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## New times, new politics: history and memory during the final years of the CPGB

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### Publication date

01-01-2011

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### Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Robinson, E. (2011). *New times, new politics: history and memory during the final years of the CPGB* (Version 1). University of Sussex. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23402168.v1>

### Published in

British Politics

### Link to external publisher version

<https://doi.org/10.1057/bp.2011.24>

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Article (Unspecified)

**Original citation:**

Robinson, Emily (2011) New times, new politics: history and memory during the final years of the CPGB. *British Politics*, 6. pp. 453-478. ISSN 1746-918X

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This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *British Politics* 6:4 (2011), pp. 453-78. The definitive publisher-authenticated version (doi:10.1057/bp.2011.24) is available online at: <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/bp/journal/v6/n4/full/bp201124a.html>

## **New Times, New Politics**

### **History and memory during the final years of the CPGB**

Dr Emily Robinson, University of Nottingham

#### **Abstract**

This article examines the relationship between collective memory, historical interpretation and political identity. It focuses on the dissolution of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and particularly on the effects of the collapse of the USSR on both the identity of its members, as constructed through collective narrative memory, and on Marxist interpretations of history.

The CPGB provides a powerful example of the interplay between history, memory and political identity. Marxism is particularly closely connected with the discipline of academic history: its political analysis being explicitly based on a theory of historical development. Moreover, the small size and intense commitment of the CPGB meant that it developed an unusually strong mnemonic culture. The divisions within both the party itself and the wider Marxist community, which stretched from 1956 right through until 1991, were often framed around questions of historical interpretation.

The events of 1989-91 created an historical and mnemonic crisis for CPGB members who struggled to reconcile their past identities with their present situation. Unlike the outward-facing revisionism of other political parties, this was an intensely personal affair. The solution for many was to emphasise the need to find new ways to progress socialist aims, without relying on a discredited grand narrative. In contrast,

other Communist parties, such as the Communist Party of Britain, which had been established (or 're-established') in 1988, fared rather better. By adhering to the international party line of renewal and continued struggle, the party was able to hold its narrative together, condemning the excesses of totalitarian regimes, while reaffirming the need for international class struggle.

**Keywords:** Communist Party of Great Britain, 1989, collective memory, Marxist history, party identity, party membership

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## **New Times, New Politics**

### **History and memory during the final years of the CPGB<sup>1</sup>**

Dr Emily Robinson, University of Nottingham<sup>2</sup>

This paper focuses on the final four years of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Founded in 1920, following two years of negotiations between a number of socialist societies (Klugmann 1969), the party reached its peak of just under 60,000 members in the early 1940s (Davies 1992, 156). However, the revelations of Stalin's purges and subsequent Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 caused a crisis of both membership and ideology, from which the party never recovered. Following a prolonged period of internal dispute, heightened by the collapse of the Soviet Union, it disbanded in November 1991.

Despite being a marginal electoral and political force in British history, the CPGB has attracted a great deal of academic attention, particularly from within its own ranks. As we will see below, the ability of communist historians to analyse their own party was restricted throughout most of the twentieth century. Yet, since the opening of the

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper appears in Emily Robinson, *History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics: Past Politics and Present Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2012). I am grateful to Sarah Hunt and Manchester University Press for permission to reproduce it here.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Richard Grayson, James Martin, Steven Fielding, Andrew Flinn, Lawrence Black, John Greenaway and two anonymous reviewers who all read and commented on drafts of this paper and provided invaluable advice for its improvement.

Comintern archive in the early 1990s (see Morgan 1993) and especially since the fall of the USSR, a rich and diverse historiography of the party has flourished. As Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn have noted, this has included biographical studies of former party members, as well as examinations of the cultures and mentalities of communism (Morgan et al 2005, 15).

The present paper focuses not on the cultures of communism *per se* but on the breakdown of these cultures and associated identities during the final four years of its existence. The fall of communism has inspired many studies of trauma and memory in the former USSR (see for instance Nadkani 2003; Smith 1996). Unsurprisingly, this has not taken place in Britain, where the events of 1989 did not entail a reorganisation of state machinery or a renegotiation of national identity and where there was little direct experience of oppression or brutality. Yet, the breakdown of the CPGB did necessitate a re-examination – and in many cases a repudiation – of the collective narrative structure upon which members' personal identities were founded. It is clear that British communists did think of this in terms of trauma and crisis. Indeed, the editors of *Socialist History Journal* felt able to claim that 'it has been those communist parties farthest removed from the regimes of the bloc which have suffered the greatest traumas' (Editorial 1993, 2). This paper draws on correspondence – both personal and printed in the party's internal newspapers – in order to examine the ways in which members discussed and reacted to the shocks of 1989 and the dissolution process within their own party. In so doing, it hopes to shed light on the ways in which members negotiated this rift in their narrative memory and attempted to reconcile their past, present and future political identities.

All political parties function as mnemonic communities: they 'socialize' their members as to 'what should be remembered and what should be forgotten' (Mizstal 2003, 15). In joining a political party, members enter a community of memory, with its own

'cognitive maps' of social reality (Geertz 1964, 64), many of which will be based on interpretations of the past. However, the CPGB provides a particularly powerful example of this phenomenon. Its small size and intense commitment meant that it developed an unusually strong mnemonic culture. The party functioned as a repository for personal, familial and collective memories of struggle, exclusion and comradeship. Raphael Samuel (2006, 13) has described the way in which 'To be a Communist was to have a complete social identity' and how its activities 'might be seen retrospectively as a way of practising togetherness', notwithstanding the political urgency accorded to them at the time. Robyn Fivush (2008) has detailed the extent to which the stories we tell ourselves about our own history and our sense of self are constructed through narrative discourse within the family. Within the CPGB 'family' these narratives were strong enough to infuse all other potential narratives. Phil Cohen's (1997) collection of testimonies from former 'Communist children' makes clear the extent to which Communist identity was tied up with a sense of difference – of holidays spent in Eastern Europe rather than Blackpool, of weekends delivering copies of the *Daily Worker*, of the imperative to challenge school orthodoxies. Parents were busy with party business, career opportunities disappeared, along with non-party friends. A world view was constructed, not only through the immediate memory work of families and close friendship groups, but also through broader narratives of the party's place in national and international history.

