SOCIALIST HISTORY SOCIETY

Newsletter

Autumn 2026 Vol 15, Number 2

Talking About Revolutions

Donald Sassoon spoke at our AGM on the topics raised in his latest book, *Revolutions – A New History.*

Professor Sassoon's talk addressed an area that is perennially fascinating for all socialists, namely the causes and fate of revolutions in modern history. Avoiding entanglement in theory, Sassoon did not set out to offer a model answer as to when and why revolutions occur; the ambitions lay elsewhere. His talk faithfully reflected the comprehensive sweep of his book which covers several centuries and continents taking in all the major revolutions in Europe and North America: the chapters are divided into the overthrow of Charles the First in England, which historian Christopher Hill named the "English Revolution", the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the national revolutions of 19th century Europe and the Communist revolution in China.

Some readers may quibble as to why Latin America is only dealt with in passing with the briefest mention of Cuba and nothing at all on the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, which was a very "big deal" in the eighties, as anyone active in that decade can testify. Sassoon deals with the Bolivarian revolution led by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela as an example of where modern revolutions end either in the creation of "some important reforms, or else in failure".

The book and talk explored the meaning of revolution today and its contemporary relevance. The talk provoked discussion on the definitions of revolution. I found a simple summary of the classic Marxist view of revolutionary change in the autobiography of Ralph Russell, where the author reflects on what distinguished Communists from Labour Party activists,

"For non-Marxists, I should explain that 'revolution' in communist terminology means the ending of the rule of one class and its replacement by the rule of another. In our time this meant destroying the power of the capitalist class and the establishment of the rule of the working class. We assumed that this could not be achieved without the use of armed force."

Sassoon does not follow this class-based understanding of revolution and concludes that "Marx did not provide a Marxist theory of revolution". He argues that classic literary Utopias describing post-revolutionary societies such as Thomas More's *Utopia*,

Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* and William Morris's *News From Nowhere* do not "explain how the state of affairs comes about: the actual revolution is missing". This bold assertion oddly forgets Chapter 27 of Morris's visionary work which is headed, How the Change Came, which is one of that story's longest chapters.

Sassoon's ambitious new book considers key questions that have long preoccupied socialists like the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the virtues of reform versus revolution and mass participation in politics and the role of the party as a catalyst for social change.

Donald Sassoon must be commended for putting these core issues back on the agenda of historians and for providing some provocative observations that can provoke future research. His talk to our AGM on 6 June at the Marx Memorial Library stimulated a lively and engaged debate among our audience. The book will be a rewarding read for all those concerned about continuing social injustice and seeking to build a better world. The SHS was very pleased to host the author, who is one of the leading historians working today.

David Morgan



Professor Donald Sassoon with Duncan Bowie at Marx Memorial Library after the AGM.

An Invaluable Archive on the Chinese Seamen's Union in Liverpool

Arthur Clegg's daughter, Jenny, recently passed her father's papers relating to the Chinese Seamen's Union in Liverpool during WW2 to the Maritime Museum Archives at the National Museums, Liverpool. Arthur Clegg (1914-1994), a British communist and national organiser for the China Campaign Committee (CCC) which mobilised support for China's resistance to Japanese aggression from 1937, became involved in supporting the Chinese seafarers' struggle against discrimination during the Second World War.

In 1941, a branch of the Chinese Seamen's Union was formed in Liverpool and between February and April 1942 there were a series of strikes and violent confrontations with police which saw Chinese sailors jailed. With support from the CCC, the National Union of Seamen and the National Council for Civil Liberties, the seafarers eventually won an equal war risk bonus but not equal pay.



Chinese merchant seamen memorial, Liverpool's Pier Head

These documents, including information about the union, its constitution and elected committee, as well as correspondence and details pertaining to the seamen's claims, are of significance in showing firstly, that the Chinese did not accept unequal treatment lying down but stood up for their rights; and secondly, that they were not alone but had support through the CCC from other organisations in Britain.

This history not only evidences the colonialist practices of the shipping companies, with government backing, against the grain of the Allies' war against Nazism and racism but also the opposition among the Chinese actively demanding equal status as a wartime ally, and support for this within Britain. The unjust treatment was compounded when at the end of the war, hundreds of the seamen were secretly

deported. Their families left behind in Liverpool have long campaigned for the release of details to find out what happened to their fathers and to demand an apology from the government.

