

# Reviews

## Latin America

**Grace Livingstone, *Britain and the Dictatorships of Argentina and Chile 1973-1982*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 292 pages, ISBN 9783319782911, £16**

During the twentieth century, Latin America was the scene of numerous military coups which established oppressive dictatorships notorious for their abuse of democratic and human rights. This book is a detailed study of the policies adopted by Britain towards two of them – in Chile and Argentina.

On 11 September 1973, Augusto Pinochet, the head of Chilean armed forces, launched a coup against the democratically elected socialist president, Salvador Allende. He bombed the presidential palace, fired on and arrested thousands of Allende supporters and other left-wingers, and shut down all democratic institutions.

In Argentina on 26 March 1976, the widowed third wife of former dictator Juan Peron, Isabella Peron, who had been elected president, was overthrown by the army, which closed down the Congress, banned political parties, dissolved the Supreme Court, and arrested thousands of political activists including former ministers.

In the cases of both Chile and Argentina, the British Foreign Office and leading ambassadorial staff – despite theoretical commitments to democracy – recommended recognition of the military juntas established and downplayed reports of human rights infringements. Grace Livingstone attributes this to the class basis of the personnel involved. She states that, in 1950, 83% of Foreign Office recruits attended private schools and the figure was still 68% ten years later. In 1980, 80% of ambassadors and top Foreign Office officials had attended fee-paying schools.

Not surprisingly, their advice on the Chilean coup was accepted by the Conservative government led by Edward Heath, but when Labour, under Harold Wilson, was elected in 1974, the government's attitude changed to condemnation of the Pinochet regime. The author attributes this to the very robust anti-Pinochet campaign by the Labour and trade union movement from the day of the coup. Grace Livingstone describes this from the initial demonstration organised by Liberation to the continuing protests and deputations later co-ordinated by the Chile Solidarity Campaign. She argues that ministers could not fail to be aware of the powerful feelings

generated by the coup.

In the case of the Argentinian army's seizure of power, however, the Labour government of the time largely accepted Foreign Office guidance. Despite a limited number of protests (including one from the present reviewer to the Prime Minister – then Jim Callaghan), the Labour and trade union movement was suspicious of the Perons and only woke up to the enormity of the dire terror inflicted by the Argentinian junta several years later.

In the cases of both Chile and Argentina, business interests were strongly against any criticism of the juntas which could damage their activities. One of the principle business interests concerned was the arms industry. Even with Chile, the Labour government pushed through the delivery of two frigates and a destroyer, although two submarines were temporarily held back and workers at East Kilbride stopped work on Rolls-Royce engines intended for Hawker Hunter aircraft destined for Chile.

With Argentina, however, Vickers provided two missile destroyers that were later used against British forces in the Falklands War. Six type 21 frigates sought by Argentina were lobbied for by the Ministry of Defence sales department, but later the orders went to Germany. Sir Anthony Griffiths, chair of British Shipbuilders, wrote to Eric Varley, Industry Secretary, suggesting diversion of a Royal Navy warship to Argentina, although the commanders of the armed forces were strongly against this. Numerous visits were made to Britain by Argentinian military leaders to discuss possible arms sales. One of these, Brigadier Miguel Angel Osses, was later indicted on charges of involvement in 100 cases of kidnapping and torture. British officials and military personnel visited Argentina to promote arms sales, regardless of this.

It was all linked to a concern to promote jobs in the defence industry, but criticisms of the Argentine regime gradually increased: from Amnesty International, student and religious groups, and trade union branches. In subsequent years it emerged that the junta killed an estimated 30,000 people.

At this time, negotiations were going on with the Argentine regime about the sovereignty of the Falklands, but no one seriously expected the issue to lead to war. Oil companies were interested in the possibilities of exploration in coastal waters and were unhappy about a transfer of the islands to Argentina.

When the Conservative government was elected in 1979, Mrs. Thatcher did everything possible to strengthen relations with the junta and Nicholas Ridley closed the door on Argentinian refugees. Proposals to increase

arms sales were legion. Ambassadors were exchanged and two Conservative ministers, Cecil Parkinson and Peter Walker, visited Argentina to promote good relations and trade. Despite this, Hugh O'Shaughnessy wrote a *Financial Times* supplement detailing human rights abuses and a number of Labour MPs (including the present reviewer) maintained their criticisms of the regime.

The Conservative government foolishly agreed to a number of steps which the junta took to indicate that Britain would not defend the Falklands. *HMS Endeavour*, the only British warship in the South Atlantic, was withdrawn, and the British Nationalities Bill (1981) was introduced which deprived the Falklanders and others elsewhere of British citizenship. Intelligence reports suggesting the possibility of an invasion were disregarded. Negotiations for a deal with the junta were abandoned and the invasion followed.