Where this paper differs from much of the literature in the field of 'memory studies', is in its attempts to relate communists' narratives of collective memory to their understandings of history and the historical process. Most literature on collective memory tends to separate this from formal, written history (see for instance Halbwachs 1980; Nora 1996; Radstone and Hodgkin 2003, 10). However, the study of the CPGB shows how problematic this is. While understandings of 'the past' and of 'history' are always interrelated in complex ways (see Robinson, forthcoming 2012),

this was particularly true of Marxist parties, which were explicitly based on a theory of historical development and which counted a disproportionate number of renowned historians among their ranks; in the British case these included Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson. Communism as an ideology was predicated upon the 'truths' of objective, *scientific*, historical analysis, yet communism as political practice depended upon maintaining a restricted view of its own past.

The communist historians were extremely restricted in their ability to analyse the history of either the party itself or of the labour movement in the twentieth century; at the same time, they were expected to provide the party with a politically useable *past* - a framework for celebratory collective memories. These tensions became particularly apparent in 1956, following Khrushchev's revelations after the death of Stalin and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. It is significant that the party's historians were at the forefront of internal dissent. Over the next three decades, as the divisions within the party deepened, it is unsurprising to find those historians who remained within the party firmly attached to its Eurocommunist wing. The Gramscian turn away from teleology and certainty and towards a recognition of the particularities and contingencies of lived experience both reflected and shaped the concerns of academic history in this period. For Marxists, in Britain as elsewhere, political revisionism went hand in hand with historical revisionism.

This dual aspect of revisionism marks out the CPGB from other British political parties which have similarly undergone periods of political revisionism. As will be seen below, the CPGB revisionists grouped around *Marxism Today* argued that it was necessary to adapt their ideology to fit present social reality. This has close parallels with debates within the Labour Party in both the 1950s/'60s and 1980s/'90s. But the CPGB's historical revisionism was not intended to justify future changes in policy; changes were made necessary because of a new perspective on the past.



More fundamentally, this historical knowledge necessitated a new attitude to both history and politics, one that was characterised by pluralism, openness and contingency.

The CPGB was already in crisis when the Soviet Union collapsed. Long term divisions within the party had come to a head in 1988, with the expulsion of leading left-wingers and the formation of the rival Communist Party of Britain (CPB). As we will see, the members (and particularly the leaders) of the CPGB reacted very differently to those of the CPB and an earlier breakaway party, the New Communist Party (NCP, formed 1977). While members of these latter groups were able to maintain both their existing communist identities and their visions of the future, the CPGB disbanded. The loss of the social framework of the CPGB was disorienting for members; the destruction of the collective narrative of communist identity was arguably worse. While many party members made attempts to find inspiration in alternative radical histories, it was by concentrating on the needs of the present and future that they were able to reconcile their past identities with their present situation. They stressed the need to find new ways to progress socialist aims, without relying on a discredited grand narrative of historical development.

### Communist History

The Communist Party Historians' Group, established in 1946, was one of the party's key contributions to wider intellectual debate, particularly through the seminal journal *Past and Present*, founded in 1952. Although the group continued to meet until 1992, when it became the Socialist History Society, which continues to this day, it lost the majority of its members in 1956 and its reputation dimmed thereafter. Although Steve Parsons (1992, 26) has shown that the 1956 membership exodus was not restricted to intellectuals, it is clear that the Historians' Group had a particularly strong reaction to Khrushchev's revelations, quickly forming 'the nucleus of vocal opposition to the

Party line' (Hobsbawm 2002, 206). Almost all of its members left the party, including Christopher Hill, Raphael Samuel and Rodney Hilton. Most spectacular was the resignation (under threat of expulsion) of John Saville and E. P. Thompson after beginning a journal, *The Reasoner*, in order to discuss the revelations and - a few months later - the invasion of Hungary. Saville explained that they were both 'emotionally, politically and morally shocked at the revelations of what Stalinism really meant' and that 'as Communists and historians we saw clearly that we were obliged to analyse seriously the causes of the crimes which in the past we had defended or apologised for' (1976, 7-8). The idea that this was their obligation *as historians* is key. Eric Hobsbawm, who famously stayed within the party, made the same point many years later: 'what had been done under Stalin and why it had been concealed was literally a question about history' (2002, 207). Yet, as Perry Anderson has remarked, Hobsbawm's (2002, 204) complaint that 'We were not told the truth about something which had to affect the very nature of a communist's belief' showed rather a disconnect between 'militant and historian' – in the case of the Soviet past, 'not independent sources critically checked, but the word of authority was expected to deliver the truth' (Anderson 2005, 284).

In 1978 Hobsbawm had admitted that his (and the other British Marxist historians') approach to the party's history, and even to the twentieth-century history of the labour movement, was very different from their approach to other historical subjects. They were under 'constraint', particularly with regard to 'some notoriously tricky problems' in the party's history. Even on the occasions when they attempted to write such a history - particularly in 1952/3 - they found that 'The gap between what historians thought it necessary to write and what was regarded as officially possible and desirable to write at this stage – or even much later – proved too large' (1978, 28-9). Hobsbawm also quotes an unnamed colleague's comment at the Historians' Group meeting on 8 April 1956: 'We have accepted Soviet articles on contemporary

history in a way we did not for earlier centuries. We stopped being historians as regards the history of the CPSU or current affairs' (1978, 41).

This lack of critical engagement by intellectuals like Hobsbawm was a serious weakness for a party which placed so much emphasis on rigorous analysis of the past. Not only were Stalin's distortions of history and historical sources a moral offence, they also attacked the very notion of a 'scientific' history, based on deductions from empirical research. As another communist historian, Monty Johnstone, pointed out in 1979, 'As materialists our starting point must be reality.' The position of the CPSU, in which facts were selected in 'the service of the prevailing political line', made it impossible to learn from mistakes or to draw correct conclusions from the study of history. In support of his position, Johnstone quoted Marx: 'Is it not the first task of the scientific researcher to go directly to the truth without looking to the right or to the left?' and Lenin: 'We need full and true information and truth should not depend on the question of whom it should serve', noting laconically that this letter of Lenin's was itself suppressed until after the XXth Congress of 1956 (1979, 7).

It is striking that in a movement with so many first-rate historians, Martin Jacques was able to comment that 'Now I think it is fair to say that, not least in Britain, the development of Communist history has not had a very good record'. It was, he felt, 'essentially narrative, descriptive and often celebratory' (1978, 6). This was not for want of trying. In the aftermath of the 1956 revelations, the Historians' Group 'demanded a serious history of the CP', this led – by Hobsbawm's account – to 'frustrated meetings' with the party leadership who would only countenance a celebratory history: 'a record of battles fought, heroic deeds, sacrifices for the cause, red banners waved' (2002, 209). In a 1979 article for *Our History Journal*, Monty Johnstone highlighted the disjunction between 'the demand for an objective

evaluation of our past' raised by 1956 and the central party's view of history, as shown in a 1937 statement from the Secretariat, which spoke of 'the urgent need for a history of the British Communist Party, in view of the increasing number of new members coming into the Party, as well as the increasing interest on all sides in the Communist Party' (1979, 5). This was unlikely to be the 'frank and balanced account' the Historians' Group had called for.