Jenny was until recently a Senior Lecturer in International Studies, and a China specialist, at the University of Central Lancashire. She and I hope that academics in the universities will direct their research students to this invaluable archive so that they can revive interest in and perpetuate knowledge about the seafarers' part in the world-wide anti-colonial struggle and how it is to be placed in the context of the international anti-fascist movement. (Much of this is discussed in the book *Chinese in Britain* that I published with MacMillan with Terence Gomez a few years ago.)

Jenny adds that the records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Nationalist government in the historical archive in Nanjing might also throw light on the Liverpool Chinese Seamen's pool. Arthur Clegg's papers pertaining to the China Campaign Committee are held at the Marx Memorial Library.

Gregor Benton, Emeritus Professor, University of Cardiff



A commemorative blue plaque on the site of a boarding house for Chinese sailors in Great Georges Square

Contact the Socialist History Society info@socialisthistorysociety.co.uk
or write to 53 Fladgate Raod, London, E11 1LX

Church of England’s £100m plan to address historical links to slavery faces legal challenge

The Church of England is facing a legal challenge over *Project Spire,* its £100m plan to further reparative justice for historical links to enslavement. Project Spire was set up in 2023, after research into a fund known as Queen Anne’s Bounty found that the Church had invested in the South Sea Company, which trafficked 40,000 enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. Project Spire has been attacked by the rightwing think-tank *Policy Exchange* and Tory politicians like Katie Lam and the Reverend Lord Nigel Biggar. It has been condemned by the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*, while the staff of the Church Commissioners, "have had to put up with some of the most vile abuse and correspondence".

Niger Biggar, retired Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at the University of Oxford is one of the leading opponents of Reparations within the Church. He says:

> *The Church's response to the killing of George Floyd and the upsurge of Black Lives Matter was exactly the same as that of many cultural institutions in the country. I'd regard it as a kind of moral panic.*

Presumably for Lord Biggar, Black Lives DO NOT Matter. While he acknowledges the Church's complicity, he insists it must be viewed through the moral lens of the 18th Century, rather than the 21st.

> *Slave trading and slavery were institutions and practices, practised on every continent by people of every skin colour since the dawn of time.*

Biggar wrote in the *Daily Mail*:

> *The humiliation and cruelty of British slave-trading and slavery was unique neither in kind nor degree. Many, many other peoples did similarly lamentable things, not least Africans and Arabs, and for a much longer period of time*.

Alan Lester, Professor of Historical Geography at the University of Sussex replies:

> *I am not an Anglican theologian so maybe I am missing something, but my lay understanding of the Christian idea of sin is that it is an affront to God in its own right, regardless of how many others commit it. Biggar’s observation seems relevant only if one believes that the more people commit a crime the less it matters*.

In any case, systematic enslavement of Africans in the Americas was many times vaster in scale than any previous system. The consequences are still with us today and the profits from the business of slavery were an important foundation block of the sys-

tem of industrial capitalism that still dominates the World. The ill-gotten gains of the traffickers and enslavers can be traced right through to the present.

If the business of slavery was so respectable, why do those who profited not proudly have the word "Slave Driver" inscribed on their tombstones and monuments?

But Nigel Biggar's most offensive claim is that:

> *Barbadians, mostly the descendants of slaves, are considerably better off than the average Nigerian.*

This is a slightly more respectable version of Suella Braverman's deliberately provocative statement:

> *The British Empire did so much good for the world*.
>
> *If the government is seriously thinking about this then former colonies should pay the British back for the considerable investment, effort and contribution that this country made which laid the foundations for many flourishing democracies today.*

But there are some sensible voices in the Church of England. The Right Reverend Lord Harries of Pentregarth, former Bishop of Oxford, and an Honorary Professor of Theology at King's College London writes:

> *Even given all that Biggar writes about the universality of slavery and the complicity of Africans ... Britain played a key part and, however others may want to respond to their own history, it is morally responsible to face up to our own heritage.*

Rosemarie Mallett, Bishop of Croydon wrote:

> *£100m is a heck of a lot of money, but we also recognise that it is not a lot when you consider the harm done. How do you put a price on that?*

This attack from the extreme right wing is not just about the Church, it is an attack on the whole notion of Reparations.

