Stuart Macintyre, Stephen White and José Gotovitch: An appreciation

Kevin Morgan

Without its editorial advisers *Twentieth Century Communism* would have been a non-starter. There were four editors when the journal first appeared in 2009. All were UK-based; three of us had begun our research working on communism in Britain. The previous year, when the idea of the journal was first floated, there were just two of us meeting in a shopping centre in the English midlands. 'A journal of international history' could never have been the outcome had we not enjoyed the goodwill and support of an outstanding body of historians internationally. Following the opening up of communist archives in the early 1990s there had been a flourishing of international exchanges; one of our principal aims as editors was to bring together research we had come across in this way but which was not always accessible to English-speaking readers. It was our good fortune to be able to tap into these networks without any institutional support beyond that of a politically committed independent publisher.

Our editorial advisers brought to the journal not only the breadth of their expertise but a depth of experience that we would have otherwise lacked. We had been drawn to the subject since the first great flourishing of scholarship in the 1960s-1970s and, in all but one case (my own), since the great stimulus to research fed by the collapse of Europe's ruling communist systems in 1989-91. This had been a moment of archival opportunity and not a little opportunism. Instant experts popped up and in some cases moved swiftly on. Old scores were settled, or bones of contention gnawed upon, not infrequently leaving everyone much where they started and none the wiser.

There were, however, historians ready for this moment who were deeply immersed in communism's history and whose specialism and vocation this was. These historians had long wrestled with the problem of archives either closed or needing to be prised open. Far from being discouraged by this, they had shown both political and methodological resourcefulness in circumventing such obstacles. The years between destalinisation and the great wave of party dissolutions and rebranding were ones in which some combined a political commitment to communism with a critical engagement with its history and an openness to constructive dialogue with those who did not share these commitments. This also encouraged a breaking down of the simpler antitheses between political and social history, which enabled a more nuanced account of these parties' simultaneous resilience and volatility, and the wide variations that could never simply be the product of communism itself. Beginning in the mid-1960s, and picking up speed by the end of the 1970s, this was the first critical mass of historians to map out the subject as one of serious academic enquiry.

Stuart Macintyre (1947-2021), Stephen White (1945-2023) and José Gotovitch (1940-2024) were three of the finest historians of this generation who were also generous in their support for this journal. In remembering them here, I have also been asked to take stock of their achievement as the journal moves forward with a renewed body of editors and advisers. In first offering a few thoughts on each in turn, I come last to Stephen White only because his involvement with the journal began slightly later than the others'.

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For communism's historians the 1990s was the decade of the single-party monograph. Since the aftermath of 1956, and the generating of regimental-type histories (Hobsbawm) by the parties themselves, this had become the subject's primary field of enquiry as claims to legitimacy or a genuine societal presence were fought out on a national terrain. For the generation of the 1960s-1970s, these had become the alternative readings of the political-institutional versus the social, the top-down versus the bottom-up, the printed resolution versus the factory paper and

the activist caught on tape. With the opening of party archives, debates were at first set within the same basic dualism, now recast as centre and periphery. But there was the prospect of genuine synthesis.

Published in 1998, Stuart Macintyre's *The Reds* was one of the very finest of the new party histories that resulted. It tells the story of the Australian party (CPA) from its origins to the Second World War, weaving its scrupulous documentation and sophistication of analysis into a narrative history aimed at more than just an academic readership. Just as French communists used to promise a socialism 'aux couleurs de la France', *The Reds* offers a familiar sequence of 'Bolshevisation', 'Class Against Class' and 'United Front', but in a vividly sketched Australian setting. One chapter is headed 'Communism goes bush', another 'The socialist sixth of the world', and it was between these competing pulls that *The Reds* trod a careful path that left many of the old debates behind.