The 1957 History Commission resulted in the official party histories, written by James Klugmann under "'Collective" Party control'. Klugmann had 'to submit drafts' to a committee of party grandees, 'with the requirement that all of them should be satisfied!' (Johnstone 1979, 5). Hobsbawm believed that Klugmann 'knew what was right, but shied away from saying it in public' (2002, 209). Johnstone sought to demonstrate that Klugmann began to speak out as he contemplated writing the third volume of the history. In a letter dated 16 June 1976 he wrote of his intention that the next history would include his '*own considered views of what was correct and what incorrect*' and would address the CPGB's relationship with the Comintern, dealing with the 'difficult periods' as well as the 'good periods' (Johnstone 1979, 6. Original emphasis). In the event, Klugmann's death cut off this project but the third volume of the party's history was written by Noreen Branson with the 'co-operation' of the Executive Committee, but not under its control (Jacques 1978, 8).

### 1989

Like 1956, the events of 1989-91 could be seen not merely as a political crisis but also an *historical* one, calling into question both past and future. As an editorial in the Historians' Group's *Our History Journal* put it:

It can be seen that our understanding of our history is very much conditioned by our expectations about the shape of the future and looks radically different

after 1989 from what it did before. The past is not what it used to be (1990b, 1).

*Our History Journal*, immediately announced that the next issue would be devoted to 'A review of the processes since the Russian Revolution which have led up to the present state of affairs'. This would 'aim especially to disentangle aspects of development which were intrinsic to the nature of the Soviet Union and its allied regimes from occasions where other decisions might have produced very different outcomes.' The editors also could not resist noting that 'The orientation of this journal for the last several years, to concentrate on the history of the international communist movement and to face its most discreditable aspects has been amply vindicated, for they have proved in the event to be very consequential' (1990a, 1).

Nineteen months after that editorial was published, the CPGB ceased to exist and its resources were used to establish a pluralist think-tank called Democratic Left.

Francis Beckett has argued that the dissolution of the CPGB was not a consequence of the fall of the USSR, saying that 'Actually at the end of its life, the Party which had sometimes been slavishly obedient to Moscow was surprisingly little affected by what was happening there' (1995, 212). Whilst it is true that the party was tearing itself apart long before 1989, the sources show that party members (and even somewhat distant left-wing intellectuals) were deeply shaken by the news from Eastern Europe and from China and that they were forced into re-examining – and in many cases repudiating – the collective narrative structure upon which their personal identities were founded.

Although the debate over the party's redraft of the *British Road to Socialism* had begun in 1988, it was the shocks of the following year which turned it into the *Manifesto for New Times*, an explicit statement that the party was breaking with the

processes and expectations of its past. Moreover, there are some indications that the longer-term divisions within the party were themselves a direct legacy of the revelations of 1956. In particular, the nickname 'tankies', applied by eurocommunists to their traditionalist opponents, was a direct reference to the Soviet tanks which had rolled into Hungary that year. Beyond this, it is particularly telling that these internal divisions shaped responses to the events of 1989, with the two breakaway factions reacting very differently to the CPGB.

### Crisis? Or no Crisis?

The New Communist Party was established in 1977 and the Communist Party of Britain in 1988. Both of these parties claimed continuity with the founding ideals of the CPGB, in their opposition to the revisionist tendencies of the current leadership. The founders of the NCP claimed that 'The old party had ceased to be revolutionary and was no longer part of the mainstream of world revolution. Thus, after 57 years, Communists in Britain had to begin again.' They drew an explicit parallel with the original formation 'with Lenin's help' of the CPGB in 1920:

The formation of both parties were [sic] important milestones in the history of the working class movement. Both events were motivated by the same aspirations – the need to break with the reformist and social democratic traditions of our labour movement and to unite with all peoples struggling for socialism [...]

Today, the banner of those earlier communist fighters is again taken up. The fight has begun once more (NCP, undated [1977?], 3; 9).

The Communist Party of Britain took this line even further, treating the new party as a 're-establishment' of the old which had effectively ceased to exist as a communist party. As Tony Chater, editor of the *Morning Star* and founder of the new party, put it

in the first debate of the Re-establishment Congress, 'We are not creating a new Party. We are re-establishing the Party on the basis of its' [sic] rules and programme' (CPB, 1988, 4). The first party card was presented to Andrew Rothstein, who had been a delegate at the 1920 Unity Conference which had voted to establish the CPGB. In his acceptance speech he reassured his comrades that 'the spirit of July 31, 1920 is in this hall today' and also said that 'For several years we've been without a Communist Party at the time when Thatcher has been renewing the capitalist offensive against the working class' (CPB, 1988, 16-17).

The differing reactions of the three parties to the events of 1989 depended upon their respective interpretations of the history of the Soviet Union. The NCP saw nothing to regret in that history until the arrival of Gorbachev, whose policies it presented as a counter-revolution. According to this interpretation, it was not communism which was in crisis, but the capitalism which Gorbachev had introduced to the USSR. No historical rethinking was therefore required. It was simply necessary to return to the previous state of affairs. Thus, in a letter to the *Morning Star* which was much criticised by CPB members, Eric Trevett, the General Secretary of the NCP 'welcomed' the attempted Soviet coup of August 1991 which not only 'vindicated' the position of the NCP but would also lead to a 'restoration of pride in the Soviet people's achievements and their heroic potential.' Under its new leadership the Soviet Union would now be able to 'once again take its rightful place in the vanguard of progressive humanity in the struggle and achievement of peace, national liberation and Socialism.'

