

As a new feature in the Newsletter, we are asking members and supporters to write a short piece explaining how they became a Socialist. Please write to us at info@socialisthistorysociety.co.uk

How I Became a Socialist

by David Morgan

As is common, it is a combination of facts that shapes a person's outlook.

I had a powerful sense of injustice and sensitivity to suffering from an early age. I recall one memory from when I was about ten years old which retains its vividness to this day. I was out walking in a field and saw a small frog leaping in the grass. It suddenly found itself caught in an ants' nest and I watched in horror as the ants swarmed the little creature to entirely cover its body. This all happened so quickly. I froze, repulsed by the ugly sight and ran away feeling intense guilt that I had not intervened. This incident sounds utterly absurd now, but it is one of those small incidents that just stays with you throughout life.

My family circumstances inevitably had a shaping influence. My father had worked at Irlam Steelworks since he left school at fourteen but was made redundant when that industry was shut down. He was one of the last to leave. I remember his distress at losing his job and several stressful weeks when he was looking for employment. Mum had to find parttime work to make ends meet. Out shopping, she would ask for discarded vegetables such as cabbage leaves from Eccles Market stallholders claiming that this was for our rabbit. We did not have a pet rabbit at the time.

Later my father told me some stories about his parents' family, such as one who was a lay preacher, but he also told me about Harry Pollitt whose brother had married one of his mother's relatives. I started to find out more about Pollitt and remember being tremendously impressed when I learned that the Soviet Union had named a ship after him. I thought that was a huge honour and was proud to be associated with it.

My father had a cousin who went into journalism and regularly presented the news on Granada television. This and the distant connection with Pollitt were our humble family's only real claims to any distinction. The only other notable achievement was that my father's brother, a good athlete, had a trial for the Lancashire County cricket team. He did not succeed in that, he became an alcoholic and died aged forty-four, a great shock to us all.

I became interested in current affairs and world news events such as the poor people fleeing Vietnam in boats made an impression on me. I started to watch televised coverage of Labour Party and TUC conferences. After I left school in the seventies, I started to go into Manchester city centre on a Saturday afternoon to browse in the many bookshops that existed in those days and spend my pocket money on old books.

It was then that I discovered Grassroots Bookshop located on the corner of Newton Street. This was a radical bookshop run by a co-operative which included the socialist feminist Hilary Wainwright, whom I met much later when I moved to London after my university in 1985. I saw Tony Benn in the shop signing his books.

It was on the shelves of Grassroots that I found the Marxist classics in those plain cream coloured paperbacks with red and black lettering. These were imports from China and cost only a few pennies, and extremely affordable for an unwaged student. Some had curious titles, but I bought them nonetheless and I still have my copies of Marx, Engels and Lenin that I avidly read. They all have the markings made in the fountain pen that I then always used.

I went to public meetings, such as a mass rally with Benn and others in the Free Trade Hall. I remember a meeting with Dennis Skinner, hosted by local MPs Frank Allaun and Stan Orme in Salford. Later I travelled to Blackpool for a Deputy Leadership Debate with Benn, Denis Healey and John Silkin at the Labour Party Conference.

My first encounter with the Communist Party was at a public meeting the local branch organised in Eccles Public Library on the Sabre and Shatila massacre. I bought party pamphlets though I never joined the party. I started reading the *Morning Star* in the library.

Discussions with college friends helped shape my outlook. I became aware of the Marxist historians when I went to university and Christopher Hill was a guest lecturer. My developing ideas were helped by reading *The World Turned Upside Down* and works by Raymond Williams were influential, such as *The Country and the City* and *Keywords*, because I was majoring in English Literature with History as a subsidiary subject.

This was my political awakening.

We would like to encourage readers to send in their own story of becoming a socialist.