Though it was anything but a regimental history, the book did in a sense represent the genre's last rites. It was undertaken at the invitation of the CPA's successor body, the Search Foundation, but written in conditions of unconditional glasnost and by a historian whose credentials for the project were clearly unmatchable. Stuart was by 1998 arguably the leading historian of twentieth-century Australia. Returning from a visit there, a Manchester colleague told me that he was like the country's 'Mr History': at once a public historian who spoke out in the 'history wars' concerning Australia's darker past and the author and editor of prestigious works published by the major university presses. 'Stuart knew it all', recalls a collaborator on one of these productions, 'the most minute detail about publication dates and landing dates, about territorial journeys and intellectual journeys, about wool clips and coal exports, about parliaments and governments and self-government.' And of course about social movements and labour struggles: who better qualified to place the CPA within this environment?

But Stuart's credentials for the project were also that he was unapologetically a former communist approaching the subject with both empathy and the seriousness he believed the subject deserved. He had joined the CPA in 1971 but spent most of his communist years in Britain, researching a doctorate on British communist history at

Cambridge. Few can have made such contributions to the historiographies of not one communist party but of two, and Stuart's two books on British communism are also held in the highest estimation by those working in the field. Both were published in 1980: one, *A Proletarian Science*, is a *tour de force* of the social history of ideas, the other, *Little Moscows*, is a pioneering exercise in communist micro-history suggesting fruitful comparative lines of enquiry. Researched in the 1970s, these were heady times both politically and intellectually: years of Gramscianism, Althusser (a favourite of Stuart's) and of the intersecting milieux of the History Workshop and Communist University of London within which Stuart moved. Writing *The Reds* as a history at once of people, commitments and party was a legacy of that approach. 'I wanted to show how it was that Australians became communists, what that meant, what they sought to do, how far they succeeded …'

For over two decades *The Reds* left us hanging in suspense in the early war years. Nevertheless, the project was always conceived as extending beyond the Comintern period, and this was in itself a distinctive feature and a strength. Nourished by the Moscow archives, a characteristic production of the 1990s was the national study set within the Comintern years. Stuart, in *The Party: The Communist Party of Australia from heyday to reckoning*, carried on the story, though alas this second volume appeared only posthumously in 2022. As editor, contributor, compiler and enabler, while also exercising high responsibilities at his university, Stuart had meanwhile maintained a prodigious level of activity – but always with the intention of finishing what he had begun. The delay in the end was even to the history's advantage, for it helped with the wider perspective he drew from big, expansive works like his treatment of Australia's post-war reconstruction, *Land of Opportunity*, and in the social and cultural milieux he evoked without any hint of tunnel vision. Among the British circles in which he moved in the 1970s, the writing of a small-party history had the rationale that they took from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*: 'nothing less than to write the general history of a country from a monographic viewpoint'. Though Stuart would never have expressed himself with such grandiosity in his later histories, few historians in their actual practice can have come so close to such an ideal.

José Gotovitch was another such historian. Stuart recalled that it was 'communist history' and the 'aura of the communist tradition' that had drawn him into communism. With José it was certainly the other way round. Born into a Brussels Jewish household in 1940, and avoiding deportation only by good fortune, José in his teens made a rapid transition from the zionist to the communist youth movement, and in 1961 became co-founder and secretary of the union of communist students. He had also by this time visited Moscow, for the World Youth Festival of 1957, and revolutionary Cuba. He studied history at the University of Brussels but a serious interest in communist history came only later. Instead, his early research interests focused on the period of the two world wars, working on German sources with a facility he recalled as owing something to his Yiddish-speaking parents. It was through the resistance years, in which the Belgian communist party (PCB) came briefly into its own, that José in the 1960s found his way into communism as field of history.

Even into the late 1970s, Stuart, in Britain, learnt how resistant communist parties often remained to facilitating any sort of critical party history. As yet ploughing something of a lone furrow, José had certainly not found things any easier. As a young historian working at the Centre National d'Histoire des Deux Guerres Mondiales, his contribution to its researches was obstructed by resistance veterans of other political persuasions opposed to the entrustment to a communist of such a role. José thus made the fateful turn towards the communist resistance, of which he would write the definitive history, though this too was not plain sailing. With a bracing disregard for political taboos, in 1971 he collaborated with the non-communist Jules Gérard-Libois on an account of the traumatic year of 1940 that did not gloss over the PCB's severely compromised role during the period of the Nazi-Soviet pact. The book proved an instant best-seller; this merely confirmed the misgivings of party loyalists who thought it tantamount to going over to the other side. Censured if not ostracised, José was denied the party's co-operation as he embarked on what became his magnum opus on the period.