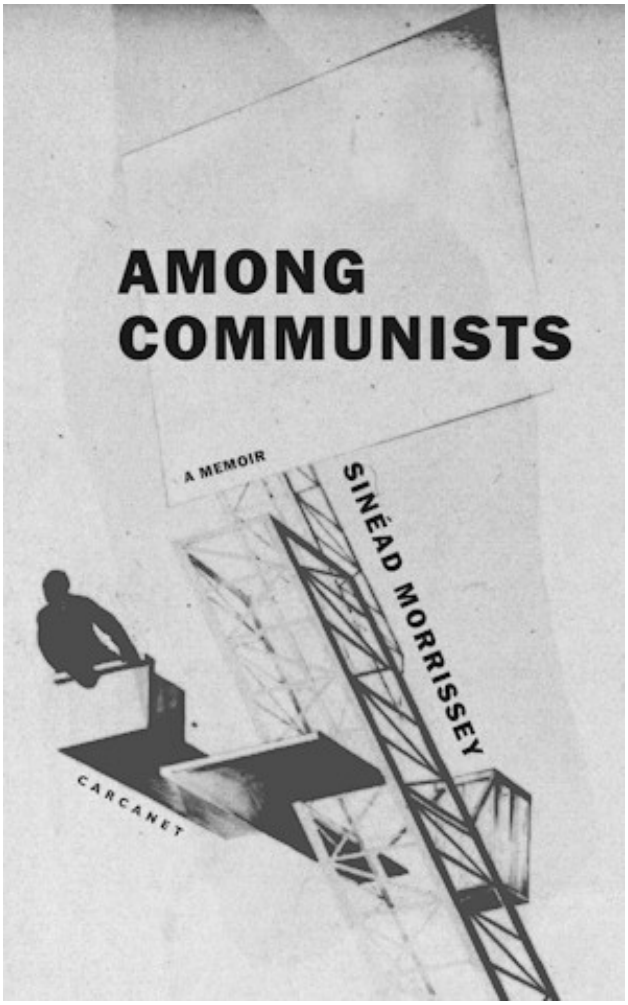
Steve Cushion, Caribbean Labour Solidarity

Among Communists, Sinead Morrissey, Carcanet Press, £16.99

Reviewed by *David Morgan*

Throughout the history of the Communist movement, biographies and autobiographies were a major feature of the literature that was produced. This was true of the Communist party in Britain as elsewhere in the world. Books about Communists were written by activists to inspire future generations, and to explore the successes or failures of party strategy. The lives of leading figures were always popular among party members, and these volumes would be proudly displayed on the bookshelves of most self-respecting activists. One prime example was Serving My Time by Harry Pollitt, the former general secretary of the CPGB, which must have been required reading among comrades.

During the height of the Cold War in the 1950s, the life stories of repentant former Communists were for a while in vogue, preaching the lesson that Communism was a sham, a dream, a "God that failed", the title of one well known book in this genre.



In later years, critical biographies emerged as historical studies of their subjects, many produced by leading historians of the left or often not so left. These volumes supplemented the autobiographies of Communists themselves but often added important details that were unknown or deliberately left out. There have been at least two biographies of Pollitt, for instance, the first relatively laudatory by John Mahon, appeared in 1976; which was followed in 1993 by a more critical reassessment by Kevin Morgan.

Sinead Morrissey's book is a very welcome late addition to this tradition of Communist biographies. Morrissey is a distinguished poet who was brought up in Belfast and is now a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She has produced a very well written book that is full of vivid incidents and great humour. As a biography of Communists, the book is very unusual in several respects: it is written several decades after the events that it recounts; it is the story of her own parents, who were

leading Communists in Northern Ireland, so it is affectionate, honest and slightly sceptical.

Her child's eye approach of the adult world is the book's most attractive feature. Morrissey is critical of her own involvement in politics and derives humour from describing the activities that she was encouraged to undertake, such as joining peace marches, leafleting in the street, attending meetings and mass gatherings of Communists at international festivals; all normal activities very familiar to leftwing activists.