Blood, Sweat & Tears

Photographs from the great miners' strike 1984-1985

By Various photographers

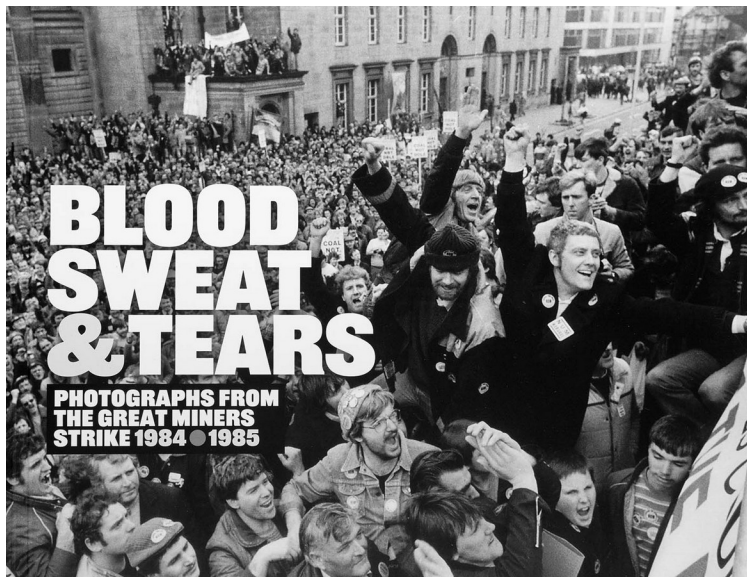
Miners' Strike Publications, £30.00 paperback (2025)

The 1984-85 miners' strike was the longest national strike in British history. The miners took on a government that provoked the strike and then prosecuted it like a civil war. This book shows the resistance of the miners and their supporters. The striking mining communities withstood unprecedented police brutality and travesties of justice in the courts. They endured poverty, hunger and media smears, and they held firm for a year. The photographs in this book document that struggle. The men and women who captured these images decided from the start of the strike which side they were on.

They could have stood behind police lines and provided images that supported the government and mainstream media's attempt to demonise the miners, their families and supporters as thugs, 'bully boys or dinosaurs from a bygone age. The alternative was to stand with the miners on the picket lines and live with the strikers in their communities and record the reality of what was really going on. The photographs in this book not only captured the reality of the strike but played an important role in encouraging the solidarity movement that sustained the action for a year.

The book brings together images, some of which have not been published in 40 years, and some which have never been published before. Despite the passage of time, these photographs remain relevant. They are not some gritty artefacts of a bygone era, to be remembered via an uncredited social media post or admired in a gallery. They were taken by photographers who were absolutely committed to the miners, and their publication today is aimed at inspiring a new generation of activists to fight back and win.

'It's 40 years since the miners' strike but that struggle still colours everything in Britain today; from the laws that constrain trades unions, to the loss of our manufacturing industry, to the lack of good jobs in many parts of the country. This brilliant collection of photographs recalls the immediacy of those days. The blunt nature of a class struggle prosecuted by the Thatcher government in order to do down working people. And, crucially, it recalls their resistance to it.'



Kevin Courtney, Former General Secretary, National Education Union

Photos from *Blood, Sweat & Tears*



This account of the launch of a *Socialist History Occasional Publication* first appeared in the *Waltham Forest Echo* written by Claire Weiss

The Legacy of Slavery and the Case for Reparations

Speaking to a vibrant audience at a public meeting and book launch in the William Morris Hall, Walthamstow on 27th March 2025, Peter Ashan, author of 'Freedom Walk' said: *"Growing up in Waltham Forest with people of Asian, African and Afro-Caribbean heritage at school I realised that none of this history was reflected in our history books, and I have spent much of my life dedicated to uncovering local histories of east London's Black communities"*. He emphasised that discovering and publicising unknown and forgotten histories was an educational key to tackling today's ongoing racism and the current rise of fascism.

Luke Daniels, President of Caribbean Labour Solidarity drew attention to the links between modern racism and Britain's historical involvement in the enslavement of Africans, explaining that slavery did not end because the owning classes suddenly found their moral compass. Rather the enslaved, by their continuous rebellions in the Americas, made it very expensive to maintain the system, and this, combined with the anti-slavery movement in Britain, finally put paid to the system. In making the case for Reparations for Slavery, he argued that the descendants of enslaved Africans still suffered from discrimination as a legacy of the enslavement of their ancestors and that an apology from the state, in addition to financial reparations, played an important role in overcoming racism.

Chaired by Geoff Nicholls, the meeting saw the launch of two books:

- **Enslaved Worker Rebellions and Revolution in the Americas to 1804** by Mary Turner [published jointly by the Socialist History Society and Caribbean Labour Solidarity]
- **Slave-trade Abolition and Leytonstone House: the Sansoms, the Buxtons and Black History** edited by Claire Weiss, co-authored by Peter Ashan and Geoff Nicholls.

