

# Reviews

Alexander Baron, *Chapters of Accidents: A Writer's Memoir*, Colin Holmes and Nick Baron (eds), London, Vallentine Mitchell 2022, 363pp, ISBN 978-1803710297

The writer Alexander Baron (1917-1999) is best remembered for his war novels, especially *From the City, From the Plough*, which was well received in both Britain and the United States when it first appeared in 1948. He is also known as a London writer, mostly thanks to the success of *The Lowlife* (1963), a boarding-house novel set in his native Hackney. His writing for film and television and his journalism is less often mentioned. What will probably be of most interest to readers of this journal, though, is Baron's deep involvement in left-wing politics during the 1930s and 1940s, when he worked as a writer and editor for *Tribune*, Unity Theatre's magazine *New Theatre*, the Labour League of Youth's paper *Advance*, and the Young Communist League's *Challenge*.

It is this early stage in Baron's life, when he drifted into the inner circle of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), along with his childhood and his time in the army, that provides the subject matter for *Chapters of Accidents: A Writer's Memoir*. This was left unfinished by Baron when he died; it appears now thanks to the editorial work of historians Colin Holmes and Nick Baron, Alexander's son. The book includes reproductions of various photographs and documents, an introductory essay by Holmes, and the author's notes about what he intended to revise or expand before publication.

Born Joseph Alexander Baron Bernstein, Baron was descended on both sides from Jewish immigrants, arriving in London from different corners of the Russian empire. His father, Barnett Bernstein, was a Polish fur cutter. As a boy, Barnett had fled his homeland with his parents to avoid being conscripted into the tsar's armies. The family of Baron's mother were Lithuanian, though Fanny Levinson was born in

Spitalfields and worked in a factory in the East End before marrying. These details are included in part one of Baron's memoir, which offers many glimpses into the lives of the Jewish working class in east London from the 1890s to the 1930s. The valorisation of the arts stands out as a theme, as do the vexed questions of cultural difference and assimilation. From a young age, Barnett was taken by his father to see plays performed in Yiddish. When Baron told him, many years later, about his impressions of a new adaptation of *King Lear*, he remembers Barnett replying, 'What? Have they translated that play into English?' (p48).

*Chapters of Accidents* is also full of insights into the constellation of left-wing organisations operating in Britain in the run-up to the Second World War. Baron remembers the 1934 overthrow of the socialist city council of Vienna, and the bombing of workers' apartments by government troops, as the moment that radicalised him. Although he never officially joined the CPGB, Baron soon fell under the influence of the Scottish communist and later general secretary of the party John Gollan, who saw him as a potential future leader. Another figure who looms large here is Ted Willis, a contemporary of Baron's in the Young Communist League, who went on to write the television series *Dixon of Dock Green*. Baron gives a particularly detailed account of the CPGB's attempt to win support from the Labour League of Youth for the 'popular front', a cross-class alliance of anti-fascist parties, by secretly infiltrating the organisation with party activists, a plan that was eventually foiled by a wave of purges and disaffiliations.

As the Second World War escalated, it was expected that the British government would clamp down on the CPGB, not least because the party had reversed its original, pro-war position after the Nazi-Soviet Pact (1939-41). Its leaders prepared to go underground. A hideout was found for Baron in a London psychiatric hospital, which he was to enter as a private patient of one of the doctors, an undercover member. Instead of going into hiding, though, Baron joined the army. Soon he felt his allegiances beginning to shift. He wrote to the security authorities, promising to refrain from any political activity on the condition that he would be allowed to join the fight overseas, and given 'any promotion that I earned' (p248). There was no reply, and Baron never rose above the rank of corporal, but his first request was granted: much of the last

third of his memoir is taken up by an account of his time in Sicily and his participation in the Normandy Landings, all of which is undercut by his gradual political disillusionment.

As well as being a well written and interesting memoir in its own right, *Chapters of Accidents* reveals much about how Baron's early life provided the raw material for his novels. It will also be of interest to anyone researching the history of Jewish people in Britain, the experiences of lower-ranking soldiers in the Second World War, or the CPGB.

