

# Reviews

Anne Garland Mahler and Paolo Capuzzo (eds), *The Comintern and the Global South. Global Designs/Local Encounters*, Routledge, London, 2023, 250pp, ISBN 978-1003154976

*The Comintern and the Global South: Global Designs/Local Encounters* brings together a set of essays on the Comintern's global career and the many modes and scenes of engagement between the Comintern and radicals from the Global South. The subtitle refers to the overarching methodological framework under which the essays have been organised. The essays in the first part of the book, 'Global Designs', outline the theoretical origins of communist internationalism. The second part, 'Local Encounters', focuses on specific zones of contact between Comintern projects and radical internationalist movements in the Global South. In constructing this methodological framework, the editors draw on a productive tension between viewing the Comintern as a centralised body while simultaneously recognising the many complex and complicated processes of translation (both linguistic and cultural) through which centralised directives were re-framed and even subverted in local contexts. The essays foreground the tensions within Communist circles regarding the role of the Comintern in relation to colonialism and race. They seek to reconstitute, through a zoomed-in analytical lens, the intersections between the political projects of the Third International and anti-racism, anti-imperialism and nationalist agitation in the Global South.

Sandro Mezzadra's essay traces the genealogy of the idea of the 'world market' in Marx's key works as a way of understanding the theoretical moorings of Marx's analysis of the global dimensions of capitalism and the subsequent articulation of proletarian internationalism. Mezzadra shows how the concept was pivotal to imagining the global spatial scale at which capitalism operated from its very inception. In Marx's early works, the

world market is seen as an alienating force that produces the conditions for the emergence of the proletariat and, thereby, of communist internationalism itself. The world market was a regulative idea for capitalism, driving competition and creating a hierarchised and stratified space. Most importantly, Mezzadra shows that the concept plays a crucial role in opening up the discussion of primitive accumulation, opening up Marxist thought to non-Western European histories and experiences. This provides a clue to understanding how major anti-colonial radicals and Black Marxists found in Marxism a vocabulary to talk about their political programmes, and also invites us to think about ways of reading Marx for developing a critique of ‘methodological nationalism’. Mezzadra’s work sets the stage for the two other essays in the ‘Global Designs’ part of the book, which explores the theme of race and colonialism in relation to the Second International and Black Bolshevism respectively.

The essays in the second part of the book cover a range of historical actors and regions from the Global South: *muhajirs* who would form the Communist Party of India in 1920 at Tashkent with M.N. Roy; the Chinese volunteers who were present during the Spanish Civil War; and communism in the Caribbean. Due to constraints of space, I will briefly discuss two essays.

Daniel Kent Carrasco’s essay sheds light on Pandurang Khankhoje’s role as the director of the Free Schools of Agriculture in Mexico. Khankhoje was an interesting figure, whose remarkable life encapsulates many of the features of the anti-colonial internationalism of the inter-war years. After playing a part in the diasporic *Ghadar* movement, Khankhoje arrived in Mexico in 1924 after a circuitous journey through Constantinople, Persia, Berlin and Soviet Russia. Upon his arrival in Mexico he distanced himself from the anti-colonial cause, and immersed himself in the lively world of agrarian organisation spear-headed by the communist organiser Úrsulo Gálvan. Under Khankhoje’s supervision, the Free Schools addressed the local concerns of their students, while linking these to international issues. The way Kent Carrasco locates Khankhoje and the Free Schools perfectly captures the basic methodological framing of the collection. The Free Schools were sites where the ‘global designs’ of the Comintern encountered ‘local’ issues and processes, with Khankhoje acting as the mediator between

the two. The author manages to strike a careful balance between the descriptive and the analytical, the local and the international. Local contexts (Khankhoje's travels and the socio-political and intellectual climate of post-revolutionary Mexico, for instance) are clearly described and analytically connected to what historians have termed the 'internationalist moment'.<sup>1</sup>