Mary Turner's work shows the multiple ways in which the enslaved resisted their enslavement across the Americas. Local author Claire Weiss, in researching the history of Leytonstone House, a locally-rare Grade II-listed Georgian mansion, had found the untold residence there of Philip Sansom a member of the 1787 Abolition Committee, and the forgotten story of a visit eighty years later by formerly enslaved Sarah Forbes Bonetta Davies to the Buxton family then living there.

Steve Cushion of Caribbean Labour Solidarity and the Socialist History Society said: *"Caribbean Labour Solidarity is pleased to have had the opportunity to host a meeting in the borough that has defeated Tommy Robinson three times. The books launched at the meeting explain how the abolition of slavery was a result of the resistance of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean allied with a mass movement of solidarity in Britain. Both speakers stressed the importance of such Black and White unity in the struggle against racism and fascism today"*.

The Social Railway and Its Workers in Europe's Modern Era, 1880-2023

Moments of Fury, Ramparts of Hope

By **David Welsh** Bloomsbury, 2025, Hardback £85

This thematically arranged book examines the evolution of rail transport and a number of railway workforces across Europe in the modern era. Each chapter explores how, within the context of a social railway, rail workers developed distinct national and international perspectives on the nature of their work and their roles in societies and states. David Welsh convincingly argues that workers formed a raft of entirely new and enduring organisations such as trade unions that, in turn, became ramparts of hope.

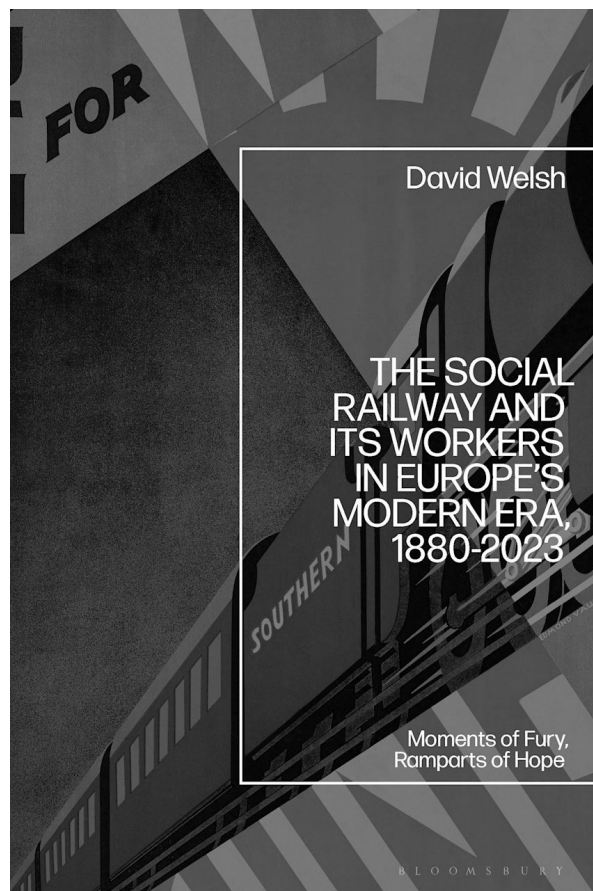
Welsh goes on to consider how the insurgent character of these organisations produced moments of fury during tumultuous periods in the 20th century. *The Social Railway and its Workers in Europe's*

Modern Era, 1880-2023 explores the national and European contexts in which both characteristics came to the fore, including the ecology of fossil fuel technology (coal and oil). Above all, it argues that social, economic and political forces are not simply external 'scene-shifting' but integral to the history of railway systems.

The book examines the cultural construction of European railways through literature, art and other forms of writing as well as recent oral history. It also includes a detailed investigation of the role played by nationalisation and public ownership in Europe. In the context of neoliberalism and globalization, it proposes a 21st century programme for the social railway.

Most books on railways are more concerned with the engines than the workers who make them run. As a former railway worker and a retired member of the RMT, as well as a long standing member of the Socialist History Society, Dave is well placed to write this bottom up view of the railways, from the perspective of the workers who built this industry. Perhaps a book to ask your library to buy.

