

On Edward Aveling's forgotten short story *A Dangerous Husband*

Having edited and introduced Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling's *Letters from England*, I was able, with my co-editor Tony Chandler, to expand on its references to Eleanor's death with new evidence in an article published in *Socialist History*. At this point I was relieved to think I had got Aveling out of my hair once and for all. But this wasn't to be. Soon after, I came across a previously forgotten work of fiction by Aveling written under his nom de plume of Alec Nelson, which is worthy of consideration.

Aveling's (Nelson's) short story, *A Dangerous Husband*, was published in the periodical *Home Chimes: An illustrated monthly magazine*, in April 1890. The story can be summarised as follows. Newlyweds, Reginald and Lina Smith, medical students at University College London, travel to Matlock, Derbyshire for their honeymoon in August 1884. Reginald is hard up and doesn't settle his debts. Lina has inherited an income of £600 per annum and lives modestly. Lina has signed a will in Reginald's favour. With the couple staying at the upmarket Matlock Bath Hotel Reginald, now with (Lina's) money in his pocket, enjoys the conviviality of the place, partaking in fine dining and drinking all hours.

Prussic Acid

Lina suspects him of having secret liaisons with women during nocturnal absences from the hotel. Over the course of a week or so Reginald makes three attempts on Lina's life, including one where he adds prussic acid to her medicine. Lina survives these murderous attacks and on a train returning to London she tells Reginald that although she will not inform the police, they must separate. Reginald tells Lina that his actions have not only been motivated by his wish to get her money but also driven by uncontrollable homicidal thoughts which he then turns on himself by swallowing what is left of the prussic acid.

It is difficult to know what exactly to make of Aveling's decidedly melodramatic story. Was it a work of pure imaginative fiction or did it, at least to an extent, reveal his conscious or unconscious thoughts about his own life and partnership with Eleanor? While we cannot be certain about this, there are undoubted parallels with his own and Eleanor's biographies to suggest that he drew on these when fashioning the story.

Mirrored Lives

Beyond the obvious references to the study of science and medicine at UCL, the marriage in the summer of 1884 and the honeymoon in Derbyshire – all events mirrored remarkably in the real lives of Edward and Eleanor – Aveling's description of Reginald's character and his treatment of Lina merit particular attention.

Reginald, murderous intentions aside, bears some resemblances to Aveling who was known as a womaniser and borrower of money to fund his West End socialising. It is interesting to note that in one of his stage plays, *The Jackal*, performed at the Strand Theatre in November 1889, the character of Reginald Smith also makes an appear-

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ance and was described as a ‘hard drinking, dissolute fellow, who is generally supposed to be a talented dramatist and writer’. It is tempting to think that Aveling is writing about himself with a degree of self-consciousness that might be regarded as bordering on narcissism.

Drank too much

Similarly, in Aveling’s portrayal of Lina one detects a congruence with Eleanor’s early experiences of ‘married’ life with Edward. After Reginald’s first attempt on Lina’s life, she understands that, *‘The warm-hearted, keen-souled life of a man and woman, working together, playing together, seeing lovely things through one another’s eyes, touching existence at all points doubly – that life for which women... long...she knew could never be hers’*. Later on, when travelling to London, Lina confronts Reginald with the truth of their short-lived relationship: *‘Within two days of our marriage I found you drank too much. Within a week you began to ill-treat me. Not with evil words, but with silence – not with blows but with neglect’*.

Chilling

Writer Olive Schreiner, on seeing her friend Eleanor holidaying in Derbyshire in July 1884, noted how she looked ‘miserable’ because of Aveling’s mistreatment. If there is something in Aveling’s writing about Lina derived from Eleanor’s experience, it is chilling that he was aware of her plight and prepared to use it in his fiction, but yet unwilling to respond to her emotional needs.

The mention of prussic acid is perplexing because we know this was the poison that Eleanor took when committing suicide in 1898. Newspapers regularly reported cases of prussic acid poisoning heard at coroners’ inquests and in 1895 the novelist Grant Allen featured suicide by prussic acid in his 1895 novel *The Woman Who Did* which created something of a sensation. That novel’s main character is an independent woman who opts to live and have a child with a man outside legal marriage. She takes her own life by swallowing prussic acid ‘that a scientific friend had given her long ago for use in case of extreme emergency’.