The CPB's position was more nuanced. For all that it was attacked by the CPGB as a Stalinist party, its analysis of events was largely based on adherence to the CPSU line, which involved rejecting Stalin's rule as counter-revolutionary and embracing perestroika as an important step towards reviving the socialism of the early years of

the USSR and as a necessary step on the path to full communism. While the horrors of the past were admitted and regretted, this continued belief in a Marxist-Leninist future served to insulate members from the need for serious historical revision. The distortions of the Stalinist era could be rejected while the overall historical trajectory of communism in practice was retained and defended. The CPB's revived Young Communist League approvingly published extracts from the Platform of the CPSU agreed in 1990 'as a guide' to the correct interpretation of perestroika. In its words:

It is dangerous to idealise the past and refuse to learn the complete and grim truth about the tragic aspects of our history, as it is to try to obliterate everything that is truly great and valuable in our historical legacy. The continuity of the Soviet people's labour efforts and struggle must not be interrupted. (Coyle undated [1990?], 10)

Unsurprisingly, it was in the CPGB where the real crisis of historical narrative took place. The leadership – and much of the membership – sought to dissociate itself from Soviet communism in all its guises, even suggesting that their support for the October Revolution had been misguided. In her 1990 report to the Executive Committee, Nina Temple, the newly-elected (and final) General Secretary of the CPGB, argued that the circumstances of the CPGB's foundation had tied it to a form of communism that was fundamentally flawed. Although the party had 'moved on' from its origins as 'a Leninist party in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution', this had been only 'a partial and incomplete moving on. As the edifice that was Eastern Europe collapses we have one foot in the rubble'. The fall of the USSR had 'made the world quite literally a different place. A place in which every previous assumption must be reconsidered, especially by us who call ourselves communists' (Temple 1990, 4; 3).



The CPGB leadership put out a relentless message of novelty, change and innovation. A promotional sheet encouraged members to 'Keep in touch, be part of it, make it happen!' (CPGB undated [1990?]). The appetite for change was combined with a taste for iconoclasm. An earlier press release, with the title '70 Yrs [sic] of history "up for grabs"' had boasted that 'Up for grabs at the weekend's Executive Committee meeting will be one of the sacred tenets of communist thinking – INTERNATIONALISM'. Temple had commented on this that 'The internationalism of the 1990s will be as much informed by Greenpeace and Oxfam, as communism *once was* by Marx and Engels' (CPGB 1990, emphasis added). Temple's message of change was tempered only by her insistence that it was only by transforming that the party could preserve its values and traditions. It needed to look back into its own past, to the indigenous English communism championed by the Marxist historians and also outwards to the new Europe:

Can we be part of a new movement that reclaims the best of our traditions, going right back to the Levellers and William Morris? Can we play our part in the new dynamic in Europe, overcoming the divisions between socialists and communists? [...]

We can be part of the last breath of the old or the first breath of the new. (Temple 1990, 7)

This focus on the realities of the present and possibilities of the future was not only brought about by the events of 1989. The *Marxism Today* approach had long been based on the need to be *timely*, to base communist politics on analyses of society as it was, not as it had been. This reorientation did not mean relinquishing the radical socialist future, it was by 'Submit[ting] everything to the discipline of present reality' that this future could be brought about (Hall 1988, 14). In the words of Stuart Hall (1988, 15), 'we can only renew the project of the left by precisely occupying *the same*

*world* that Thatcherism does, and building from that a *different* form of society' (original emphasis). An acceptance of the present was the key to reaching the future.

But in the years after 1989 the realities of the present did not offer much fertile soil for communism. At the most basic level, any political strategy now had to be rethought, reworked. If communism had failed, how much of Marxism and Marxist historical theory could be salvaged? In addition, these internal discussions were taking place against the background noise of the New Right's triumphant declaration of the 'end of history' and the unsettling arguments of postmodernism, which had been troubling the Historians' Group since the late 1970s. Some communists saw the New Right and postmodern left arriving at a similar end point, despite the differences in their intentions: 'Together, the end-of-history and post-history theses deny reason to hope that the future could actually be different from the present' (Kaye 1991, 148). In many ways, Marxist intellectuals 'preferred [Fukuyama's] Hegelian belief in something like historical process to post-structuralist radical relativism' (Berg 2007, 49). While British communists accepted that the teleological narrative of Marxism 'has to be rejected along with all teleologies'; the problem was finding something with which it could be replaced (Thompson 2000, 54; 182; 144).

### Identity Politics

Yet the members of the CPGB did not unanimously follow the leadership's line. Inevitably the splits of the previous twelve years had not been clear cut and some of those who agreed with the positions of either the NCP or CPB remained within the CPGB. For instance, in 1989 it was still possible to find CPGB members who backed the Chinese government against the Tiananmen Square protesters. One such member wrote to Temple (27 July 1990) to express 'regret' that she had criticised the Chinese Government, 'who have educated the students ignorant enough to foul the city centres'. This member attacked the victims of Tiananmen Square for their actions,

saying that they 'should show their gratitude for the privileges bestowed on them by returning to work in industries and thereby help in improvements of conditions for the helpless.' For the most part, CPGB members' reactions were more nuanced. Yet while they might not have been as supportive of the CPSU as the CPB or as uncritical of Stalin as the NCP, they cannot be dismissed as purely anti-Soviet liberals. These were people who had remained in the party through 1956 and 1968. They might have had long-standing intentions of changing the party, of revising its position, but for the most part they continued to self-identify as communists even as they argued that the historical experience of communism had served to discredit and misrepresent that creed.

The most common reaction was negotiation, an attempt to preserve some of the dignity of the past at the same time as accepting the need for a new future. Members acknowledged that there had been 'mistakes' but insisted that 'the CPSU record over these 70 years contains a great deal to be proud of as well as some grounds for shame and condemnation' (letter to Temple, 25 April 1990). Another of Temple's correspondents reminded her that the Soviet Union had 'been surrounded by hostile states' and so 'had to take harsh methods to protect the young Socialist society'. But, he assured her, 'if it had not been for Joe Stalin, you and I might not be alive right now' (2 April, 1990). A third noted that 'Anyone who believed that Socialism can be built without dreadful mistakes, including wrongful deaths must have done very very little thinking about human nature' (19 August 1990).

It is not surprising that some of the members who had stayed with the party until the bitter end were now resistant to the leadership's unrelenting drive for change. In part, their political identities were founded upon that decision to stay in the party; it became a matter of 'pride' (Hobsbawm 2002, 218). Many members insisted that Marxism was more relevant than ever in the late twentieth century when 'The

contrasts between rich and poor in developed societies and between rich and poor countries is increasing. The environment is threatened and radicalism and reactionary nationalism is increasing' (Harlow Branch CP, 1990). We have already seen Temple's claim that the 'internationalism of the 1990s will be as much informed by Greenpeace and Oxfam, as *communism once was* by Marx and Engels' (CPGB, 1990, emphasis added). But not everyone accepted that this had to be a choice. Instead they stressed the continued relevance of Marx to the problems of the present. One seventy-nine-year-old member told how in preparing a speech for a local Greenpeace meeting he 'was struck by the relevance of what I learned 50-60 years ago from Marx'. It wasn't that he was behind the times, just that he couldn't accept 'the total rejection of Marxism' (letter to Temple, 24 April, 1991).