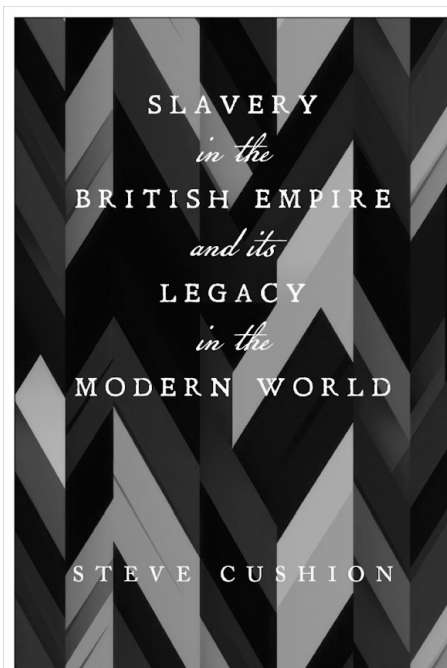
Steve Cushion



Slavery in the British Empire and its Legacy in the Modern World

by Steve Cushion, Monthly Review Press, reviewed by Ken Fuller

Did you know that the racial term "white" had its origin in Virginia in 1675 when a rebellion against the governor gave rise to an alliance between European indentured workers and African slaves? Were you further aware that the Virginia Slave Code, which was subsequently drafted to ensure that "blacks" and "whites" were forever divided, was partly the work of British philosophers John Locke and David Hume? These are just two of the nuggets found in Steve Cushion's *Slavery in the British Empire*. You will also learn that Britain's Industrial Revolution was made possible by the capital accumulation generated by the "business of slavery," and that the genesis of Britain's banking and insurance industries can be traced to this same "business." The British Royal Family, moreover, participated eagerly (and profitably) in the slave trade.



Although largely free of slavery itself (this was neither practicable nor profitable in northern climes) the economy of New England was heavily dependent on the slave trade, and one of the reasons for the Declaration of Independence was that Britain's Sugar Act would "cause the destruction of the rum distilleries and destroy the slave trade."

Cushion also traces the origins of Britain's policing to slavery and points to the link between slavery in the Caribbean and the depredations accompanying the enclosure of common land in England, which were often financed by the profits from slavery. The book demolishes the (too-) widely accepted myth that Britain finally abolished slavery as a result of the efforts of bourgeois "humanitarians" like William Wilberforce, pointing to the contributions of revolts by the slaves themselves and working-class reformers in the UK: the Reform Act of 1832, while extending the franchise somewhat, also abolished the "rotten boroughs," many of which were controlled by absentee slaveowners, thus diminishing their influence in Parliament.

Cushion points out that the effects of slavery are still with us. Sugar, the foremost product of the Caribbean colonies, has left a world-wide legacy of ill-health. And the industrial civilization which the profits of slavery made possible has created the current climate crisis which threatens to bring the curtain down on us all. Slavery, through deforestation and soil exhaustion, has also deprived the former Caribbean colonies of reasonable possibilities of development, and for this, along with the unpaid wages of millions of slaves over centuries, reparations are, says Cushion, both necessary and justified.

Slavery in the British Empire is necessary reading for those whose view of the world was received in UK and US schools.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: *Martin Shaw*, Agenda £19.99

Duncan Bowie on 70 years of the peace movement

Books on CND tend to be written by activists. Martin Shaw was an activist but is also a respected historian and his study is sound and sympathetic without being polemical. For a relatively short history, though quite expensive for a paperback, it is surprisingly comprehensive. It covers the whole period from the early 1950's with the campaign against Britain developing its own hydrogen bomb to the recent campaigns against the war in Iraq and the proposals to bomb Syria. This examines the continuities and discontinuities, which is welcome as previous studies and memoirs tend to focus on single phases of the anti-nuclear movement.

Shaw was himself involved in both CND and European Nuclear Disarmament (END) and sets the various campaigns within the wider geo-political context. After studying the postwar campaigns and the origins of CND, he gives attention to the more militant Committee of 100 and the development of the direct action movement which returned in the 1980's with the camps and occupations at Upper Heyford, Greenham Common, Lakenheath, Molesworth and Faslane. He examines the components of the movement – the Labour Left, the religious input such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the role of the Communist Party, the revolutionary socialist left and links with the wider women's movement, the ecology movement and the campaign against civil nuclear power.