Young Sinead's upbringing stimulates her interest in poetry. "Poems fell into me and altered my consciousness", she says. It also gave her some surprising insights. "When Sylvia Plath described mushrooms expanding into existence, their toes and noses taking 'hold on the loam' 'acquiring the air,' I knew she meant nuclear war."

The tone of the book is gently ironic and partly reminded me of Jeanette Winterson's autobiographical novel, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit. One example of the whimsical style is when Morrissey recounts the first meeting of her parents,

"'Come over here and let me tell you my theory about the negation of the negation,' said my father to my mother. He was wearing a trench coat with the collar turned up, smoking a Peter Stuyvesant cigarette. An offer my mother couldn't resist.

"Thirteen years later, the prospect of taking part in an evening of avant-garde theatre exposing the iniquities of capitalism and rehearsing for months in advance with her Party comrades couldn't have appealed to my mother more."

Despite the humour, the family's political activism was a serious business and as their involvement in the party intensified, they did not escape the ever-watchful state, "If Special Branch were listening in, the line would click at the start of the call," Morrissey recalls; the phones of all UK Communists were tapped, but comrades in Northern Ireland were prioritised, she concludes.

That the book reads like a novel is meant as a compliment and I can heartily recommend Morrissey's memoir for its readability. As for always being historically accurate, I am not too sure.

Forthcoming Socialist History Society on-line meetings

Stalin's Peacemaker: Ilya Ehrenburg and the Struggle Against Nuclear Annihilation
Speaker: Geoff Roberts Tuesday 1 December 2026 at 7pm

The Paris Commune in Britain
Author Laura Forster will speak about her new book Tuesday 2 February 2027 at 7pm

The Age of Hobsbawm: The Life of a Revolutionary Historian
Author Emile Chabal will talk about his new book, Tuesday 2 March 2027 on-line at 7pm

More details on the website https://www.socialisthistorysociety.co.uk/



LABOUR HERITAGE

11, Aylmer Road, London W12 9LG

0208 743 4189. LabourHeritage45@btinternet.com

www.labour-heritage.com

Hon. President: Sir Wayne David.

Annual Birkbeck Bursary appeal in memory of Stan Newens and Linda Shampan

In 2021 Labour Heritage established a bursary at Birkbeck University to support students from refugee backgrounds who have no other means of support for they studies.

The bursary is in memory of Stan Newens, ex-member of parliament and our past chair who had a long record of campaigning for international causes, and also in memory of Linda Shampan, our past secretary who played an essential role in establishing the bursary and once worked at the Refugee Council.

Birkbeck has been awarded the 'University of Sanctuary Status' in recognition of its work with forced migrant communities.

Five students have benefitted from our bursary since 2021 including the student below who describes her experiences in Syria and how our bursary enables her to achieve her ambitions in the medical field.

Our aim is to raise £3,500 and payments can be made by bank transfer to Labour Heritage: Unity Trust Bank sort code 608301. Account Number 20149763. Reference your surname & 'Bursary.'

Alternatively donation can be by cheque payable to 'Labour Heritage.' Please write 'Bursary' on the back of the cheque and post to Labour Heritage, 11 Aylmer Road, London W12 9LG.

John Grigg.
On behalf of Labour Heritage Committee.

Aisha (name anonymised) writes: My desire to work in the medical field resulted from my experience of growing up in Syria, along with my interest and aptitude for science. I passionately want to help individuals suffering from disease or injury, The tragedies I witnessed during the war gave me a better perception of how working in the medical field makes a significant difference to people's lives, and I volunteered in an emergency department in a local hospital in Syria during the war.