Suspicious about his role in her death

Edward and Eleanor would certainly have been familiar with Allen’s story and as a scientist, he would have a knowledge of the properties of prussic acid, prompting some to hold suspicions about his role in her death.

It seems surprising that following Eleanor’s death nobody, especially those who wanted the public prosecutor to investigate the case, remembered Aveling’s short story with its reference to poisoning by prussic acid and thereby made a connection. Conversely, it is possible that people were aware of Aveling’s story but attached no importance to it, believing it to have no relevance to the real lives of the couple. And perhaps that is what we should do and consider it just for what it was, a curious

and histrionic work of fiction by an enigmatic man who, like all artists, drew on personal experience to enhance the art. After that, all is coincidence. I’m not so sure.

By Stephen Williams



Sylvia Townsend Warner Statue Appeal

An appeal has been launched to mark the life and work of the author, Sylvia Townsend Warner with a public monument in the centre of Dorchester. This is a laudable endeavour, and we should support this worthy cause, writes *David Morgan*.

Over £50,000 has been donated to the campaign so far but it still has to raise a further £10,000 to enable the statue to happen.

Sylvia Townsend Warner's writings were rediscovered in the wake of the emergence of the modern feminist movement and especially when Virago Press published her novels as part of its women's classics series launched in the 1970s.

A statue, planned to be unveiled in Dorchester's high street, would be the very first of a non-royal woman in the Dorsetshire county town.

My only concern is with the emphasis of the campaign material in that the author's politics appear to have been erased: this is unfortunate as it should not be forgotten that Sylvia Townsend Warner was an active Communist from the 1930s and beyond. Indeed, as far as I understand, she remained a party member until her death in 1978. One of her notable activities included her support for Republican Spain and the anti-fascist struggle against Franco. She took part in a writers' delegation to the Spanish Republic.



The campaign for the statue has been led by a charity called Visible Women UK, which calls for more representation of women in the country's public art. The campaign asks,

'Who was Sylvia Townsend Warner, and why does she deserve a statue?'

Warner was a pioneering novelist and poet whose work defied conventions in literature and life. A contemporary of Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes, Warner gained early recognition with her debut novel *Lolly Willowes* (1926), which was

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shortlisted for the Prix Femina. It marked her out as a fresh voice in modernist fiction.

Over her career, Warner wrote many novels and contributed short stories to the *New Yorker* for over forty years. Her literary work, characterised by sharp wit and profound understanding, frequently explored the oddities and complexities of human nature. Through her writing and storytelling, Townsend Warner looked closely at the contradictions and idiosyncrasies of human life, often revealing profound truths about society and personal identity.'

Her partner was the poet, Valentine Ackland, who, among other achievements, was a pioneer chronicler of social conditions and struggles of rural workers in and around the Dorsetshire area where she and Townsend Warner set up home. Valentine Ackland was the subject of a talk hosted by the SHS a few years ago.

Why a statue?

The organisers state, "we aim to honour Townsend Warner's legacy by introducing her physical presence into Dorchester with a beautiful work of art. This public artwork will serve as a focal point of remembrance and respect, celebrating Dorchester's rich and diverse heritage while ensuring that her personal and literary story continues to inspire. Especially in rural communities, where LGBTQ+ heritage can often be lost or overlooked, such a tribute would provide visibility and connection, offering the next generation a chance to see themselves reflected in their town's history. By championing Townsend Warner's legacy, we aim to introduce her work to new readers, inspire further scholarly debate, and pave the way for greater acceptance and equality."

She should be remembered for her political commitments alongside all her other achievements. The memorial is worthy of support.

Link to the appeal:

<https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/help-raise-a-statue-for-sylvia-townsend-warner>



Socialist History Society

Annual General Meeting

1pm, 3rd May 2025

Marx Memorial Library

AGM to be followed at 2pm by a talk

Hugh Davie

The Organisation of the Soviet Army in the Second World War

Hugh G.W. Davie is a visiting research fellow at the University of East Anglia who studies the logistics of the Red Army during World War II. His research focuses on how the Red Army was able to maintain its operations and mobility despite limited resources and a poor transportation system

Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat – film review

By Greta Sykes

Jazz and decolonialisation are entwined in this historical montage of original footage in a mesmerizing film from the producers of *I Am Not Your Negro*.