The last sections of the book follow the trajectory of the wider movement after its mid 1980's heyday, with CND being reduced to a much smaller organization, dominated by the hard left, and allying itself with more radical but perhaps more narrow causes such as the Stop the War movement, which can be accused of being selectively partisan as to its selection of which wars it wants to stop. More recent tendencies on the left no longer distinguish between methods of war – nuclear, biological or conventional weapons, but tend to be militant in their non-pacifism and advocacy of greater military intervention in some cases. Much of the Labour Left is no longer opposing military alliances and British participation of NATO, but is instead arguing for greater military spending and the expansion of NATO, while other elements seem to justify Russian nationalistic imperialism on the basis that it is countering a Western alliance. Your imperialism is OK while ours is not! Oh how the world has changed – and not for the better. Reading the book brought back memories of a more idealistic youth – for some reason I ended up chairing the first CND rally at Upper Heyford in 1980, at which Edward Thompson and Bruce Kent spoke amongst campaigners from the Oxford CND group, known as Campaign ATOM, including Meg Beresford, who later became CND general secretary. Where are our ideals now? Naïve we may have been, but sometimes we do need to at least try to keep our values and principles.

**The
Campaign
for Nuclear
Disarmament**
Martin Shaw

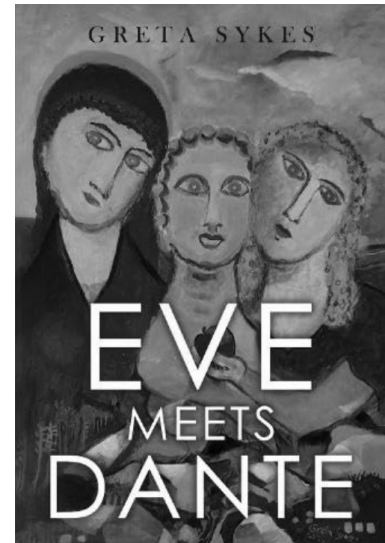
short histories

Eve Meets Dante By Greta Sykes, Vanguard Press, 2025 Paperback: £12.99

David Morgan reviews a new novel by Greta Sykes that puts women centre stage and projects a vision of hope.

Eve Meets Dante is Greta's third novel in what is intended to be a tetralogy and introduces the reader to some exceptional women from ancient and Medieval history, mostly from the Middle East. The book combines Greta's long standing interests in ancient culture, the history of women and poetry, which in the novel is embodied in the figure of poet, Dante.

The novel follows the journey of a young woman named Eva starting with a vivid description of the agony of her birth, amid a war-ravaged world in October 1944: "My mother named me Eva. I was a new beginning, a new hope for her that war could end soon." Later various women are encountered in dream-like episodes, beginning with Beatrice, the inspiration for Dante. The poet appears and tells Eva, "You thought we were far away in geography and time, but we are as near as your hand." This is clearly no ordinary realist novel.



The novel combines vivid imaginary and autobiographical elements. Successive encounters with heroines from history, representing poetry and spirituality, intermingle with vivid descriptions of brutal real life experiences of a war torn country. The book captures the hopes and struggles of one young woman and the encouragement she gains from the courageous women she meets on her journey into adulthood.

After Beatrice, the other women that feature are Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, Mary Magdalene, Dido, Queen of Carthage, Syrian Empress Zenobia, Christian martyr Blandina, scientist, Hypatia, the martyr, Perpetua, the Queen of Sheba, poet Sappho, the Byzantine empress, Theodora, St Etheldreda, Medieval nun Roswitha of Saxony, the Benedictine abbess Hildegard von Bingen, the Ottoman ruler, Roxelana, Roman Queen, Tanaquil, and Renaissance painter, Artemisia Gentileschi. This is an eclectic and impressive collection of women, not all household names by any means. These female figures are brought back to life for us and made to speak directly to modern readers. As told by the author, these women have many insights to share with Eva and the readers as the narrative unfolds.

Greta interweaves the fictional stories of these individuals with vivid details of personal memories from her own childhood and teenage years to create a unique work of fiction that offers reflections on the meaning of life and human liberation. Greta herself lived through the ending of the Second World War and post-war Germany, divided by the Cold War. Her experiences of growing up informs the novel's themes and emotional power.

