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OUR HISTORY

The ANTI-FASCIST PEOPLE'S FRONT in the ARMED FORCES

the communist contribution 1939-46

Eds: Bill Moore, George Barnsby

Foreword

On September 26, 1986, following the publication of Richard Kisch's book The Days of the Good Soldiers, the History Croup called a Conference of Communist Party members, past and present, primarily those who had been in the armed forces during the second World War, in order to record a wider picture of communist activity that it was possible to present in the book. Of the forty-odd people attending, some had already appeared in the book; most had not, and had new stories to tell. Twenty-six people spoke, and these accounts were taped, but we afterwards received letters from sixteen others.

This pamphlet, within its limits, presents their accounts - as far as possible in their own words. They give a picture of the problems faced by CP members before the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union (the period when the Communist Party was opposed to the war), but in particular they deal with activity after that date in relation to three general aims : to win a full understanding among the troops of the meaning of fascism and of the significance of the Anglo-Soviet Alliance; to improve the fighting capacity of the troops by this knowledge (the 'Good Soldier' who "knows what he fights for and loves what he knows"); and to promote the widest discussions on the kind of Britain we wanted to come back to, one without the poverty, unemployment and exploitation that had marked the two decades before the war.

What is particularly outstanding in the accounts is the absence of sectarianism in the work of these communist soldiers: they tried theoretically to instil an understanding of Marxist principles, but in practice they worked to win support for a Labour Government after the war. Labour's landslide victory in July 1945 was due to no small extent to the vote from the armed forces - but a greater measure of credit for creating that vote than has ever been given them should go to the members of the Communist Party who ran ABCA classes, inspired discussion groups and 'parliaments', organised wall-newspapers, issued leaflets, edited regimental bulletins and in a hundred and one ways - especially after Alamein and Stalingrad had put the enemy finally in retreat - created the kind of politically conscious citizens' army never seen since Cromwell's in the English Civil War.

We paid tribute at the Conference to those who had helped Richard Kisch and had since passed on : Sam Bardell, Michael Katanka and Mick Noble. To them we now regretfully add Henriette Bardell (nee Arie) who was unable to attend the Conference, and Leslie Morton and Arthur Gibbard who both spoke on that day.



The contributions relating to Burma (and some on India) are edited by George Barnsby; the rest by Bill Moore.

The Anti-fascist People's Front in the Armed Forces the communist contribution

The contribution made by members of the Communist Party in the armed forces to stimulating discussions on war aims, and especially discussions about the kind of Britain the troops wanted to come back to (with the usual conclusion about how to get it: by electing a Labour Government) was present almost from the beginning. The interpretation of the character of the war, however, changed after the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 - or rather was extended: the anti-fascist character of the war was now beyond all doubt, but the underlying imperialist objectives were never lost sight of, particularly by those members in the Burmese, Indian and Middle East theatres of war. Our accounts cover both periods.*

1939-41

The advice given to members in the first month after war was declared was clear. RON BELLAMY said:

In 1959, like many other students, I'd been in the Party less than a couple of years and . . . my political experience was really extremely small . . . Harry Pollitt called on all Communist students to volunteer for the forces, and we did.

Similarly BILL ALEXANDER:

It has been said that some Communists were advised to keep quiet in the forces . . . I could have avoided call-up, but Raji Dutt told me 'Get in, we need Communists in the forces'. He and Harry Pollitt, far from telling me to keep quiet, urged me to get a firm basis in any unit as a good anti-fascist soldier.

It was when the political line was changed, denouncing the war as an imperialist one, that caution entered - until after June 1941. RICHARD KISCH said:

When you were eventually called up you went to consult with Gollan or whoever it was in 16 King Street, and they said 'For Christ's sake keep quiet, don't organise, and be very circumspect'.

* Some of the experiences given during the Conference had already been recorded in Kisch's The Days of the Good Soldiers. These we have tried to avoid repeating, and would recommend readers to get hold of the book for even fuller accounts.

SAM FISHER recalled:

I went up to King Street and saw Bob Stewart who was duty officer on this issue at the time, who warned me that at all costs we must not recruit. I said 'Was that the advice the Bolsheviks gave to their members in the Red Army, or even in the White Army?' He looked a little uncomfortable. I had no feeling he was convinced by this policy. I said 'I have these people who want to join the Party; what are we going to do about them?' And honestly he said something rather like this: 'There's a certain little road in Camden Town, knock three times and ask for Rosie.' It wasn't quite that but it was virtually like that. And actually two of these blokes did that, finding it with great difficulty, and did join the Party.

Many members of course did not check with the Party "beforehand. Some, like BILL MOORE spoke to his local District Secretary and was given the name of a member already at Catterick, and told to be very cautious. And in the field, of course, you were left to your own initiative, as DON BRAYFORD said:

Communists, whoever they were, weren't directed by the Communist Party or the Comintern into the various battle zones . . . we were getting no directives, no lines to work on . . . We had to formulate our own policies, some drawn from pre-war experiences of Party members, others on the basis of the Marxism they had been able to equip themselves with as they went along.

BERT RAMELSON 'B experience, however, was apparently exceptional.

As soon as I received my calling-up papers, a discussion in 16 King Street took place between me and Comrade Robson. Not only was it a very helpful one but I was also provided with a 'portable library' which stayed with me and was widely used until I was taken prisoner. It included Jack London's The Iron Heel, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists. Strachey's Why You Should be a Socialist. I also had the Communist Manifesto and Bukharin's ABC of Communism. . . the Party consciously helped and encouraged its members not only to be active but also to guard against sectarianism.

In the later years of the war there were few of these problems, as JOHN TOWNS recalled, when he thought of joining the Party at a time when membership of the Party was almost respectable:

I had a bit of leave so I went up to King Street and saw Beattie Marks. She said 'Sign on, join the Party. If you're going to die (which I was quite convinced I was) you might as well make your peace with God or Marx.' So I joined.

In general, this period was a very difficult one for members, and not just because those in authority were on the lookout for anyone canvassing 'disruptive' ideas. In the aftermath of the Soviet-Nazi Pact there could be opposition from rankers too.

I began to do a bit of barrack-room talking in the first three days in the RAP, said DON BRAYFORD. In no time at all I was looking for another barrack to live in because I wasn't tolerated.

RON BELLAMY was in an even worse position:

My potential officers' squad had five Rugby Internationals, three or four young businessmen, Sir Peter Cadbury - all totally reactionary members of Public School sixth forms. There wasn't another person even remotely progressive in the whole lot . . . In January 1940, on the parade ground one morning, we were invited to go as ski-troops to Finland to fight against the Soviet Union. That is what it was like in that period.

JOE BERRY recalls an instance of how field security operated:

In late 1940 at a flying school near Grantham two comrades and I went to a CP public meeting in the town. Emile Burns spoke, and we left with literature and leaflets - only to be stopped outside by field security police: names and numbers taken, and from then on our cards were marked as dangerous elements!

BILL MOORE could not remember where the instruction or information or recommendation came from, but 'we were all agreed that we would not accept a commission until we knew which way the war was going to go.' He attended regularly for the two years or so that he was at Catterick a hush-hush meeting of Party members in Richmond. He remembered meeting ARNOLD KETTLE, RANDALL SWINGLER, GEOFFREY BING and BILL SHEPHERD (Daily Worker reporter who was arrested with George Allison during the Invergordon episode). BILL CARRITT remembered himself and JIM FIRTH attending some of these meetings. The comrades came from different units, since Catterick was made up of training camps' and OCTU's, so there was no possibility of collective action by all who attended. In any case they were all, with the exception of Moore, transients - there for three or four months and away (Moore was the only one on staff). So the discussions dwelt mainly on methods of propaganda in each unit in the very tricky situation they all felt they were in.

In these circumstances making contact with others was quite an art and a number of instances were given: mentioning Left Book Club books, or some 'left' personality, or making a contribution to ABCA discussion that another Communist would immediately recognise.

But over and above the physical precautions that had to be taken was the fear of being used, not to fight fascism, but to further imperialist aims. This fear was naturally strongest during this first period of the war, but it emerged again in

the far East and the Middle East at the end of the war with the rising tide of anti-imperialist movements, and our members had to deal with it in Burma, India, Egypt, Palestine, Greece and so on.

What in fact do you do? asked DAVE WALLIS. What actually do you physically do when you've a rifle in your hand and you're ordered to fire on a demonstrating crowd of Indian or Egyptian nationalists?

WALLIS also recalled a phrase: "Getting things ready for AMGOT"*

What it meant was that as the end of the war came in sight and Germany was facing defeat and was no longer going to be a direct danger to British imperialism, anti-fascist after anti-fascist was sold out by British Intelligence to the Gestapo in order to 'get things ready for AMGOT' - and it shouldn't be forgotten. We've been told it didn't happen, but by God it did.

After June 1941

Gradually after June 1941, when the Soviet Union was now our ally, it became possible for Communist Party members to come out more openly with ideas about the conduct and final aims of the war through discussion groups, ABCA discussions, wall newspapers and the like which culminated in the forces' vote in the 1945 General Election. For this part of the Conference, BERT RAMELSON sounded the keynote:

I think we should acknowledge our responsibility for our Party's failure to learn some important lessons from the tremendous achievements of Communists working as Communists in mass organisations - and a wartime Army is certainly a mass organisation.. .We were so keen to get stuck into activity the moment we were demobbed that we failed to record the experiences we had and the influence we exerted . . . This failure, in my view, is in no small measure responsible for historians in general, and Communist historians in particular, totally underestimating the contribution Communists made, through their activities in the Army and the RAF, towards the great Labour victory in 1945. This failure . . . led to the superficial conclusion (since the Forces' vote was not given to Harry Pollitt who, contrary to expectations, failed to win the Rhondda) that the Party had overestimated Communist influence in the forces. What was not grasped was that Communists, while propagating the case for socialism and communism, shunned a sectarian approach, recognising the reality that only a Labour Government could replace the Tories. The whole emphasis of our work was to encourage a vote for Labour.