*David Hobbs, University of Manchester*

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**Tom Lodge, *Red Road to Freedom: A History of the South African Communist Party 1921-2021*, Woodbridge, James Currey 2022 (UK); Johannesburg, Jacana 2021 (South Africa); 636pp, ISBN 978-1-84701-321-7 (UK), 978-1-4314-3134-2 (South Africa)**

South African Communism has played an extraordinary role in its country's history, despite the party's very small numbers during most of its life. Founded in 1921 by British immigrant artisans and Jewish Bundists from Eastern Europe, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) punched above its weight from the beginning. It was prominent in the insurrectionary general strike of white mine workers on the Rand goldfields in 1922, and, in the mid to late 1920s, began to break through to gain influence in Black politics by attaining a significant leadership positions in the first African labour-populist mass movement, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union. After disastrous setbacks caused by Comintern policies in the 1930s, the CPSA re-emerged in the 1940s, animating mass community and labour movements in the Black 'townships'. Following the party's banning in 1950, it re-organised underground, becoming the South African Communist Party (SACP).

The communists forged a close alliance with the above-ground African National Congress (ANC) in its mass civil disobedience campaigns, recruiting a number of key ANC leaders. After the state's suppression of the ANC in 1960, the party was crucial to the ANC's

decision to turn to armed struggle. When the ANC went into exile, the SACP permeated the movement's political structures and played a key role in gaining aid for the Congress from the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries. The next two and a half decades saw party members lead the ANC's guerilla campaign against the apartheid regime. The ANC-SACP alliance continued with the start of the country's transition to democracy in 1990, and, at a time when Communist Parties elsewhere were collapsing, the SACP became a mass membership organisation for the first time. To this day, the SACP exerts a significant pull in South African politics, with a number of cabinet ministers in the ANC government and important trade union official being party members.

The historiography of the party has been, to say least, unsatisfactory: party members' work has tended toward retrospective justification of past policies, while critics have often reduced the party to being a tool of the Soviet Union. There are only a few exceptions, for example Allison Drew's excellent biography of party founder Sidney Bunting, and Lucien van der Walt's innovative work on the party's syndicalist forerunners. Tom Lodge's new work immediately establishes itself as the most authoritative history of South African communism, and it is unlikely to be rivalled as such at any time in the foreseeable future. Lodge began studying modern South African politics as a graduate student in the 1970s, and by the 1980s had already established himself as a leading scholar in that field; this book represents a crowning achievement of a lifetime of distinguished scholarship. Lodge has, over the years, met and interviewed many of the leading figures in party history. He also has a superb knowledge of the archival sources, the party and party-front newspapers and pamphlet literature, and the by-now quite extensive party memoir literature. And, in a field in which South African parochialism can be a problem, Lodge has a remarkable grasp of international politics, and particularly that of Eastern Europe, which is crucial to an understanding of the party's history.

The present book displays all the characteristics which have made Lodge's previous work so attractive – a mastery of different research techniques, a sensitivity to local and regional social contexts, analytical rigour, clear prose, and a light touch of fine, dry wit. Lodge's stance

combines a sympathy with the communists' contribution to struggles for social equality with a justified scepticism toward their ideological self-understandings and often authoritarian attitudes.

A great strength of the book is Lodge's rich portrayal of the party's syndicalist predecessors and founders. In the party's orthodox view, there has been a strong tendency to disparage these activists: they are often seen as white labour racists, and, in this portrayal, true racial egalitarianism only comes with the formation and development of the CPSA. Lodge, however, paints a much more complex picture. On the one hand, though the labour movement as whole had a strong white labour protectionist bent, a significant minority of the white activists of the 1910s were racially progressive, and some played an important part in stimulating and supporting the beginnings of Black trade unionism. On the other hand, some leading white activists in the early CPSA were sometimes quite overtly racist or willing to cater to white sensibilities, not only in the 1920s but even into the 1930s, and occasionally shockingly so. There was no great divide in 1921.

Lodge's mapping of the social base of the CPSA, and how it changed across time, is brilliantly done. He provides hard-to-find detail of branches, membership numbers and publication circulations to ground his account. He rightly emphasises the importance of Black militants in the pre-1921 syndicalist period and in the party's very early days, something that has perhaps been underemphasised in past contributions. He also highlights the extraordinary long-term impact of the CPSA's night schools for Black workers, from which an important group of party, union and nationalist leaders emerged.