In 'Pan-Islamism, South Asia, and Communist Internationalism', Ali Raza looks at the 'seismic impact' of the Russian revolution on the political imagination of Indian revolutionaries, particularly those who were associated with pan-Islamism and the Khilafat movement. In the aftermath of the Russian revolution and Germany's defeat in 1918, Moscow became a focal point of convergence for Indian nationalists and diasporic radicals, who sought to enlist communist Russia's support in the anti-colonial struggle. Raza explores the way South Asia featured in the theatre of communist internationalism, and the complex ways in which the lives of South Asian radicals from diverse ideological lineages, mostly diasporic, intersected with the global lives of the Comintern. He also addresses the issue of the reception of Communism in the Global South. Far from being a monolithic idea that was received uniformly, Communism was interpreted from diverse perspectives. Using the example of Barkatullah's 'Bolshevism and the Islamic Body Politic', Raza shows that the 'meaning' of Bolshevism was not rigid or fixed, but was open to processes of translation and re-contextualisation. His work draws attention to the varied interpretive modalities through which Communism was comprehended in South Asia, as it became intricately connected with the history of colonial and post-colonial South Asia. His essay best reflects what the editors claim to be a 'lasting contribution' made by Communism to radicalism in the Global South as 'an anti-colonial network maker'. However, one could argue that the term 'contribution' is somewhat reminiscent of the old 'derivative discourse' model.

Theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich, this volume is an important contribution to the study of Communism in/and the Global South. Not only is it exceptional in terms of the diversity of contexts covered, but also in terms of methodology. The volume pushes forward a trend in historiography to think about Communisms in the Global South in non-Eurocentric terms.<sup>2</sup> However, there are problems in the

way the editors articulate the link between the approaches embodied in this work and postcolonial scholarship. This connection, which is not fleshed out very clearly, is somewhat problematic given the fact that postcolonial scholarship has engaged very little with the processes through which Marxism and Communism became tools of anti-colonial dissent, and a crucial ingredient in the crucible of anti-colonial thought. However, this is precisely the task that the present work takes up – and executes commendably. It breathes fresh air into the scholarship on interconnected networks of radicalism in the interwar years, paving the way for further research in this area.

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## Notes

- 1 See Ali Raza, Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zacharia, 'Introduction: The Internationalism of the Moment: South Asia and the Contours of the Interwar World', in Ali Raza et al (eds), *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, World Views, 1917-39*, India: Sage Publications, 2015, pp1-22.
  - 2 See for example, Kris Manjappa, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2011; Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Past: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
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**Udo Grashoff, *Gefahr von Innen: Verrat im kommunistischen Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021, 471pp, ISBN 978-3835339507**

The title of this book translates as *Danger from within: Betrayal in the communist resistance against National Socialism*, and it documents the many different kinds of betrayal experienced within the KPD, from the Weimar Republic until the end of the second world war.

The problem of betrayal was and is a central problem of all movements that aim to change society; and they are also prone to be infiltrated from

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within by their opponents. Under conditions of illegality, the problem takes on exceptional dimensions. After Hitler's regime had crushed the German labour movement, the concept of betrayal took on a new and real meaning for the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (German Communist Party, KPD). Whereas until then it had been a term of abuse hurled at Social Democrats and Communist dissidents, it now meant the deliberate breach of a loyalty relationship with the party. Yet, as Udo Grashoff emphasises, the book under review is also about borderline situations that forced people to act in ways that would normally be beyond anyone's imagination (p14).

For this book, originally a post-doctoral thesis submitted at the University of Leipzig, Udo Grashoff has drawn primarily on sources from the German Federal Archives in Berlin, including both KPD and legal and police files, as well as state security files from the GDR in impressively large numbers. He has divided the book into three parts. These deal with different manifestations of betrayal; borderline cases of betrayal due to the scope of action of the *V-Leute* (*Vertrauensleute*, i.e., agents smuggled into the KPD by the Gestapo); and the handling of traitors on the part of the KPD and later the SED in East Germany.

The KPD saw any breach of loyalty, even a forced one, as fundamentally a case of treason. This thus applied to KPD politicians who turned away from the KPD after 1933 but remained active in the left – from Willi Münzenberg to Herbert Wehner; to Heinrich Wiatrek, who testified under interrogation after his arrest in Denmark in 1941; and to Maria Reese, who first broke with the KPD in 1933 and joined the Trotskyists, but defected to the National Socialists two years later. Most of the approximately four hundred cases evaluated by Grashoff, however, involved mid-level cadres who were often politically untrained (e.g. secretaries) or had only a superficial attachment to the communist cause. The relatively high proportion among the group of former employees of the paramilitary arm of the KPD, the *AM* apparatus (*AM* stands for antimilitary), is striking, and this weighed heavily in the restructuring of illegal party work. *AM* employees thus became a particular target of the Gestapo, especially after the arbitrary wave of arrests in the spring of 1933 was replaced by the systematic observation and infiltration of KPD structures.