Even so, José came to see that the conditions for such an enterprise were more favourable in Belgium than in some other countries. Whatever proscriptions defined the field, these were embodied in

neither an official party history, like the one that constrained research in Britain, nor a serious anti-communist history that reinforced ritualised position-taking, like the one written by Stuart's PhD supervisor Henry Pelling. More generally, anti-communism in Belgium was qualified by the sort of liberality which José experienced at the University of Brussels, and which combined with his own formidable energy to allow the launching of important research groupings like the Centre d'Histoire et de Sociologie des Gauches, and a whole succession of key events and publications. At the same time, as José pursued his researches he was never permanently alienated from his party comrades; he recorded an extensive programme of oral interviews, and, from the mid-1980s, took the lead in the classification of the Belgian party archives. His legacies thus not only include his big book *Du rouge au tricolore* and the studies collected in his *Du communisme et des communistes en Belgique* but also the Centre des Archives du Communisme en Belgique (CArCoB), which remains an important resource at the time of writing.

Stuart's interest in communist lives was attested by his one book-length biography, of the Fremantle dockers' leader Paddy Troy, and by the empathetic portraits that were skilfully woven into his party histories. For José a commitment to recording communist lives was a more integral part of his entire work, as with the more than two hundred interviews listed in *Du rouge au tricolore* and the hundred or so pages of biographical appendices in the same volume – which indeed he characterised as a 'collective biography of a collective being'.

In this respect as in many others, the crucial context was that of the wider francophone scholarship with which José so identified. He sometimes referred to the PCF as the PCB's big brother and, albeit on terms of complete equality, there was also something of the same relation historiographically. As a student José attended Brussels party gatherings addressed by PCF historical luminaries like Émile Tersen and Albert Soboul. He later had a high regard and affection for Annie Kriegel, notwithstanding their obvious political differences. Collaborators of his own generation included Aldo Agosti, Antonio Elorza and, importantly, Serge Wolikow, who in Dijon provided another of the academic red bases for European communist studies. Most of all, José was a valued collaborator of the Maitron biographical dictionary; and was thus a

member of the team, along with Wolikow, Claude Pennetier, Brigitte Studer and others, who in 2001 produced *Komintern: l'histoire et les hommes. Dictionnaire biographique de l'Internationale communiste en France, Belgique, au Luxembourg en Suisse et à Moscou (1919-1943)*, a volume that remains a model of its kind.

In his vocation of writing a national communist history, José Gotovitch has been described as sitting at both the heart and the margins of his country's historiography. Stuart Macintyre could never have been thought of as marginal; but some must have found his ultimately undeflectable interest in the CPA disproportionate. Stephen White's position was rather different. Born in Ireland and first studying in Dublin, where he was president of the students' union, in 1979 Stephen published his first major monograph *Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution*. Though this must have appeared on many reading lists alongside Stuart's histories, as a 'study in the politics of diplomacy' it was not moved by the same interests in agency, identity and the actors of the new social history.

Stephen instead was a Russianist of great distinction, who first enjoyed the enlivening of Soviet studies with Gorbachev's arrival and then successfully negotiated the existential challenge of his departure. He was an editorial board member of the *Journal of Communist Studies*, established somewhat on the pattern of the French *Communisme*, and in 1994 became its principal editor as it redefined its remit as the *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* (JCSTP). The journal continued to feature historical as well as political-science research, and Stephen remained in post until the journal headed off in a rather different direction in 2012.