A striking feature of Lodge's account of the late 1940s and early 1950s is that he shows how – as a result of the rather numerous visits and sojourns by South African Communists in the new Eastern Europe socialist states – the notion of a national or 'people's' democracy exercised a huge ideological influence within the underground SACP: this conceptualisation was imported wholesale into their shaping of the ANC's key manifesto document, the Freedom Charter.

Lodge's account of the SACP's period of exile from 1960 to 1990, and its leadership role in the struggle against apartheid during that time, is especially powerful. The party's attempts to reconstruct itself within the

country are traced in fascinating detail. Lodge's narrative of the guerilla campaign is by far the most incisive and informative I have read: it covers the ideological influences of Soviet, Guevarist and Vietnamese military doctrine; the bold armed attacks inside South Africa, which gave the ANC some powerful propaganda victories; the camps in Angola, from where the South Africans fought for the MPLA government against UNITA insurgents; and the debacles caused by the over-zealous and brutal ANC security apparatus. From the point of view of the international history of Communism, one of the most interesting aspects of this section of the book is Lodge's account of how activists of foreign Communist parties – particularly those from Britain and the Netherlands – were recruited by the SACP to participation in the South African armed struggle.

The overall picture that emerges in Lodge's account is that, despite a formal insistence that they had a multi-pronged strategy, by the late 1970s and early 1980s the party leadership was over-invested in a militarist approach, concentrating all their resources on guerilla warfare; and, from about the time of the 1984 mass protests, they came to believe that their armed units would lead a mass insurrection. Lodge is clear, however, that the ANC was never, in fact, in a position to militarily overthrow the regime. He shows how, ultimately, a split ran through the party over whether and how far to follow a strategy of negotiation with the apartheid government; and how party member Thabo Mbeki and his supporters played a crucial leadership role in turning the ANC toward a negotiated settlement.

My criticisms of Lodge are largely matters of nuance. I did feel that he slightly tended to understate Soviet influence on the party after the dissolution of the Comintern, and that he slightly downplayed the extent of the SACP's grip on the ANC during the exile period. But in both cases, this is a matter of emphasis; in fact one of the virtues of the book is that it enables the reader to make up their own mind on such issues: varying interpretations are laid out with scrupulous fairness, while the rich detail of the narrative always provides much to reflect on.

This is a book which is distinguished not only in the field of South African history, but in the historiography of Communism. It is amongst the very best scholarly histories of a single national communist movement, and because of the global importance of the anti-apartheid

struggle in the late twentieth century, it should be of interest to a very wide audience.

*Jonathan Hyslop, Colgate University, Hamilton, New York*

*After this review had been written, Tom Lodge passed away, at the far too early age of 72. In a long career, primarily at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Limerick, Lodge established himself as the foremost scholar of modern South African politics, as well as being a capable and inspiring academic leader. He is deeply missed by his colleagues and students for his brilliance, his kindness and his wit. JH*

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**Kostis Karpozilos, *Red America: Greek Communists in the United States, 1920-1950*, New York, Berghahn 2023, 201pp, ISBN 978-1-80073-855-3**

This book is a welcome addition to the sparse scholarship on immigrant radicalism in America before the Cold War. Karpozilos's general aim is to underscore the importance of immigrant labour to the development of the American left. His specific aim is to retrieve the history of its Greek-American contingent, a forgotten tradition of militancy that constitutes a vital pre-history to the better-known phenomenon of Greek-American anti-communism in cold-war America.

Karpozilos brings to life a history of community organisation and activism that is in constant negotiation with the forces of Americanisation, on the one hand, and the ongoing influence of events in the 'motherland', on the other. Radicalisation of a multi-ethnic proletariat necessitated Americanisation of the communist movement in the United States, but the Greek case shows that this process had its limitations, at least for a time. A robust shared Greek ethnicity undercut the communist line on the natural hostilities between Greek-American capital and labour, undermining unionisation efforts as workers and employers remained united to protect what was seen as Greek-American economic interests, and to preserve the status of the Greek presence in

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the US. The Great Depression, however, made their distinct interests clear; the end of community self-sufficiency fostered Americanisation through the necessity of American charity and welfare, and encouraged greater migrant interest and participation in American politics, especially in support of the New Deal. Austerity also facilitated the resurgence of the labour movement in the form of industrial unionism.