The motives for betrayal were partly pragmatic-opportunistic, but far

more often they arose from emergency situations. The author traces the concrete circumstances of betrayal and their consequences on the basis of regional examples, focusing especially on the Central German region and the area around Breslau (Wrocław). He identifies six categories of betrayal: (1) a change of heart (these were the renegades in the true sense); (2) apostates/capitulants; (3) genuine spies who had often joined the KPD purely out of a sense of adventure; (4) torture victims; (5) apparent defectors who then found no way out of the betrayal thicket; and (6) alleged traitors. The KPD circulated lists of informers, which often contained false warnings.

The high level of political fluctuation in the final phase of the Weimar Republic caused ideological fluctuations, especially among young people; according to Grashoff's conservative estimates, about 50,000 of 300,000 KPD members defected to the Nazis, but by no means had all of them practised open betrayal through denunciation (p41). Incidentally, such betrayal was only partially avenged by the KPD, since the risk was too great. There were only a few vengeance murders, though this is what happened to Alfred Kattner, who was forced to testify after brutal torture and betrayed several political functionaries, including Hermann Dünow and Rudolf Schwarz, and who was shot dead in his Potsdam apartment by the KPD commissioner in early January 1934.

After a wave of arrests, the KPD restructured its organisational network in 1935: the central domestic leadership and the district leaderships were abolished and replaced by section leaderships operating from abroad through instructors. The Gestapo was particularly successful in infiltrating the KPD in the Silesian/Breslau district leadership. On the other hand, information on the cross-border strategy of the Gestapo could be intercepted in Chemnitz; in this way valuable information on the KPD exile reached Prague (pp194-5).

By 1936, the Gestapo had largely succeeded in crushing the resistance. Then, from 1939, the war, and the cooperation between Germany and the Soviet Union until 1941, caused further disorientation and demoralisation of the KPD domestic cadres. Almost all communist groups were disbanded; betrayal from within encouraged this – hence the title of the book – but the communist resistance was mainly crushed by merciless terror from outside, which was virtually unprecedented at that time.

Becoming a V-man meant an irrevocable commitment to the Gestapo; refusal or only half-hearted execution of orders was impossible. Nevertheless, it turned out that V-men were not always reliable. Some of them were torture victims who had not resisted their recruitment but then tried to deceive the Gestapo. This often failed and usually ended fatally for those discovered. A few, like Karl Plesse, remained undiscovered. Plesse rejoined the KPD resistance after his release from Gestapo detention, without anyone knowing about his previous collaboration with the Gestapo. When his temporary cooperation with the Gestapo was discovered in 1952, he was sentenced to ten years in prison in the GDR, but was released after three and a half years. Plesse died in 1978 and did not live to see his complete legal rehabilitation in 1992. Friedrich Schlotterbeck, whose entire family was murdered by the Nazis and who himself managed to escape to Switzerland, was falsely accused of being an undercover agent of the Gestapo in 1953. In addition, he was accused of having connections to the alleged American agent Noel Field. Sentenced to six years in prison, he was released halfway through his term in 1956 and 'rehabilitated' both legally and politically. However, this rehabilitation took place without the public knowing anything about it: otherwise the (supposedly infallible) party leadership would have had to admit that they had made a mistake.

The KPD paid a high price for its resistance: almost half, around 150,000 of its 300,000 members in 1932 were arrested, 20,000 of them murdered. In the GDR, the KPD's resistance was often exaggerated and turned into stories of flawless heroism. Grashoff's book shows, however, that the communists in the resistance were often internally torn, and were humanly contradictory. Yet, as the author emphasises, they deserve high respect. But 'traitors', too, deserve a fair assessment. The book does not provide ammunition for a facile condemnation of totalitarianism. The communists did not resist an inhuman system to put another oppressive system in its place. In resisting, they defended the principles of the workers' movement and the values of a supra-temporal humanity.

