

Introduction: Communism's poetry

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The twentieth-century communist movement was intensely poetic. Poetry mattered as a prestigious cultural form that crystallised and communicated the non-alienated human creativity that capitalism allegedly crushed. The point of communism was to recast human history in the name of those values; as both political movement and historical destination, communism was seen as poetry to capitalism's prose. Communism's father figures, Marx and Engels, wrote poems as young men; poetry informed their political, theoretical and historical writings, and features prominently in their five-hundred-page collected works on culture.¹ Communist leaders wrote poetry: Chen Duxiu, the first General Secretary of the Chinese party, was a significant poet; before channelling his energies into making revolution, the teenage Stalin wrote verse, published and much praised;² Mao Zedong's poems contain fine lines in self-mythologisation ('I swim across the thousand-mile-long Yangtze'; 'I ... Smash the bureaucracy's machine') and invective, especially against Khrushchev (a 'crazy wasp', 'a mantis out to block a chariot').³ Versifying soldier Ho Chi-Minh insisted that 'the poet should also know how to lead an attack'.⁴ Many communist workers wrote poetry, including the Bulgarian Nikola Vaptsarov, Hungarian Lajos Tamási and Spaniard Miguel Hernández. They were by turns inspired, encouraged, supported and corrected by their parties' cultural networks, writers' groups, newspapers, periodicals and publishing houses. Between the wars a dissident fraction of middle-class intellectuals found a poetic subject, and sometimes themselves as writers, in the communist movement. In Britain alone these included A.L. Morton, Edgell Rickword, Charles Madge, Randall Swingler, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland, John Cornford, Cecil Day

Lewis and Stephen Spender. Across the century, major international poets aligned themselves with communism, including Bertholt Brecht, Langston Hughes, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Pablo Neruda and Hugh MacDiarmid.

On one hand, communism's poetry is extraordinarily wide, involving thousands of writers (occasional, minor, major), scores of languages and all the earth's continents. At the same time, the centrifugal dynamics of the world communist-movement, with the Soviet Union as model and administrative centre during the formative years, shaped patterns. Drawing on the pre-October Russian Futurism of Aleksei Kruchenykh and others, Vladimir Mayakovsky was the outstanding poet of the revolution who called for 'a new form of art' to 'pull the republic out of the mud'.⁵ Widely imitated, the breathless, exclamatory style of poems including his 3,000 line 'Lenin' ('Power to the Soviets!/ Bread to the hungry!/ Land to the peasants!') proved an enduring model, reproduced not only on October's anniversary. Composed in Moscow in 1933, for instance, Langston Hughes's 'Our Spring' ('time has given us/ Our spring /At last') is a typical exercise in the genre.⁶

Through the 1920s this full-throated mode harmonised with a future-oriented poetry of communist construction. Poems celebrated Soviet industrialisation and modernity, often in terms of the natural world: 'Into one orchard city, asphalt beehive', wrote the Constructivist Soviet poet Vera Inber, 'All cities will grow'.⁷ Debates about poetry's form and function were part of wider discussions about the viability of an independent proletarian culture that might break from the dead weight of inherited tradition (the Soviet Proletkult movement led by Alexander Bogdanov had 84,000 members by 1920).⁸ Lenin and Trotsky stressed the need for communism to assimilate and learn from the culture of the past, but the communist and modernist movements grew together.⁹ Communist poets outside the Soviet Union drew inspiration not only from Russian Futurism and Constructivism but from the international avant-gardes. Communists were active, for instance, in shaping the disruptive poetics of surrealism, with its drive to disclose connections between surface phenomena and underlying structures, both psychic and social; communists including American Sol Funaroff imitated and subverted key modernists works, including T.S. Eliot's *The*

Waste Land (1922), and presented proletarian revolution, rather than art or mysticism, as the solution to civilisation's crisis.¹⁰