Although this book stops short of dealing with the Argentinian aftermath of the Falklands war, defeat brought the junta down and eventually led to the trial and punishment of many of those who had inflicted unlimited terror on the population.

The author provides a most revealing exposure of the way in which British foreign policy was made towards Chile and Argentina in the face of military coups. It suggests that a similar pattern of events was followed through in the case of military coups in Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and elsewhere. No sanctions were imposed and trade and investment were encouraged in every case.

If ever there is to be an ethical foreign policy, the research on which this book is based deserves careful study. Grace Livingstone's book should be read by everyone who takes an interest in foreign policy and international affairs. It is a gem which demonstrates not only the need for changes in the way that foreign policy is formulated but also for a more open and democratic system of recruiting Foreign Office and diplomatic personnel, which does not rely so heavily on the output of public schools.

*Stan Newens*

**On trial**

**Norman Birnbaum, *From the Bronx to Oxford and Not Quite Back*, New Academia Publishing, 2018, 722 pages, paperback ISBN 9780998643342, £26**

Now in his 90s, the sociologist Norman Birnbaum has published a readable and compendious memoir. His Index of Names runs to almost 20 pages, ranging from Ralph Miliband to François Mitterrand, Lionel Trilling to Leon Trotsky, Luciana Castellina to Leszek Kolakowski. The entries reflect Birnbaum's lifelong political interest with a global perspective. For example, Arthur Schlesinger, a friend from Harvard installed in the White House in the early 1960s, was reading an article on the emerging Sino-Soviet Conflict, written by Isaac Deutscher. 'Does he have good sources?' Arthur asked our author. Birnbaum explained that Deutscher's sources were excellent, since he retained close contact with former Polish Communist Party comrades who were now well placed in Warsaw. The CIA, Pentagon and State Department might have told Schlesinger a different story about China and the Soviet Union.

Bertrand Russell rates just one mention in *From the Bronx to Oxford*, about the emergence of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the late 1950s, when Birnbaum was teaching at the London School of Economics. However, a letter in the Bertrand Russell Archives at McMaster University, Canada, indicates Birnbaum's regard for Russell, to whom he made a rather daring proposal.

In March 1959, on LSE stationery, Birnbaum wrote to Russell about a 'certain hardening' in negotiations over Berlin: '... our rulers, on both sides, are criminal enough to risk war', he said. Birnbaum went on to propose a 'mock trial' of Eisenhower, Khrushchev, Macmillan *et al*, based on Nuremberg principles, for planning crimes against humanity. Birnbaum reminded Russell that John Dewey, many years earlier, 'inspired a trial of Leon Trotsky in Mexico': the Dewey Commission. Birnbaum contended this had 'much effect' in convincing public opinion of the fraudulent nature of the purge trials in the Soviet Union. Such a new project would require careful preparation, and Russell's 'immense prestige' to launch it, concluded Birnbaum.

Russell was, on reflection, not persuaded. He replied to Birnbaum a few days later:

‘When I first read your letter, I was much attracted by the idea that you put forward. On further reflection, however, I have felt considerable doubts. The example of John Dewey on Trotsky was scarcely a precedent, since he could invoke anti-Soviet feeling and was not concerned to point out sins on the part of the West ... I do not think that the example of the Nuremburg trials is any more to the purpose than the example of Dewey on Trotsky. Only *German* war criminals were tried. It was probably the Russians who committed the Katyn massacre, but no investigation was permitted. I think you show an optimism which I cannot share in supposing that genuinely impartial people could be found to conduct your suggested trial. I think, further, that the way to get Governments to reform is not only to point out sinfulness of past actions but also to point out the possibility of different policies and the imperative necessity of avoiding disaster. I do not mean that Governments are undeserving of censure. I mean only that censure is not the most likely way to induce them to change, and censure alone is likely to be only one-sidedly admitted and therefore to harden existing opposition.’

There the correspondence seemingly ended. Nevertheless, the idea of a trial resurfaced a few years later with the early preparations for what became the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal. Birnbaum says nothing about any of this, but his letter to Russell may have planted a seed.

Interestingly, *From the Bronx to Oxford* records that Birnbaum’s father had a copy of the 1937 report of the John Dewey Commission, which interviewed Trotsky in Mexico. Norman read it, and the contents seem to have stayed with him.

*Anthony Lane*

## Bad News

**David Edwards, David Cromwell, *Propaganda Blitz: How the Corporate Media Distort Reality*, Pluto Press, 2018, 336 pages, paperback ISBN 9780745338118, £14.99**

Firstly I think it important to declare an interest, such as it is. I do occasionally watch the BBC News. I was previously a regular viewer but then found Channel 4 News more detailed and offering improved presentation. I was also a regular purchaser of *The Observer* every Sunday. In the past three years my use of these sources has declined dramatically.

