

**MONTY JOHNSTONE**  
**History lessons**



Noreen Branson's *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1929-1941* appears at a time when the party is undergoing the deepest crisis in its history, and its role and future is the subject of increased debate on the Left and attention by the media. As John Saville pointed out in his review (*MT* August), Noreen Branson's book provides us with 'both new material and the beginnings of the discussion of old problems not previously debated in communist circles, at least in print.'

One of the sharpest controversies in and around the Communist Party is about different conceptions of internationalism. It seems to me that Noreen Branson's *History* points to some important lessons for us today on this issue.

The Communist Party's genuine, practical and active internationalism runs like a red thread through the book. It brings to life the party's campaigns for friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union, its mobilisation of solidarity with republican Spain and its initiation of the International Brigade, as well as its direct help to liberation and working class movements in the British Empire.

At the same time Branson's *History* illustrates the damaging effects of an uncritical and misguided form of 'internationalism', which entailed communists convincing themselves of the correctness at every stage of the advice and actions of the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party and the Communist International.

Such an attitude was understandable at the time, when it was the practice of the whole international communist movement. What is less understandable is the position of those who, despite the revelations of the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956 and in defiance of historical experience, take such an uncritical and fundamentally un-Marxist attitude today.

Three of the most harmful examples of this misconceived 'internationalism' are spotlighted by Noreen Branson's book.

Firstly, she devotes two chapters to the turn taken in 1928-29, which led to the party adopting a left sectarian line, which condemned the Labour Party as a 'social fascist' capitalist party and substituted for the immediate communist objective of a Labour government the totally unrealistic slogan of a 'revolutionary workers' government'.

Secondly, the book deals with the over-

turning in the autumn of 1939 of the party's initial support for the war against Nazi Germany in favour of one opposing it as imperialist and unjust and calling for immediate peace negotiations to end it.

In both these cases the previous realistic policies of the majority of the party's leadership were reversed under pressure from the Communist International in Moscow.

After initial opposition and hesitation the new line was adopted and overwhelmingly accepted by the membership. For the great majority it was not a case of implementing communist international discipline whilst reserving their opinion, but arose from what Noreen Branson describes as 'a deep-rooted conviction that the collective opinion of the world's leading Marxists was more likely to be correct than not.'

Experience was to demonstrate the perils of operating on such an assumption. Thus the turn of 1928-29 led the party into decline and isolation, from which it was only able fully to break out, in ways graphically described in the *History*, after the change to the unity line finally approved by the Communist International in 1935.

The third example of the danger of presupposing the Soviet leadership to be right rather than independently investigating the facts can be seen in the party's defence of the four Moscow Trials of 1936-38. At these, top Soviet political and military leaders were condemned to death for allegedly plotting against the Soviet state and acting in collusion with fascist powers. As Noreen Branson shows, party members at the time firmly believed the charges, since until 1956 'the idea that the new socialist society . . . could itself generate new forms of oppression was something which no communist countenanced.'

The party's defence of these trials undoubtedly had a detrimental effect on its

very important campaign for a united front with the Labour Party, as Harold Laski, a prominent Labour supporter of unity, noted in 1937.

Already at the time evidence was available which cast doubt on the validity of the trials. However, it was the official rehabilitation by the Soviet Union in 1957 of all those condemned at one of these trials (that of the generals) and subsequently of some of the key defendants in the other three, on whose court confessions the convictions of many of the others depended, which conclusively showed these trials to have been frame-ups.

Yet even today we find people who, like the Bourbons, have neither forgotten anything nor learnt anything and, choosing to ignore the overwhelming contrary evidence, still attempt to justify the trials - presumably because, regrettably, the Soviet authorities have not yet seen fit officially to revise three of them.<sup>1</sup>

The honest and absorbing account given by Noreen Branson of the experiences, both positive and negative, of some of the most important years of the party's history provides an essential background to present debates in and about the Communist Party, which it is to be hoped will stimulate the widest reading and discussion of her timely and valuable book.

See eg *New Worker* journalist Denver Walker's curious concoction of fact, falsehood and frivolity, *Quite Right, Mr Trotsky!* (Harney and Jones, London, 1985) pp30-31.

**We welcome your contributions to the Viewpoint section subject to available space. Please write not more than 600 words and send it to the editorial office by September 9. Please enclose a description of yourself for our Notes on Contributors.**

## CHILE IN SEPTEMBER

**Aug. 31:** Holly Near in concert, Camden Centre, WC1,  
£5/£3.50 from CSC

**Sept. 11:** Picket, Chile Embassy, all day till 8pm  
12 Devonshire St, W1.

Public meeting on Human Rights 8pm  
Conway Hall, WC1 CCHR. 01-837 7561

**Sept. 14:** NATIONAL DEMONSTRATION, 2pm, Temple  
Place, WC2, to Jubilee Gdns. Music, speakers etc.

Chile Solidarity Campaign, 129 Seven Sisters Rd., London,  
N7 7QU. 01-272 4298

## HISTORY WORKSHOP CENTRE FOR SOCIAL HISTORY

*The Politics of Work*  
A History of Work Group workshop  
19th - 20th October, 1985  
*Ruskin College, Walton Street, Oxford*

Papers by: C. Hall, S. Alexander, C. Cockburn, K. McClelland,  
M. Savage, H. Benyon, P. Thompson, T. Lane, R. E. Pahl

For more tickets and information contact:  
History Workshop Centre for Social History,  
Ruskin College,  
Oxford. OX1 2HE. Tel: 0865 56041.