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Gabriele Mastrolillo, *La dissidenza comunista italiana, Trockij e le origini della Quarta Internazionale. 1928-1938*, Rome: Carocci, 2022, 242pp, ISBN 978-88-290-1640-2

John Kelly, *The Twilight of World Trotskyism*, Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2023, 130pp, ISBN 978-1-032-35008-0

Today we look at two books on Trotskyism. Kelly's *The Twilight of World Trotskyism* systematically analyses Trotskyism from the cradle to the grave to prove that it chronically fails in practice because its theory is dogmatic and outdated. Kelly (who is Emeritus Professor of Industrial Relations at Birkbeck) avoids jargon and approaches his topic from a social scientist's angle as he, fairly caustically, dissects the world of this schismatic Marxist tendency. The result is a lucid piece which enables readers to navigate their way through the Trotskyist multi-verse. Mastrolillo's *La dissidenza comunista italiana, Trockij e le origini della Quarta Internazionale. 1928-1938* (Italian communist dissidence, Trotsky and the origins of the Fourth International, 1928-1938), which focuses on Italy, sets itself a number of goals – perhaps too many. The book's aim is to study the relationships between Italian communist dissidents, Leon Trotsky, the Trotskyist movement leadership, and Italian Trotskyists like Alfonso Leonetti and Pietro Tresso (p24): this, in turn, should demonstrate their contribution to creating an alternative to Stalinism, globally and transnationally. The final product is impressive in terms of the primary material it garners. However, analytical depth and argumentative coherence occasionally suffer.

In Italy, Mastrolillo begins, those communists dissatisfied with the increasingly Stalinist leadership of the world communist movement organised within two main groups: the Left Fraction (*Frazione di sinistra*) and the New Italian Opposition (*Nuova opposizione italiana*). The Left Fraction was founded in 1928 upon the intellectual skeleton of Amedeo Bordiga, though he never actually joined them. For this group, the only revolutionary actor was the proletariat: any potential coalition to combat fascism was bourgeois-reactionary. This had been a point of contention with Gramsci, and had already led to Bordiga's loss of leadership within the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I). The New



Italian Opposition was more 'purely' Trotskyist. It was founded in 1930 by some of those who had been expelled from the PCd'I, including Leonetti, Tresso and Paolo Ravazzoli. Less than three dozen people joined (p53).

The story of these two dissident groups mingles insofar as they were both opposed to the growth of Stalinism. But the personalities involved, and all the divergences and accusations that ensued, soon led them to agree to disagree, acquiescing in a pacific non-marriage, rather than divorce, by 1932. Even Leonetti, who was leader of the Italian Trotskyists and close to Trotsky himself, distanced himself from the movement in the mid-1930s – Mastrolillo identifies 1935 as the end of Italian Trotskyism's first phase (p170). Leonetti's move away from the Trotskyist current was probably due to his frustration with Trotskyism's political impotence, and the fact that by the mid-1930s Stalinist parties were beginning to adopt the successful formula of popular fronts against fascism. He returned to the Italian Communist Party (PCI, heir of the PCd'I after the end of the Comintern) in 1962.

In 1930, Trotskyists organised the International Left Opposition (ILO), and its International Secretariat, largely as an opposition group within the Comintern. The Comintern itself at that time was propagating the Stalinist position that social democrats were social-fascists, leading to the cretinous disunion of left-wing parties that helped Hitler win the 1933 elections in Germany. This meant that the Comintern was compromised beyond repair. In 1933 the ILO renamed itself the International Communist League, signalling that the Trotskyists were now 'talking directly' to the working classes. Fascism grew; so did Stalinism. Trotskyists and others formed new groups, committees, secretariats. Some left-wingers accepted Trotsky's leadership in the whole affair and were included in the party; others didn't, so were excluded from it. In 1938, the Fourth International was founded. It counted around 5000 members scattered around the planet (p209).

Mastrolillo's history stops at this point, and Kelly's starts. Covering the now nonagenarian, yet ever-decrepit, movement, Kelly studies it in much less historical detail than Mastrolillo: his point is not to describe, but to explain. This is quite welcome as it clarifies, albeit somewhat schematically, several aspects of the story. Three of Kelly's chapters (2, 3

and 4), however, are more focused on history – a tale of unsuccess and miniscule groups.

Following the analytical lines already deployed in his 2018 work on British Trotskyism, Kelly sees three essential phases in world Trotskyism: from the 1930s formation to the 1950s, the Bleak Years; leading on to the Golden Years between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s; and then the twilight zone that followed after the collapse of the USSR.