* AMGOT : Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories

DON BRAYFORB, recalling the way the Party worked in the most famous discussion group, the Cairo 'Parliament', said:

We were working collectively . . . there weren't individuals going off and making statements in the name of the Communist Party or even of the Labour Party without us having discussed it. And the reason that there wasn't a Communist selected to stand at that Cairo Forces Parliament is that we decided that the first requirement was for a Labour Government to be returned whenever the opportunity arose . . . with a shortage of Labour members (in the Parliament - BM) it was necessary to make sure there was a Labour majority. So a majority decision was taken - and it was only a majority decision - not to stand, and to vote Labour.

ARTHUR ATTWOOB described the mock election in his camp:

We went all round the camp on the back of a lorry putting our case. The Party member withdrew in the interest of unity. There was one stage when we had to restrain the members of the audience from throwing the Tory into the fire-pool. He got a ridiculous result - about 8 votes - and the Labour chap romped home. The Liberal chap was second.

HYMIE FAGAN in Britain reported the same responses here:

As the end of the war came nearer, interest grew in what sort of government would rule postwar Britain. Most of those to whom I spoke wanted a Labour government. They wanted no truck with the Tories. Their prewar record of support for Hitler and the fascists, and their treatment of the unemployed was too well remembered. They wanted a Labour government and they got one.

But while the 'parliaments' and mock elections were the most publicised, and also the most dramatic, exhibitions of democratic discussion in the armed forces, they were in fact only a very small fraction of the discussions that went on in the last three or four years of the war. It was such discussions that threw up the demand for mock elections, which in their turn give rise to further discussions. COLIN SIDDON gave a more detailed picture of his discussion group than appears in Richard Kisch's book (hereafter BGS). Helped by the comrades who were responsible for the Cairo Parliament he set up a discussion group at the Tura Caves, the bomb-proof Ordnance stores some miles out of Cairo, and also organised a flourishing wall newspaper:

The high spot of the discussion group was the mock election. We deemed it wiser to treat this as a special case and get special permission to hold it. 'Yes, you can have a mock election but - there must be a Tory candidate.' Conster-nation! Who among us would pretend to be a Tory? Nobody volunteered so we had to draw lots, straws actually. The

drawer of the shortest straw had to put the Tory case. Between us, and quite seriously, we wrote a Tory speech. (The Tory got no votes).

Our wall newspaper Griff was a great success. John Whatley was editor. It was splendidly produced and illustrated. Every week we had an editorial committee meeting to decide on the next issue. The Cairo comrades helped me with the political side. What surprised and heartened us was the amount of real talent, it brought out. A shy lance corporal produced a cartoon of the Nazi defeat at Stalingrad - it was up to the standard of David Low's cartoons . . . We had a serial rather on the lines of the 'Jane' comic strip. It had a different writer each week: a young woman (the 'Desert Wanton') was about to meet a fate worse than death at the end of each instalment; the next writer had to rescue her from her predicament, only at the end of his contribution to land her there once again.

We had one article censored! it was about British justice. We did not argue. We withdrew the article and replaced it by a long excerpt from Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress which was a far more biting denunciation of British justice. The officer simply saw Pilgrim's Progress and let it pass. We prepared in advance a Second front edition, many months in advance. It was a superb piece of work.

One class I did keep going - an ABCA class on current affairs. The topics were suggested by the Army Education Corps. One was on democracy. I began it with a question: 'Private Yates, what do you know about democracy?' I had chosen my man well. Quick as a flash came his answer: 'Nothing sergeant, we haven't been issued with any!'

Siddons summed up his experiences at Tura Caves thus: 'We made use of the exceptional period to spread socialist ideas and prepare for the struggles to come. The harvest was reaped in the election of 1945.'

FRED WESTACOTT, in a large Base Manufacturing Workshop in Italy, was the assistant editor, then editor, of the unit's own paper, The Chronicle :

We produced about 600 to 1000 of each issue . . . As each copy had to be vetted by our Colonel and had to go to Caserta (HQ of the Central Mediterranean Forces) there was a limit to what could be put in it, but we were able to use it to stimulate interest in political issues, particularly issues that would be facing us when the war was over. On the week the war ended we simply put on the front page in block letters 'NOW THE LAST FIGHT LET US FACE' and though the Colonel didn't much like it - 'didn't understand what it meant'¹ - he uneasily let it pass.

JOE VANDENBURG's experience at Almaza in Egypt was an example of how the word spread, how contacts were made, and how Party members found themselves in some advantageous positions:

The very non-political padre of the Scottish Church decided to start a Brains Trust, inviting guest speakers, sometimes civilians, sometimes officers. I and another comrade, Sergeant Hendry, always had something to say about many of the questions. Consequently after a few meetings the Padre suggested that we should both go onto the Brains Trust, which we did. And I remained on that Brains Trust right through to the very end, because I was on the permanent staff. In that way we were able to influence people along what we thought were the correct political lines.

Then ABCA, the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, came to the Middle East, and my Colonel came to me (I was a Warrant Officer - Sergeant-Major) and said 'I have to appoint an ABCA officer. I want you to be our ABCA officer'. I said 'But I'm not a commissioned officer'. He said 'But you're a Warrant Officer, and in any case nobody knows anything about this subject except you, so you'll be our ABCA officer.' So I attended the conferences and everybody in the whole camp had to attend my lectures on the current ABCA pamphlet.

Then we had some people come from the Army Education Corps, two sergeants. One of them turned out to be a Party member, Comrade Crouch. One day he came to me and said 'I'd like you to meet some people in Cairo, will you come with me?' I did, and there I met the leadership of the Communist Party in the British forces in Cairo. They included Jim Jefferys, Dave Wallis, Sam Bardell, Colin Siddons, Harry Sherwin and others whose names I can't remember.

We stimulated discussion in every possible way through every camp and unit we could possibly contact in the Middle East. We had no contact with the Navy, but we certainly had with the RAF camps as well as the Army camps.

We had some very confidential reports brought to us by members of our committee . . . on one occasion we were given to study - only for that afternoon - an official report from GHQ, where one of the comrades worked, on communist activities in the Forces. Needless to say, they'd got it all wrong. "Music for All" (the original organisation out of which the Cairo Parliament sprang - BM) and the activities around it, they said, was the work of some intellectuals. You could always tell them - they always carried three or four books! They hadn't a clue about who was responsible for the work that went on.

One of my friends whom I knew in Civvy Street, a Party member, had become an officer and was stationed for a while

in my camp at Almaza. He was in charge of censorship, and one week he brought me the censorship book with the list of people whose mail had to be inspected. So I was able to go through that, select the comrades that we knew, and tell them not to write anything that shouldn't be in their mail.

ARTHUR GIBBARD was another Warrant Officer in Egypt who had a similar experience, being appointed ABCA officer for his unit :

I used to nip over to Sarafan, which as the Education Centre where I remember there was a Captain Braver and two Warrant Officers, one of whom was called Pearson. He told me he was on the West Riding Committee of the Party. So you can imagine the kind of briefing that was dished out in that Centre. We were able to go back and hold discussions in the unit which were tremendous.

At the same time we produced a magazine. There was a committee that used to run it and we circulated it right throughout the Middle East. And although they on the Committee weren't, shall we say, committed political animals we were able to get across the political approach.

I got involved with the discussion group at the "Music for All", always held on a Wednesday evening. I remember Solomons, who became the Prime Minister of the Parliament (he was a Labour Councillor in London) leading one of the discussions on Marxism. I can't remember the Speaker's name. He was RAP and I understand he'd been a Hansard reporter. He certainly knew all the jargon, because I can remember when we were debating the King's Speech one of the lads made a real rousing speech finishing on the note that promotion in the Armed forces should be based on what you know and not on who you know - and he got clapped and cheered. And this Speaker said: 'I should like to remind the House that it's hardly parliamentary behaviour to applaud in this manner. If the honourable members wish to applaud, they must utter the word "Hear" with a successive utterance of the same word!' Not only had that Parliament enormous political significance, it had a tremendous entertainment value too.

I also linked up with a Party member - I can't even remember his name - in what was named the Middle East Forces Anti-fascist League. Nobody, as I understood it, knew the organisation; you only knew your next contact. My contact used to get a supply of leaflets for us to distribute, and we used to go out to all the Service Clubs and leave them in reading rooms, leave them anywhere where there were troops. My contact told me who his contact was in case he got posted, so I wouldn't be left high and dry: it was Joe Vandenburg. Where did you get the leaflets

printed? This one (displaying his leaflet) explains the whole business of Greece, not only the whole explanation of what the resistance movement was in Greece but of course the politics behind the landing and all the rest if it.

PETE PERRY spoke of activities in the Kasforet camp in Egypt, a vast Maintenance Unit with hundreds of American-built medium bombing planes to prepare for service in desert warfare, nothing for miles in any direction, no newspapers, wireless, books or beer - 'a sizeable captive audience'

We formed a Marxist study group thirty or forty strong. We knew nothing of the official CPGB. We were just a self-study political group led by a few communists who seemed to be exceedingly bright chaps. One, a Sergeant Taylor, could usually, with good humour, reduce any officer he met off duty to a state of mental inferiority - which was most impressive to an elementary-schooled cockney!

I was deputed from the group to see the Camp Education Officer to see if we could have the use of a hut for our Sergeant Taylor to give some lectures on Political Economy. 'Well, yes' said the officer, 'but it will have to be official. He will have to be paid for the lectures.' 'What!' I said, 'the RAF will pay for us to teach Marxism?' 'Yes' replied the officer with a solemn face, 'but of course you will have to submit a proper syllabus.' Which we smartly did. It consisted of the chapter headings of Leontiev's Political Economy. The officer was Australian, not British.

When the battle of Alamein was over and the pressure to send the maximum number of bombers to the Western Desert was relaxed, the men were tired out and bored. To counter this condition and to educate the troops in bourgeois democracy an Education Officer was sent from Cairo to set up a mock parliament. It was a liberal move which we accepted with enthusiasm. The 'Parliament' met once a week, with a Labour majority and lots of eloquence, but with the communist contributions having the most political content. Inevitably the time came when the Communists became in those conditions the most popular of the Parties, and there was a call for a General Election. But at the climax of the preparations the 'Parliament' was shut down - 'by order

The way in which ideas, information, new methods of propaganda were spread throughout the Middle East, especially by the RAF boys, was stressed by DON BRAYFORD:

Because we moved from one place to another, sometimes leaving mates behind, making new mates at the next camp and so on, then perhaps returning and renewing acquaintances, so a link-up with discussion groups arose right the way from Iraq down through Palestine into Egypt.

