



The October 2018 update adds thirty-seven articles (including one reference group article), containing thirty-seven biographies, accompanied by four portrait likenesses. The particular focus is on global lives, and biographies of people connected with communism. The communist lives have been curated by Professor Kevin Morgan of the University of Manchester, whose introduction to them is below.

From October 2018, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) offers biographies of 60,727 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 62,993 articles. 11,608 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

## **Introduction to the communist lives**

Biographies of communists were at one time notoriously thin on the ground and frequently either unreliable or uninformative when one did dig them out. Fundamentally this was all bound up with the political constraints and anathemas of the Cold War period. Crucially, it was therefore only after the fall of the Berlin wall that a wealth of archives and personal testimonies became accessible which allowed the documentation of individual communist lives on a scale that had once seemed inconceivable. As one of the quintessential political movements of the twentieth century, communism drew its recruits from the most disparate social and political environments, with personal costs and compensations which historians are still only beginning to comprehend. Not just in Britain but internationally, biography has become arguably the principal means by which historians have been seeking to unravel the complexity of what so often proved life-changing commitments.

It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to have a further cross-section of these lives represented within the ODNB. Naturally they will interest those with particular concerns with left-wing movements and political activists. Nevertheless, these stories also matter in the wider biographical register of British history. Particularly in the context of the inter-war years, communists are sometimes grouped with fascists as an alien or marginal force encroaching on society from the extremes. Whatever the merits of this view, what it seems to me to miss is how much more closely these activists' lives were interwoven into Britain's wider cultural and political history. Communism was never just another political commitment: not, at least, as far as the security services were concerned. But it can be located within a political tradition that not only dated from the mid-nineteenth century, but also was never fundamentally delegitimised in the way it was in some other countries.

Already the ODNB must contain hundreds of entries on sometime British communists that we would not necessarily think of as such. By the 1970s, their numbers included a Poet Laureate, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Master of Balliol and general secretary of Britain's largest trade union. If each of these already has their article in the Dictionary, thousands more were similarly embedded in different corners of British society without ever achieving such celebrity. Far fewer of us, for example, would recognise a name like that of Bert Ramelson. Nevertheless, there could be no doing justice to the great industrial conflicts of the 1960s-70s without mentioning his activities as a communist industrial organiser – as famously Harold Wilson did on the floor of the House of Commons. Admirers of the 2014 film *Pride* may readily associate Mark Ashton with the solidarities that crystallised around the last great miners' strike of the 1980s – though possibly they do not even know that Ashton too was a communist organiser.

As with any political movement or tradition, the great advantage of biography is how it takes us beyond the boundaries within which we usually think of any such collective enterprise. One such boundary is that between one period and another. In the wider picture of communism, the key defining event is the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, from which communism as an international movement is usually dated. Nevertheless, we can see from these entries how even leading British communists like Tom Bell were indelibly marked by the older socialist traditions in which they were first politicised. For some of these communists, like Bell, there was to be no relinquishing that party commitment once it was adopted. Coming of age in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, Andrew Rothstein was among the very few able to demonstrate absolute loyalty to the Soviet state from its foundation to its collapse. A.L. Morton was another, whose conceptions of a radical history pushed at the limits of party discipline, but would never have overstepped them. Though there were obviously many more such cases, communism was a movement with a high membership turnover, and many more passed through it than necessarily remained there. The communist commitments of Eden and Cedar Paul thus form only one part of a multi-faceted career, while the case of Karl Polanyi shows how it was possible to move through similar milieux without ever necessarily adopting the tenets of official communism.

Another boundary brought into question by the entries is that of the highly gendered roles performed by communists. Formally speaking, communism as a creed of emancipation was meant to transcend the division of the sexes. Eden and Cedar Paul represented the attempt to embody this ideal in their own collaborations, and Ruth and Edmund Frow continued that tradition within their joint work in the cause of working-class education. Nevertheless, there were many more lives than that of Marian Ramelson, communist wife of Bert, and one with a much longer career as an activist who nevertheless became overshadowed by her husband. In the words of one of her contemporaries, much influenced by later feminists, the centre of communism's stage was 'occupied by Man'.

Most striking of all, perhaps, is how often these were lives that were also transnational, overstepping national boundaries and linking a section of British society with movements and ideals of truly global scope. Long predating the Russian revolutions, a tradition of socialist internationalism can be traced through émigré socialists like Johann Eccarius, or through Helen Macfarlane's rendering of the *Communist Manifesto* into English. Texts, like activists, could circulate internationally, as epitomised by the way the young Mao Zedong in Beijing found an inspiration in Thomas Kirkup's history of socialism that Kirkup himself would neither have

anticipated nor much have relished. Theodore Rothstein, father of Andrew, was a Russian émigré of considerable standing in socialist circles who after 1917 became a crucial point of contact with the Bolsheviks.