The first phase of Trotskyism, was a bleak period. The hostility of Stalinists and social democrats, doctrinaire splits and scarce resources all contributed to this bleakness. Two exceptions confirm the rule: Bolivia and Sri Lanka had large and influential Trotskyist parties, at least for two or three decades, because their formation (in 1935 in both cases) predated the creation in their respective countries of USSR-backed communist parties. But, typically, successful governmental reforms and controversial alliances led to splits that doomed both parties to political insignificance.

Anti-imperialist movements and 1956 caused a Trotskyist surge by the mid-1960s. The Golden Years peaked briefly in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America. Uncertainty was always around the corner for Trotskyism, however. It subsequently trailed the decline and collapse of the Soviet-led world communist movement. Ironically, Trotskyism went down with that to which it claimed to offer an alternative – or one of the many, at any rate.

Stasis and disintegration have been following since, ergo ‘twilight’ in the title. Today, there are 32 Fourth Internationals, dozens or more isolated sects (each claiming correctness of analysis, obviously), and only about ten elected followers of the ‘old man’ worldwide (p59). Kelly does not spare Trotskyism from humour, acknowledging, for example, that one of the limits of his book lies in the fact that political bodies which exist only as Facebook pages do not count (p59). Whilst not greatly impressed with his subject-matter, Kelly nonetheless recognises that Trotskyists have engaged in some radical campaigns which have brought about some actual results. The Anti-Nazi League in the UK or the campaigns in many countries against the US invasions of Vietnam and Iraq are good examples, though they were achieved precisely because rigid doctrine was relaxed, or dropped altogether, and a problem-solving approach adopted. Still:

Trotskyists have not led a revolutionary struggle for power in any country; they have never won a national election; and they have never built an enduring party anywhere, at any time (p100).

Kelly is clear about it: Trotskyism fails in practice because something is rotten in its doctrine. What?

Trotskyism's nine 'core elements' are expounded in the first chapter, which makes it easy for readers to swing through the rest of the book. They explain Trotskyism's continual marginality, something with which Kelly deals in the last chapter. One of these elements is its conviction about the absence of revolutionary leadership of the working class. Leadership sucks, Trotskyists say, and this is what prevents the revolution from happening. As Kelly has it, 'Can working class politics really be reduced to a "crisis of leadership"?'(p17). In fact, the problem is deeper, scarier. It concerns the revolutionary role of the working class (or indeed the lack thereof): can an incompetent leadership really thwart the all-mighty and, more importantly, historically-chosen revolutionary class from launching The Revolution? Or is the proof simply not in the pudding? The issue is as dogmatic for some Marxists as the virginity of the Holy Mary is for Christians.

Especially during his explanation of Trotskyism marginality, Kelly at times falls into a positivist view of progress, tainted by Eurocentrism. This, in turn, leads him to be quite dismissive of Trotskyist analyses, rather than critically engaging with them. Russia (p79) today is formally a multi-party democracy, for instance; however, authoritarianism in practice is still perfectly at home there, as well as in many other places of our beloved West. Similarly, Kelly conveniently leaves out the many (accurate) Trotskyist analyses of NATO expansionism in the last decades – in fact, one does not need to be a Trotskyist to see this: the trend had already been noted by intellectuals like E.P. Thompson some forty years ago.<sup>1</sup> And Trotskyists have often been acute observers of these processes.

How, one then may argue, can this be squared with their political ineptitude? The reason is that analytical sophistication is often beyond the point in the dirt of politics. The logic of facts is stronger than that of people. For Trotsky, Stalin was the 'outstanding mediocrity' (p12). True enough. Still, Trotsky could not work out how a brute like Uncle

Joe could be just so bloody successful. Umberto Eco understood better. His analysis of a similar personage, Mike Bongiorno, has explained why he was able to conquer millions of Italians through a similar process: he was 'an ideal that nobody has to strive for, because everyone is already at its level'.<sup>2</sup> This lack of understanding was one of the old man's limits. It haunts his accolades.

Mastrolillo has evidently collected a great deal of material for his research. The footnotes are a clear indicator of this, and the bibliography is remarkable, especially when we consider that the book came out after years of Covid-19 and lockdowns. However, there is a central problem in his work, around which others orbit. Researching is not writing, and, at times, the text falls down empirical rabbit-holes. The reader will struggle, for example, to understand why to report the granting of a consultative vote to the Czechoslovakian Trotskyist section at a pre-conference for a first Trotskyist international conference (p107) is relevant or consequential in this work, apart from the opportunity it provides for stuffing in some more primary sources.