The potentialities of having a 'captive audience' over a long period were realised by BERT RAMELSON in a special circumstance:

I was a POW for eighteen months in three different POW camps in a variety of circumstances - but the pattern was the same. The size of the camps varied, with 'audiences' from six to ten thousand. In the early days there were no provisions for occupying the mens' minds and avoiding demoralisation. Communists seized the opportunity, took the initiative and responsibility for organising education, information and a variety of activities which provided an essential need. And what rich rewards came from it.

To us communists the most satisfying and abiding reward was the reinforcement of our confidence in the working class, seeing what a bit of encouragement could achieve in developing self-confidence and, as a consequence, commitment. To encourage this development we ran a series on such themes as 'My Town', 'My Job', and soon found we had more offers to be speakers than we had time for. The idea was to start with a subject the lads knew, and then provide the encouragement to develop further. But of course we also concentrated on developing their class and socialist consciousness, running a series on Marxism as well as a little Hyde Park Corner with agitational courses side by side with educational courses.

I remember one POW camp, 'Tahrano' near Taranto in southern Italy (just before the allied armies landed in Sicily and we were moved further north) where we were so well organised by then and had developed so many lads, that we devoted a full week to a symposium (though we didn't call it that) on the theme 'What Post-War Britain Will be Like', with different lads leading on specific topics, eg. the economy, housing, education, culture and a host of other aspects. What emerged during that week was a picture of what a socialist Britain would look like if the working class were to take power.

The overwhelming majority of those who introduced each theme never belonged to any political organisation, not had ever before felt confident enough to stand up and make a coherent statement. I still think the most fruitful result of this communist work ... was to enable working class lads to gain confidence, become articulate, develop their appetite for learning and in turn themselves becoming teachers and orators, and quite a few taking to 'theory'.

SAM FISHER too had a captive audience at the end of the war:

The only captive audience I had was at the end of the war when one had to have 'citizenship retraining'. I was then at Group Control Centre, RAF 2nd Air Force, and the officers

were so terrified at having to lecture the men that they gave me the job of doing the whole lot. So five hundred men would be marched into a wooden hut and sit down and listen to me. It was just before the (1945) Election, so I said: 'Look, let's not be formal about this citizenship. We've got an election coming, let's discuss the issues of the election, what it's all about.' And we did that, and these five hundred hostile men who'd arrived under duress in the first instance came quite happily to the rest of the successive sessions. We had a real go at the Tories about unemployment, about the pre-war period and all the rest of it, and I have a feeling they voted the right way when it came to the election.

Relations with other Nationals

The relations with other nationals, communist and non-communist, in the far East (Burma and India) are dealt with in the second part of this pamphlet, and in great detail in DGS. New material comes first from ALLAN MERSON, stationed in Iceland:

I contacted the Party Bookshop in Newcastle when I learnt I was to be posted to Iceland as a lance-corporal in a field security unit, and they gave me the name of a communist soldier serving in Iceland. As soon as I reached Iceland I contacted him and he introduced me to others, and in particular one whom I will call Tim and whom I would like to take this opportunity of praising as a model of a communist serving in the British Army. A Scotsman, a lance-corporal in an infantry battalion, he was highly political and used his relatively humble position of Company Clerk to make the Company Office a hive of political activity.

An Icelandic Communist Party member had met Tim and their meeting was the beginning of a fruitful friendship and collaboration not only between the two individuals, but between a whole group of Icelandic Communists and soldiers with left views. This was important when a strike broke out.

The 1930's in Iceland had been a time of crisis and bitter class struggle, and this culminated on the 2nd of January, 1941 in the calling of a strike by the principal trade unions including Dagsbrun, the rough equivalent of the British TGWU. The strike affected the British Army since it threatened to impede the building of an airfield outside Reykjavik which the Army was constructing with Icelandic civilian labour. Consequently the military authorities, disregarding the undertaking which the British Government had given at the time of the original invasion of Iceland (May 1940) not to interfere in Icelandic internal affairs, threatened to have the work done by soldiers.

Some of the strike leaders, who were in fact communists, then distributed a leaflet in English to British soldiers, calling

on them not to break the strike. The Army commander thereupon arrested five leaders of the unions supporting the strikers. As neither the Icelandic government nor the British authorities wanted a serious political confrontation, a compromise was quickly patched up whereby the arrested men were handed over to the Icelandic police and tried in an Icelandic court. At the same time two of the most active of the trade union leaders admitted responsibility for the leaflet, one for writing it, the other for translating it.

That these two men were the authors of the leaflet was not believed in Icelandic circles then and is not believed now, for they knew little or no English. One clue to the authorship is to be found perhaps in the wording of the leaflet:

"You are working men's sons. When we go on striken to better our lot, which is also the lot of your fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, you are called upon by your officers to murder us. Don't do it!"

These words, I hardly need to remind you, were taken from the leaflet for which Tom Mann served six months imprisonment in 1912! It would be surprising if they were familiar to Icelandic trade unionists.

Soon after, the Army made a further intrusion into Iceland's internal affairs, prompted, as the Icelandic communists came to believe, by the garrison's chief intelligence officer, a Chamberlainite Tory M.P., Major A. R. Wise. In April 1941 the Garrison Commander banned the Icelandic Communist newspaper, Pjodviljinn (The People's Will) and deported the paper's editors, one of whom, Einar Olgeirsson, was a member of the Icelandic Parliament and Chairman of the Party. The pretext for this action was simply that the paper had consistently denounced British as well as German imperialism. Willie Gallacher, the Communist M.P., was informed of the deportation, visited Olgeirsson in Brixton prison, and made representations for his release.

Daily Post, an English-language paper for the troops, was started by an Icelander as a commercial venture, but was edited by a British soldier (ultimately by me). It was another medium through which Tim spread his influence. He organised his comrades to send in a constant stream of 'Letters to the Editor' on current issues. The possibilities here were at first of limited scope since the paper was censored at proof stage by Major Wise. But the situation changed with the conclusion of the Anglo-Soviet alliance in June 1941, and Tim made the most of it. Through the columns of the paper donations were collected for Mrs Churchill's Aid to Russia fund, with accompanying publicity, to which the Army censor was powerless to object.

BILL MOORE, who was invalided out of the Royal Artillery preparations for D-Day through breaking an achilles tendon, had a somewhat different if interesting experience :

I eventually finished up in Egypt, thirty miles out of Alexandria, in the Western Desert, with 350 Nigerian troops, a captive audience indeed in this isolation, but with only about thirty who could speak English - and an officers' mess of true-blue English gentlemen, soured by the fact that they were stuck with such troops to whom they normally referred as 'the black bastards': the Royal West African frontier force.

Not a happy time having to argue that these were human beings also, not animals of a different species, and being treated as if I were up the pole for thinking so. Eventually we did get a couple of subalterns posted to us who were more human, more sympathetic to the Nigerians, which made life easier. But no Party members. So I had to decide for myself what was the right thing for a communist to do.

The first thing was to argue for a better attitude to the men. I think I softened them up a little but I wouldn't claim more than that, winning a rather precarious paternalism. But as far as the troops were concerned, I took on the job of Education Officer (there hadn't been one before) and taught roughly three-quarters of the Company to speak English and over seventy of them to read and write English - which I hope helped them afterwards. But it was only with a few that I was able to have any significant discussions; I was after all not only a white man but an officer, two valid reasons for suspicion; but we did have these discussions about imperialist exploitation, about industrialisation in Nigeria after the war, and so on - all subjects expressly forbidden by GHQ who wanted them to go back to their villages in the bush and not be a nuisance. Actually, when I took a general census of the whole Company, only one old man wanted to go back to his village.

I hope it helped the movement for independence afterwards, but I wouldn't bank on it.

BERT RAMELSON referred to communists in Palestine :

On my first visit to Palestine, on leave from Cairo, I met Emile Touma in Haifa where he was editing an Arab paper for an Arab Marxist group. There was no united Party then. But later on I learned that communists staying in Palestine played a part in bringing together Arab and Jewish communist groups, and facilitated the establishment of the Palestine Communist Party.

PETE PERRY recalled a remarkable exercise he and his comrades pulled off with Yugoslav troops in his camp :

There were about four hundred Yugoslavs on the camp. They had been prisoners of the Italian Army and had been released by our Eighth Army. They helped us work on the aircraft and most of them could speak some English. Each morning they formed up in front of their tented encampment for an elaborate parade. The Royal Yugoslav flag was slowly raised up the flagpole while the ranks chanted in slow unison what I suppose was their oath of allegiance.

But one day we collected some money and went to Cairo and bought some yards of red felt. All that night was spent in cutting up red stars for cap badges. Then, in the darkness, three quarters of the tents were folded and set up again about a quarter of a mile away. And lo! in the morning the majority had become the People's Army of Yugoslavia!

Whether this was the start of the overseas People's Army of Yugoslavia I don't know. But it was a good venture.

FRED WESTACOTT spent all his overseas service in Italy, starting in Naples where he joined an undercover communist group which met in the Royal Palace, taken over by the Army and turned into a palatial NAAFI :

I was fortunate to make some good friends among Italian communists who had come out of hiding, and attended several local Party branch meetings. It was most moving to be shown a handwritten copy of the Communist Manifesto which had been used as a basis for underground discussions.

Later on, after the defeat of Italy, we achieved one small campaigning success. The famous San Carlo Opera House had been taken over by the Allies, operas were performed regularly and were popular with the troops. Then it was announced that the famous tenor, Beniamino Gigli had been invited to sing, despite the fact that the Italian Partisans had denounced him as a fascist collaborator and banned him from singing in Rome. There was outrage at the fact that the Army paper, The Crusader, published an apologia from him on its front page. We decided to campaign against his appearance. We organised letters to the Army papers - The Union Jack. The Crusader and The Stars and Stripes - and took the risk of producing a leaflet, which we surreptitiously distributed to contacts in units around Naples. The campaign was successful and Gigli's attempt to stage a come-back and ingratiate himself with the Allies was defeated.