In 1960, sixteen newly independent African countries joined the United Nations, a political earthquake that shifted the majority vote from the colonial powers to the global south. Congo became the arena in which an early battle over the UN was fought. Nikita Khrushchev pounded his shoe at the UN top table in reaction to the neo-colonial grab of the resources of newly independent Congo. UN delegates from African countries were blackmailed and betrayed.

The film relates the actual speeches and intrigues of politicians, in particular the Eisenhower administration discussing how to get rid of Lumumba and do it by causing as little suspicion as possible. Lumumba was very popular. Although they managed to destroy his political career, he still lived among the people, made popular speeches and had worldwide support. His eventual assassination led to the uniting of the Afro-Asian bloc, who demanded the UN General Assembly to vote for immediate worldwide decolonization.

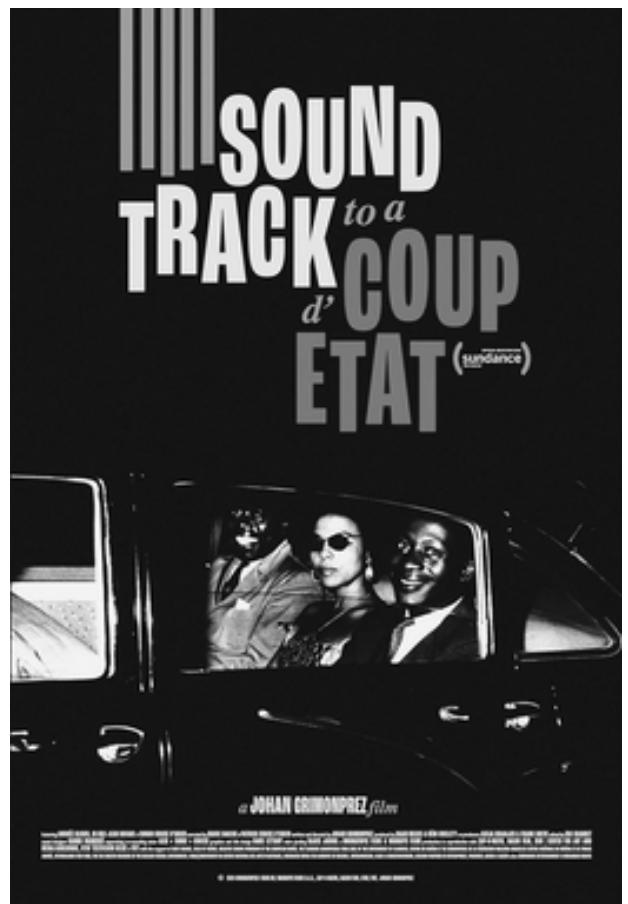
Who killed Lumumba?

The film is star studded! There are Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, Nina Simone, Miriam Makeba, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, Malcolm X and many more. Among the most edifying portrayals is Nikita Khrushchev, then leader of the Soviet Union. His jolliness and animated behaviour brighten up the dark events that unfold.

Johan Grimonprez, the director, is a Belgian multimedia artist, filmmaker, and curator, best known for his films *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997), *Double Take* (2009) and *Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade* (2016), based on the book by Andrew Feinstein.

Grimonprez's films are characterised by a criticism of contemporary media manipulation as "an attempt to make sense of the wreckage wrought by history." His films "speak to the need to see history at a distance, but at the same time to speak from inside it". Other themes include the relationship between the individual and the mainstream image.

Grimonprez finds that "Hollywood seems to be running ahead of reality. The world is so awash in images that we relate to 9/11 through images we had already projected out into the world. In a sense, fiction came back to haunt us as reality. A perpetual distraction, this illusion of abundance staged by techno-magic hides the ugly face of an info-dystopia. Images of Abu Ghraib, 9/11, swine flu, the BP oil spill and the economic crisis seem to compose our new contemporary sublime. Amongst Grimonprez's influences are Walter Benjamin, Jorge Luis Borges, Don DeLillo.