Assembling and scrutinising many subjects of different political inclinations in one piece requires a clockwork that must be sublimely tuned, like the Chinese opera. By contrast, squeezing them results in the sporadicity of its main actors: it's orgiastic but not necessarily orgasmic. The Left Fraction suffers particularly from this problem. It is present in the first two chapters, disappears in the third like water in a karst, pops up suddenly and briefly in the fourth, and is swallowed up again in the fifth – a useful trick here is to search the concentration of terms like 'Frazione' or 'Bordiga' in the book.

Further, although a book does not and cannot exist in isolation, it must nonetheless work autonomously. I suspect that Mastrolillo's impressive level of mastery of the subject – this is his second volume on it – and the specificity of Italian Trotskyism have contributed to his taking a few things for granted. For example, Leonetti's introduction is relegated to a footnote (p20). Can we truly excuse this when we are told, a few pages later, that: 'after Trotsky, Leonetti was the most important figure at the top of the international Trotskyist movement between 1930 and 1937, to the point of being called "general secretary" by Trotsky himself' (p22)? The same question applies to other communists. It is

significant, too, that Leonetti's companion Pia Carena remained in the service of the PCd'I in the 1930s (p98), a period of witch-hunting against Trotskyists in the party. This is indicative of the misguidedness of seeing communists in monolithic terms and confirms the potential fecundity of recent historical developments on rethinking the intellectual exchanges and porous relations among the 'Reds' (not only Italians). It is the exploration of these intellectual dialogues and their implications – certainly more than mentioning the Czechoslovakians' voting fortunes – which can help us to establish whether or to what extent Trotskyists offer(ed) any alternative to Stalinism.

The researcher is apt, the topic relevant and the bar high. Mastrolillo's work contains three proto-books: one on Italian Trotskyism; one on world Trotskyism; one on Italian communist dissidents. It is evident that his book, if re-arranged or written in multiple volumes, could taste like Italian wine. And one can already appreciate its fragrance: a single reading will not suffice; after two, the reader may start to experience a buzz. The empirical accumulation displayed in this work makes it possible, urging its author to develop further these protos. Mastrolillo is undoubtedly in a better position to do so than anyone else.

Hate it (as many Trotskyists will do) or enjoy it (anybody else), Kelly's work must be reckoned with. His scathing analysis of world Trotskyism and its problems is convincing. However, we are not quite as teleological about the movement being a dead-end for socialists, if only because ends and things historical (which means contemporary) do not usually go well together.

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## Notes

- 1 E.P. Thompson (ed), *Protest and Survive*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980.
- 2 Umberto Eco, 'The Phenomenology of Mike Bongiorno', in *Misreadings*, trans. William Weaver, Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993, p163.

Phillip Deery, *Spies and Sparrows: ASIO and the Cold War*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne: 2022, 270pp, ISBN 978-0522878318

The personal was an integral part of cold-war espionage. Western security services relied heavily on human sources to infiltrate communist groups. The lives of such individuals – agents and informants – are often difficult to find out about, remaining classified for decades if not in perpetuity. Phillip Deery's reconstruction of some of these stories, using the files of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), is a particularly novel aspect of this book. The relative accessibility of ASIO's files – compared to the UK's MI5 and to a lesser extent the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) or Canada's Royal Mounted Police (RCMP) – makes the Australian case illuminating.

*Spies and Sparrows* examines the experiences of both agents and their targets. It explores how cold-war politics and ideas of 'national security' slipped into the lives of quite ordinary people; and it also highlights the consequences of government approaches to security and foreign policy for individuals unconnected with the halls of power and decision-making. Deery has published previously on the Cold War in the US and Britain, and this shows in *Spies and Sparrows*; though the book takes place primarily in Australia, it is contextualised with events in the cold-war West and the Soviet Union.

Eight biographical chapters, each examining one individual, make up the volume. Intelligence work – and the records it produces – often lends itself to biography, particularly when it comes to the targets of surveillance. Security services assemble a version of a target's biography – a dossier filled with field officers' and informants' reports, telephone intercepts and threat assessments. ASIO's (redacted) target files are available upon application, even though the process is frequently protracted. Information on ASIO's agents, however, is typically never released, with a few exceptions (several of whom appear in the book). These restrictions shape Deery's selection of individuals and leave behind gaps and unanswerable questions. But in each case he supplements ASIO's material with other security files, newspaper reporting and interviews, often with former activists and retired ASIO personnel.