As Unit Education Instructor, Westacott conducted 'some rip-roaring political discussions which went well beyond the limits laid down in the manuals', but he was able to help the Italians too in a fashion appropriate to an engineer :

On one occasion (just after the end of the war) the civilian workers at the factory supervised by REME went on strike, but twenty-five years under fascism meant that they had no experience of organisation. So I arranged a secret meeting with some of them and was able to give them some advice on what to do : form a strike committee, elect representatives, formulate demands, etcetera. At the same time, of course, as a REMENCO, I was supposed to be working to break the strike.

One theatre about which we still appear to know far too little as regards communist activity in support of the resistance fighters is Greece. There is some account in DGS, and there were two small contributions at the Conference.

SAM FISHER said :

I think we ought to know a bit more about what our people did in Greece. I know for example that John Jones established contact with the partisans whenever he was there. He actually organised three lorry-loads of ammunition from the Ercoli ordnance dump and drove up into the hills to supply them with ammunition.

On one occasion his Colonel said to him: 'Now look here, Sergeant Jones, I know you know these chaps. I want you to go up in the hills and tell them we will patrol between the hours of whatever-it-was, say so-and-so and four o'clock, and they can patrol between the hours of four o'clock and so-and-so, and we won't have any trouble.

And that was the email contribution Jones made to the partisans.

DAVE WALLIS said :

There is not too much here about the Greek mutiny and the Greeks - except the romantic story of Mick Katanka, bless him, stealing a lorry load of American food, together with a master-sergeant who was a member of the American Communist Party, and driving it right through the British lines into the Greek mutineers' camp. The details of that, as far as I know, are pretty well accurate.

What none of us at the time of this tragic Greek story was of course that there was a secret agreement with Churchill that Greece would become a British sphere of influence after the war, and that Yugoslavia in turn would become a Russian sphere of influence. This led to a lot of misunderstanding.

The Greek Communist Party made a very bad tactical blunder . . . they issued a document saying that the British Forces in Greece, or preparing to enter Greece, were being prepared to play a role more cruel than that of the Gestapo, "Plus cruelle que le Gestapo" it said in French, and I was the one who translated it. And of course the blokes seized on this

and said 'Telling us our boys will behave like the Gestapo! We're not a lot of torturers!' That in fact is not what the Greeks meant to say. What they meant to say was that the British forces would be welcomed as liberators when in fact they were coming there as traitors to everything progressive. They spent most of their time shooting Greek partisans as the Germans withdrew unopposed.

Another secret agreement was that we would only go into Greece as the Germans pulled out, and every damned lorry they took with them went straight to the Russian front.

A rather different kind of cooperation was recounted by JACK SPECTOR who after being deported from Germany by MI5 in 1945 and managing to avoid a court-martial, was posted to a German prisoner -of-war camp in County Durham :

I found that the Germans had been divided into three categories : the blacks, who were the extreme Nazis, the greys and the whites. I was able to work with the whites in the job of educating the rest of their comrades. I established contact with colleagues who had been with me at the interpreters' school in preparation for going to Germany. They, mainly Canadians, had gone on to Berlin after MI5 deported me from Germany, and I arranged with them to send me the German Party papers which we managed to distribute among the Germans in the prisoner-of-war camp. I also got material from German anti-Nazi groups in London.

Just before I finished my service I was asked by the Camp Commandant to select people for early return to Germany. Naturally I nominated some of the 'whites', and found that the Commandant was extremely glad to get rid of them. They were always causing trouble, he said:

Communists in the front line

So far the accounts have come from members out of the firing line, back at base, in maintenance units, prisoners of war and the like. There was time to discuss, to run education classes. What could communists do in the front line? There were two contributions of particular importance.

BILL ALEXANDER said :

I want to stress what communists did when they were in a fighting unit involved in action, in battle. Every communist's attitude, and my own, was to create a powerful fighting force able to achieve the military defeat of fascism. That demanded military units with two qualities, inseparable and intertwined, military skill and political understanding.

The communists I met and worked with in the Army set out to influence their own units, make them into tough, fighting units, understanding why they were fighting and trained and

fit for action. Some typical examples ; John Longstaff, a Sergeant-major in the Rifle Brigade who fought from the desert up to the Po, refused to take a commission because all the men in his Company relied on him for brave communist political and military leadership. John Purton, M.C., Second in Command of the Northants Battalion, was universally admired and respected by all the men in the battalion. They would have done anything for him, followed him anywhere. He set the toughest standards in training and in action, but everyone knew they could trust his political and military ability.

Another example from a different field : Lippy Kessel M.C., communist doctor in the Medical Corps, dropped with the Parachute Regiment at Arnhem - all agreed that his bravery and determination under intense fire, facing overwhelming odds, helped to prevent a military set-back from becoming a debacle.

As a result of this understanding of what was needed for the military defeat of fascism, and this political understanding, I say that communists in the units involved in active fighting commanded general respect and admiration - and that in turn made wider political understanding and activity easier.

Life at the front made us very clear about the two-pronged character of Churchill's war aims : defeat the Axis but hold back the advance of socialism and democracy. In Italy, local men were eager to join us as partisan fighters. We were told by Higher Command: No more than thirty - when we could have had three hundred. So we scrounged rifles and food and gave them out. Every extra partisan brought victory nearer.

In Germany we set free a minor concentration camp. Fifty living skeletons, Norwegians rounded up by Hitler as anti-fascists, marched out to offer their services. We welcomed them, gave them arms - until British Military Police arrived and put them back inside.

SAM FISHER said :

There's a different role to perform when you're actually with fighting units, almost continually in action. I found myself without a captive audience, certainly, and isolated in the sense that I was the IRO of the regiment and ultimately IRO of the division. And as Bill Alexander said, your role was in a sense different. The first thing was to see that everybody about you knew what the war was about. I managed to persuade my Colonel that the essential thing was that whenever we were involved in action, the men should know precisely what the objectives were, and so on. And that we managed to do. And I did the same when I was at division, with the Commander of Royal Artillery, as far as the regiments were concerned.

Secondly, you had to be an effective officer who wanted to win the war, but at the same time was prepared to save the men from the stupidity of so many traditional officers. I established an alliance with the Commander R.A. who was one of the survivors of the 1914-18 war and who did not like casualties. Whenever we were put in a stupid position, vulnerable to the enemy and beginning to be lambasted, I would ring up divisional headquarters, let them know we were having trouble, indicate to them why, and the Commander R.A. would promptly order- the movement of the battery concerned to somewhere safer. That won me a great respect among the men.

Communists in the Navy

There were only two contributions from sailors. The position in the Navy was quite different from that in the Army and the RAF. As DAVE DAVIS said:

The Navy had a different relationship, a different way of living. You're trapped in small ships or big ships, so you had a captive audience, but you had to be very careful how you spoke since the Invergordon Mutiny.

I joined the Party in 1943 and I was in the Navy the next month - a big intake for the Second Front. So I can think of many messdeck discussions, not necessarily structured like some of those we've heard, but wherever you go with a group of people in the Navy you've got a class relationship because of the very structure of the Navy itself. The pigs (officers) are seen as the class enemy almost, because it often really seems that way.

There's one memory : being on the messdeck writing a letter and looking up and seeing a pamphlet before my eyes: Lenin on Religion being read by a leading seaman, which inevitably led to a discussion. I think that sort of thing went on a lot more than is known.

JOHN TOWNE remembered a rather more collective expression of left-wing opinion :

I remember very well the attitude of the sailors. In the fore-castle mess there was a very left-wing feeling. When the Old Man went round, the Captain, there on the bulkhead was a picture of Uncle Joe, and the Captain, jolly nice fellow, says: 'Oh! Oh! most excellent!' Leading signaller says: 'In this mess, sir, we've got a lot of time for Uncle Joe.' What he meant was, we've got a hell of a lot of time for the Red Army. 'Yes, I think it would be better, you know, if the other two leaders, Mr Churchill and Mr Roosevelt, were there.'

The next time the Captain comes round there's still the same big picture of Uncle Joe and a rather small one of Churchill,

and the Captain says: 'Towne, Towne, let's finish with all this politics.' There must have been a lot of people thinking the same as I was.

Then I remember this other thing - once when we were coming into harbour, passing our sister ship, this call went out: 'Joe for King!' - it was a popular call - and back came the most unpolitical reply : 'And Betty Grable for Queen!'

Party work in Britain

Perhaps it could be expected that Party work back in Britain would be more difficult than it was abroad. There was a much closer watch apparently kept on those suspected of membership of the Party. FRED WESTACOTT recalled :

It was not easy to do open political work in the Army in this country, but at the big Royal Ordnance/REME Depot in Old Dalby a few of us sold the Daily Worker (this was 1943) - with care of course - and in collaboration with local civilian evacuees we succeeded in setting up a branch of the Communist Party in the nearby town of Melton Mowbray . . . I was billeted with Austrian and German Jewish anti-fascists who were in the Pioneer Corps. Some had been members of the Communist Party and we had many interesting political discussions on the events that led up to the Nazi seizure of power.

BILL BROOKS had a frustrating experience with the 15th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers :

We were working night and main - we were in Barnstaple at the time - to try and get the morale up and the political discussions going, military preparedness and so on. I was editor of a newspaper, a monthly, a wall newspaper called Rapid Fire, and we organised various things - concerts for medical aid for the Soviet Union, collecting for the Daily Worker, and so on. We organised a big debate at Barnstaple demanding the opening of the Second Front immediately and that we should be given special training so that the battalion could take part in it.

This was done with the full cooperation of our commanding officer who was one of the old school, absolutely delighted because he wanted to get into action himself and supported everything we were doing.

He sent me a message as editor of the wall newspaper, to put up for everyone to see : 'Delighted at the result of your debate . . . No one wants to get to grips with the Boche better than me.' So we got a come-back from a lot of the lads, who were all East-enders and anti-fascists : 'Gor blimey, Brooksey, you'll get us all slaughtered by that old bastard!' He was a good CO. but a little naive.