The emphasis on the challenges of the present moment (and the imagined future) is a key feature of all the party's debates at this time. The editors of the second issue of the *Socialist History Journal* commented that 'It is scarcely imaginable that the *objectives* of the communist movement will not continue to dominate the human agenda, no matter how rightly and vehemently its methods and political structures may be repudiated' (Thompson et al 1993, 4, original emphasis). Even in his merciless analysis of the failures of Bolshevism, Willie Thompson clung to the challenges of the present as a way of explaining, if not excusing, the past:

The events of the past year [...] mark a historical terminus [...]. The human deprivation, ignorance and wretchedness which called the project into being are still as much present as they ever were, and having once been set on foot it is impossible to abandon. The historic mistake was in believing that the communist movement represented the project's final and definitive incarnation: the response now of the women and men who constitute its fragments is to work out what can meaningfully replace it. (Thompson 1990, 7)

In both academic texts and party members' correspondence, the question of the future of Marxism was debated. Whilst most contributors to the discussions accepted that 'the project of 1917 has reached its terminus and [...] there is no foreseeable revival' (Thompson et al 1993, 2), many held out hope that Marxism could be salvaged from the wreckage. As Perry Anderson argued in 1992, socialism had not been given a 'fair trial' (360-1). Monty Johnstone similarly felt that Marx's 'long-term objective of a democratic communist society' had 'never yet [been] tried' and remained 'worth working for' (1993, 8).

However, the November 1991 editorial of the CPGB's *Our History Journal* was doubtful about the prospects of rescuing Marxism from the legacy of the CPSU, which it described as 'a parasitic excrescence on society'. By this account, Stalin was not an aberration, rather he 'acquired absolute power by exploiting the contradictions and deadlock in which the communist movement was enmeshed by the 1920s.' Even an international revolution in the years after 1917 could not have avoided the fundamental problem of how to organise production without market forces to regulate demand. The editors pointed out that 'the theoretical underpinning' for solving this issue 'has barely started and will require the work of decades if not generations.' (Editorial 1991, 1-3).

### Taking Responsibility for the Past

The debate within the CPGB was about the past at least as much as it was about the future. It was the re-examination of the past which necessitated a revision of the present strategy. One of the most dramatic expressions of this process came from party member Margaret Peck. In October 1989 she and her husband, John, had written an article for *News and Views* enthusing about a recent trip to the GDR. Although they mentioned their concerns for democracy, the tone of the article was

highly optimistic, praising the low rents and plentiful food. They also rejected any suggestion that East Germany was a police state, supporting their claims with anecdotes about the helpful, non-intrusive police they had encountered during their two weeks in the country. By March 1990 Peck had cause to revise her opinions. She wrote a moving letter to *News and Views* admitting that she now felt 'deeply ashamed about an article John and I wrote on our return from East Germany.' Crucially, Peck attacked the stories that British party members had told themselves. 'Yes' she wrote, 'it is easy to say we were against such and such':

We are saying now that we opposed Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan and were for Solidarity in Poland. But did we actually protest strongly or march against these suppressions? No, we did not. In fact, anybody who did take part publicly in solidarity with the Poles was strongly criticised. (Peck 1990, 17)

Peck's letter insisted that members incorporate the full story of Soviet communism into their personal and collective memories; not to dilute, excuse or bury it but to carry the truth with them and to bear responsibility for it.

As we have seen, attempts were made firmly to separate the CPGB from the CPSU, in the hope of saving the narrative of the former. Suggestions were made that the party should revive an indigenous English socialist tradition or even an older native 'communism', derived from groups like the seventeenth century Diggers. Implicit in these arguments was the idea that the CPGB could somehow dissociate itself from the regimes in Eastern Europe and China, on the basis that 'In Great Britain the Communists have nothing to be ashamed of [...] no crimes were committed' and 'A selfless struggle has been conducted which had many historical links with struggles over centuries for democracy and human rights as well as political rights' (Bradford

Branch CP, 1990). This was not a new development. The party's historians had long sought to demonstrate the native English roots of Communism and to reclaim narratives of indigenous radicalism from the Whig tradition. But this was no longer enough. Neither Margaret Peck nor Willie Thompson would allow themselves to seek solace in these kinds of platitudes:

We are the same as communist parties in eastern Europe. The only difference is that we have had (luckily for the people of this country) no power.  
(Peck 1990, 17)

The non-ruling CPs, though exempt for [sic] responsibility for the crimes and shortcomings of their counterparts in the bloc and often worthy in their criticisms and condemnations, have nevertheless continued to define themselves as part of the same tradition. The British Party, for example, sent a delegation to the Romanian CP congress in 1989 and accepted reciprocal greetings at its own. (Thompson 1990, 7)

### Still Communist?

The uprooting of the past brought into question the present identity of party members. They struggled to balance their hopes for the future with their obligation to the past. The name of the party was a key part of this balancing act. Those who stayed in the party had to address the disjunction between their own understanding of communism and the wider public understanding. For instance, Howie Martin had joined the party in 1944, aged nineteen; in a letter to *Changes* he made clear that he would 'always consider [him]self to be a Communist' but acknowledged that the word's meaning had shifted and that the party would have to shift with it: 'To the majority of British people especially young people' communism now 'means Stalin, Ceausescu, the

Berlin Wall, the utter collapse of economies in Eastern Europe'. He was, he concluded, 'for a change of name' (Sept-Oct 1991, 5).

Yet, for many members, the change of name was not simply outward-facing strategic change; it was an intensely personal renegotiation of self-identity. And this was a gradual process. Some of those who had been against change in 1989 revised their positions in August 1991, following the attempted Soviet coup. In a letter to *Changes* Arthur Mendelsohn explained that before the coup he 'favoured retaining either "communist" or "socialist" in our title – no longer! Our congress must make a decisive break and must carry the majority of members to support the change' (Sept-Oct 1991, 6). Similarly, George Barnsby told *Changes* that although he had voted for the name 'Communist Federation' in the newspaper's survey, he now believed 'that a complete break with former practices can only come about from those who are prepared to break with the name' (Sept 1991, 6). Another longstanding member wrote to Temple on 22 July 1990, telling her that although he had previously been totally opposed to any change in the identity of the party ('When I heard of anyone thinking of name change, I stated do that and I'm off'), again the events in Eastern Europe had changed his mind. His response was nuanced, at first seeming to stick by his original principles, in spite of their corruption by others, but then questioning that response himself:

Gordon [MacLennan, former General Secretary] was so right, when he claimed these people have tarnished the name of socialism, now Nina *what you and I have always believed in was and is right*. But today, I would see little point in going on the knocker and say good moring [sic] I'm a communist, I have come to offer you a better standard of living. They would laugh at us, or to mean it right, they wouldn't want to hear what we have to say.