It seems likely that he has spent years assembling fragments of the stories that appear in this book.

The individuals include three left-wing targets of surveillance, three anti-communist informants, and two Soviet spies. Tom Kaiser, an Australian physicist, belonged to the first category. Kaiser was dismissed from the government scientific research bureau after participating in a small demonstration against the government's handling of a 1949 coal strike. But, as Deery reveals, Kaiser was less the victim of McCarthyism than bad timing: the Australian government was on the verge of restoring its intelligence-sharing relationship with the US, cut off the previous year due to Australian leaks. Kaiser was sacrificed to maintain this strategic partnership.

The other two cold-war casualties appear later in the book. Doctor Paul James was also dismissed from his job in a repatriation hospital. The context Deery sketches here is domestic: the 1950 Communist Party Dissolution Bill, which banned both the party and 'front' organisations. James condemned the bill at a trade union meeting and was a member of the local Peace Council, so he was fired. He never received an explanation for his dismissal. In the case of the third target, Demetrius Anastassiou, it was not employment that was withheld, but citizenship. Anastassiou was a Greek migrant active in union and communist politics in Australia. As a result, the government attempted to deport him in 1952. The cabinet eventually withdrew these efforts and changed its policy, but Anastassiou's citizenship was not granted until the 1970s.

Anastassiou's file hinged, largely, on one Mr Smith's denunciation of him as a communist. Deery's next group are of the Smith type: informants. William Dobson never worked for ASIO, but was an active anti-communist in the trade unions. He carried out his own 'active measures', most famously throwing himself from a ferry into Sydney Harbour to frame communists for a supposed attempt on his life. But he was probably more of a con-man than a spy: he later provided information *to* communists, claimed links with the CIA, and ran confidence scams. Czech migrant Maxmilian Wechsler's story is a similarly wild ride. An ASIO 'walk-in' sent to infiltrate the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), he became a productive source during the 1970s. But

if the CPA had not vetted Wechsler sufficiently, neither had ASIO. After resigning suddenly, he sold his ASIO story to the newspapers. Later, in Bangkok, he would sell arms to the Ananda Marga as an *agent provocateur* and was also, perhaps, used by the CIA.

ASIO's infiltration of the CPA began long before the 1970s, though. During the 1950s Anne Neill, a middle-aged housewife, had also penetrated the party. Her matronly appearance made her inconspicuous; she produced voluminous intelligence and became the first embedded ASIO operative to visit the Soviet Union.

Deery highlights the strain of Neill's double-life, a theme which also runs through his chapter on Evdokia Petrov. Soviet spies Evdokia and Vladimir Petrov's defection to the West in 1954 triggered the 'Petrov Affair': a political scandal which formed a high point in Australia's cold-war tensions. Deery seeks to pull Evdokia out 'from the shadow of her more famous husband' (p112) – as does Wilhelm Agrell's recent book *Mrs Petrova's Shoe* – and his focus on her post-defection experiences is novel and deftly executed.

Michael Brown is Deery's other spy, a British airman who passed documents on Australian weapons testing to the Soviets in 1958. As with Kaiser, Deery emphasises the case's foreign-policy backdrop: Prime Minister Menzies and his British counterpart, Harold Macmillan, dealt with it quietly, and Menzies suppressed newspaper reporting to avoid further American censure of Australia's security practices. Brown's motives and experiences are more elusive than those of the other characters, but Deery's description of his escape from the airbase makes for lively reading.

This book paints a portrait of surveillance which highlights its negative impacts but also its participatory nature – and some participated out of genuine belief in the stakes of the Cold War, which touched ordinary lives as well as those of diplomats, generals and politicians. *Spies and Sparrows* is vividly told and an enjoyable read, in addition to being well-researched and illuminating. It will be of interest to specialists working on espionage, particularly the dynamics of infiltration and informants embedded within communities. But there will also be a broader readership among those interested in cold-war politics, the policing of communism in the anti-communist



West, and the impact of foreign policy upon ordinary lives: both the target's and the agent's.

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Joseph W. Esherick, *Accidental Holy Land: The Communist Revolution in Northwest China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022, 978-0520385320

Joseph W. Esherick has spent an illustrious career bringing new light to bear on revolutionary China; and this monograph, his first since retirement, adeptly builds on his previous scholarship. It argues that Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi province) became the 'revolutionary holy land' of the People's Republic of China via a series of 'accidents' and coincidences that ended up making it the perfect place to give birth to the new socialist order in China. Connecting the local, national and transnational in painstaking detail, and with an exciting narrative, Esherick has created a work that answers the question of how this remote backwater region of China became such a decisive flashpoint in world history.