Within a fortnight the battalion, which was rated to be the best in the command - high morale, weapon training superb, everyone raring to go - within a fortnight we were disbanded and I was given a single posting and that was that. The CO. was in tears, pleaded in vain with the War Office to preserve the battalion.

Everyone suspected that it was disbanded because of the political activity - 'because we were a Bolshie battalion', but there was never any proof. Which was what Brooks had to say to Colonel George Pettifer, Colonel of the Regiment, Royal Fusiliers at the Tower of London who was also interested in what had happened at Barnstaple.

HARRY FULLER recalled a minor triumph. He was called up into the Green Howards and sent to their depot at Richmond (Yorks), In July 1941 he took part in a debate on the motion: 'That Germany should be dismembered.' He gave them the Party line straight! opposing the motion as ridiculous :

I went on to show that this war need never have taken place for when the Soviet Union asked for international unity to stop the onward march of Hitlerism . . . Great Britain and other democratic countries were seeing the mouth-frothing dictator as the person who they hoped would put Russia in its place. During my contribution you could have heard a ball of wool drop, and the officer chaitman was constantly telling me my time was up, but I realised I had the recruited lads on my side and in the last few minutes I made a real tub-thumping finish, making an appeal for us to win this battle but to remember that it was capitalism that caused wars. When I ended my peroration I was embarrassed, for the lads clapped, cheered, threw their caps in the air and would not stop.

It was at this stage that the Colonel came to the front of the meeting and raised his hand for the applause to stop. Then he came out with a statement which really pleased me for he said: 'The only person in this debate who has spoken any sense is the communist. You cannot dismember any country of eighty million people. They must be treated as a sick nation.'

When the motion was put to the vote it only got about twenty votes.

HYMIE PAGAN also had some frustrations, but some rewards too:

I had formed a small Party group which met weekly in the house of an ATS member. One of the issues we took up was to try to get an official Education Centre but the request was refused. So we formed an unofficial discussion group. It grew, and we even got a Unity Theatre group to give a most successful performance. We attracted so many troops

to the discussions that the officer commanding took notice. Finally an official Education Centre was opened with a sergeant from the Army Education Corps in charge.

But the lecturers we got were most reactionary, especially one from Bristol University who was so hostile to the Left, especially the Party, that he provoked a row every time he spoke. Soon the attendance trickled away until all that remained were the handful of Party members. The sergeant tried to introduce such courses as basket-weaving, boot repairing and such but it didn't work and ultimately the Centre closed, which may have been the intention of the General Officer Commanding.

So at the next Party Group meeting I asked them whether they were prepared to organise a petition for the Second Front, circulate it among the troops and then send it to Churchill. I said I would start collecting signatures to judge the response, and then on 48-hour leave went to see D. N. Pritt in the House of Commons. He advised me about the legal position and said he would certainly attend the Court Martial if I was charged with mutiny.

Back at the unit I had collected about ninety signatures when someone reported me to the newly-appointed sergeant-major who put me under arrest. When the charge was read out the CO. asked why I had done it . . . I told him that Churchill had once accused the communists of dodging the Army and I saw it as my duty to prove him wrong. He said he had to do his duty as I had to do mine, and most unwillingly he would have to send me to face a Court Martial. In the meantime I would be confined to barracks and he would have to confiscate the petitions.

The signed petition forms were in my pocket but I told him they had already been sent to Churchill, at which he exclaimed 'Oh my God, the fat is in the fire!' He told me to wait in the outer office. Fortunately a Party member who worked in the Company office was alone there. I quickly handed in the petitions saying 'Don't ask questions, send these to Churchill at Downing Street, I'll explain later.'

I was just in time, for I was recalled to the inner office. The CO. must have phoned the War Office. After a few questions and my answering that no-one else was involved, he dismissed me to await Court Martial. I am still waiting. The War Office was as smart as I was.

W. TURNER, who was not in the armed forces, but worked as a chemist at Woolwich Arsenal and was a member of the Home Guard, took part in one special campaign :

I did participate in one campaign, the Second Front campaign, which was very intense in the summer of 1942. It was after attending the huge rally in Trafalgar Square in July, 1942, that I joined the Party.

Churchill gave this campaign overt support, describing it as the 'heart-beat of the nation', but we know from his memoirs that he told the Chief of Staff covertly to ignore it. However there is no doubt that together with the Dieppe raid the Second front campaign had quite an effect on the Hitlerites and diverted a lot of troops from the Russian Front in the crucial summer of 1942, as well as huge resources in building the 'West Wall'.

JOE BERRY had a somewhat chequered, but exciting, time in the RAP :

Through 1941, at bomber stations in East Anglia, contacts were made and we managed to arrange discussions in pubs. Without the Daily Worker (as the ban was on) our political diet was Labour Monthly, Daily Worker League material, pamphlets, etc., the wisdom of which we tried to spread around wherever possible.

Mid-1941 was the turning point in terms of mood. After that, everything seemed to focus on how the war would turn out in the Soviet Union. More and more that big question became the talking point in the flight huts, hangars and barracks. The arguments raged as the panzers lunged towards Moscow, and increasingly became political controversy, on whether the socialist system could survive and hit back. When the Soviet counter-offensive saved Moscow in late 1941, and was followed by the British debacle in Malaya, we hammered the lesson home everywhere we could. And got hammered ourselves by the security police, to shut up or else . . . We didn't, and were moved again.

After some more bouncing about from one RAP base to another, in mid-1942 I landed up at the Henlow Maintenance unit in Bedfordshire. A very large base with thousands of personnel, it serviced aero engines and assembled new fighters for despatch to Malta and Murmansk.

Through the second half of 1942 the communists and labour lefts got together some organisation for a kind of camp strategy, the essence of which was to promote everything possible for the slogan Open the Second Front Now! First that meant the Daily Worker, reborn on September 7th, and we sold a fair quantity of that initial issue . . . We built up a regular sale through a complex pattern of daily distribution during the day and evening, and collected for the Fighting Fund.

We sold pamphlets, Labour Monthly, progressive books, and started a lending library of sorts. We helped to get some visiting speakers for camp lectures, and organised contingents to meetings in surrounding towns and villages and to at least one Trafalgar Square 'Second Front' rally.

Our main objective was to get a camp journal, with broad left progressive politics. It took a lot of twists and turns through 1943, but by the time the Second Front was opened we managed to convince the Air Commodore in command that a wall newspaper at salient points throughout the camp would be conducive to all-out production for the anti-fascist war effort. He agreed, provided this and that, and appointed his adjutant as censor, a nice liberal bloke who hardly vetoed anything.

It took a lot of hard work, and a longish time to develop successfully, with a mixture of camp news, cartoons, satires, Daily Worker politics, etc. As I recall it the leading team was Jack Sherman from Teeside, Jock Slessor from Luton, Dr John Atkins, Alan ? (later CP secretary in Kent), Bill Tait now in Sydenham, Tony Farsky now in Dulwich, Harry Fromberg and myself - with help from all sorts of characters, eg. Frank Muir (the Television personality) no politician but a good photographer.

Discrimination against well-known communists was common. Bob Cooney was never allowed to go overseas despite repeated requests. Neither was Harry Stratton.

BILL CARRITT writes:

Before the war I had worked as National Secretary of the League of Nations Union and with the British Youth Peace campaign. I was called up in the early months of the war. Soon afterwards I was sent on a course to learn how to operate Radar, then a very secret weapon. After three weeks a report from 'high up' recalled me as 'unsuitable', and I returned to basic training.

I then applied to go to an Officer Training Unit. To my surprise I was accepted and came out as one of the best on the course. When I was not accepted as an Officer I insisted on seeing the Colonel and being told why. He eventually explained that orders from higher up stated that since I was a communist my name could not be put forward.

LESLIE MORTON had some interesting experiences of 'the way in which the Army keeps its eye on one' :

When I was posted to a unit (I was told this by two separate officers) a security person always followed me and saw my commanding officer and said that I was a

communist and that I must be carefully watched. However, nothing much came of that. One Major told me he'd said: 'I told them they could bloody-well find something better to do with their time!', and in general people were rather sympathetic.

I used at this time, 1943, to write a large part of the material in our local Branch paper, the Leiston Leader, and among other things I wrote an article about the Second Front called 'Grigg Must Go!' (Sir James Grigg was War Minister) - a rather vitriolic article. One day I was sent for to the Battery Office, and there's a large fat security sergeant-major there, bearing a copy of this article. He said 'Did you write it?' Well, there it was with my name at the bottom, so I said 'Yes, I did.' He said 'Oh, you mustn't do things like this in the Army, you know.' Then he went away and nothing happened for a long time.

Then one day I'm sent for by the Major again and he was really apologetic. He said 'It's nothing to do with me. I'm instructed to send you on to the Colonel.' Well, the Colonel is equally apologetic. 'It's nothing to do with me. I have instructions that you are to be sent for court-martial.' So presently a court-martial is assembled. Everyone was sympathetic because Grigg was not popular in the Army at all. It was all very technical because there was no dispute about the facts - there was the article and I had admitted writing it - it was a question of whether it did or did not infringe certain sections of King's Regulations. I had a very nice chap defending me (a solicitor in private life) very friendly, and the upshot was that I was acquitted and everybody was pleased! My immediate officer said 'Well, Morton, you certainly hit old Grigg for six. Personally I agreed with every word of it.'

There was an interesting sequence. About a year later - I'd got a bit bored by this time with being an amateur builder's labourer, which is what I'd been doing for the greater part of the war - I decided to apply for a transfer to the Education Corps, for which I had every conceivable qualification. So I go up to London to be interviewed by a Selection Board. They told me 'We think you are very suited for the Education Corps', but they were outraged that attached to my papers was the report of the court-martial. 'This is absolutely disgraceful' they said, 'We shall ignore it, and we shall have no hesitation in recommending you for a transfer to the Education Corps.'

But I didn't get it.

JACK GASTER had a similar experience:

I was appointed to the then newly established Army Legal Service with the rank of Captain . . . but the War Office intervened and cancelled my appointment. I was indirectly told by my C.O. that this was political. Surprise!