Eva's personal search for meaning represents hope, happiness and love and the realisation of our common dreams for a better future. *Eve Meets Dante* introduces the reader to some inspirational women who are brought out of obscurity.

The Czech Refugee Trust Fund in Britain, 1938-1975. Lifeline to Freedom by Charmian Brinson and Jana Buresova, 2025
Reviewed by *Merilyn Moos*

The Nazi period is too often reduced to the Holocaust and the killing of millions of Jews. But this construction both obscures the real causes of Nazism and also the extensive though largely doomed resistance to it. The Communists were in the forefront of this resistance in Germany and elsewhere both before the Nazis took power and afterwards. This book's focus is on those who fled Czechoslovakia for Britain, many of them Communists.

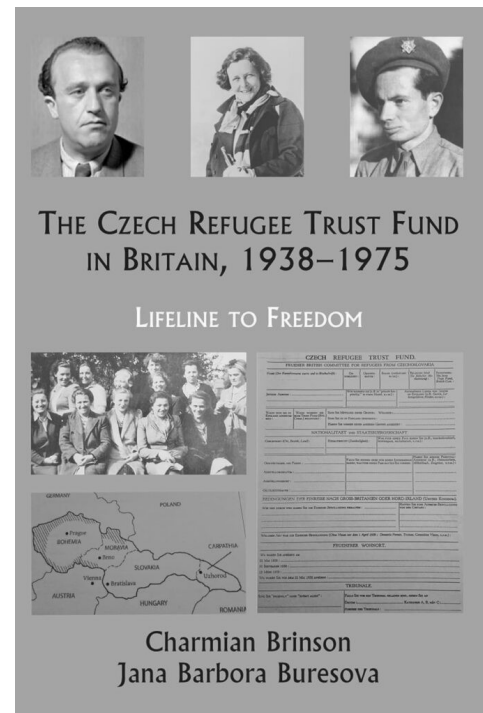
The previous absence of research into this area is partly because of contentions between the British Government, the Czech Government in exile, the Czech Refugee Trust Fund (CRTF) and the refugees themselves, which makes any historiography more hazardous, partly because many relevant documents have only recently been released.

The CRTF, the focus of the book, was established in response to the British Government July 1939 Munich Agreement and largely funded by them. The CRTF became responsible for looking after the approximately fifteen thousand refugees who arrived in the UK from Czechoslovakia, which included a wide array of groups: Czechs, the largest group, but also Sudeten Germans, many of whom had already fled internally as German troops arrived, and many Germans and Austrian Communists and some Social Democrats, who had already fled the Nazis to Czechoslovakia. Some also were fleeing because they were Jewish.

The CRTF took on many responsibilities: obtaining visas to get people out of Czechoslovakia, then feeding, watering and ensuring they had somewhere to lay their heads (later also retraining, information and cultural activities). MI5 considered the CRFF a highly dangerous association, not least because so many of the staff were suspected Communists (who mostly subsequently got the sack) and there was a suspicion that, in the intense jostling for places, Communists were favoured.

Suddenly, men and a few women who had been at the forefront of struggle found themselves marooned in a foreign land. Carrying on any kind of anti-Nazi activity was virtually impossible, partly because it was logistically very hard to influence the struggle from so far away, and partly because the British government strictly forbade any form of political activity. It threatened to deport any refugee who was politically involved (a threat occasionally carried out). In exile and isolated, the refugees turned against each other.

The tensions, if not enmity, between Social Democratic and Communist groups of refugees were acute. The different political groupings refused to meet and would cold shoulder each other though living cheek by jowl in refugee hostels. Social Democrats



denounced Communists, but worse, both Social Democrats and Communist refugees denounced others from their own party. The non-aggression pact between Hitler-Stalin (also known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact or the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the USSR) signed in August 1939 and adopted as ‘the line’ by Communists in Britain in September 1939, created even greater hostility towards the Communist refugees.

Controversy about this pact continues: on the one hand, Stalin may have been buying time in order to build up the USSR’s armaments but, on the other, it undermined the anti-Nazi struggle. The war, the Communist refugees in the UK, repeated, was a consequence of the rivalries of different imperialisms and we do not take sides. They would not participate directly in the war effort. This position was shared by a few on the non-CP left.