As far as one can tell, Stephen did not pass through a phase of partisan commitment entailing the convergence for a time of a movement and its history. He was nevertheless always of the left, as those drawn to Soviet studies in the UK seem almost always to have been. At the University of Glasgow, where he was a member of the Institute for Soviet and East European Studies, Alec Nove and Hillel Ticktin were among the current representatives of a longer tradition, and Stephen particularly appreciated Nove's close analytical skills. A good friend, certainly in more recent years, was Harry Pollitt's son Brian – now also sadly deceased – who was a specialist in the political economy of

Latin America and remained true to the underlying values of his father. Stephen was a highly regarded commentator on developments in post-Soviet politics, particularly on Russian elections. But, while working among political scientists, he always looked beyond the disciplinary divide and was a staunch supporter of the Centre (later Network) of Socialist Theory and Movements (CSTM) set up in the 1980s.

With doctorates in both politics and history, Stephen always understood the importance of the latter. His *Bolshevik Poster* (1988), beautifully produced and clearly a labour of love, had required the Soviet-era skills of circumventing official narratives and digging for the materials that made it possible to do so. *Russia Goes Dry* (1996) located Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaigns within the longer troubled history of modern 'Russia, alcohol and politics'. His 'collective biography' of the CPSU central committee, co-authored with Evan Mawdsley, ranged across the entire Soviet period and made effective use of the concept of generations in a way that Stuart and José would both certainly have appreciated.

Every journal must evolve, and in 2012 the JCSTP was again rebranded, this time as *East European Politics*. The old *Journal of Communist Studies*, according to its founding editor Michael Waller, had aimed at widening the scope of its subject 'from an over-exclusive concentration on the Soviet Union and its client ruler parties'. Communism, however, was now abandoned as an organising category; historical studies were explicitly excluded unless directly bearing on issues of current politics. Whatever was thereby gained, something that mattered was also lost. Stephen had been closely identified with that something, and it was around this time that he reached out to this journal and soon joined us as an editorial adviser.

The benefits were soon apparent. When we launched *TCC* there was no shortage of journals in English covering the histories of the USSR and 'its client states and parties' better than we could ever hope to. What these journals did not currently provide was an English-language forum opening up the connections that made this an international history, after the manner of *Communisme* or the *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismus-Forschung*. For pragmatic reasons of collegiality and the division of labour, we therefore worked largely within the well-

established divide between communist and Soviet historical studies. Stephen was among those who now argued against any such self-denying ordinance; and in 2016, through the CSTM, was among the chief animators of *TCC*'s 'Memory and nostalgia' issue, which so clearly confirmed the good sense of that point of view.

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The work of these three prolific historians, each of whom contributed far more than the individual works bearing his name, illustrates both the strengths of the traditions on which this journal has drawn and the challenges it could yet play some part in addressing. The study of twentieth-century communism is a vast field that involves moving, as these historians moved, between social, institutional, diplomatic, biographical – and sometimes visual – approaches. But there is a further dividing line to be negotiated – that between the national histories, or groupings of national histories, within which these richly contextualised histories were produced, in most cases no doubt necessarily. A paradox of our 'international history' is that it has so often been constructed on national monographic lines. Like the old Comintern secretariats, as historians we also move freely within language or regional groupings – in the case of the three historians discussed here through the anglophone and francophone parties, or the countries of the old Warsaw Pact. This was not the weakness but the strength of a scholarship that commanded respect for its deep knowledge and understanding of the wider milieux and interactions without which communist history becomes its own form of tunnel vision. There can, however, also be a cost: the obscuring of the connections between these histories, except sometimes in relation to the centre-periphery dynamic linking them all with Moscow.

Twentieth Century Communism was launched amidst the preoccupations with the global and transnational that, since the turn of the century, have been reflected in the proliferating histories, networks and compilations seeking to open up these connections. The journal was envisaged as playing its part in this activity for those reading English either of necessity or as a convenience of communication. We had no particular bias beyond seeking to neutralise the over-

representation of British subjects as a tendency inevitably arising from our location: while there may or may not be a rationale for a national communist history journal, our purpose was the very reverse of such a project, which in a country like Britain, could so easily descend into ghettoisation, self-parody and exchanges generating more energy than enlightenment.