I as good as left BBC News as I often found it trite and simplistic, failing its Charter requirement of impartiality. Sadly, Channel 4 News is losing its edge, too, although Alex Thomson still provides consistent journalism of merit. It is many years since *The Observer* was bought in my household, about the time of the ‘coup’ when Will Hutton was appointed editor. Its journalism seemed to just fall apart at that point.

Since then I have been on a journey of discovery through social media and it has proved more enlightening, refreshing and more honest than I ever expected. So my declaration is that I have found Media Lens online and applaud their clear and precise journalism without the mainstream media condescension. You may not always agree with everything they have to say but at least they attribute their work. But far better, they do not appear driven by the MSM (mainstream media) partiality.

Of all the social media sites, Media Lens tends to write deep and detailed articles and grasping all the information can take considerably more time than on other sites. But it is worth the effort. I therefore expected that a book by these authors would be a dense and detailed affair, and I was correct.

*Propaganda Blitz* proves to be not just a book title but a methodology they have dared to expose, as used by mainstream media outlets. The focus you would expect would be to target the usual right-leaning sites. But, in typical Media Lens fashion, they realised that any readership would already be aware of the biases, and they determined, therefore, to concentrate their attentions more on the supposedly left liberal elites. No stone is left unturned. Every possible insight is provided. Not just with the usual journalistic insight, as though doing a ‘talking head’ piece to camera as per the television news sites, but with quotes, counter quotes and naming the names of those responsible. Only then do they offer an analysis of the pressures and persuasions that led to that particular piece having been offered.

The chapter titles give an insight into their work and perspective. ‘Dismantling the National Health Service’ created most emotional responses from me. It was powerful stuff and offered details of those involved and their allegiances, both political and financial. This was presented to the wider public through mainstream media in a fundamentally flawed manner. The public were expected to swallow the spin whole. *Propaganda Blitz* offers ‘who, why and what next?’ Propaganda presented as news stories is not attributable to just one outlet or politician, but several acting in concert to achieved a defined and often malign end.

The most dangerous chapter for the authors, as they expose seriously powerful global sources with seemingly endless resources, is ‘Climate Chaos, An Inconvenient Emergency’. There is a never-ending parade of named and quoted individuals working to the propaganda agenda, and an equally lengthy group of names and quotes offering objective and reasoned rebuttal. My hackles rose and subsided virtually with every paragraph.

We have all been critical of the media and railed against news channel stories which contradict our own knowledge and understanding of particular incidents, episodes and events. But this exposé goes further and deeper than ‘ranting at the television news’. The book provides the purpose and the context for the propaganda blitz to which we are all daily subjected, both in general terms but also in a detailed and cogent analysis of the motivations and politics. It is written by two journalists who are searingly honest about their journalistic colleagues in the mainstream media. The questioning remained courteous, polite but entirely on point and offered a journalistic service rarely seen.

There are many excellent social media news sites, but Media Lens stands out in its journalistic contribution. *Propaganda Blitz* carries on something I thought had almost been lost — investigative journalism with detailed, clear, precise use of language worthy of a much wider readership.

The corporate media has much to answer for, including many attempts at destroying the lives of individuals who hold differing political perspectives or ideals. They will continue to denounce (their term) the ‘useful idiots’ of the independent media. But with this powerful book, their Propaganda Blitz is now under deeper scrutiny that at any time in the recent past. That is to be welcomed.

*Dave Putson*

## **Humanity, undefeated**

**Joshua Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time: The Life and Work of John Berger*, Verso 2018, 294 pages, ISBN 978188663720, £20**

‘Our Time’: with John Berger’s death, there’s an obvious sense in which the phrase can no longer apply. But if the trajectory is a familiar one, from battling polemicist to multi-generic artist to rural sage, for Joshua Sperling these are ‘switchbacks of a longer journey’ whose narrative repudiates, like every word Berger wrote, the ‘iron laws of short-term cause and

effect' and asserts an overarching social and historical continuity through to the present and beyond. Sperling laments the spate of obituaries aimed at corralling, pacifying, and rendering obsolete that lifelong, undeviating commitment: 'The establishment pats the back of a former opponent' and hopefully the file is closed. Instead, he delivers a magnificent eulogy, but in the future tense. From 'For the Future', one of the earliest *New Statesman* broadsides trumpeting a rejuvenated social realism, to 'Looking Forward', the show he curated at the Whitechapel in 1952 of Kitchen Sink artists meant to be the vanguard of the new populism, to the 'undefeated despair' of his final essays in the teeth of neoliberal globalisation's intensifying cruelties at turn-of-century, that was always where Berger's ultimate loyalty lay.