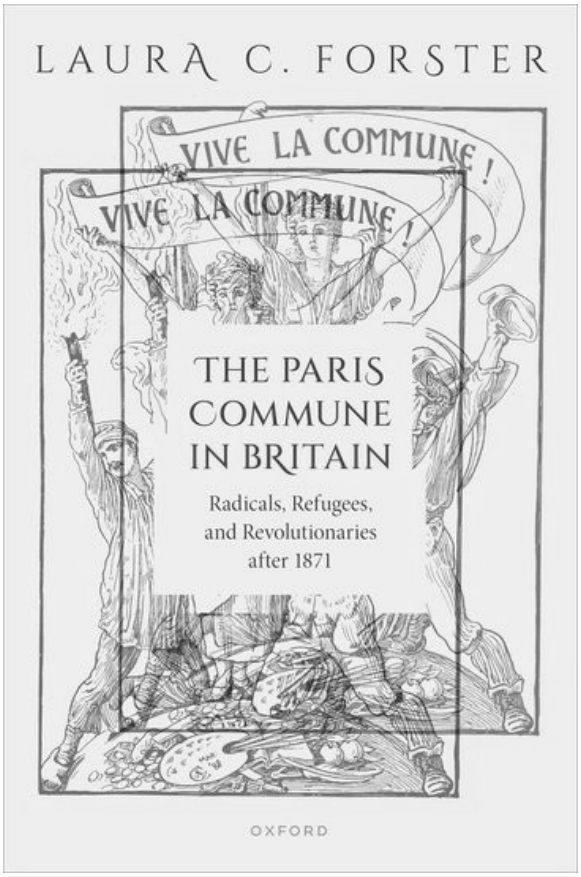
When I arrived in the UK as a refugee , I had to adapt to an unfamiliar environment, learn a new language, and integrate with a new community. It was not an easy journey. But Birkbeck was made for me. It has all the modules useful in real life – not only as basic knowledge. I am enjoying every bit of it so far. Receiving this bursary helps students focus much more on our studies, and worry less about financial issues.

Revolutionaries in Fitzrovia

Duncan Bowie reviews a study of Communards in exile.

The Paris Commune in Britain Radicals, Refugees, and Revolutionaries after 1871 by Laura C Forster

Oxford University Press, 2025, hb £84



This is an important book as well as a very readable study. Forster is a history lecturer at the University of York and a member of History Workshop editorial collective. The book is a study of the impact of the Paris Commune of 1871 on British radicals. While much has been written on the European republican refugees in England after 1848, there is less material on the post-Commune refugees. The early chapters focus on the geographical spread of communard refugees in London, centred on Fitzrovia, and maps the pubs, coffee houses, shops and meeting halls in which they met, distinguishing their networks from the established French emigration which was centred on Soho and Holborn to the south of Fitzrovia. It is perhaps difficult to imagine how Fitzrovia, now such an upmarket area was once host not just to Louise Michel's anarchist school but to a fairly numerous group of poor, transient republican and anarchist French working men and women revolutionaries.

Forster also provides a guide to the various institutions formed in London by the communards, such as La Societe des Refugees de la Commune a Londres. La Commune Revolutionnaire and the Cercle d'Etudes Sociales, also mentioning (in passing) the English Federalist Council and the short-lived International Labour Union (which involved the secularist republicans Charles Bradlaugh and Harriet Law). Forster does not however fully examine the politics and inter-relationships of these different organisations or the writings of the exiled communards such as Charles Malato. Instead, Forster examines the role of friendship between communards and English radicals.

Interestingly, Forster does not comment on the role of leading communard exiles - French republicans such as the Blanquist Edouard Valliant or Marx's son- in-law,

Charles Longuet, but on the activities and friendships of lesser known individuals. Forster chooses the communard and engineer Victor Delahaye, who worked with the young John Burns at various workshops in South London, and in effect became his political mentor, with Burns being inspired by Delahaye's memoir of the Commune. Burns was to be the first working class member of the London County Council, later writing a pamphlet on the LCC as a London commune, as also did the SDF leader, H M Hyndman. Her second subject is the Clarion writer, Alexander Thompson, known as 'Dangle', who grew up in Paris and later wrote on his personal experience of the Commune. Forster examines the impact on his later writings on direct democracy and his friendship with communards Jules Magny who grew vines in the Old Kent Road and Jean Allemaine, a leading socialist in the Third Republic, who though not exiled in London, Thompson later visited in Paris.