It comes as little surprise that the key points thereafter in the trajectory of Greek-American communism were the formative Popular Front period followed by the destructive Cold War. The globalising effects of fascism and anti-fascism brought the Greek-American movement into the orbit of the international communist movement against fascism. The movement was further energised by the strength and success of the EAM or *Ethniko Apeleftherotiko Metopo* (National Liberation Front), the communist-led resistance coalition that mobilised against the Axis occupation of Greece (1941-1944).

As the end of the war approached and the post-war settlement dominated the agenda, the popular front 'compromise' came to an end. In Greece, the emerging Cold War was announced in no uncertain terms when British forces opened fire on their communist allies during a Liberation parade held in Syntagma Square, Athens, in December 1944, an event known as the *Dekemvriana*. The 'secret hope' for Anglo-American/Soviet co-operation and a peaceful post-war settlement that lingered among Greek-Americans, the American left, and indeed the Greek left, was finally quashed by the outbreak of civil war between left and right in Greece in 1946 and President Truman's active support of the Greek government. The Greek Civil War became the first 'hot' conflict of the Cold War.

The final chapter of the book is thus focused on the disintegration of the American left in the new equilibrium of the Cold War, and specifically, the success with which state-anti-communism penetrated immigrant communities in America under Truman. Karpozilos reminds us that the threat of deportation of unnaturalised immigrants had been a powerful weapon of defence and reprisal, given the leading role that immigrants had played in the labour movement and in the development of communism in the US. Greece followed suit with the cancellation of passports and citizenship of diaspora Greeks, especially Greek-



Americans who had been tainted or suspected of any association with communism. The fear of deportation decimated the Greek-American left, prompting many to seek refuge in the safe havens of the Eastern bloc countries, especially Poland, as did many Greek communists following their defeat in the Greek Civil War.

The rest of Greek America became staunchly anti-communist, allied closely with the Civil War and post-Civil War Greek governments, and with US foreign policy. Greek-American leftists distanced themselves from the tradition of radicalism that now threatened everything they had achieved. The conservative consensus within the community was well served by the post-war economic miracle that proved that American capitalism could work for everybody. This 'hegemonic conservatism' would define the community at least until the Colonels' dictatorship in Greece (1967-1974), which became a totemic rallying point for international organisations and human rights activists.

Karpozilos's book brings together a rich and diverse range of Greek and English language primary source materials in a neatly organised and beautifully translated volume (originally published in Greek by Crete University Press, 2017). There are only a couple of noteworthy omissions in an otherwise solid bibliography. For example, Kate Weigand's *Red Feminism* would have informed Karpozilos's cursory engagement with female immigrant labour and radicalisation, while Ioanna Laliotou's study of Greek American migrant subjectivities – which is listed in the bibliography – could also have featured in the discussion.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, this book is more than its title suggests. As Karpozilos is rightly aware, the history of Greek-American communism is a transnational one. His book is a valuable contribution to a growing and diverse scholarship that acknowledges the historical interplay between transnational immigration, political radicalism, nationalism, and global power politics.

*Margarite Poulos, Western Sydney University*

## Notes

1. Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002;

Ioanna Laliotou, *Transatlantic Subjects: Acts of Migration and Cultures of Transnationalism Between Greece and America*, Chicago, Illinois: Chicago University Press, 2004.

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Francisca de Haan (ed), *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists around the World*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2023, 725p, ISBN 978-3031131264

Francisca de Haan's introduction to this book discusses three channels through which communist women have contributed to the construction of communism: through their presence and activism in communist parties dominated by men; through introducing gender-based organisations and theoretical reflection into communist parties; and through contesting the patriarchal structure of socialism and communism. Clara Zetkin (1857-1933), Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) and Claudia Jones (1915-1964) are presented as the foremothers of the twenty-two other communist activists profiled in the collection. As de Haan writes, the collection is informed by global, non-teleological and feminist perspectives. The result is a history of communist women that challenges Euro- or Euro-Asian-centric narratives, through a focus on specific historical subjects. It offers a counter history to anti-feminist perspectives, and includes criticism of the behaviour of the communist male leaders with whom communist women shared their political activism. The struggle with patriarchy thus receives special attention, since the twenty-five activists are discussed both as communist activists and as human beings with their own contradictions, hopes, fears and conflicts.