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Decolonisation

In *Soundtrack to a coup d'état* Grimonprez presents the promise of decolonisation, the hope of the non-aligned movement and the dream of self-determination. It is also about the multinational corporations working hand-in-glove with the military-industrial complex to smother this very dream.

On February 16, 1961, jazz musicians Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach crash a UN Security Council meeting to protest against the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime-minister of Congo.

Demonstrations

Belgian embassies worldwide must close their doors, as demonstrators are pelting eggs or simply setting the Missions ablaze. Belgium had drawn Congo into an international intrigue that tore the country apart in less than a month after its independence. Lumumba, like Nkrumah in Ghana and Nasser in Egypt, claimed that the riches of the land should become the riches of its people. Western powers, coveting colonial riches, took fright at the Pan-African movement that Lumumba personified.

Washington, exploiting the hiatus left by the crumbling colonial empires, cooked up a paranoid cold-war narrative to smother the African dream of sovereignty. In September 1960 Congo had entered the UN world body together with 15 other newly independent African countries. As a result, the balance of the General Assembly majority vote tipped to the expanded Afro-Asian bloc.

Racism

Taking advantage of the situation, Khrushchev invited all the heads of state to discuss demilitarisation and decolonisation at the forthcoming General Assembly in New York. By October 1960, racist policies of the US and the global interest in the civil rights movement gave ground for Soviet accusations of hypocrisy.

The Eisenhower administration, to restore its image, turns to a most unconventional weapon: Jazz. Louis Armstrong is dispatched as a Jazz Ambassador to Congo, as a diversion from the unfolding CIA-backed coup against Lumumba. But as more and more jazz ambassadors perform alongside covert CIA operations, the likes of Louis Armstrong, Nina Simone, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie and Melba Liston face a painful dilemma: How to represent a country where racial segregation is still law of the land?

The film, released in November 2024, was selected for the 2024 Sundance Film Festival World Cinema Documentary Competition where it won the Special Jury Award for Cinematic Innovation. And it has been nominated for the European Film Awards given by the European Film Academy.

Fear management and paranoia

In his films Grimonprez aims to present "the contemporary condition of what it is to be human calling into question the relevance of politics and reality, one that has collapsed under the weight of an information overload and mass deception." To him the present political debate "has shrunk into mere fear management and paranoia suddenly seems the only sensible state of being, where it is easier to ponder the end of the world than to imagine viable political alternatives".

His films illustrate how we have arrived at a situation where the mere demand for peace is perceived as a threat by the media and their military industrial puppeteers and their paradigm of greed and social Darwinist rhetoric.

Book review

From Maidan to War - a different Ukrainian perspective

Towards the Abyss

Volodymyr Ishchenko

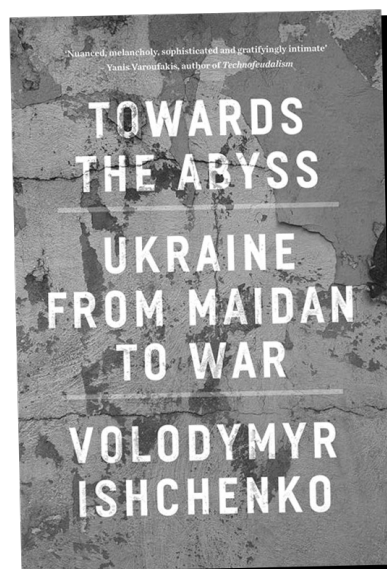
Verso £12.99

By Duncan Bowie

This is a rare political analysis by a Soviet Ukrainian. What is different from other contemporary works is that this is not the simplistic advocacy of Ukrainian nationalism, which tends to dominate commentary in the West. Ishchenko provides a nuanced analysis, based on his understanding of the social, linguistic, political and economic divisions within Ukrainian society. His historical analysis examines the conflict between different traditions – the association with Russia and Soviet society which is still significant among the mainly working-class population of Eastern Ukraine, and the new urban based intellectuals and professional classes who look towards the European Union.

He points out that Zelensky and the westernisers do not articulate the interests of all Ukrainians. Nor does he consider that the adoption of western capitalism is necessarily in the interests of Ukraine. While not seeking return to the Soviet model of governance, he is also critical of both neoliberalism and a Ukrainian nationalism he sees as regressive.