The second half of the book focuses on the English positivists, the followers of August Comte, Frederic Harrison and Edward Spenser Beesley and their defence of the Commune. Beesly and Harrison were both liberal intellectuals with links to the trade union movement – Beesly was a friend of Marx and knew Engels and was later to chair the inaugural meeting of Hyndman's Democratic Federation, but like Harrison, was active in the Liberal Party. Harrison's main political activity was criticizing successive government for their aggressive imperial policies. He later joined Burns as a progressive member of the LCC. However, neither were involved in the artisan-based London republican and radical networks – organisations such as the international Democratic Association, the Land and Labour League or the Metropolitan Radical Federation. By focusing on the positivists, Forster has perhaps missed other key relationship between communards and their ideas and working class radicalism and republicanism – the Irish and Scottish links are also only very briefly mentioned. Forster is stronger on her review of popular fiction relating to the commune, such as the writing of G A Henty and Eliza Lyn Linton, novelist wife of the Chartist William Linton, and on the commemorative activities of the socialist organisations of the 1880s and 1890s -the Socialist League; the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party.

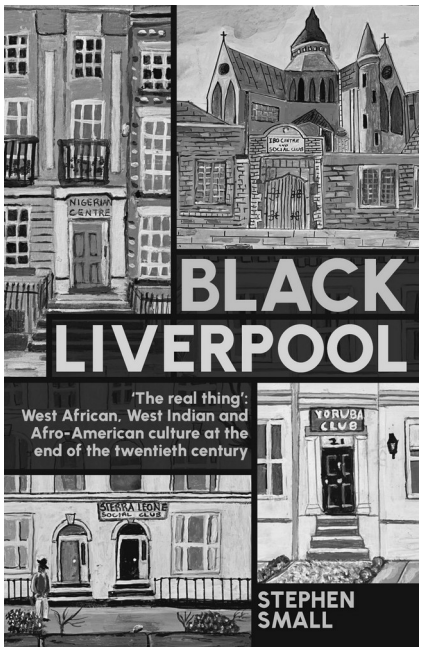
These are perhaps minor points because Forster's study is certainly welcome and includes interesting new material as well as a novel approach to the subject.

Laura will be speaking at an on-line meeting for the Society on February 2nd

A Powerful History of Black Liverpool

Black Liverpool 'The Real Thing': West African, West Indian and Afro-American culture at the end of the twentieth century. By Stephen Small, Liverpool University Press 2026, £25.

Book review by Chris Jones



Stephen Small is uniquely qualified to write Black Liverpool. He draws on both his upbringing in Liverpool 8 and his subsequent career as a sociologist and professor at the University of California, Berkeley. His personal connection to the area, combined with historical and sociological research, enables him to produce an exceptionally comprehensive study of Liverpool's black community.

A central theme is the distinctive character of Black Liverpool. Unlike many British cities, whose black populations became predominantly associated with the post-war Caribbean migration of the Windrush generation, Liverpool's black community has much deeper roots and historically maintained particularly strong links with West Africa. Liverpool 8 became the centre of this community, with an extraordinary concentration of African social and cultural organisations and nightclubs, including Ghanaian, Somali, Yoruba, Nigerian, Sierra Leonean, Kru and Ibo. This concentration meant that black people were highly visible in L8 but dispersed elsewhere in the city only to a limited degree.

Small gives particular attention to women, emphasising their importance to the history and development of the black community. He identifies numerous women who played significant roles despite experiencing discrimination both publicly and within their own homes. Notable among these was Dorothy Kuya, a long-standing member of the CPGB and the city's first community relations officer.

Liverpool 8 itself emerges as the book's principal character. Small portrays it as both a place of protection and community solidarity and an unofficial racial reservation. The community's historical origins extend back to Liverpool's involvement in the slave trade, while the later settlement of African seamen, students, visiting academics and health workers created an unusual racial and cultural environment. Many African men formed relationships with white women, resulting in a large mixed-race population. Small describes the population as a "racialised anomaly".

Another major theme is the influence of Black America. Black seamen returning from voyages brought American music that was otherwise difficult to obtain in Bri-

tain, helping make Liverpool 8 a centre of black musical culture. Clubs such as the Timepiece provided places where people could socialise without the restrictions of the colour bar. American servicemen from the nearby Burtonwood airbase were attracted by the music, the absence of racial segregation and the opportunity to meet local women, although Small stresses that these women often resented assumptions made about their sexual availability.