All the women discussed here shared the idea that women's total liberation could only occur within the framework of socialism. The contributors to the volume show in a very convincing way how activists' struggles for women's emancipation combined and intersected at the global level with women's participation in wars, revolutions and political parties, as well as in struggles related to militarism, fascism, apartheid and colonialism.

Although each chapter is dedicated to a profile of one communist,

with a timeline ranging from the late nineteenth to the beginning of the twenty-first century, the book does not adopt an approach to history that gives prominence to exceptional individuals. The contributors also look at the connections between peoples, spaces, ideas and struggles, as well as discussing the masses of women who were involved in the historical processes under consideration. Women activists created forms of mutual help, co-operation and solidarity in which hundreds of thousands of other women participated. The committees, federations and organisations described in these chapters make it clear that women's history is a collective history – one of people who have valued the power and potentialities of working together and expanding the forms of political activism.

The volume is divided into six parts. The first part, on the 'foremothers', is followed by geographically defined sections, on Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Oceania and the Americas. At the end of each chapter, a selection of 'recommended documents' provides the reader with an opportunity to deepen their insights and perspectives through referring to archival and published sources.

Zetkin, Kollontai and Jones are described through multidimensional profiles. Zetkin stands out for the modernity of her thinking – some of her revolutionary ideas anticipate today's notion of 'intersectionality' – as well as her pioneering role in the communist movement. Kollontai's political life is notable, among other things, for her diplomatic ability and her attention to the psychological aspects of female emancipation. The chapter on Jones shows her importance as a leading communist and a radical intellectual who extended her conception of Marxism to encompass Black women, people of colour and the experiences of African-Caribbean migrants in Europe.

Communist women from Europe are represented by Helen Crawford, Ana Pauker, Dolores Ibarruri, Teresa Noce, Edwarda Orłowska and Nina Vasilievna Popova. These women were important activists in, respectively, Scotland, Romania, Spain, Italy, Poland and Russia. The chapters document the points of similarity and difference in their long-lasting careers: their local impact as well as their transnational projections; their legacies and heritages; and controversies in which they were involved. The case of Ana Pauker is in many ways exemplary. Born in a poor rural area, Pauker eventually became a leading figure in

the Romanian and international communist movement, and in 1947 became the first female Foreign Minister in the modern world. Despite her many abilities, her gender and Jewish origins made her vulnerable in the power struggles for leadership in the Romanian Communist Party. She was accused of both left and right deviationism, and was imprisoned in 1953; it was only Stalin's death later in the year that made possible her release. She was never fully rehabilitated, and in Communist Romania she continued to be described as the supreme evil, responsible for all the party's mistakes. This remained her fate in post-communist Romania too, and a negative image of Pauker as an emblem of the violence of Romanian communism has been perpetuated: she has even been described as 'Stalin in a skirt'.

Asia is the setting of Part III. The six women profiled are Deng Yingchao from China, Pak-Chong-ae from Korea, Iijima Aiko from Japan, Nguyen Thi Binh from Vietnam, Umi Sardjono from Indonesia, and Behice Boran from Turkey. Thi Binh's transnational connections are of particular interest; these were mainly developed through diplomatic assignments and alliances with Western women. The author shows how Thi Binh, starting from a conception of the struggle for women's emancipation within the struggle for national liberation, achieved the goal of establishing a common agenda with Western feminists beyond ideological and national boundaries.

Africa and the Middle East (Part IV) are unfortunately only covered by three chapters, dealing with Iraqi communist Naziha al-Dulaimi, Algerian Arlette Bourgel and Aoua Keita from Mali. Naziha al-Dulaimi is perhaps the least-known figure of the three, and, as the author notes, scholars have hitherto devoted very little attention to her. The chapter is very important as it demonstrates al-Dulaimi's role in exposing the consequences of British rule (through their installation of and support for the Hashemite monarchy) for the conditions of women in Iraq. Furthermore, it shows how she worked for women's emancipation, through her political activity in the Communist Party from 1948, as well as in her leadership in the League for the Defence of Women's Rights. After the fall of the monarchy in 1958 she became Minister of Municipalities; and she also collaborated in the drafting of the New Personal Status Law, which established equality between men

and women. Until 2003 no government leader, including those who supported a tribalist view of the role of women, had ever repudiated this law.