He sees class as more important than identity politics. Ishchenko however is pessimistic as he sees no end to the war – Zelensky will not compromise, while he sees Putin's autocracy in Russia as largely unchallenged. This makes for sober reading.



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Future Meetings – Online

Imperial Politics in the Indian Ocean

5 March 2025 at 7pm

Speaker **Laleh Khalili**

All Welcome, but you will need to register:-

<https://ucl.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJwudO2pqjotG9PqLVOOfX2QYzD57z4rICgX5>

or <https://tinyurl.com/Laleh-Khalili>

The Indian Ocean basin is one of the most contested political spaces in contemporary politics, not least because of the long history of colonial conquest and imperial projection there. In this talk, Laleh Khalili will discuss the long history of the intrusion of European powers into this maritime space and discuss the afterlives of colonialism and continued imperial interest in this space.

Laleh Khalili is a professor of Gulf Studies at the University of Exeter and the author or editor of 7 books including *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (Verso 2020) and *Extractive Capitalism* (forthcoming 2025).

A. L. Morton: Life in the Radical Tradition

Thursday 3rd April 2025 at 7pm

Speaker: **James Crossley**

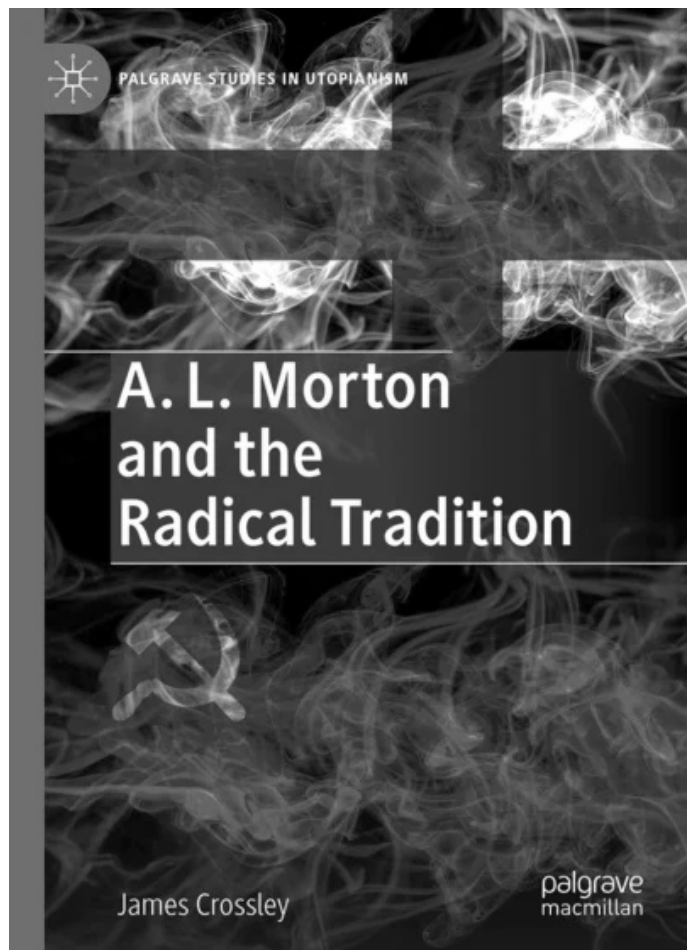
All welcome, but you will need to register in advance

https://ucl.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJUrf-CuqTkvg9PRQUMoB05H4UfyRyEQ_mPX

or <https://tinyurl.com/almorton>

This talk will provide an overview of Morton's life and work based on recent archival research. It will cover the formative influences on Morton's political and intellectual development and contextualise his work in light of his membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Morton's main publications will be discussed, including *A People's History of England* (1938) and *The English Utopia* (1952), explaining the shifting emphases between the two. The talk will continue with a reassessment of Morton's role as a historian of England, utopianism, and millenarianism.

James Crossley is Professor and Director of the Critical Study of Millenarian and Apocalyptic Movements at the University of Cambridge, and research professor at MF Oslo. He is the author of the biography *A. L. Morton and the Radical Tradition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025).