'Never again will a single story be told as if it were the only one', as the excoriatingly militant novel of colonialism and bourgeois (sexual) self-aggrandizement, *G*, famously asserted, and Sperling's biography proceeds with the clear understanding that the life it celebrates, however seminal, invites – indeed, demands – a similar enlargement. The occasional flirtation with hagiography – 'world elder', 'spiritual lodestar', 'towering career', 'preternatural analytic intelligence' – notwithstanding, Sperling steers a steady and judicious course towards this first encounter with posterity of the definitive *oeuvre*. 'All that interests me about my past life are the common moments', Berger avowed at 60, a commonality extending from the drawings he made in the Chauvet cave to the first European then global 'network of peripheries', as Sperling calls them, he established with writers, artists, photographers, activists of all kinds into the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a linking of hands, indeed, between the living and the dead – whose continuing resonance and urgency is powerfully communicated in the recent collection of *essays in celebration: a jar of wild flowers* [eds. Gunaratnam and Chandan, Zed Books 2016]. Yves Berger, drawing his father in his coffin, has reflected poignantly of the way Berger drew *his* deceased father and placed this portrait in the family kitchen as if asserting an irreducible value in human experience against the tide of exclusion, forgetting, 'cost accounting': Sperling's, perhaps, is the same gesture of passionate conservation in a more restrained key.

The Marxist Berger of the 1950s, on the other hand, tirelessly displayed a vitriolic animus against the critical establishment that was anything *but* restrained, at least up until the fiasco of 1956, his dogged advocacy of Sicilian neo-realism, in particular Guttuso's 'Death of a Hero', finally colliding with the *realpolitik* of the Hungarian uprising. Sperling weighs

into the high drama of this Manichean stance – the drive to extend the remit of a truly national art to every corner of the land as opposed to the ‘slashed, scratched, dribbled-upon, violated’, elitist effusions of abstract expressionism in the metropolis – with a corresponding *élan*, relishing the punch-drunk skirmishes (Herbert Read lampooning Berger as ‘some frothy-mouthed Goebbels’, Berger citing, as he did so often in his career, the exemplary humanity of Van Gogh: ‘Oh that each town, each village had a public art gallery’ ...) and jockeying for attention on a very narrow public stage. All that follows, Sperling argues, in terms of the expatriation and progressive remodelling of Berger the intellectual and writer, (his politics *never* underwent a remodelling, but remained steadfast), can be traced back to this initial period and the realisation it engendered that ‘All criticism has in it ... an element of claustrophobia, and in the long run this can prove fatal’. One already senses, however, a disproportionate pull in the biography towards the recognisable landmarks and broader strokes of epochal history and controversy – after all, this is to be an ‘archaeological record of leftist hope’ – with less attention, inevitably, to the uncannily evocative action of word upon word that makes Berger the essayist and novelist, for many, irreplaceable. ‘After I’ve written a few lines I let the words slip back into the creature of their language ... I listen to their confabulation”, he states with an abiding sense of wonder in one of the very last published pieces, in 2016.

What Sperling does capture is the intellectual ferment and incessant productivity that, in retrospect, was bound to catapult Berger out of the miserabilist public school enclaves of the London art scene and, simultaneously, the doctrinaire grip of Moscow: almost overnight, wrestling with the revolutionary potential of subjectivity – especially Cubism’s – in ‘The Necessity of Uncertainty’, he found himself labelled a revisionist and an ‘obsequious apologist of Modernism’. Sperling traces the liberating impact of New Left heresy – the narrative displaying a new tendency to dissolve into summative abstraction – which Berger, departing to Geneva and then, permanently, the Haute Savoie, roundly embraced but as with all theoretical positions, was never subservient to. His voice, for one thing, sought a wider public than the convoluted propositions rapidly gathering force under the banner of postmodernism: one only has to witness his discomfort, surrounded by the comradely earnestness of the tenured radicals in *The Seasons in Quincy*, and desire to puncture the fog. In all the staggering output that flowed from that late 1950s moment of self-recognition, one never encounters a phrase, argument or image designed to baffle or intimidate, only modesty and accessibility.