American influence extended beyond music into civil rights and political activism. Small discusses the impact of the American civil rights movement, the Black Panther Party in Oakland, and figures such as Angela Davis. He also highlights the Liverpool 8 "Green Jackets", a group influenced by the Panthers.

Much of the book is based on interviews with prominent figures from Liverpool's black political and cultural life, providing extensive first-hand testimony. Small's personal involvement occasionally appears to compromise scholarly detachment, particularly in his forceful criticism of relations between L8 residents and the police. Yet this could be seen as a strength, giving the book an organic and authentic quality.

The book's arguments are supported by extensive official statistics on employment, housing, education and health, providing empirical weight to Small's conclusions. Black Liverpool is a powerful history of survival, resistance, resilience and renewal, combining scholarly rigour with a deep personal warmth towards Liverpool 8 and its people.

'A Descent into Hell' *Leicestershire Framework Knitters and George Hort – Leicester's Forgotten Working-class Hero* by Steve Marquis

Two centuries ago, Leicestershire's framework knitters, who made up around half the workforce at the time, were starved, brutalised and degraded in a decades-long descent into a living hell. Not since the darkest days of the Civil War had so many Leicestershire people suffered such incessant deprivation and hopelessness. In this book, I attempt to tell not only the story of their degradation but also to commemorate the incredible courage, endurance and determination shown by this county's stockingers as they fought desperately to preserve their livelihoods and way of life.

Britain's emergence as the world's first industrialised society marked one of the most transformative events in human history since the development of agriculture ten millennia ago. Every aspect of economic, social, and political life was in flux as the dynamic forces of industrial capitalism swept away the last vestiges of the medieval

world. In such tumultuous times, old interests are destroyed and newly created ones fought over; conflict, and in particular, class conflict, becomes inevitable.

Leicestershire's framework knitters found themselves locked into an unrelenting fight for survival. A battle not only with their employers over wages and conditions, but also with the entire power of the state, which was used to callously crush any attempt made to resist the forces that were dragging them into absolute impoverishment.

The book examines the conflict, which spans the fifteen years following the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 when general trading conditions were poor, with employers imposing wage cuts while insisting that frame rents and other fixed charges still be paid. Stockingers responded with numerous 'turnouts' (strikes), but, with no real bargaining power, they invariably failed as they were starved back to work. In desperation, they resorted to attacks on the property by breaking into workshops and smashing machinery in what became known as 'Luddism'. The failure of Luddism led to the formation of the Leicestershire Framework Knitters' Trade Union in 1817, one of the first, if not the first, modern trade unions in the country. George Hort had emerged as its leader by 1824 at the start of its most militant phase.

Local newspaper reports indicate that Hort was at the forefront of all the resistance campaigns. These newspapers gave full coverage of political events, though very partisan, as Leicester emerged as one of the most active urban centres in the fight for Parliamentary Reform and an expanded franchise. Hort's actions were just too radical, and he was universally condemned, more so than any other political figure of that period. One interesting question remains. Why was Hort's name never directly associated with Chartism during a period when he was still very active and when the fight for the Charter dominated the union's agenda? I try to offer some possible reasons for this.

One interesting question remains. Why was Hort's name never directly associated with Chartism during a period when he was still very active and when the fight for the Charter dominated the union's agenda? I try to offer some possible reasons for this.

George Hort, a leading figure in the Framework Knitters Union and a formidable campaigner, seems to have gone largely under the radar as regards any historical recognition. As far as I'm aware, mine is the first ever written account of Hort's life and activities.

The book is available from the author at £14.99 including p&p.
stephen.marquis@outlook.com

How I became a Communist by *Greta Sykes*

Bombs were falling on the small town of Oppenheim near Mainz on the night of 13th to 14th October 1944. That night my mother gave birth to me, her fourth child after an eight-year gap. A bomb exploded next door enveloping staff and patients in smoke. Everyone rushed to the air raid shelter to avoid asphyxiation. Germany was burning. Hamburg had been firebombed the year before. The Allies had at last opened the Second Front when It was clear that the Soviet Union was winning. The victory in Stalingrad in January 1943 had been the decisive blow to the Nazi Army who were now in full retreat. The thirties had seen the exodus of most of Germany's writers, artists and composers like Anna Seghers, Stefan Zweig, Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht, to name but a few. Germany's cultural life lay in ruins.