After that I tried to get a transfer to the Army Education Corps, but I didn't even get an interview until after Pritt (then a member of the Cabinet) took it up with the Secretary of State. You can imagine the shock waves! So of course I got an interview, and I passed the interview (my Marx House training stood me well) but, as I expected, there was no posting.

Later I got a posting 'attached AEC' to an experimental army school and training unit - a Command appointment which didn't go through the War Office, The War Office caught up with me a year later and demanded I be returned to unit, but the AEC Command refused. So I spent my time indoctrinating the School with daily sessions on the news and current events!

Tailpiece from PETE PERRY :

I'd given up the idea of getting home on time, but one morning I was told there was a truck waiting to take me to a ship waiting at the quay a few miles away. I knew no boat would wait for a leading aircraftsman, so I grabbed my kitbag and ran for it.

While running the half-mile to catch the truck I remembered the books - the orange box full of Marxist books and classics I kept at the side of my bed. 'Oh well,' I thought, 'they will be very useful to the boys. Those books are a unique collection in the Aden Command.'

Later, after I had been in Civvy Street some five months, Carter-Patterson Carriers knocked on the street door and put down a stoutly made wooden box. All the books were there - the Airforce didn't want them!

BILL MOORE

Political activity in Burma

Early Spin-offs.

At the Conference organised by the Communist Party History Group to discuss Richard Kisch's book THE DAYS OF THE GOOD SOLDIERS, most of the attention was fixed on political activity in the Middle East, with the Cairo Parliament, as a splendid centre piece.

Yet there were a number of us at the Conference who had served in Burma, and we who had been a Forgotten Army seemed to be forgotten still.

So Selwyn Evans and myself volunteered to try to trace comrades who had served in Burma, obtain written statements from them regarding their political activities, and hold such information until something turned up! Our current commitments precluded us from doing more.

Before discussing this political activity In Burma it might be better to discuss the spin-offs and wider fields which our decision pitched us into.

The first was that two comrades responded who had not been in Burma but had been in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. Moreover, Communist Party political activity had gone on in these camps. This was too important to ignore and so we widened our remit. We now await with great interest a manuscript from Stan Henderson and his co-prisoner Ernie Potter which we feel is going to be of **considerable** interest.

Next we were contacted by Arthur Clegg, well-known China expert, who put us in touch with David and Isabel Crook, who have lived in China for the past forty years. David had also served in Burma during the war and had been a member of the influential East-West Association in Rangoon which did much to combat the racist, colonial attitudes among British military and civil personnel. The Crooks came to England for a holiday this summer (1989) and the History Group arranged a meeting to hear of their experiences (David had been imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution) and they had left Beijing University at the time when the student occupation of Tienanman Square was in progress. They also wanted to bring themselves up to date on the situation in Britain and Europe. A fruitful meeting was arranged, but the state of the party being what it is, we were able to make only imperfect use of such important visitors and for that we have apologised to them.

Our next contact was with an American scholar Robert H. Taylor at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. He has translated WARTIME TRAVELLER by Thein Pe, who was one of the most important leaders of the Burmese Communist Party. Taylor has also contributed a long introduction to this account of Burmese resistance to the Japanese. Taylor also gave us the address of a former leader of the Burmese Communist Party U Myint Swe. In response to a subsequent letter U Myint Swe expressed surprise and pleasure at being contacted by a group of British comrades who had served in Burma. He informed us that the widows of Than Tun and Thein Pe (the two most important CPB leaders) were still living In Rangoon. He also showed the letter to Thakin Tin Mya who had been a member of the Burmese Party's central committee and who had been present at one of the meetings when Major John Angus and four or five other British soldiers visited the CPB headquarters in 1945. He also gave us details of Burmese guerilla activities in co-operation with Force 136. Finally, U Myint Swe told us that his daughters were doctors in England and that he was coming to England to stay with them for about a year. We therefore began to make arrangements to meet him, but, unfortunately, in December 1987 we had a letter from Robert Taylor informing us that U Myint Swe had died of a heart attack the previous month.

Taylor also informed us that he had a colleague, Richard Boyd, who was in contact with the Japanese CP and we have thoughts of ascertaining whether any Japanese Communists had experiences of anti-fascist activity in S.E. Asia, particularly as Stan Henderson met Japanese Communists in the camps. But this has not so far been pursued.

Another plus came from Brian Pearce (of whom more later) who informed us that the daughter of Aung San, the legendary leader of the army of the Anti-fascist Peoples Freedom League, was studying in England. In this case history moved ahead of us, and before we could contact her she had become the leader of the new resistance movement in Burma.

Yet another spin-off was contact with the Imperial War Museum where Charlie Hall, who has an incredible store of memories of full-time Party work dating back to the 1920s, has four tapes deposited.

During this time there also appeared Michael Carritt's fascinating memoirs, A MOLE IN THE CROWN, which details his work as an Under-Secretary in India assisting the illegal Communist Party of India during the 1930s.

The moral seems to be that it is impossible to confine ourselves to so limited a theatre of war as Burma. Adjacent

fields so far untapped include USA, Indian and Malayan Communist Party members in touch- with British service personnel. We also have so far no contact from service women and our only naval contact is David Davis.

Political Activity.

Some of the political activists were leading figures in the Communist Party before the war. Clive Branson is the outstanding of these figures. Born in India in 1907 he returned to the town of his birth in 1942 as a gunner-linnetruetor. He had Joined the Communist Party in 1932, fought in Spain and had been in a Franco concentration camp. Called up in 1941, he was drafted to India and a year later was killed on the Arakan front in Burma in February 1944. His LETTERS FROM INDIA are the most important document left by a soldier eye-witness to conditions in India (including the Bengal famine of 1942) and the development of the liberation movement. The final letters describe action in Burma.

Another International Brigadier was John Angus. He was subsequently, the leading figure in a Communist Party group that operated from Pegu and later Rangoon, of which more later. Unfortunately, John Angus died some years ago leaving few papers relating either to Burma or Spain.

Jim Fyrth was another experienced Party organiser who served briefly in Burma and then went on to **Malaya**. His service in India reflects so clearly the experience of nearly everyone who went on to Burma that it must be quoted. He emphasises the non-sectarian character of political work, particularly when many Party members found themselves in small units, often Indian. This was a continuation of People's Front politics developed in Spain and the fight against fascism. Apart from individual discussion, opportunities were grasped for group discussions at YMCA, ABCA and unit groups etc. Fyrth stresses publications sent from home or bought at left-wing bookshops in India. Very important were the Left Book Club books and also such Gollanz books as WHY HOT TRUST THE TORIES? by Aneurin Bevan, GUILTY MEM and YOUR HP. as well as the Beveridge Report and other documents of post-war development. Like many others Fyrth had sent out to him the DAILY WORKER and LABOUR MONTHLY with its Notes of the Month by R. Palme Dutt which were particularly influential in India and SE Asia. Even more influential was the forces newspaper SEAC edited by the socialist Frank Owen, and supported by Mountbatten the commander-in-chief who played an important role, whether intended or not, in radicalising the forces to vote in a Labour government in 1945.

Contact with the Indian Communist Party was an important part of the shared experience of so many service personnel.

The Indian Party not only educated us in Indian **politics** and supplied us with literature, including their weekly paper PEOPLE'S WAR, but also introduced us to the communal system within which the full-time comrades lived, sharing their worldly goods.

Fyrth joined the 50th Indian Tank Brigade in December 1944 and was in the Arakan until March 1945 when the brigade was pulled out to prepare for the landings in Malaya. His political experiences were therefore with the Malayan CP rather than Burmese politics.

Another experienced comrade was Brian Pearce. He had considerable contact with the Burmese resistance. He says that Thakin Soe has memoirs which have not yet been published. Soe had differences with the main Party leaders Than Tun and Thein Pe and had his own resistance group in the Irrawaddy delta. Unfortunately, Brian Pearce's recollections are still in his head instead of on tape.

Wally Togwell had also fought in Spain. He is convinced that this was the reason why he was always 'surplus to establishment'. This continued when he was posted abroad. From a Field Artillery Regiment in India he was transferred to an Indian Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment at Assansol whence he was seconded to Movement Control and Gaya the forward reinforcement centre, well-known to most Burma hands. On again to a holding camp at Chittagong and then to the Arakan front with the 8th Belfast HAA Regt. On his travels again from via Dacca to Kohima where he Joined a City of London HAA Regt. and fought right through to Mandalay where he left the regiment - still not on the establishment. During this time Togwell met Tony Gilbert, also an ex-IBer and later secretary of Liberation, who was receiving similar treatment. Wally wrote to CONTACT, a service magazine, saying that large sums had been spent on his training, that he was always being moved, and rarely used in his trade capacity. The result was the inevitable 'chat with the CO', warnings concerning his contacts and the observation that he had served his 3 years 8 months and it would be a pity if he stayed on a lot longer.

Yet another experienced comrade was Bill (Gabriel) Carritt. Bill writes that his time with the Welch Regiment of the Dagger Division of the Fourteenth Army was the most memorable of his five years service as gunner and bombardier. Passing through Imphal where the great battle had been won in June 1944, they then went into the Jungle, ambushing and being ambushed by the Japanese, each trying to get behind the other. When cut off they were supplied by air and carried their wounded with them. The heavy equipment was carried by mules which frequently suffered heavy casualties when

shelling took place, Carritt pays tribute to the battalion commander who 'knew how to fight a Jungle war', and to the divisional commander, Pete Bees, who 'marched with the troops singing hymns'. He says his experiences in Burma were not political and his memories are of the people, the kind of war they fought and the patience, endurance and good humour of the men.

When the war in Europe ended, Bill Carritt was flown out of Burma to become Communist parliamentary candidate for Westminster. He became an object of interest and the envy of everyone in his company and on the plane back home, high ranking officers were full of questions. Bill, brother of Michael and Noel (another ex-IBer) is a member of a very distinguished Communist family whose collective memoirs ought to be brought together.