Sperling charts the major interventions and collaborative projects of the 1960s and 70s, not least the Booker debacle and the ‘tossed grenade’ of *Ways of Seeing* which, he claims, annihilated the *beaux-arts* curriculum at a stroke, as well as the accusations of regressive middle class flatulence which greeted the Tanner films. Stoking the flames of these controversies again comes, inevitably, at a price of which Sperling himself is not unaware: they can distract – and have done – from the overriding achievement, which lies in multiplicity and an infinite crossing of boundaries between established genres and disciplines, and in the quieter regions of the reflective essay. Opportunities are missed to release individual works into the contemporary perspective the biography claims as its *modus vivendi*: *A Seventh Man*’s gruelling exploration (no *plaisir du texte* here, or in the brutally systems-analytical *G!*), for example, of the *Gastarbeiter* programme for Turkish migrants cries out for reinsertion into the debate over a walled-in Europe and Merkel’s unique brand of compassion and pragmatism, just as its insistence on socio-economic cause and effect offers an essential corrective to the heterogenous, unassimilable flows of Ai Weiwei. Nor does *To the Wedding*, Berger’s literary masterpiece, receive anything like the attention it deserves as a snapshot of the reunited Europe of the early 1990s, replete with optimism but with the undercurrents already detectable of rootlessness and anomie and a localism that can so easily become tribal. Elsewhere, Sperling isn’t averse to tossing his own grenade into the proceedings: he vehemently critiques the patriarchal values inscribed in *G*’s philandering, written, as he says, ‘from behind a deeply sexist astigmatism’, and draws in another son, Jacob, to testify to his father’s complicity with a generation of ‘political alpha-males, megalomaniacal’ and personally traumatising.

The ‘beloved’ final phase of Berger’s writing, with its more lyrical and meditative amorousness, finds the biographer on safer ground but wary, rightly, of conflating this with any suggestion of an incipient quietism. On the contrary, for all that works such as the co-translation of Darwish’s *Mural*, or the homages to family and friendship in *The Red Tenda of Bologna* or *here is where we meet* celebrate re-enchantment and the metaphysical, a writer ‘defined less by what he was against than by what he loved’, Sperling places equal weight on the irreducible political anger, ready to catch fire at a moment’s provocation, the searing indictments of a world ruled, especially after 9/11, by twin fanaticisms and the ubiquitous logic of the market wherein ‘The planet is a prison and the obedient governments, whether of right or left, are the herders’. What perhaps he misses are the countless instances of patient discernment where a single

act of *looking* – Berger’s trained and unfailingly sensitive, indeed preternatural art historian’s eye – and recording (the written phrase, as deft as a stroke of the brush or pencil) wed the two strands indissolubly together, compassion and defiance, tenderness and the inexhaustible belief that humanity will prevail:

‘Palestinian couples, except for certain more sophisticated young ones, generally observe in public the decorum of a certain distance. At the checkpoints couples of all ages hold hands as they cross, searching with each step for a foothold, and calculating exactly the right pace for hobbling past the pointing guns, neither too fast – hurrying can arouse suspicion, nor too slow – hesitation can provoke a ‘game’ for relieving the guards’ chronic boredom.’  
[‘Stones’, Gaza, 2003].

*Stephen Winfield*

## **Able Archer versus END**

**Taylor Downing, 1983: *The World at the Brink*, Little Brown, 2018, 400 pages, hardback ISBN 9781408710524, £20**

There is very little in this book that cannot be gleaned from other sources, but it is surely useful to bring all this material together in one well-written narrative. Downing, for the most part, leaves the reader to come to his own judgement as to the motives and behaviour of the various actors. The book horrifyingly describes the year that nearly culminated in nuclear Armageddon where, according to the author, the mostly moribund yet resolute leadership of the Soviet Union became convinced war was inevitable. They feared that the bellicose words emanating from Western spokesmen and particularly from President Ronald Reagan were readying the US war machine for a nuclear “first strike”, probably to coincide with *Able Archer*, NATO war games planned for November 1983.

Prior to 1983 (and after) there have been many incidents involving nuclear weapons and the author mentions some of the more dangerous lapses. The most worrying were perhaps where aircraft carrying nuclear weapons suffered catastrophic occurrences mid-air and inadvertently released hydrogen bombs: one in the Spanish holiday resort of Almeria and one in North Carolina. In both cases the bombs only just failed to detonate. Our luck has held so far but there are no guarantees for the future

and the installation of a new generation of “thinking” computers, without the benefit of human intuition, may make for more dangers.

The book’s main subject is, of course, the events of 1983, a year which in some ways has parallels with our present situation. The United States has a President with extreme right-wing views, and the NATO powers have just completed *Trident Junction*, the largest military exercise since the demise of the Soviet Union. Although President Trump seems to have a peculiar relationship with President Putin, most other Western leaders are joining in the singular vilification of Putin and Russia. The imposition of economic sanctions against Russia is comparable to the American wheat embargo of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. In March 1983 President Reagan described for the first time the Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire”. This was a time when diplomatic niceties were still usually observed, so the Politburo would not have been overly enamoured by such a description. Similarly, today we see the constant vilification of President Putin by the mainstream media and some governments as a “murderer” — hardly conducive to nuclear disarmament and the easing of international tensions. However, the most worrying analogy of them all is the very likely reintroduction of intermediate ballistic missiles to the European theatre. In 1983 the placement of high-speed Pershing missiles was so close to Moscow, Russia’s political and military centre, that the Soviet leaders became convinced that *Able Archer* provided NATO with such an opportunity. How much more threatened must the Russians feel now the border is so much closer? As in 1983, NATO staged a war game exercise in 2018 involving 45,000 troops, with some nuclear bases on alert with nuclear weaponry.