The fifth part is dedicated to Oceania. The two chapters present the internationally known Australian Freda Brown, renowned for her role in the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), and Rona Bailey, from New Zealand. Bailey's path is particularly interesting for two reasons. Firstly, her communist militancy went hand in hand with a dedication to theatre, dance, music and literature. Bailey did not create two parallel careers, nor did she separate the two areas of social action. On the contrary, she sought to use poetry, song and art in the service of the anti-capitalist and workers' movement. Secondly, in the latter part of her life she became involved in the anti-racist movement, seeking alliances with the Māori people and questioning her role as a Pākehā.

The volume concludes with the Americas, and features Jeanne Corbin, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Gachita Amador, Vilma Espín and Fanny Edelman from, respectively, Canada, the United States, Mexico, Cuba and Argentina – although their roles often extended beyond national borders. Edelman's case is exemplary for her very long militancy in the Argentine Communist Party, a relationship of absolute loyalty and a sense of responsibility. At the same time, she was an internationalist and internationally recognised figure: she participated in the Spanish Civil War and met other women there fighting for the republic, including Tina Modotti, Dolores Ibarruri and Teresa Noce. Edelman was the General Secretary of the WIDF from 1972 to 1978, and this gave her the opportunity to meet many women in her travels, including Cuban women protagonists of the revolution, but also women fighters in Asia, Africa and Europe.

This is a book of great relevance for all those interested in the history of communism and women's history, but also in the global dimension of anti-racist, anti-capitalist social movements and for the self-determination of peoples. In my view, Africa is underrepresented in the collection - Algeria and Mali are the two countries considered - and this is a limitation of the book, especially for the possibilities of studying the intersections between Marxism-Leninism, anti-colonialism and

women's emancipation, and the relations of African countries with the USSR or Cuba. In addition, the connections between the biographies could have been emphasised, as many of these women participated in the same historical processes or events, such as the Spanish Civil War or the WIDF meetings.

However, the book has the great merit of showing a broad spectrum of being a communist: the biographies of these women show how communism was experienced and practised transnationally and through very diverse paths. In addition, de Haan has literally overturned the perspective of communist studies, which has dealt with women's history and gender in a very limited way. Putting the biographies of communist women at the centre of research has definitely been an innovation for communism studies.

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**Mike Taber and Daria Dyakonova (eds), *The Communist Women's Movement, 1920-1922: Proceedings, Resolutions, and Reports*, Leiden/Boston, Brill 2023, xxv, 587pp, ISBN 978-9004526556**

In the socialist tradition there is no socialism without women's emancipation. Though women's emancipation is a particularism (the universal being represented by the working class), it is an indispensable part of the universal emancipation of mankind. The Bolsheviks put this principle in political practice when they came to power. First by introducing laws that considered women and men as equal and favoured equality (suffrage rights, maternity rights ...) then by promoting women's participation in the political struggle. They also wanted to liberate them from housework by socialising 'house drudgery'. The aim was to integrate women into the labour market in order to make her 'the equal of the man', as Lenin had explained in a speech delivered in Moscow to Non-Party Working Women on 23 September 1919.

The Comintern, the Communist International or 'world party of the proletariat' founded by the Bolsheviks, shared the aim of promoting

women's emancipation by organising them. At its first congress, in March 1919, it accepted the resolution introduced by Alexandra Kollontai demanding the creation of a women's section. One year later, on 30 July 1920, the First International Conference of Communist Women opened in Moscow. Twenty-five delegates from nineteen countries were present, supplemented by participants from the Second Comintern congress which met at the same time. One year later, there were 82 delegates from 28 countries. The proceedings, the reports, and the resolutions of these two international conferences form the main part of this voluminous edition of documents. These are supplemented by materials about the Near East Women's Conference in Tiflis (today's Tbilisi) in December 1921, and the two conferences of women's correspondents in 1922, as well as by area reports. Nearly 90 per cent of this material is published for the first time in English, almost half of it appearing for the first time in any language. The sources have either been located at RGASPI or stem from the journal *Die Kommunistische Fraueninternationale* (*The Communist Women's International*), founded in April 1921 and published in Berlin for five years, under the editorship of Clara Zetkin.

