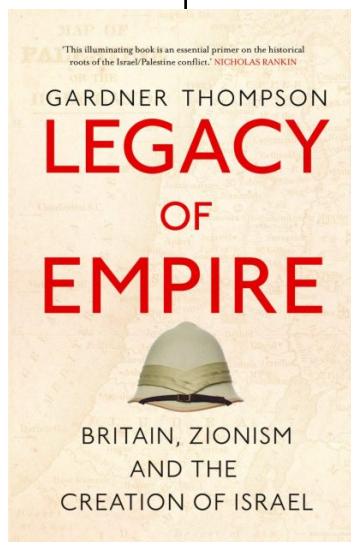
Socialist History Society Public Meeting

Saturday 28th March 2020 at 2pm

RED LION HALL Basement, Tresham House, Red Lion Square entrance via Lamb's Conduit Passage by Conway Hall Holborn, WC1R 4RE nearest tube Holborn

Socialist History, the journal of the Socialist History Society, is producing a special issue, to appear in spring 2020, on 'the British Labour Movement and Internationalism'.

Duncan Bowie, who guest edited the issue, will give a talk to coincide with the journal publication.



Engels in Eastbourne

Conference to be held to mark Engels@200, 23-24 June 2020,

University of Brighton, Eastbourne campus

28 November 2020 marks the bicentenary of the birth of Friedrich Engels, the German radical philosopher who in works such as *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850), *The Housing Question* (1872), *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man* (1876), *Anti-Dühring* (1877), *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), *Dialectics of Nature* (1883) and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) made pathbreaking and profound contributions to modern social and political theory. As the co-thinker of Karl Marx and co-author of *The Communist Manifesto* and *The German Ideology*, he played a critical role in the forging and development of classical Marxism specifically. But like Marx, Engels was 'above all a revolutionary', who also played a role in revolutionary upheavals such as the German Revolution of 1848 and in the international socialist movement

When Engels died in London on 5 August 1895, at the age of 74, his last wish was that following his cremation his ashes be scattered off Beachy Head, near Eastbourne. Marx and Engels had visited many Victorian seaside resorts, such as Margate, Ramsgate and the Isle of Wight, but Eastbourne was Engels's favourite place and where he holidayed for extended periods during the summers in later life. Engels wrote to Sorge on 18 March 1893 for example that he had spent two weeks in Eastbourne and 'had splendid weather', coming back 'very refreshed'.

Keynote speakers:

Tariq Ali, writer and filmmaker

Terrell Carver, Professor of Political Theory at the University of Bristol

Book Launch Anti-Nazi Germans

Enemies of the Nazi State from within the Working Class Movement

by *Merilyn Moos*

German Volunteers in the French Resistance

by *Steve Cushion*

March 26th 5:30 pm at UCU Head Office, Carlow Street, London, NW1 7LH

It is a commonly held myth that there was little resistance in Germany to the Nazis except for one or two well known instances. But, regularly ignored or forgotten is the level of opposition from Germans, and in particular from the German working class movement. This book examines that resistance in two parts, starting with the internal resistance. Here are forgotten stories of brave men and women who organised against the Nazis in German towns and villages, as well as in the concentration camps and the armed forces.

The second part chronicles how German refugees contributed to fighting the Nazis in France. From spreading anti-Nazi propaganda in the German Army and attempting to organise mutiny and desertion, through to extensive involvement in urban terrorism and the rural guerrilla struggle.

£10 - By post add £1:50 p&p [£5 p&p overseas]
more details from: s.cushion23@gmail.com