In retrospect we can now see we were closer to nuclear Armageddon in 1983 than ever before, even closer in fact than the 1962 Cuban missile crisis when the whole world was on tenterhooks. Unfortunately, in 2018 the Russian and Chinese, prior to NATO’s *Trident Junction* exercise, carried out a massive display of men and equipment with 300,000 Russian troops, but only 3,200 Chinese troops. NATO’s response was to have their own exercise of 45,000 troops with the mock enemy coming from the East. In fact, for many years there had been no exercises by NATO presuming an attack from the East. Presumably such a scenario had not been envisaged since the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

*Able Archer*, as the book makes clear, took place when the Cold War was at one of its high points of tension. On 11 August 1983, President Reagan was unfortunately caught out making insensitive jokes at his weekly radio broadcast. These were recorded and broadcast by the three major radio

broadcasters and, later, by NBC and ABC. We can be certain the following joke did not get many laughs in the Kremlin: “My fellow Americans, I am pleased to tell you that today I’ve signed legislation that will outlaw Russia for ever. We begin bombing in five minutes.” The Politburo was not in a jocular mood: General Secretary Yuri Andropov was at death’s door and his deputy, Konstantin Chernenko, suffering from acute emphysema, was not far behind him. On 1st September, the Soviet Air Defence Force shot down a South Korean Boeing 747 passenger plane, which for some reason had strayed into a sensitive area. An effort was made to contact the 747 to no avail and, in poor visibility, the Russian fighter pilot mistook the plane for a spy aircraft and was ordered to shoot down K007. All those in the plane were killed and the outcry from the West was a torrent of invective and high-level protests.

If one Russian pilot stuck to his orders and was responsible for the unnecessary killing of 269 people, another Soviet officer was responsible for saving countless lives some few days later on October 27th. He was Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov of the Missile Defence Force and was Deputy Chief of the Department of Military Algorithms. The satellite readings said that the US had launched two missiles and, a few minutes later, further missiles. Alarm spread quickly, with news of developments probably reaching Ustinov, the Minister of Defence, and even Andropov. A trembling Petrov chose to refrain from action, thinking that this was not the much-feared pre-emptive surprise attack because a lot more missiles would have been dispatched. Additionally, Petrov had worked on the new early-warning computer and satellite technology and was therefore not unaware of the possibility of glitches. In fact, the sun’s reflections on high clouds had been translated by the warning system into the exhaust heat of a rocket detected by infrared sensors. Petrov had been reluctant to follow the official stipulations for such a situation and had not passed information down the line for fear of a panic reaction. The Soviet authorities, however, did not thank Petrov for his actions that night, quite the opposite. He was removed from the military and forced to live on a reduced pension and had to be satisfied with a statue from the UN of himself holding a globe in one hand with the inscription “The Man Who Saved the World”.

The autumn of 1983 saw, if anything, an intensification of hostility between the two superpowers. Andropov and the Politburo believed that the US was planning an imminent attack and acted accordingly. The readiness for use of the Soviet nuclear arsenal was increased significantly and, according to Downing, the Soviet leadership became more insular and paranoid. KGB officers were posted to weapons silos to make sure that

orders from the high command were obeyed instantaneously. Luckily there were no further incidents and *Able Archer* concluded, but there was no appreciable relaxation of tension. With the death of Andropov and Chernenko and the accession of Gorbachev the world breathed a small sigh of relief, albeit temporarily.

Finally, the book is rather good in its appreciation of Gorbachev and the Reykjavik summit meeting where we glimpsed a nuclear-free world. Other reviewers have called this book “gripping and frankly terrifying” and it mostly certainly is, but it also shows what a difference one man can make. We can wonder what our situation would now be if the August 1991 *putsch* had never happened, and Gorbachev had continued his pursuit of a nuclear-free Europe. Would there have been a President Trump?

This is a workmanlike book that is in parts quite illuminating, but the chapters on espionage are too long and add very little to the narrative. President Reagan is given a far too sympathetic hearing and his unrealistic hopes for ‘Star Wars’ were rightly taken by the Russians as an aggressive posture enabling the possibility of first strike capability. Gorbachev and Reagan were to sign the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty (INF), which banned ground-launched nuclear-armed missiles with ranges from 500km to 5,500km. As a direct result of the agreement some 2,700 Cruise and SS20 missiles were destroyed, a significant victory for European Nuclear Disarmament and those protesting to prevent Europe becoming a nuclear battlefield for the two superpowers. Undoubtedly, the restoration of this kind of weaponry to the European theatre, threatened by Trump’s abrogation of the INF treaty, brings nearer the nuclear obliteration of Europe and should provoke the same kind of outrage the citizens of Europe showed to the earlier manifestation of such missiles. When nuclear weapons are in the hands of political and military control in the context of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) in an atmosphere of reciprocal suspicion, insults, hatred and lies the opponent becomes ‘evil’ without the usual moral impulses that we all possess. The present hostility between Russia and the West surely echoes those dark days of 1983 and we need to alert the populace that the ever-present danger of nuclear war is still very much a reality.