REWILDING WILLIAM MORRIS

Speaker *Dr Phillipa Bennett*

A Socialist History Society on-line meeting

17 June 2025 at 7pm

All welcome, but you will need to register in advance:

https://ucl.zoom.us/meeting/register/A_O6dDWaTbWttfpqmAM87A

or <https://tinyurl.com/rewilding-morris>

In William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, Old Hammond describes England as 'a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt'. His companion Guest, a time traveller from the nineteenth century who has already been entertained with a brief tour of twenty-second-century London, questions this description. Wildness is not, admittedly, a quality we might readily expect from a writer or his works in his final years. But there is also a danger in interpreting the last romances exclusively in these terms; to do so is to suggest that they offer closure rather than inspiration, that they espouse rest rather than action and that they have more to say about the end rather than the totality of life. The romance is by very nature a wild mode which refuses to be reined in.

Phillippa Bennett's Research interests:

The life and work of William Morris. Nineteenth-century literature, particularly medievalism, the development of the romance form, gothic writing and utopian writing; nineteenth-century Socialism and Communism and the development of revolutionary ideals; nineteenth-century aesthetics, including Pre-Raphaelitism, architecture and the Arts and Crafts movement; nineteenth-century explorations of Iceland and the revival of the literature of the Great Old North.

Phillippa has recently published a co-edited collection of essays on William Morris's literary, aesthetic and political legacy in the twenty-first century and is also working on a book on William Morris's Last Romances.



Save the Blean

A previous issue of the Socialist History Newsletter contained an article concerning the campaign to save Blean Wood in Kent from an ecologically inappropriate housing development proposed by the University of Kent. It traced the area back to an incident in the local class struggle known as the Battle of Bossenden.

As well as campaigning against the proposed development of 2,000 houses in the heart of the Blean Woodland, *Save The Blean* is working with partners and funders on a pioneering alternative for the land.

We are in the early stages of developing a plan for the site – working title Blean Bio Park – that includes a country park with a range of fascinating heritage sites, reforestation and rewilding areas, green capital projects that will benefit the whole district, and land set aside for agriculture to protect local food production.

German workers stop British troops from closing down the Herman Goring Steelworks, Salzgitter

by *Meryl Moos*

Most of the attention to immediate postwar Germany has focused on division between spheres of influence and the millions of refugees and camp inmates who had – just about – survived. But, virtually unheard of, is an instance when German workers resisted the British Government to stop them dismantling a steel works. This does not fit in with the Cold War narrative which has largely ignored resistance from workers to the Nazis and subsequently to the Allies.

Reichswerke Hermann Göring was an industrial conglomerate in Nazi Germany from 1937 until 1945, situated in South Eastern Lower Saxony, a poor region, then lacking industrial jobs. It was an early example of state-run industry, though Goring had to fight the steel barons who objected to the state take-over. Its purpose was to operate an iron and steel works in the Salzgitter region, initially to exploit domestic ore deposits, then iron ore from Sweden, following the occupation of Norway, and from Lorraine, following France's surrender. One aim was to produce bullet casings and artillery shells.

Concentration Camps

Those employed at the Salzgitter works estimate from around 50,000 to 100,000. Neumann estimates that between 1940 and 1945, non-Germans made up the majority of the Reichswerke workforce: 'free' Italians, many forced labourers, especially from the USSR, PoWs, concentration camp and other prisoners. In the autumn of 1942, the first 50 prisoners had come directly from Buchenwald concentration camp to Salzgitter.

The Drütte satellite concentration camp, established on 18 October 1942, was in the actual grounds of the works, and provided 'labour'. It also obtained labour from the SS and Buchenwald. The largest group of prisoners, mostly political, 'worked' in "Aktion 88", where they forged 8.8-cm shells. There were a large number of executions, attributed to 'prisoner sabotage'. Many were also shot making "escape attempts". The Gestapo ran its own camp within the camp: Lager 21 for recalcitrants, especially political prisoners, where 'discipline' was even more draconian. In 1945, very few who 'worked' there survived the forced marches, executions and British bombing at the end of the war; the few who did generally ended up in displaced persons camps.