It may be dishonest to believe in the same things, say the same things, but call it by a different name. *But I don't think we are saying the same things any more, we have new policies, and we need a new name to go with it.*

(Emphases added)

Opinions on the name of the party were much divided. A survey carried out by *Changes* in October 1991 showed that the largest proportion of respondents (73 of 161) favoured the name proposed by the leadership, 'Democratic Left'. However, as Dave Priscott pointed out in a letter to the Executive Committee (26 October 1991), the other votes were split between many competing options. In total, 53% of members wanted to keep the word 'Communist' somewhere in the title and 21% wanted the word 'Socialist', compared to only 22% who were in favour of neither. It is not surprising that the proposed name change was so contentious. As David Kertzer (1996) has shown in relation to the Italian PCI, this was so painful because it was not only the name of the party, but also that of its members: no longer would they be 'communists', except in their own estimation. Whilst some members like Howie Martin were able to reconcile their own identity as communists with the need to change the name of the party, others were not prepared to make this leap.

One 'foundation member' wrote to Nina Temple on 7 June 1990, saying that he was totally opposed to the name change because 'it is a disservice to the services and sacrifices of comrades in the party and others who gave their all to the working class.' He highlighted the particular contributions made by those who fought against fascism in the 1920s and '30s and emphasised that 'They were not the cause of giving the word Communism a dirty name'. Another member, Michael Balchin, wrote to *Changes* to say that 'For the CPGB to abandon the name communist and with it, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Dimitrov, Pollitt – to mention a few of the many previously honoured names – would be an entirely retrograde step' (Sept 1991, 4).

This debate was particularly poignant because it took place against the backdrop of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the CPGB. The mid-November 1989 issue of *News and Views* featured an anniversary cover. Inside, two small articles noted respectively that next years' membership cards would have a seventieth anniversary logo and that a commemorative calendar would be available. The calendar featured photographs 'Charting the Party's history and involvement from the first Unity Convention, through the General Strike and the Hunger Marches' right up to 'the miners' strike, the People's March for Jobs and the fight against Poll Tax' (inside cover). This was the last issue of *News and Views* before the forty-first Congress at which the *Manifesto for New Times* was adopted. It is worth noting that this calendar was not mentioned in either the December or January issues. It seems that commemoration was offered as a necessary ritual, part of the mnemonic structure of the CPGB, rather than through any particular sense of its continued importance. Yet this half-hearted approach to the past was not shared by all the members. A recurring fear was that by changing (or disbanding) the party, communists would be betraying their ancestors and denying their sacrifices and achievements. One 1991 letter to *Changes* urged fellow members to 'save the CP against those who are hell bent on the elimination of 70 yrs [sic] of struggle' (Sept-Oct 1991, 5).

Again, there is a clear contrast between the CPGB and the CPB on this issue. The latter party published a celebratory seventieth anniversary history of 'Britain's Communist Party', running from the party's foundation in 1920, through the fights against fascism in the interwar years to the present day. This was an opportunity to assert their unchanging identity as proud communists, regardless of the party's tumultuous recent history. While the international situation was entirely ignored, two of the nine chapters were devoted to the divisions within the CPGB. The first of these

was entitled 'The Party and the [*Morning Star*] Paper Attacked' and detailed the revisionists' 'step-by-step coup to take over the party' (Berry 1991, 18). The final chapter, 'Towards Re-establishment' stated that 'The CPB is now clearly the inheritor of the traditions of the 70 years of struggle of the Communist Party of Britain' and rejoiced that it was 'now set to resume the long and difficult march to socialism in Britain' (ibid, 22). The narrative ended with a statement of continuity:

Seven decades of capitalism and imperialism , of exploitation, oppression and war, have confirmed the justice and necessity of our cause.

Britain's communists have played their role in battling to overcome capitalism's problems at home. We have also mobilised solidarity with national liberation struggles and against imperialist wars, including the Gulf war.

After 70 fighting years, we are prouder than ever to say:

**JOIN THE PARTY OF STRUGGLE AND SOCIALISM. BUILD THE  
COMMUNIST PARTY OF BRITAIN.** (Ibid, 22. Original emphasis)

### The Collapse of Narrative

Many members found the process of transforming the CPGB as unsettling as the events which had inspired it. A report from the London District Secretariat described the 'considerable anxiety and uncertainty in the Party about our role and future' and called for an immediate debate because, as they said, 'We are losing members now through their sadness and despair about the party and communism' (1990, original emphasis).

The first focus for unease was the process of drafting the *Facing up to the Future* (FUTTF) document. This was intended to be the redraft of the British Road to Socialism agreed at the fortieth Congress in 1988 but in the wake of the events in

Eastern Europe, it became the basis for the *Manifesto for New Times* (MNT) which set out a new, pluralist, but not specifically Marxist programme for the 1990s. This *Manifesto* was adopted at the forty-first Congress. The decision to call the new version of the *British Road to Socialism* a Manifesto, rather than a Strategy, is significant.<sup>1</sup> The title *Manifesto for New Times* could not have been more explicit in its intention. Temple even described it as 'very different from the original Communist Manifesto', leaving no doubt that it was intended as a replacement, not an addition. The only similarity she admitted was that 'both share a rejection of capitalism's inequality and exploitation' (Temple, 1990). This process provoked a heated debate in the CPGB newspapers. For instance, Bill Wildish wrote to *News and Views* saying he was 'confused by the exact status of the document' and concerned that it would be adopted at Congress 'precisely because there is nothing else on offer' (Sept 1989, 12).

Distrust of Temple was an important element in the debate. Her election as General Secretary in January 1990 epitomised the spirit of reform. Born appropriately enough in 1956, Temple had long been at the forefront of attempts to reform the party and came to personify its modern, feminist, green values. On her election, she immediately removed the bust of Marx which had always sat in the General Secretary's office and dropped 'General' from her title (Beckett 1995, 214). Temple's report to the EC after her election made clear the way the party was heading. She set out three possible options for the party: ceasing to exist, regeneration within the present structures and transformation into 'something new and relevant to the future'. She argued for the latter of these and, while listing a number of ways in which this could take place, expressed her preference for the party becoming 'a distinctive element in a new style of forum politics, of loose alliance between progressive forces' (Temple 1990, 6-7). There seemed little possibility of altering this course. The constitution of Democratic Left – the progressive alliance imagined by Temple – was

drafted by the inner circle, circulated to the membership and adopted at the November 1991 Congress. The other options fell by the wayside.