At the end of the war my mother was homeless. Bombed out of her comfortable home with house and garden, with maid and gardener, she learnt that my father had to spend two years imprisoned by the British as a member of the Nazi party. During those two years my mother and her children were moved into the offices of British Petroleum company, my father's employer. Upon his release in 1947 we were moved to Hamburg by BP where my father was offered another job. When we arrived in Hamburg, I was nearly three years old, and my brother was just one. Memory tends only to begin between two and three years of age, but I had already some vivid memories and suffered nightmares due to the war. These never completely went away.

We were initially housed in a Nissen hut as the blocks of flats we were supposed to be housed in were only being build. It seemed to rain every day. Often the rain seeped into the hut and our feet and shoes got soaked. We all had lice. My sisters began to attend school. My brother and I played in the street. Nearby were army residences with refugee children and families housed there. We met the children after school and learnt of their fates and from where they had come. We were also refugees and had lost our wider family who were living in the Ruhr. We had all been misplaced. These shocking experiences I never forgot. After several months in the Nissen hut we were offered a ground floor flat in one of the first blocks to be built. I realised from the photographs how tired and exhausted my parents looked and how threadbare their clothes were. Nothing was ever said about the war. It was taboo. We had to quietly exist and were glad to have enough to eat. My parents were a loving couple, and I saw they did their best to return to a situation of moderate wealth within a few years. Although my parents were a traditional couple with my father the breadwinner and my mother looking after her five children, she had a vibrant and powerful personality expressed in a quiet manner. She had trained at the Berlin hospital, The Charitee, to become a physiotherapist and had worked before she had her children. She was a naturist, a nudist with a deep love and respect for nature. This also became one of my enduring commitments.

I saw my mother had a great sense of fairness and warmth. I was often comforted by her, especially at night when I continued to suffer nightmares. I became aware of how hard my mother worked to feed and dress us all. I often saw her standing in the kitchen quietly crying while no one was around. I felt a great pain inside me about her sadness. Sometimes I saw her walking naked into the bathroom with her stomach and breasts all wrinkled after five births and thinking to myself if that was also going to be my fate. I became a feminist by the age of 12.

School was my next wake up call. Studying German literature brought my attention to the works of Brecht, Gunter Eich, Friedrich Dürrenmatt and others who alerted me to the catastrophe that had destroyed German culture so utterly. It remains a permanent shock to me how in such a short time so much devastation had been brought about. Most of Germany's artists either fled the country or were murdered or hunted down all the way to the south of France. Many never returned. The physical, emotional, psychological, cultural and political trauma remains. History and geography classes remain blurred and insignificant in my mind due to the poverty of the instructions. I studied philosophy and since then have remained deeply interested in it. I used to go out with a small 'Reklam' copy of Emmanuel Kant's writings which became an enduring guide to my thinking.

By the time I was at university I saw myself as a nonconformist, always looking for the 'why' in everything. I began my studies at Hamburg University in philosophy which meant studying Heidegger. I felt a great sense of alienation in those days. Life eventually intervened luckily in the form of a young Englishman whom I met while he was studying German at the university. We swiftly left the country together. Arriving in London was a startling experience. I had to study for a Cambridge Proficiency in English to gain a university place. Every day I walked from Moorgate to Oxford St with a fellow student. I began to love the city's old streets as I still do today. History had not been destroyed here.

But I still felt troubled about the seemingly insurmountable tasks a woman must face in earning a living and having children without becoming dependent on a man. I had two children and finished my studies years later at the Institute of Education, now UCL. I went to work as soon as I could. The war had burnt into my mind the need to campaign for peace. All my first political activities involved joining local peace groups. I joined CND, the World Peace Council, Teachers for Peace and the British Committee for the Helsinki Final Act. Journalist Gordon Schaffer, formerly a BBC correspondent who had reported from East Berlin, and I, often travelled together to Brussels for the European joint events. I joined the Communist Party in 1977 in Haringey and have remained a solid believer in the class struggle and in solidarity with the USSR and Russia to this day.