Wally McFarlane was another experienced activist and trade unionist. He fought with the 7th. Worcesters at the battle of Kohima, He tells of a War Office dispatch asking for a report on him, stating that he had spent a year at the Lenin Institute in Moscow. In fact he had spent a three week's holiday in the Soviet Union in 1934 on the strength of getting four aways up on Littlewood's Fools. The dispatch said that he was also a trade union infiltrator. In fact he had been a Transport & General Workers' Union shop steward and had been awarded the TUC Tolpuddle Medal in 1936. The battalion report said that he was 'a good boy'; but this was a way of telling him that he had better be!

After the Kohiraa/Imphal battles the Worcesters were taken out of the line to be rested and brought up to strength with redundant anti-aircraft gunners from India. The company commander gave Wally the Job of organising a Model Parliament and over four weeks they debated Equal Rights for Women, State Control, What to do with Germany after the War and Should India have Independence. The adjutant acted as Speaker and the commanding officer took part in all the debates. 'After these debates the lines were a babel of noise and the debate continued in the bashas.' Like Bill Carritt, Wally pays tribute to his commanding officer, Colonel Charles Street, who was later killed at the Irrawaddy crossing. 'He was a great man.'

Wally firmly believes that the democratic alliance between the Soviet Union and Britain opened up political opportunities never before known in the armed forces. He quotes the example of the Earl of Munster being sent out to investigate conditions in the Forgotten Fourteenth Army. General Nicholson convened a conference of representatives from every unit under his command to receive Munster and he

opened the conference by stating that a report would be taken back to England and then he retired from the assembly. Munster, dressed in civvies, asked 'How shall we begin?' and Wally said, 'I'd like to begin. Delegate from 7th Worcesters'....and away the Conference went.

Wally served with an all British division, which was unusual. Regular army brigades consisted of three battalions representing the north, the midlands and the south. With the Worcesters were the Camerons and the Dorsets, but the latter had a preponderance of Londoners whose 'political IQ' Wally thought was higher than the county regiments. From the Dorsets Wally met Party members Humphrey Silkman and Barney (surname forgotten) and learned of such things as money being raised for the Party at home. Wally laid out the tapes for a Dorset assault on a Japanese position and met Humphrey, which was a great moment for both of them. Later, Wally learned from Barney that Humphrey had been killed in that assault.

When the Worcesters reported that Tamu was undefended, Wally found himself acting as a guide to the Camerons, who came through to clean up the town. They were in great spirits marching in column and Wally, for the first time in his life found himself whistling the International on the march. He said to the officer in command, 'This could never happen in the Worcesters.'

After crossing the Irrawaddy desertion of Indians from Bose's Indian National Army became a frequent occurrence. The Worcesters were eventually flown back to India to prepare for the sea and air invasion of Rangoon.

Other activists in Burma were those of us less experienced and learning and practising Communist politics from a background of pre-war unemployment and the struggle to defeat fascism and prevent war.

Selwyn Evans served with the 6th Bn South Wales Borderers. For a time he was in Shillong at a transit centre for troops on their way to the Burma front, here he helped form a left-wing discussion group and brought out a wall-newspaper cum magazine.

George Johnson was originally a paratrooper who reached Burma as an infantryman with the Royal Berks, towards the end of the Kohima/Imphal battles. He entered Burma by the route known to so many of the boat trip up the Brahmaputra to the railhead at Gauhati followed by a rail trip to Dimapur and finally the dangerous truck trip along the mountain road to Kohima and Imphal. At Kohima they were

dropped off in the Naga Hills. George reports, 'I never saw so many empty 303 and shell cases. The place absolutely stank with rotten corpses. Not only human corpses, mainly Japanese, but dead mules and elephants.' George goes on to give a vivid account of the subsequent fighting in Burma and when the Japanese surrendered in August 1945 'We were on the 34th milestone from Toungoo, somewhere in the Shan states, on the border of Siam.' George joined the Party after the war.

Peter Kingsford joined the Party in 1936. He was at the Army School of Education in India responsible for training officers and men to take ABCA and BWP courses. He mentions two comrades he met. One was Capt. Isaac Pushkin of the AEC stationed in Poona. The other was Alan Strachan who was in the first retreat from Burma and then education officer at the Dehra Dun OTC. He wonders Peter says, 'The Army Education Corps claims some credit for the 1945 General Election.'

Alan Strachan's views surfaced in a recent article in the bulletin of Ex-Services CND. Like George Johnson's these are military, vividly recounting the retreat from Burma when Alan was fighting on the Arakan front in late 1941 and early 1942. If Alan reads this and would like to keep in touch with those of us who served in Burma, we would be very happy to hear from him.

Two RAF contributions were interesting. Dennis Crossland was at the Dum Dun camp in Calcutta at the end of the war when a large scale protest occurred. Dennis was elected one of a committee of six who were flown back to negotiate with Attlee and Eden.

D.L. Starnes was stationed at Agartala in the state of Tripura on the Burmese frontier keeping Dakota aircraft flying. He suggests that in this area where facilities for other ranks were non-existent (not even a dartboard!) there was a reversion by most of the officers to a 'pukka sahib' attitude worse than in any other theatre of war. While the beer ration for other ranks was four pints a month, he was told to construct a 45-gln spirit still. Whether it was used for the troops or found its way to the palace he doesn't know, as he was sent on detachment. In the grounds of the Maharajah's palace, which was surrounded by a high wall, ORs were ordered to install a Spitfire. This at a time when the Japanese had surrendered and troops who had served their three or four years in the Far East wanted only to be demobbed. So Starnes wrote to his Labour MP George Wallace who passed the letter on to John Strachey, the Air Minister. The CO in question was reprimanded. Starnes was glad he was on detachment when he heard that the CO was looking for someone who had complained to his MP. Starnes is in no doubt

that it was this sort of illegal activity together with the bad food and the fact that many had served more than their three or four years abroad that was responsible for the strike at Singapore.

Starnes finished the war at Pegu. While there he flew delivery and collection operations. One of these was to Saigon. Nobody could leave the plane as the airfield was being mortared at this time by the Vietnamese. Although the Japanese had been defeated they were being used, marching around with fixed bayonets, against the Vietnamese until sufficient British and French troops could be landed to crush the Vietnamese.

Reverting to the Burma campaign, as our troops drove south with the objective of capturing Rangoon before the monsoon set in, contact between the British forces and the Burmese resistance movement was made. At this point it should be recalled that although victory in Burma was that of the British army, the overwhelming majority of troops were Indian and Gurkha with considerable numbers of Africans.

The position with regard to the Resistance was that a Burmese army under Aung San had collaborated with the Japanese and then changed sides in March 1945. Central to the negotiations for this change over was Force 136. This was a mixture of an intelligence gathering force (of which Donnison, the Civil Affairs brigadier attached to 4 Corps, claimed that at least one was a Communist) and a large scale guerilla force. But it was members of V Force - units of a couple of officers with a team of Gurkhas, Karens or other nationalities operating behind Japanese lines - that U Myint Swe remembered and asked us to contact when he proposed to visit England. These were Lt.Col. Stanley Gardner, Capt. Gillette, Major Whittaker at Imphal in 1944 and a Mr. Waller, last heard of in Canada.

At this stage 4 Corps HQ was at Pegu. Here there was a functioning group of the British Communist Party of which George Barnsby was a member. The only other member he can remember is Major John Angus, who was a leading figure. This group established contact with the guerilla forces and then with the leaders of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. Regular meetings took place with Than Tun and Thein Pe who were leaders of the AFPFL and also the Burmese Communist Party. These Communist leaders were not only anxious to explain their own policies to fellow-Communists but also to learn of the political situation in the rest of the world. What struck Barnsby was that, despite their isolation from the rest of the world for several years, United Front politics recognising the overwhelmingly important first aim of defeating Japanese and German fascism

and building united fronts to fight for independence were pursued by the Communist Parties of Burma, Malaya, Vietnam, Indonesia and, of course, the great Communist Party of China.

With the liberation of Rangoon the British CP group continued in contact with the Burmese CP leaders. Some of these meetings took the form of education classes with the CP leaders in which the LABOUR MONTHLY with its Notes of the Month by Palme Dutt was one of the sources much appreciated.

But after the abrupt surrender of Japan in August 1945 British CP members together with other progressives also turned to the 'domestic' questions of democracy in the forces, support for the Labour Party's progressive measures at home and opposition to Ernie Bevin's disastrous foreign policy in SB Asia, and attempts to speed up the demobilisation process. An extremely important aspect of most activity was its multi-racial character with the corollary of strenuous attempts to combat the racism which was widespread, particularly among regular army personnel and the returning civil administration intent on retaining the pre-war segregated clubs etc. as well as restoring the old order complete. These activities can perhaps be best illustrated through the experiences of three comrades.

Jim Butlin was on the Arakan front for most of his service. Here the only political activity was attending a Hay Day meeting back at base in Chittagong of the Indian Communist party in the town where local comrades had spent many years in jail as terrorists for a raid on an armoury and where they had transformed themselves en masse into Communists. Jim eventually reach Rangoon and here he was in touch with several other British comrades who met in a Burmese teacher's house to discuss politics. The group also donated 10% of its pay to the Burmese party.

One of the most important activities was the setting up of an East-Vest Association which attracted good attendances from both Burmese civilians and the British forces. David Crook was also a participant in this Association. Apart from cultural matters there were speakers from the newly formed Burmese trade unions, and the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. There was also a short-lived Forces Parliament in Rangoon. Both of these institutions met at the YMCA, but pressure was brought on the staff and both were closed down.

To combat the reactionary line that the AFPFL was an armed, revolutionary group about to take over the country, the group published a pamphlet for the troops, explaining the real situation. The pamphlet was made Issue No.3, and it is understood that the security branch spent a considerable

time trying to track down non-existent Nos. 1 and 2, Jim Butlin throws some light on the relationship between the Burmese CP leadership and Comrade Soe. Soe was thought to be splitting the Party. It was therefore considered that it might be helpful for Soe to have a period in India to consult with other comrades. Transport was laid on for him. Unfortunately it was not so easy to arrange the return transport and he had a very arduous Journey back. 'He created a fuss and threatened to expose those who had arranged the transport. This would have been fatal for those concerned and only strong arm threats managed to shut him up'.