Some members expressed a fear that they were losing ownership of the party and its processes; they were 'baffled and bewildered' as one letter to Temple put it (2 April 1990). The leadership seemed to be rushing ahead into a future they hadn't asked for and couldn't control. One member complained that having voted for the 'twin-track' option at the previous Congress, 'when the Democratic Left constitution arrived it was a 'single-track' document, and the Communist Party had disappeared' (*Changes*, Aug 1991, 1). Another characterised the available options as 'which form of dissolution do we most prefer?' (*News and Views*, March 1990, 27). In July 1991 Lambeth Branch passed a resolution condemning the 'unequal treatment' given by the Executive Committee to the Draft Constitution of Democratic Left, which was published in 'readable type and attractive layout as against the existing Party Rules printed incomplete and in type so minuscule as to make them difficult to read without a magnifying glass (which was not supplied)' (Letter to EC, 10 July 1991).

The debates over the possible futures of socialism focused not only on the contents of the reformers' strategies, but also on their modes of expression. The debates over MNT and FUTTF showed that it wasn't just the narrative which had changed; it was the mode of storytelling itself. A central line of criticism was that the new documents were un-Marxist in their style and thinking as well as in their conclusions. Rigorous dialectical analysis was out; soft-focus consumer politics were in. As Francis King put it in a letter to *News and Views* in February 1989 (13), FUTTF was 'vague verbiage – meaningless chatter about 'new agendas', 'modernisation' and so on'. The previous issue carried a letter from Jim Tait noting that:

Words are important things. [...] The past five editions of the British Road to Socialism all used words that they said were programmes for a revolutionary transformation of society from capitalism to socialism.

From my observations of 'Facing up to the Future' the word revolution appears twice and never ever in relation to Socialism.

[...] Neither in solitary words nor organised concepts is there any semblance of a revolutionary strategy for socialism in the document (Ibid).

Where 'revolution' did appear in FUTTF it referred to technological revolution and a hoped-for cultural revolution in male behaviour. The following July, a letter from David Allen noted that MNT overused the words 'progressive' and 'popular'. He felt that they had become 'Eurocommunist newspeak, as much part of our language as "worker" and "the state" are for Trotskyists' (*News and Views*, July 1990, 12) To use the language of Laclau and Mouffe (so popular among the reformers), such terms had become empty signifiers. They came to represent all that was positive and acceptable; to signify an entire system of meaning. All that was not 'progressive' was necessarily negative – no distinctions or differences were permitted.

#### 'Nothing to Lose but our Certainties'

The extent to which the old forms of expression broke down in 1989/90 can be seen in an extraordinary series of minutes and letters generated by a CPGB working group established to plan a series of 'education' meetings. The nine members of the groups found themselves unable to agree on the contents of the meetings, or even on a basic approach to them. As one member of the group put it in a letter to Temple: 'The Party remains divided between those who seek to retain out-moded 'Marxist education'' and those who recognise that profound changes must be catered for' (30 June 1990). There was a sense that they were arguing over the very nature of communism: its past and its future. This was understandably painful and contentious.

After one meeting, a member of the group wrote to another, 'Not for some years have I been present at a meeting which generated so much indignation and resentment' (8 July 1991).

One of the most fundamental disagreements was over the format of the talks: should one speaker give a lecture on a subject, or should two or more speakers provide alternative viewpoints? This seemingly organisational matter had important philosophical implications. Could the CPGB any longer claim to speak with one voice? Did it have any right to give lectures on the correct position? Questions were also raised over the contents of the proposed meetings. The original plan was to look at subjects like class, imperialism and revolution, dealing with the future of the party only at the end of the series of meetings. This was vigorously opposed by one member of the group who felt that 'The explanations given by CP literature and speakers in the past cannot even begin to provide what is needed today' and insisted that the subjects needed to be far more 'tentative'. She went on to argue that the party needed to break out of the Marxist historical framework and open itself to the possibilities of the future:

I am absolutely against the proposed form of six talks, however they are presented – with two speakers or with any number. It is the approach that is wrong – nothing but a trip down memory lane.

We have nothing to lose but our old certainties – which have turned out to have been not as certain as we thought. We have a world of exciting new possibilities to win. We may win or we may not, but if we don't accept the challenge we shall certainly dwindle away into the past and not count for anything in the future (notes read out at meeting of the Working Group on Education, 1 July 1991).

The final titles were indeed 'tentative'; question marks abounded: 'Socialism – the Death of a System?'; 'Capitalism Triumphant?' This is an important episode as it shows how deeply the crisis had penetrated the mindset of the Party. It was no longer acceptable to impart information or philosophy; instead it was time to ask questions and to admit doubts. Instead of being based on the certainties of the past, the CP narrative was now open to the unpredictable possibilities of the future. History was no longer a fixed narrative, it was an unfolding process.

### New Histories

The collapse of the Soviet bloc provided not only the political space but also the archival materials for truly analytical histories of the CPGB to be produced. A key event was the publication in 1990 of the transcript of the leadership's debates over the onset of war in 1939, after many years of speculation about their contents. In 1979 the History Group had held a conference on the 1939 change of line and requested a copy of the stenogram of the debate from the Institute of Marxism-Leninism but 'drew a blank'. It was only in October 1987, with the changes resulting from Gorbachev's leadership, that a further request 'received a sympathetic response' and in 1989 the document was received by the British party (Johnstone 1990). It was, according to Kevin Morgan, an 'exhilarating' discovery which allowed the individual personalities to speak 'like an old sepia photograph [which] suddenly becomes voluble and argumentative' (1993, 10). This was particularly exciting for Morgan who had been frustrated by the 'curiously impersonal' tone of the official histories and by the striking lack of biographical material on party figures: 'Such were the Communist Party's loyalties and collective discipline that, even long after the event, [...] [n]ot only memoirs, obituaries and funeral odes, but periodicals, speeches, even the interviews given years later to oral historians, usually adhered to a convention of collective responsibility' (2001, 12-14).