*Accidental Holy Land* is the product of decades of fieldwork in Shaanxi province, including twenty-two interviews with eyewitnesses, as well as party reports, directives and communiqués compiled by the CPC's internal historians themselves. Despite facing some challenges in archival access, Esherick was able to get the story straight from the horse's mouth. With almost a dozen easy-to-navigate maps that help bring the story to life, the reader will easily be able to keep up with the action, within a story that often zig-zags from town to town and guerrilla zone to guerrilla zone.

Esherick meticulously sets the backdrop as to why Shaanbei became such a fertile place for anti-establishment rebellion of any kind, long before marxism was even a whiff in the air in northwest China. He argues that even as far back as the period of the mid-Qing dynasty, there were already small groups of patriotic and progressive activists

scattered around the province, as well as rebellious peasant bands, and these prepared the ground for a social base for the CPC that would allow them to create a bedrock for revolution.

The broad scope of the timeline of the book is something to keep in mind, however: the first three chapters are very 'slow burn', and readers craving a consistently fast-paced read should give themselves some patience. Esherick's gradual build-up of the story of how rebel networks coalesced into a pre-Long March local communist movement across the 1910s and 1920s will enthral enthusiasts of broader communist history and microhistories of radical social movements, but could be found tedious for people who pick the book up in search of a comprehensive text about Mao Zedong's time at Yan'an. However, this reviewer is more of the former and not the latter, and thus highly enjoyed learning how the early micro-soviets and guerrilla zones of the CPC came to fruition before Mao 'accidentally' set foot in Shaanxi at the end of the Long March.

The local Shaanxi communist movement should not be seen as a mere ragtag group of directionless, ideologically-impoverished militiamen. Even before Mao's Red Army reached the area, the Shaanxi communists were attempting to put Marxist-Leninist ideals into action. For example, embryonic traces of women's liberation were beginning to appear during the Shaanbei guerrilla campaigns of mid-1927 to early 1935, including the encouragement of women to join in the communist struggle, attend schooling and choose who they wished to marry. Land reform attempts – while quite short-lived and not nearly as extensive as those after Mao's arrival – were launched in some small guerrilla pockets, and won some of the locals to the side of the communists. These attempts alone make this isolated communist experiment worth a closer examination.

One great thing about the monograph is that, while the book concentrates mostly on Shaanbei, in his final chapter Esherick branches out beyond the main setting and goes deeper into the communist revolutionary campaigns in Gansu, Ningxia and Xinjiang, staying true to the book's subtitle of being about 'northwest China' in a broader sense. The various failed attempts by these communist forces to link up with their Soviet and Mongolian comrades are tragic (for example the West Route Army's 1937 Xinjiang campaign), but in the end these aborted attempts are yet more evidence in support of Esherick's claim that Shaanbei

became the revolutionary holy land of Chinese communism through a series of ‘accidents’.

In his discussion of Soviet and Mongolian factors, Esherick demonstrates his impressive ability to tie the local to the global, although this does not become readily apparent until the last two chapters of the book. These chapters show how unforeseen events can land humans into the most unlikely places in history: the Japanese invasion; American journalists Edgar and Helen Foster Snow stumbling into Shaanxi in 1936 and writing books that ended up causing countless Chinese youth to flock to Shaanbei and transform it into their personal ‘holy land’; and the CPC’s inability to link up with their Soviet comrades.

Esherick makes an excellent point when he concludes that ‘local history must not focus exclusively on the local: microhistory sometimes requires a macro lens’. While Esherick may not be the first historian to argue this, what he says is no less true, and his latest work is a great example of how to write such a ‘macro-lensed microhistory’ correctly. Indeed, Esherick’s approach offers a paradigm that more historians of global communist movements should adopt.

While I would certainly suggest at least some background knowledge on the broader Chinese communist revolutionary experience before picking up the book, people with a basic familiarity with the subject will be able to greatly appreciate Esherick’s monograph. This is a triumphant and fascinating work of scholarship that I highly recommend to both scholars of Chinese communism and those with a more general interest, as well as to those interested in microhistories of social movements and insurgencies more broadly.

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