From the mid-1930s, however, visions of international revolution were scaled back, and the defence of the Soviet Union emphasised. The Comintern stressed alliance with progressive middle-class elements and the preservation and development of national cultures against fascist barbarism. The cultural emphasis shifted from making it new to making it national, and accessible. Poetry counted less, in official channels at least. The novel became the key cultural form through which the movement's political and aesthetic priorities were defined and developed. From the mid-1930s, the multi-language periodical *International Literature*, essential reading for literary-minded communists the world over, published poems sparingly. The aesthetic codified and quickly ossified as 'socialist realism' provided a framework to attack poetry branded soft, effusive, gloomy, self-indulgent, too difficult for workers, formalist, decadent, individualistic and 'cosmopolitan', the latter a term often chillingly synonymous with Jewishness in high-Stalinist discourse.¹¹ It was an aesthetic shift, aligned with the increasing inwardness and social conservatism of Soviet communism – the scaling back of progressive legislation and attitudes around divorce, abortion and homosexuality – that both reflected and reinforced the gendered thinking of the movement.¹² Communism was inclined to regard patriarchy as a secondary mode of oppression that would wither with capitalism, and the movement's positive terms and social imagery were predominantly masculine (the male industrial worker, the heroic male activist, the soldier). With some striking exceptions, including Inber, women had so far featured little in the story of communist poetry as writers. Women poets, however, were now disproportionately targeted in the war on decadence, notably Anna Akhmatova, 'a spoilt woman aristocrat' for cultural commissar, A.A. Zhdanov, 'vacillating between boudoir and chapel'.¹³ Zhdanov's emphasis on muscular, accessible poetry at the service of the national family and attuned to national cultural traditions persisted across the mid-century. It was reinforced during the Cold War, when 'national roads' marked the direction of travel to socialism, and progressive national cultures were identified as frontlines against the corrupting effects of American imperialism.

These broad outlines are necessary to map the terrain of communist poetry, but not sufficient. Creative practice was wider than official positions and prescriptions. Communism's poetry chronicled and celebrated resistance and struggle of many forms. It was often a poetry of imprisonment, notably for the repeatedly incarcerated Turkish poet, Nazim Hikmet ('The problem is not falling a captive, / it's how to avoid surrender').¹⁴ It was also a poetry of the military campaign. Marshal Chen Yi, for instance, wrote significant poems as leader of the Red Guerrillas in the Three-Year War (1934-37) that included snapshots of battlefield misery ('Quietly we catch lice among the mountain flowers') and confessions of unrevolutionary doubt ('What if my head now falls?', begins a poem written as he lay wounded).¹⁵ Communism's well-documented poetic responses to the Spanish Civil War spanned poetic forms, languages and national contexts.¹⁶ Significant poems of the Second World War were written by communists including Ackland, Aragon, Brecht, Éluard, Franco Fortini, Elena Shirman, Konstantin Simonov and Aleksandr Tvardovsky.¹⁷ Less well-known outside its national borders is the communist poetry of the Greek Civil War (Tasos Leivaditis), the struggle in Vietnam (To Huu), the national liberation movement in Algeria (Anni Greki), and the fight against reaction in El Salvador (Roque Dalton).

The richness of communism's poetry gives the lie to the enduring cold-war era perception that what Seamus Heaney called 'the Marxist web', said to have been skilfully evaded by his friend, the Nobel Prize winning Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, could only benumb poetic sensitivity.¹⁸ A dissident current in communist poetry had long challenged Stalinism in the image of a better future betrayed. Osip Mandelstam's 'We exist in a country grown unreal and strange' (1933) derided the 'cockroach' and his 'thick-skinned leaders'.¹⁹ Mandelstam was unexpectedly spared the death penalty; 'isolate but preserve' was the eventual order of Stalin, who admired the poet, despite the criticism.²⁰ Banished to a correction camp, Mandelstam died of typhoid fever in 1938. Poets in the so-called People's Democracies, however, extended this broken dissident tradition, including László Benjámín ('Draggled in human spirit, we live on') and Gábor Garai ('What if this ice should once be thawed?').²¹ Dissident poetry, often concerned with communist

renewal, flourished underground in the Soviet Union from the 1960s in the work of poets including Boris Slutsky ('Looks like physics is in honour,/ Looks like poetry is not'), Yevgeny Yevtushenko ('to have learnt nothing is terrible,/and peering earnest eyes are terrible'), and experimentalist Rea Nikonova ('How many patriots in this world of idiots/ each performing solo').²²