While, like most historians of communism, the initial editors identified with some notion of the left, we observed how inimical political exclusions had been to the writing of communist history and therefore abjured any further agenda beyond the standards of critical scholarship that were applied to any and all contributions. In 2014 we began appearing twice-yearly, in part to allow the space for unsolicited submissions, which doubtless will continue to be welcome. Nevertheless, the journal's core raison d'être has lain in the themed issues: these enable a great deal more than the mere juxtaposing of different pieces without regard to national boundaries, through offering possibilities of dialogue and critical comparison, not least for the better appreciation of the specificities of individual cases as these were sifted out from other features held in common. There was still a self-denying ordinance: for we did not believe that communism, let alone history, had either begun in 1917 or ended in 1991. Like the three advisers we have been remembering, we did nevertheless see the unity of this period as that of an international movement with an international history; and saw this as the place, not narrow but well-defined, that we could fill as rigorously as we hoped other publications would fill theirs.

The limitations of the work to date are also clear. Through networks and events centred on western Europe we have pushed at the boundaries of the international, but pushed far too often from the same places. We have explored the connections between 'ruler parties' and the international: for example in our issue on 'Communist states and postwar Africa'. But, interestingly, the boundaries seem less rigidly fixed in studies of the 'client' ruler parties, and within the currently flourishing scholarship on Chinese communism, than within the well-established field of Soviet studies. One thinks of how both the *History of the CPSU (b)* and the *Little Red Book*, and the cults of Lenin, Stalin and Mao, have all lately received the close attention that they deserve; but how it is Mao

and his Quotations, not the Soviet examples, that are viewed within a global and not a nationally specific context.

New editors will reach their own views as to these questions, and the journal will certainly not look the same in fifteen years as it does now. In the meantime, we thank those advisers now moving on who have helped us get this far – Aldo Agosti, Sylvain Boulouque, Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, Stephen Hopkins, Edward Johanningsmeier, Daniela Spenser, Andrew Thorpe and Alexander Vatlin; and in particular, of course, Stuart Macintyre, José Gotovitch and Stephen White.

Selected readings

In writing these brief sketches I have drawn on my own recollections and personal knowledge and on two invaluable sources: Peter Beilharz and Sian Supski (eds), *The Work of History: writing for Stuart Macintyre* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2022); and Martin Conway and Pieter Lagrou, 'José Gotovitch, 50 ans au coeur et aux marges de l'historiographie de la Belgique contemporaine', *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine*, 49 (2019), 222-48. For Stephen White I am grateful for the recollections and reflections kindly provided by Stephen's Glasgow colleague Bridget Fowler. I have also drawn on the authors' published writings, of which the outstanding examples for historians of communism are as follows.

Stuart Macintyre

A Proletarian Science. Marxism in Britain 1917-1933 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980)

Little Moscows. Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-war Britain (London: Croom Helm, 1980)

Militant: the life and times of Paddy Troy (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984)

The Reds. The Communist Party of Australia from origins to illegality (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998)

The Party. The Communist Party of Australia from heyday to reckoning (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2022)

José Gotovitch

(with J. Gérard-Libois) *L'An 40: la Belgique occupée* (Brussels: Crisp, 1971)

Du rouge au tricolore: les communistes belges de 1939 à 1944 (Brussels: Editions Labor, 1992)

(co-edited with P. Delwit), *La peur du rouge* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1996)

(co-edited with M. Narinsky), *Komintern: l'histoire et les hommes. Dictionnaire biographique de l'Internationale communiste en France, Belgique, au Luxembourg en Suisse et à Moscou (1919-1943)* (Paris: Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2001)

Du communisme et des communistes en Belgique (Brussels: Editions Aden, 2012)

Stephen White

Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution. A study in the politics of diplomacy 1920-1924 (Macmillan, 1979)

The Bolshevik Poster (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988)

Gorbachev and After (Cambridge University Press, 1991)

Russia Goes Dry: alcohol, state and society (Cambridge University Press, 1996)

(with E. Mawdsley), *The Soviet Elite from Lenin to Gorbachev: the Central Committee and its Members 1917-1991* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

Kevin Morgan was (with Richard Cross, Norman LaPorte and Matthew Worley) one of the original editors of this journal. He is currently part of the team editing two themed issues on 'A global 1956', to appear in 2025.