British military government

From June 1945, the iron and steel works in Salzgitter came under the control of the British military government. In 1945, the Salzgitter furnaces were shut down and dismantling the furnaces and foundries began in 1947. There were contradictory forces at work: postwar reconstruction required steel but the Allies did not want German steel: 'an act of imperialist brigandage' to quote the American publication, *The Militant*, April 24 1950. Rather than concern about earlier abhorrent Nazi practices, the Allies wanted to reduce their rival's productive potential. (There was also a fear, according to *The Militant*, that the Russians might take it over, as it lay close to the

border.) *The Militant* provides a rare voice, written, from a probable Trotskyist perspective, during the actual struggles over the shutting down of the coke ovens and blast furnaces.

Public opposition

From the end of the 1940s, public opposition to the dismantling of the plant grew steadily. Salzgitter had received around forty four thousand refugees from Poland – and Czechoslovakia after the USSR expelled around 200,000 people of German origin. They needed homes and jobs. Unemployment around Salzgitter exceeded 30% and it was feared that closure would make 18,000 workers unemployed. The British considered resettling the residents, in particular the refugees, in fear of a Communist uprising but many refused.

The IG metal workers union appealed to the workers to stop the dismantling. Hopes were pinned on discussions between the Allies and Chancellor Adenauer by the union leadership but the dismantling of the Salzgitter works was confirmed. On November 22nd 1949 all employment ended. The whole town went on strike. but the actions failed to halt the dismantling.

In January 1950, much of the factory facilities were shipped to Greece, India, the UK and Yugoslavia. In February 1950, the workers again demonstrated against the demolition of Salzgitter plant. The workers, led by a militant workers committee tried unsuccessfully to gain the support of the German Trade Union Federation to mobilise the German working class against the dismemberment. Apparently, Communist Party members (amazing any were still alive) wanted a sit-in. *The Militant* is scathing: this would have pitted 30,000 workers against the entire British army, they argued.

Direct Action

On March 2nd, the workers prevented the demolition of one of the coking plants. The German police did not intervene. Then, on March 6th, the workers sidestepped the official union and took their own action. Thousands started to tear down the scaffolding necessary for the dismantling of the works, Polish supervisors were stoned and chased away, and the German police withdrew.

Workers then occupied parts of the plant that were scheduled to be blown up and the British offices, which they destroyed. The next day, General Robertson, the British High Commissioner in Germany, put a ring of tanks and soldiers around the works to allow the demolition to continue. He announced that further actions would be fired upon. The British troops then occupied the steelworks in a stand-off against unarmed workers. But the workers won: what still remained of the Salzgitter works were saved. In May 1950, the British agreed to leave the facilities for civilian production intact. What happened next is not clear, but the British press firstly minimised these events and then celebrated that the British ‘won the bloodless standoff’.

The dismantling was finally halted on January 20th 1951. By then, three quarters of the blast furnaces, the entire steelworks and rolling mills, one coking plant and large parts of the ancillary works and numerous foundations had been removed or destroyed.

We get a hint of the politics which lay behind this struggle in the person of Erich Soechtig. An active member of the KPD, in 1929 he was expelled as a supporter of the circle around Brandler and Thalheimer. In 1929, he had founded a local group of the KPO (the Kommunistische Partei Opposition), an anti-Stalinist breakaway from the KPD.

Different political alignments after 1945

The very limited source material I could find on Soechtig suggest very different political alignments after 1945 from rejoining the KPD to joining the syndicalists. Those of us deep into the differences between such organisations know this would give rise to very different trajectories. One source has him drawing KPD workers away from the KPD. Soechtig, it explains, was frustrated with the KPD's half-hearted opposition to the dismantling of the works. What all sources agree on is that from 1946 to 1948, and then again from 1949 to 1963, he became the chair of the main works council, at Salzgitter a negotiating organisation specific to Germany. In 1949 he was elected to the IG Metall advisory board at the federal level, in other words, he became a union negotiator. Whatever the exact timbre of his politics, he provided a firm resistance to the works closure. The media inevitably described the leadership to the attempt to stop the demolition as driven by the Communists but that is hardly reliable! Though, in the years following the confrontation at Salzgitter, there was a significant political debate as to how exactly to remember it, these days, a street there is named Erich-Söchting Str.

This resistance to the factory shutdown has largely been forgotten. Even academic books have a political blind spot. That worker militancy was able to organise after 12 years of Nazi bloody repression against working class militants is extraordinary and deserves to be far better researched.



Workers demonstration outside the factory