For many poets across the century, Marxism was less a web than a way of seeing that sharpened perception and yielded outlines of 'the future written in the present', in the words of Hungarian poet Attila József.²³ Communist poetry was a writing of switch-points, alert to the historical significance of the here and now – as in Yiannis Ritsos's *Epitaphios* ('A knot swells in our throat/ And turns into the noose').²⁴ It was a poetry attuned to historic systems and deep structures, such as Martinican Aimé Césaire's surrealist-influenced magnum opus, *Return to my Native Land* (1939), which explored slavery's legacies and the disjunctions of colonial identities ('the old negritude/ is turning into a corpse ... the slave-ship is splitting open').²⁵ Other poems, including Pablo Neruda's 'The United Fruit Company', exposed the sharp practices of neo-colonialism ('the treasure of our submerged/ territories flow as though/ on plates').²⁶ Communism's poetry also brought materialism to memorialisation, from Pier Paolo Pasolini's historically panoramic 'Gramsci's Ashes' to more recent work, including British communist Peter Blackman's elegy for his former comrade, Trinidadian activist Claudia Jones ('I walk with the humble/ Yet not in humility').²⁷

The story of communism's global poetry awaits its historian. Restricted to Europe, this special issue of *Twentieth Century Communism* – a follow-up to Issue 12 (2017), 'Communism and the written word' – is more modest in scope. Written by a combination of established and emerging scholars, articles cover Belgian, French and Italian contexts. Edward Lee-Six focuses on the Soviet afterlife of Belgian symbolist poet Émile Verhaeren, a writer much admired by Lenin. Jeff M. Fuller analyses Louis Aragon's mid-century search for suitably French poetic forms. In thematically-linked articles, Mila Milani and Luca Mozzachiodi tackle questions of Italian communist identity at mid-century via prestige, party-supported anthologies of

translated Soviet poetry and the cultural journal *Officina* respectively. Mathieu Farizier links past to present, tracing the politics of French poetry since 1968, and assessing the contemporary re-activation of Marxism in a new generation.

As a complement to this issue, we have published, online, a poem by former TCC editor and poet Gavin Bowd: ‘Zhou Enlai in Auld Reekie’ richly imagines the four months spent by future Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of China in the Scottish capital in the winter of 1920-21. The editors are grateful to Gavin for permission to re-publish the poem, which appears in his seventh and most recent collection, *Rifle Song* (2023): <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/tcc/vol-2024-issue-27/>.

The issue is dedicated to the memory of Glyn Salton-Cox (1983-2022), a Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who wrote a characteristically illuminating article for issue 12 and would have been invited to contribute to this one. Always supportive of the journal, Glyn was an exceptional scholar whose work combined gender studies and materialist approaches. His book *Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love: Sexual Revolution in British Writing of the 1930s* (2018) is already a standard work. Like that of his favourite film-maker, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Glyn’s time on earth calls to mind words from Chen Duxiu: ‘In life there should be nothing to regret/why subject freedom to the pointless goal of getting to old age?’²⁸ He is sharply missed.

Notes

- 1 Marx and Engels, *On Literature and Art*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1976.
- 2 Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007, pp42, 47.
- 3 Mao, ‘Swimming’, ‘Inspection’, and ‘Trotsky Visits the Far East’ in Gregor Benton ed., *Poets of the Chinese Revolution: Chen Duxiu, Chen Yi, Zheng Chaolin, Mao Zedong*, London, Verso 2019, pp256, 288, 267.
- 4 Ho Chi-Minh, ‘On reading “Anthology for a Thousand Poets”’, in Alan Bold ed., *Penguin Book of Socialist Verse*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, p150.