*John Daniels*

### Three stage-coaches

**John Kelly, *Contemporary Trotskyism: Parties, Sects and Social Movements in Britain*, Routledge, 2018, 296 pages, paperback ISBN 9781138943810, £23.99**

This volume arises from a same-titled Historical Materialism 2017 conference paper, also Kelly's earlier *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* and *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. Given his 1980s membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), you might expect contemptuous hostility to Trotskyists, an attitude manifest in Mary Davis' *Morning Star* review demanding that their doctrines be 'jettisoned', harking back to the *Daily Worker's* routine sneers at 'The Trotskyite Circus'. Not so Kelly, who doles out praises and blame when due, overall treating his targets with reasoned courtesy.

His prose is clear, also dry, some gentle teasings apart. The book is dense, often hard-going, with overwhelming parenthetical references and 386 detailed end-notes. It is, though, the most astonishingly meticulous study I've ever read. Kelly seems to have read every Trotskyist journal, however obscure, every newspaper, every memorandum. Unlike too many, he makes good use of website cornucopia, also drawing on 24 interviews with members/ex-members.

Kelly does his best for readers, providing a list of the 38 tersely-informative in-text Tables, plus four Appendices detailing British Trotskyist organizations, Sources for Memberships, Western European groups, defunct Internationals, and Interviewees.

Fingering omissions in a 20-page Bibliography may seem churlish. I'd have made more use of (e.g.) the online Trotsky Encyclopaedia with its opulent Bibliographies. Also the relevant doctoral theses by J. Archer and (especially) M. R. Upham, the latter's (online, via Socialist Appeal website) beginning (likewise Kelly) by lamenting lack of secondary materials.

There's also Ted 'Militant' Grant's inevitably self-serving *History of British Trotskyism*, and Tariq Ali's *The Coming Revolution in Britain*, plus the extreme reversal of his satirical novel *Redemption* with its blatant caricatures of Gerry Healy and company.

Also add Memoirs by (e.g.) Brian Behan, Teresa Hayter, and Sheila Rowbottom, describing groupuscule life from the inside. Kelly does include one such, Mickie Shaw's hagiography of husband Robert (Healy's

Nottingham branch leader), replete with denunciations of Ken Coates and John Daniels senior. Disclosure time. I was a 1950s Nottingham member of Healy's entryist 'Club', then his open Socialist Labour League, though emigrating before transmutation into the Workers Revolutionary Party.

Memoirs would have humanized Kelly's 'isms'. One obvious candidate is Christopher Hitchens, memorably dismissed by George Galloway as 'an ex-Trotskyite gin-soaked popinjay'. Or Brian Behan, militant building worker recruited by Healy from the CPGB (1956) with Peter Fryer and others, who having attempted to expel Ken Coates, was himself kicked out for a quip about 'Rattling the old bones of Trotsky', launched two abortive new groups (Workers Party and Rank and File Movement), ending up as a fanatical nudist.

One isolated example of 'normality' (p. 84) is the weekly cricket match between *Socialist Challenge* and *Socialist Worker* — how much energy did they have after the endless meetings and remorseless paper-selling? Kelly thinks the WRP's zeal in maintaining the first-ever daily Trotskyist newspaper (*Newsline*) became a 'millstone'.

Kelly's Index is reprehensibly slapdash, with many omissions — too many to itemize — of Leftist luminaries mentioned in text and notes (e.g. Coates and Jordan and their 'small' International Group, p. 45). Here, incidentally, Ken Coates answers Kelly's question of what constitutes a 'hybrid'? As reported in George Thayer's *The British Political Fringe* (p. 138), he replied that a Marxist dialogue is maintained that includes some Trotskyist ideas, but did not think this makes him or his organization Trotskyist.

Kelly has three insistent questions: Why no mass Trotskyist Party? Why no Trotskyist-led Revolutions? Why their derisory electoral results? One oversight here. Kelly ignores the Ceylonese Lanka Sama Samaja which regularly obtained 10% of the vote, held seats in a governmental coalition, their joining which was regarded as a great betrayal, leading to political eclipse. Full details in George Jan Lerski's online book.