Reading the discussions among these committed political women, joined at times by some supportive men, proves extremely insightful. At the first conference, they had to clarify organisational issues and draw up the guidelines for the communist women's movement they wanted to build. The international women's secretariat began its work just a few months later. At the second conference, they could share their new experiences and debate how to further strengthen their movement. The exchanges were rich. Only a few of the points raised among the delegates can be mentioned here.

A first controversial question had a sociological dimension: whom to organise? If housewives were contentious, 'intellectual' women were even more so. In this context, Zetkin made a remarkable analysis of the structural transformations of the labour market in Germany and elsewhere. First, she said, a great majority of the women are [still] housewives and the proletariat cannot do without them. As to the growing number of 'female employees and intellectual workers', they are, for a great part, 'more and more proletarianised' through their working

conditions. She contradicted Kollontai, who had put them in the last place of all categories of female workers. 'Her attitude is probably based on the conditions existing in Russia', was her comment (pp284-5).

As the sources show, the opinion of the Bolsheviks was not yet sanctified. This is also evident in the discussion about the legacy of the Second International. For the Russian delegates, the struggle for women's rights only began with the Third International: they denied the Socialists any achievements. The German Rosi Wolfstein and the Austrian Anna Ströhmer contradicted this, and insisted on historical objectivity in the theses: 'We need to be accurate' (p149).

Should women be addressed and organised separately from men, as the practice of the Russian *Zhenotdel* suggested? The opinions of the delegates differed: Wolfstein was strongly in favour of it; the Swedish Gerda Linderot defended women's integration in the general party organisations; while the French Lucie Colliard saw specific women's groups as a promising future form of organising. The pluralism that was still prevalent at the time also manifested itself semantically. Some communist parties had 'fractions' instead of 'cells', others spoke of 'caucuses' and still others organised 'meeting circles'. Coupled with these debates were questions of women's role in the revolutionary struggle. Were they an avant-garde or more of an obstacle? Another recurrent issue was the situation of the women of 'the East', considered as the most oppressed of all by an archaic and religious patriarchy. But the Western communist women were also self-critically aware of their cultural bias and Eurocentrism. If necessary, there were delegates, like the Korean Nam Man-ch'un, to reproach them their inattention, or their ignorance: 'You know absolutely nothing of the woman of the East', commented the Armenian Gaiane Iosifovna Areshian (p305). Controversies also arose about questions of women's suffrage and thus parliamentarism, relations with the 'bourgeois' women's movement, and, after the failed March Action in Germany, on tactics, between defenders and opponents of the 'revolutionary offensive'.

A final point I want to mention about these early debates is the criticism the communist women expressed of their male comrades for their lack of support. Women are no priority for the party, the Russian delegate (Emma?) Yanson noted (p312-3). Yanson was not the only one. One notable aspect of this criticism of the behaviour of their male



comrades is its symbolic significance. Such criticism was different from denouncing capitalism or imperialism. It was internal, directed at their own ranks.

After the second women's conference, the Comintern declared the creation of a women's department for all parties to be mandatory. At the international level, however, the importance of women's policy declined from 1923 onwards. In 1925, the journal *Die Kommunistische Fraueninternationale* ceased publication. In April 1926, the International Women's Secretariat lost its autonomous organisational status and became part of the Comintern apparatus. During the first years documented here, however, these communist women succeeded in building an international leadership team, running international campaigns and formulating a programme for political equality before the law, at the workplace and in daily life – a programme that would become a blueprint for feminism up until today. A century later, this long overdue, carefully made, collection documents the radicality of the positions of these politically self-confident women and the innovative nature of their demands, shedding light on the relevance of their political legacy for women's emancipation. The comprehensive presentations by Mike Taber (preface) and Daria Dyakonova (introduction), the glossary, and the chronology at the end, make the book a helpful working tool.

*Brigitte Studer, University of Bern*

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