The historical work of CP members did not stop with the dissolution of the party. The final issue of *Our History Journal* noted 'the firm intention of both the Historians' Group and the editor to continue publishing' not least because 'the requirement to explore and analyse socialist history has never been more urgently felt' (1991, 3). Publication resumed under the new name of *Socialist History Journal* and every attempt at continuity was made. The publication schedule was not interrupted and the first two issues of *Socialist History Journal* even continued the numbering of *Our History Journal*, appearing as numbers nineteen and twenty. It was not until 1993, when the new publication merged with *Our History*, that a new numbering system was adopted. Throughout this time, the *Journal* had continued to publish scholarly work on historical subjects, alongside analyses of the global crisis (see, for example Roberts 1990, Hilton 1991). Analyses of the party also began to appear rather quickly, including Willie Thompson's *The Good Old Cause* in 1992 and Andrews, Fishman and Morgan's *Opening the Books* in 1995. The work of writing the 'official' history of the party also continued with Noreen Branson's *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1941-1951* appearing in 1997, John Callaghan's *Cold War: Crisis and Conflict* in 2003 and the final volume, *Endgames and New Times* by Geoff Andrews, in 2004. As publishers, Lawrence and Wishart, explain in the description of Callaghan's book, these final volumes benefit from 'much better access to archives and the views of former party members' and are also 'written from a more critical position than previous titles in the series' (Lawrence and Wishart 2003).

The parallel tasks of analyzing and preserving the past can be seen in a Socialist History Society newsletter from November 1993, which both notified members of a forthcoming conference entitled 'What went wrong in the USSR and Eastern Europe?' and also asked them to consider coming forward for an oral history project, being undertaken with the CP Archive and Manchester University, 'building an archive of memoirs of CP members from all eras of the Party's history.'

The expected progress of history had been disrupted, and so had its narrative, its certainties, its *shape*. Eric Hobsbawm's plans for *Age of Extremes* (1994) underwent a dramatic shift. Rather than the 'diptych' of 'Age of Catastrophe' and 'Golden Age', proposed to his publisher as late as 1988, Hobsbawm ended up writing a triptych with the years from 1973 re-cast as 'landslide':

What had changed was not the facts of world history since 1973 as I knew them, but the sudden conjunction of events in both East and West since 1989 which almost forced me to see the past twenty years in a new perspective (1998, 313).

Even this about-turn was not drastic enough for some. Perry Anderson has suggested that Hobsbawm's picture of the post-war 'Golden Age' does not fit the evidence of violence and misery in those years, but was governed by his commitment to the central historical role of the 'initially gradual, and then hurtling descent of the Soviet experiment' (2005, 302; 314). Along with many others, Anderson himself insisted that understanding the true nature of the past was a precondition for the 'refoundation of the socialist project' and far more important than 'Mere repudiations'. He found comfort in Robin Blackburn's *After the Fall* which showed that 'Serious reflection on the political and intellectual legacy of the modern socialist movement [...] reveals many riches that were forgotten as well as roads that were mistaken' (1992, 362).

In 1978 Martin Jacques had suggested that an honest, evaluative history of the party would have the benefit of giving coherence to 'what would otherwise be [...] a disparate set of experiences and outlooks, traditions and ideologies, that exist within the Party.' It would be a positive experience, allowing members 'to understand that

the Party actually has been through many changes and developments and shifts and [...] to understand it in terms of that process and not in any way to despise it' (1978, 8). Thirteen years later, the final edition of *Marxism Today* (except for the special 1998 issue) attempted what could be seen as a version of that task. It combined articles on the party's troubled past with those on the political struggles still ahead. In typical *Marxism Today* style, the serious sat alongside the playful; the centrefold of the magazine was a board game entitled 'Moscow Gold', featuring such nuggets as 'The Party is over. Advance to the End of History (you can't miss it)' and 'Perestroika Prospect. Become a Designer Socialist Overnight. Advance to Mandelson Rise.' The rules also declared that 'To avoid competition there will be no winners. You have nothing to lose but your principles' (Granlund 1991, 32-33). This self-aware parody was a clear attempt to absorb the collapse of the CPGB into a new narrative structure.

The task of constructing a new narrative identity on both a personal and collective level necessarily involved gallows humour, just as it involved emotional repudiations of the past, denials of reality and claims to have issued warnings long ago. The New Times rhetoric of innovative, post-party, 'new' politics provided an alternative identity for those who wanted it. This offered an opportunity to be in tune with the times, to be on the side of history. Others began the work of unpicking and analysing the past because, as Willie Thompson argued, 'if there is to be any rebirth of the left in Britain or beyond, it surely has to start from a sober understanding, free from sentiment or nostalgia, of the reasons why history has proved – so far – not to be on our side' (1992b, 6).

A further level of analysis was concerned with what history would make of the communist experiment. How would it be treated by future historians? This was the 'crucial question' according to the editors of the *Socialist History Journal*: 'whether

this failed enterprise, which has dominated, either positively or negatively, the history of the twentieth century, will ultimately serve as an inspiration to the future or as a dreadful warning' (Thompson et al 1993, 3). As early as 1992, Perry Anderson was trying to predict the 'possible futures' of socialism within the pages of history. Would it be regarded by future historians as akin to Jesuit experiments with egalitarian living in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Paraguay? Would it be able to perpetuate its message even as the movement fell by the wayside like the Levellers? Or would the fate of communism be more similar to Jacobinism or Liberalism? Would the CPGB's future be 'Oblivion, transvaluation, mutation, redemption'? (1992, 375). While Britain's communists had to resign themselves to no longer being at the vanguard of historical development, no longer *making history*, they could console themselves with the task of historical analysis. As Eric Hobsbawm put it, 'there is nothing which can sharpen the historian's mind like defeat' (1998, 317).

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate that memory and history are inter-related and essential parts of political identity. It is through telling stories about the past and creating visions of the future that politics is created. In the case of the CPGB, the link between formal, written history and shared collective memory was particularly complex, due to both the teleological nature of the Marxist interpretation of history and the role of Marxist historians in creating a celebratory narrative of the party's past. When these shared narratives collapsed along with the Soviet Union, CPGB members were left without a clear understanding of who they were in the present or what they hoped to achieve in the future. This was a matter of feeling their way towards a new understanding of themselves, their politics and the outside world and their responses were far from uniform.

It is possible to compare this experience with moments of crisis within other political parties. For instance, the founder members of the SDP who split from the Labour Party in 1981 were at great pains to employ both written history and collective memory to establish their own claims to personal and political continuity (see Robinson forthcoming 2012). However, there are also fundamental differences. The SDP founders used a particular interpretation of the past to contextualise and legitimate their attempts to build a new political party; in the case of the CPGB, collective narratives of the past and shared interpretations of the direction of history were no longer available. In historical analysis, as in political organisation, certainty, teleology and discipline were replaced with pluralism, contingency and doubt. In contrast, the NCP and CPB were able, in their different ways, to maintain a sense of continuity with the pre-1989 past, holding together both their collective memories and their political and historical trajectories

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In May 1989 the EC minutes record 17 votes in favour of the title *Manifesto for New Times* over *Strategy for New Times*. The votes against and abstentions are not given.

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17.06.2011

Word count: 11,570