Not all Communists went along with the party line, but it is understandable that this position gave rise to widespread animosity. Though the book could have developed the implications of this volte-face, once the Hitler-Stalin Pact was broken, the Communist Party became vigorously pro-war and exhorted refugees to help increase British production and oppose strikes.

The British Security Service was much exercised by the large numbers of Communist refugees admitted. Already in 1938/39, MI5 had advised against the admission of foreign Communists, even though they were especially endangered under Nazism. MI5 kept around 100 German-speaking Communists under surveillance and, ever suspicious of the CRFF’s Communist inclinations, described it as ‘this appalling organisation’.

The book goes into the complexities of who to intern: Czechs were ‘friendly aliens’ but who could claim to be Czech? And what was to be done with the Sudeten German Czechs? Some of these refugees, particularly Communists, were sent to the ‘Dominions’. The entry of the Soviet Union on the side of the Allies helped gain the release from internment of many Communist refugees.

As the Allies finally started to win the war, issues around whether the refugees wished to remain or return came increasingly to the fore, handled by CRTF. Most of the political refugees were keen to return home to help rebuild their countries, though not the case for many of the Jewish refugees (though the two categories overlapped). Some Social Democrats also wished to remain. The book goes into the infinite obstacles that the Government put to prevent or discourage Communist refugees from Germany and Austria as well as Czechoslovakia from returning. Approximately half of the total refugees under the CRTF remained in Britain.

The final section of the book considers the renewed and complex role of the CRTF after the take-over of Czechoslovakia in February 1948, which caused a new exodus. Overall, the Trust helped many anti-Nazis who otherwise might well not have survived or would have been left destitute in Britain.

A Meeting with Edward Upward by *David Morgan*

I met the novelist Edward Upward in the 1980s after I had written a review for the *Morning Star* of his short stories published in 1987. As Upward and his wife Hilda remained readers of the paper, he saw my review and sent in a letter to the editor saying how much he liked the review. He even said that it was one of the best reviews of his work he had read, high compliments indeed! He later invited me to visit him at his family home on the Isle of Wight, where I spoke to him at length about his work, his political evolution and memories of friends such as Christopher Isherwood and the poet, David Gascoyne, who lived near the Upwards.

Edward Upward became a largely forgotten member of the “Auden generation”, that group of writers including W H Auden, Isherwood, and Stephen Spender, who grew up in the 1930s, and many of whom joined the Communist Party or at least flirted with leftwing politics for a while. Unlike most of his compatriots, Upward remained a Communist and was a firm radical until the end. He was over a hundred years old when he died.

I had first encountered Upward’s writings when browsing randomly in a bookshop while on holiday in North Wales. I still recall the strong impression on me of the striking photomontage covers of the books that make up his trilogy, *The Spiral Ascent*, which are concerned with his experiences of joining the party and of struggling with Communist politics. The titles of the novels also stood out: *In The Thirties*, *The Rotten Elements* and *No Home But The Struggle*. These titles gave the impression of outspoken opinions and an uncompromising perspective. I bought the books and began reading them sitting in a tent during my camping holiday with some school friends, who all must have thought I had gone a bit crazy. I was in my first year of university, it was the summer break, and I decided to write my dissertation on writers of the 1930s. I wrote a comparison of Upward and George Orwell and their different attitudes to politics, the rise of fascism and the future of socialism.

I have spoken to others about Upward’s novels, and several people have been quite dismissive of them. The distinguished literary critic, Frank Kermode, took a more favourable view when he wrote an appreciation of Upward in the eighties, not long after I had written my dissertation, so I didn’t have a chance to consult it. I have recently started to write a memoir of my meeting with Upward and of our discussions. I would be extremely interested to hear from anyone who has read the novels and what they think of them. Did they make a lasting impression on you like they did on me?

Appeal to Our Members

The SHS is issuing an appeal to its members to get more involved with the work of the society. We would like to hear from any members with free time and skills that could be of practical use: these may involve editorial, design or technical expertise.

Most of our activities take place online these days, so we would especially like to hear from people familiar with social media and who might help us improve our communications. Please get in touch! info@socialisthistorysociety.co.uk