- 5 Mayakovsky, 'Order no. 2 to the army of the arts', in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, p182.
- 6 Hughes, 'Our Spring', *International Literature* II (1933), p4; Mayakovsky, 'Lenin', in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, p196.
- 7 Inber, 'It will come to pass', in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, p138.
- 8 Ronaldo Muck, *Marx@2000: Late Marxist Perspectives*, Basingstoke, MacMillan, 2000, p104.
- 9 Lenin, 'On Proletarian Culture' [1920] in *On Socialist Ideology and Culture*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1962, pp157-60; Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* [1924], Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1971, pp184-215.
- 10 Funaroff, 'What the Thunder Said: A Fire Sermon' [1938], reprinted in Jack Salzman ed., *Years of Protest: A Collection of American Writings of the 1930s*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), pp359-62.
- 11 See, for instance, 'Jews in the Soviet Union', *World News* [12 January 1957], reprinted in John Callaghan and Ben Harker eds., *British Communism: A Documentary History*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011), pp201-02.
- 12 See Glyn Salton-Cox, *Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love: Sexual Revolution in British Writing of the 1930s* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p23; Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual Dissent*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2001), pp181-204.
- 13 Zhdanov, 'Report on the Journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*' [1947] in *On Literature, Music and Philosophy*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1950, p26. I analyse the impact of this critique in Britain in 'Politics and Letters: "The Soviet Literary Controversy" in Britain', *Literature & History*, Vol 24 No 1, 2015, pp41-57.
- 14 Hikmet, 'That's how it goes', in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, p263.
- 15 Chen Yi, 'Bivouacking' [1935] and 'Three stanzas written at Meiling' [1936] in Benton ed., *Poets of the Chinese Revolution*, pp212, p219.
- 16 See for instance Valentine Cunningham ed., *Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War*, Oxford, OUP, 1986; and Cunningham ed., *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1980.
- 17 See Hugh Haughton ed., *Second World War Poems*, London, Faber, 2004; and Maria Bloshteyn ed., *Russia is Burning: Poems of the Great Patriotic War*, Ripon, Smokestack, 2020.
- 18 Heaney, Introduction to Czeslaw Milosz, *Selected and Last Poems 1931-2004*, London, Penguin, 2006, p xv.

- 19 Mandelstam, 'We exist in a country grown unreal and strange', in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, p147.
- 20 Montefiore, *Young Stalin*, p59.
- 21 Benjámín, 'Debris'; Garai, 'A man is beaten up', in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, pp368, 453.
- 22 Slutsky, 'Physics and poetry' in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, p379; Yevtushenko, 'Later' in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, p477; Rikonova in Andy Croft ed., *Smokestack Lightning*, Ripon, Smokestack, 2021, p264. See also Anatoly Kudriavitsky ed., *Accursed Poets: Dissident Poetry from Soviet Russia 1960-80*, Ripon, Smokestack, 2020.
- 23 József, 'What reader...' in Bold ed, *Socialist Verse*, p293.
- 24 Yiannis Ritsos, *Epitaphios* in Croft ed., *Smokestack*, p148.
- 25 Aimé Césaire, from *Return to my Native Land* in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, p352.
- 26 Neruda, 'The United Fruit Co.' in Bold ed., *Socialist Verse*, p272.
- 27 Blackman, 'In Memory of Claudia Jones' in Croft ed., *Smokestack*, p122; see also Blackman, *Footprints*, Ripon, Smokestack, 2013.
- 28 hen Duxiu, 'Inscription on a painting of Saigō Nanshū Hunting' [1903] in Benton ed., *Poets of the Chinese Revolution*, p22.

Note from new co-editors:

This issue constitutes in several ways a watershed in the history of the journal. A carefully planned generational shift has successfully been implemented during the past year and the last members of the original editorial board have now stepped down. Kevin Morgan, who together with Richard Cross, Norman LaPorte and Matthew Worley was one of the founders of TCC, commemorates this moment with a new essay. It traces the journal's intellectual origins and highlights a dynamic trio of scholars who all made crucial contributions to the field in their own distinct ways: Stuart Macintyre, Stephen White and José Gotovitch.

TCC's newly elected co-editors, Kasper Braskén and Margarite Poulos, are honoured to carry on the journal's critical mission during the next three years. Thankfully, several of the original editors and past editorial board members are readily available in the journal's renewed advisory board. We are deeply indebted to the collective efforts that during the past fifteen years have established the journal as a leading English language forum for the study of twentieth century communism. Together we form a robust and increasingly international working group who all have made this journal their intellectual home.

Kasper Braskén and Margarite Poulos

Note: simultaneously with this issue we publish an online preview of articles due to appear in Issue 30, 2026: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/tcc/vol-2024-issue-30/>