Later, the AFPFL held an enormous demonstration at Burma's most important shrine, the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, demanding self-government and raising social issues. Word was put round by the British authorities that this was an armed march to take over Rangoon. Roofs of buildings were manned with machine guns and troops confined to barracks. But this signal did not 'reach' Jim's unit which had already elected two delegates to attend the rally. Jim reports: 'The demo was huge and peaceful. Although I looked round on leaving, for the many security officers I had come to know by sight, I missed a Sikh security captain in mufti who pounced on me. He took me back to Security Office for questioning, The usual questions followed. Was I a Communist? What was I doing in a prohibited area? Was I part of a cell?. Eventually I was sent back to my unit. On arrival there was a general buzz - where had I been etc. etc. - and I was to report immediately to the Staff Captain. He had obviously been briefed as he asked the same questions, apart from 'concern' for my safety with this Burmese mob. Was I a member of a trade union in England? Did any other members of our unit go to the Forces Parliament? (to my shame I mentioned a Tory from' his own office!) Did I help organise the East-West Association? etc. It was not long before I was repatriated to the OK.

Butlin ends by saying that while he was in Rangoon the Burmese Communist Party held its first Congress, and he has copies of a number of resolutions passed.

George Barnsby was called up in Oct 1939 in the RAHC and attached to a unit of the 56th. London Division. He concurs with Wally KcFarlane in believing that London servicemen were more politically aware than others, perhaps because of the higher level in London of the pre-war campaigns against Kosley, solidarity with Spain and opposition to the Munichites. He reports political activity in a number of units of the division, not least among Jewish comrades who had been in the YCL.

Eventually, Barnsby was detached from the division and sent to India as a result of producing a series of news sheets in 1942 entitled SECOND FRONT Cat least one copy extant) demanding immediate aid to the Soviet Union. His political education was speeded up by his contact in Durban with the Communist Party of South Africa, which was the only multi-racial organisation in the country, and with the Indian Communist Party when he landed at Bombay.

Barnsby was attached to 4 Corps HQ at Imphal from 1943. His participation in the weekly sessions of the furthest east jazz club in the world was rudely interrupted by the Japanese offensive of 1944. After the siege of Imphal had been lifted he was flown out to hospital in Dacca, another great stronghold of pre-war terrorist activity which led to the development of the Communist Party of India. In the hospital an informal Communist group was formed. One surprising recruit was Sgt.Major Bill Cutler. Bill died recently, but fortunately Ex-Services CND have printed a pamphlet of his experiences in the army from 1933 entitled THE SOLDIER'S TALE which includes an outline of his political experiences in India and Burma. At Dacca, besides contacting the Indian CP the group also met up with Norman Plotkin who was serving with the US army air force. Norman suffered the double discrimination of being both a Jew and a Communist.

Barnsby returned to 4 Corps and the advance on Rangoon. But the HQ advanced no further than Pegu. Here he made contact with John Angus and the Party group previously discussed. He then transferred to a general hospital in Rangoon where he joined the political activity in progress.

In addition to the East-Vest Association there was a unique forces educational project in progress which also had multi-racial implications. This was SATO (Services Arts & Technical Organisation.) It was a Polytechnic, but because it was housed in some of the ruined buildings of the Rangoon University, some of us referred to it as the Burma University. The organisation had originated in Poona in 1942 when two architects, W.Tatton Brown and Percy Marshall-Johnson had formed SAO (Services Architects Organisation) to help all concerned professionally and technically with environmental education i.e. architects, engineers, town planners, surveyors etc. and especially students. Eventually over 20 branches of either SAO or SATO were set up in India, Burma and Ceylon. They were, of course, non-political.

The SATO Polytechnic began in Pegu after the end of the war when Tatton-Sykes persuaded 4 Corps to let SATO organise technical education, enlisting RE and REME personnel. The

Polytechnic was then removed to Rangoon. It was its Arts courses in economics and current affairs that particularly attracted Communists and all who were politically active; also the possibility of introducing Burmese people to these forces facilities - a question of integration which we knew the authorities would resist with all their power. Neither Percy Marshall nor Tatton-Brown belonged to any political party; but they were part of the progressive spirit which caught up vast numbers of service personnel determined to end with the old order and build a better world.

Such progressive activities ended as we all returned home and the reactionaries re-established their grip.

The last words of this contribution will therefore be given to Laurie Green, who only joined the army in 1943 and was still in Burma when most of us had left. Laurie left a Catholic grammar school just before his nineteenth birthday to volunteer as an officer-cadet in the Indian army, following in the footsteps of his grandfather who had soldiered there in the 1880s. The exalted rank of officer he did not attain; this having not a little to do with, he believes, his militant Catholic ex-headmaster who used to refer to Laurie as 'the member for Moscow'. The cadets went on to Bangalore to be greeted by Burma and Malayan veterans with some dismay. Passing over his political experiences with the CPI in India, his twentieth birthday found him on his travels to Imphal, where he was assigned as a shorthand writer to a colonel on the HQ staff to 2 Division, whose sign was the cross keys. Here he met left-wingers, mainly Labour Party people from Birmingham and the midlands. At Kohima he lost all his possessions from Japanese bombardments, including a precious portable gramophone and four Jazz records. Tension between racist regular officers and rank and file soldiers was considerable, the latter arguing that the war was for democracy, not to maintain Britain's ramshackle empire. An ILP corporal from Yorkshire refused to dig a slit trench for a particularly unpopular major, and when another officer ordered the same corporal to wash his Jeep, he organised a protest to the CO, who reprimanded the officers in front of the protestors.

As numbers of the Indian National Army were captured and interrogated, discussion began about their alms and those of the allies. To the Indian army officers the INA were scum and traitors, but left-wingers could be more understanding of the position of these men.

It also became clear, from signals flying between Div.HQ, Calcutta and South East Asia Command in Ceylon that Burmese guerillas were operating against the Japanese. This addition to allied strength was not welcomed by much of the command

structure of the forces and it says much for Mountbatten and the general strength of anti-imperialist feeling that the guerillas were supplied.

By early 1945 education classes were providing an open forum for anti-Tory, Socialist and Communist views. This was met by a sudden transfer of outspoken left-wingers. Laurie was posted to 14th. Army HQ at Keiktila. His mother had written to the 14th. Army commander, General Slim, who told Laurie that he had promised his Mother to keep an eye on him! But this was only half the story, for he learned from one of Slim's entourage what his colonel at 2 Div. had hinted at, namely that his grammar school head had written to the War Office warning that Laurie was a dangerous agitator who should not be given a commission.

At 14th. Army HQ he dealt with transport arrangements for soldiers who were Parliamentary candidates for the forthcoming elections. On the list was Bill Carritt fighting the constituency of Westminster. He reported in a crumpled green battle dress and stained bush hat, very different from the would-be Tory MPs wondering, to no purpose, who was to carry their luggage. Laurie arranged a reception for Bill and quite a few turned up. He spoke simply and movingly. There were only a few hurricane lamps lighting the place as the Japanese were not far away; this prevented the intrusive military police from identifying everyone. Laurie then received LIAP (leave in advance of repatriation) and while at home the war against Japan ended. He returned to the notorious Deolali transit camp where groups of 70-100 servicemen were discussing the coming general election and lorries were chalked with such slogans as 'Vote against Churchill's Tory friends' and 'Tory Churchill is the Past: Vote Labour for the Future'. Back in Rangoon, the unit was paraded to vote with an anti-Socialist introduction from the CO as to how to vote, which led to protests that officers were trying to influence voting.

About this time, news was spreading about the Cairo Forces Parliament and also the RAF strikes at Karachi and Penang.

A few days before the Japanese surrender messages began to come in of Malayan rubber workers' strikes under the leadership of the Malayan Communist Party against reduced wages. With the Japanese surrender there was high-level speculation as to how the Japanese army could be used against the guerillas in Malaya and Indo-China. Leaders of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army were shadowed, interrogated and their demands for action against Japanese war criminals fobbed off.

Following the surrender the release of prisoners from Chang Jail led to a further wave of hatred against the Japanese. This was exacerbated by orders that captured high ranking Japanese officers were to be saluted and even errands run for them. This led to a couple of Scots lads storming in to see the Intelligence Major and telling him that the only service they'd give a Jap general was 'a bullet up his arse.'¹ They told an enthusiastic crowd that one of their mates had already shot a Japanese officer who complained that he had not been saluted by the guards and had then left his boots out to be cleaned!

Signal traffic was again full of the dangers of the Malayan Communists' influence on rubber workers. Representatives of rubber companies - including Dunlop - were given top signal priority while seriously ill POWs were waiting for plane orders to come through.

Suddenly the little group of left-wingers at HQ were broken up. This followed a row about secret information being leaked to English newspapers about Japanese generals being involved, in plans against national insurgents in SE Asia. Laurie was sent to Malacca as a sergeants' mess caterer! His subsequent political experiences were with Malayan Communists and the MPAJA. Soon he came home; and still only 21.

The documents and letters from which the above has been compiled are with the author and the History Group will, as has been mentioned, be pleased to hear from other Communists with political experiences who served in Burma.

GEORGE BARNSBY.

RESOLUTION

on

DEMOBILISATION

Passed at the
18th National Congress of
The Communist Party
London, November 24-26, 1945

(Excerpts)

We believe that the principal reasons for the slow rate of demobilisation are the dangerous and wrong foreign policy of the Government and the slowness in carrying through a comprehensive plan for the reconversion of industry to the needs of peace. These are the main reasons why the Government has proposed the indefensible high figure of 2.5 million men still to be under arms in June, 1946. This figure must be cut drastically to the minimum necessary for fulfilment of our international obligations, limiting occupation forces in Germany and Japan and their reinforcements.

By adopting a friendly attitude to the newly-emerging democratic Governments in Europe, by agreeing to the just demands for self-government of the people of India, Indonesia, Burma, Malaya and Indo-China, where British troops are being used against the interests of the peoples of those countries and the British people, the rate of repatriation and demobilisation could be immeasurably speeded up.

FAIR PLAY

**for servicemen
and their
families**

D. F. SPRINGHALL

ONE PENNY

Pamphlet published in 1940 demanding better pay for the troops and higher allowances for their families