Kelly might also have asked: Which faction will be the vanguard? How will they arm the workers? Can they defeat the state's armed forces? How soon before the winning sect starts liquidating its rivals? This last touches upon another Kelly theme. Why are Trotskyist sects (much-discussed throughout — they detest the obvious comparison with religious ones) so fissiparous? Kelly tabulates 22 rival sects (a much-discussed term), with corresponding list of defunct ones. Same here in Canada: 12 groups locked in permanent ideological sniping.

Some provide their own answers. Healy, asked by SLL member Alex

Mitchell (*Come The Revolution*, p. 215) why not attempt to unite the splinters, replied: “ We don’t want to meet them, we want to destroy them.” Mike Banda is frequently quoted for saying: “Soon, in the revolution, we’ll be shooting Pabloites.” A joke, or not? Either way, a suggestive attitude. An apposite snippet from Python’s *Life of Brian*:

“ Are you the Judean People’s Front?

“ Fuck Off! Judean People’s Front? We’re the People’s Front of Judea!”

Trotsky himself receives equal measures of praise and blame, with corresponding and welcome tribute to Rosa Luxemburg, also a paradigm for Christopher Hitchens. His table of core beliefs might have added Revolutionary Defeatism, made obsolete by nuclear weapons; cf. J. C. Joubert’s online article.

British Trotskyism is divided into three parts: Bleakness, Golden Age, Degeneration. One factor in this last is ‘Corbynism’. Alan Thornett, expelled with his 200 Cowley car workers — Healy’s genius for shooting himself in the foot: he dubbed Thornett’s views as ‘ideological shit’ — thinks that, with Corbyn/Momentum in ascendance, the need for Trotskyist groups will melt. Healy’s excremental dismissal of Thornett endorses Kelly’s dubbing ‘absurd’ the claim by his panegyrists Lotz and Feldman that he developed a far-reaching new understanding of Dialectical Materialism: in fact, he did little but filch from or paraphrase Lenin, adding babble about (e.g.) ‘The New Whole’.

Constant, predictable topics include: ‘Entryism’ — ridiculed by opponents as ‘ Entryitis’: makes most sense to myself. Sectarianism — Cliff, Grant, Healy dominate, with (e.g.) Mandel, Pablo, and Posada in supporting roles. How to define Stalin’s Russia? ‘Degenerated Workers’ State’ or ‘State Capitalism’? Derisory electoral results. Vanessa Redgrave’s stardom did not translate into hustings success. Kelly pokes fun at groups’ attempts to portray losses as really gains. Marx dubbed the whole procedure as ‘cretinism’. One remembers the kerfuffle over the CPGB’s sudden embrace of the ballot box over the barricades.

A chapter on European groups and dissensions evokes memory of Trotsky’s quip (about the 1915 Zimmerwald Conference) that you could now get all the Internationalists into three stage-coaches.

Trotskyist trade union endeavours long had stiff opposition from the CPGB, which had its own famous setback when, through ex-member Frank Chappell and Leslie Cannon, it was convicted of ballot-rigging in the Electrical Trades Union. Also CPGB Derek ‘Red Robbo’ Robinson, who led 523 walk-outs at Longbridge, more successful than his Trotskyist rivals at Cowley, though the non-ovine workers refused to strike against his eventual dismissal.

Regarding union efforts and involvement in social movements and fronts (Anti-Nazi, Anti-War, etc.), Kelly observes that Trotskyists suggestively thought it necessary to play down their core beliefs when interacting with non-members.

Thanks to Aileen Jennings' denunciation of Healey's predatory sexual treatment of women members, the WRP imploded into 10 warring splinters (leading roles played by, e.g., Banda and Cliff Slaughter). The SWP went through a similar, less-publicized crisis. Kelly rightly dismisses the claims of Healy hagiographers Lotz and Feldman, plus Ken Livingstone, that Jennings had been 'turned' by British Intelligence as 'absurd'. I personally knew Aileen (daughter of the Nottingham Shaws) very well; never met so devoted a Trotskyist, such a betrayal is unthinkable.

Ramifying from this, Kelly remarks that Lenin and Trotsky wrote little about women. Alexandra Kollontai was the female revolutionary voice. Also noteworthy here is Ted Grant's dismissal of 'Womens' Lib' and 'Gay Rights' as 'petty-bourgeois nonsense', whilst the Militant Tendency (cf. Michael Crick's 1984 book) was grotesquely homophobic.

Kelly's superlative study will be definitive. At least, for a while, until the next wave of doctrinal disputes, expulsions, splits, the birth of new groupuscules and the disintegration of old ones.

William Morris (*The Dream of John Ball*) provides a telling *Envoi*:

“ Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of defeat, and when it comes it turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.”

Other (online) reviews include Ian Birchall (ex-SWP), Joseph Choonara (*Socialist Review*), and 'Rob M' (*Socialist Fight*). YouTube shows Kelly discussing his book, also debating it with Choonara.

*Barry Baldwin*