It is one of the fallacies of communist history that there was nothing more to this internationalism than a sort of surrogate Russian nationalism. Ramelson was one of those who demonstrated that by fighting in Spain, and Ralph Fox was arguably the most gifted of the communist writers who died there. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the centre of communism's stage was also occupied by the world's first and for many years only professedly socialist state. For Walter Duranty, who through the syndication of his writings was one of Stalin's most famous western apologists, there were no graver consequences than possible professional embarrassment. For Ivy Litvinov and Rose Cohen, both British women who married leading Soviet figures, that stakes were incomparably higher; and it is a measure of the scale of Stalin's terror that Litvinov's survival is in some ways more remarkable than the fact that Cohen was among the million or so who lost their lives in the single year of 1937. As increasingly we see how Britain's history has for centuries been a global history, the distinctly transnational lives of British communists are likely to continue to attract the interest so evident in this new selection of ODNB entries.

Kevin Morgan

## **October 2018: summary of newly-added lives**

### **Global lives**

In South Africa, 2017 – the centenary of the birth of **Oliver Tambo (1917–1993)**, national chairman of the African National Congress (ANC) – was designated ‘the year of O. R. Tambo’. Having been a schoolteacher in Johannesburg, Tambo qualified and practised in law, originally in partnership with Nelson Mandela. As deputy president of the ANC, he fled South Africa in 1960 following the Sharpeville massacre, and arrived in London as an exile in time for the meeting of the Commonwealth prime ministers. For the next thirty years, London was his family's home, though as head of the ANC's external mission he spent much time in Africa. During the late 1980s he frequently met business and political leaders in Britain, including the foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe, before returning to South Africa in 1990.

The international lawyer **Charles Henry Alexandrowicz (1902–1975)**, born in the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia, and educated at Cracow, where he practised and taught law, came to London early in the Second World War with the Polish government in exile, and took British citizenship in 1950. At the University of Madras, in newly-independent India, from 1951 to 1961 he studied interactions between Indians and Europeans in the eighteenth century and found that until about 1800 Europeans considered Asian and African states equal members of the family of nations. His own life as a naturalized British citizen reflected Britain's complex role in the period of decolonization, while his work looked forward to a less Eurocentric international order.

Two lives included in this release were concerned with countering the racial discrimination that students from India and the West Indies, especially, faced in Britain. By profession an organist and music teacher, **Mary Trevelyan (1897–1983)**, became interested in the welfare of overseas students through her brother, a civil servant in India and in 1932 was appointed warden of Student Movement House in London, which had been founded as a club 'for students of all nations'. After the Second World War she fund-raised for International Students House, which opened in London in 1965, when she became first director. Born in St Kitts into a family of European descent, **Bryan Earle King (1906-1987)** read law at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and subsequently taught law there. He identified with West Indian culture, welcomed visitors from the West Indies, and helped to set up the West Indian Students Centre in Earl's Court, London, of which he was chairman from 1963 to 1969.

Four lives represent the experiences of those came from the Caribbean or West Africa and settled in Britain. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, the gambler and entrepreneur **Joe Erskine (1874/1875–1925)** started his working life as a seaman, sailing between Australia and the Cape,

but settled in the Tiger Bay area of Cardiff where he opened a boarding house, which developed into other business interests, including boxing management, before moving to London where he opened a venue off the Tottenham Court Road which attracted a racially mixed clientele. The singer and entertainer **Ben Simmons (b. 1894–8 d. in or after 1934)**, born in the Gold Coast, came to Britain before the First World War, and in the 1920s lived in London's Fitzrovia where he made his historical mark as a recording artist, singing in West African languages. By 1929 he had recorded 105 songs in Fante and Asante. The saxophonist, clarinettist, and bandleader **Joe Appleton (1903/4–1991)**, born in Jamaica, was a musician in the West Indies Regiment before finding work with dance bands in Birmingham. He sought to play jazz in a period before this was fashionable, though from 1955 was able to spend five years at the Panama Club, Soho, where he created opportunities for a new generation of West Indian musicians to learn from experienced performers. The Antigua-born jazz promoter and marijuana advocate, **Johnny Edgecombe (1932–2010)** went to sea as a child, and spent time in the Bay community at Cardiff before settling in Notting Hill where he ran various enterprises on the edge of the law. He was involved in an altercation at the end of 1962 which was a catalyst for the political crisis involving John Profumo. In later life he established a jazz venue and promoted jazz event in south-east London.

Three women's lives had transnational dimensions in Europe. Between 1805 and 1814 **Lady Mount Cashell (1772–1835)** led 'a vagabond existence' in various locations in England and on the continent of Europe, using the name Mrs Mason. Born in Dublin, she was brought up on an estate in County Cork. Her governess Mary Wollstonecraft, was the formative influence on her early life. She associated with republicans and democrats, and joined the United Irishmen, before in 1801 setting out with her family to travel on the continent. Separation from her husband led to a decade of rootlessness, before settling in Pisa. While in Italy, she wrote her

most important book, *Advice for Young Mothers* (1823). A Sheffield philanthropist and slavery abolitionist **Mary Anne Rawson (1801-1887)** who was founder member with her mother of the Sheffield Female Anti-Slavery Society, attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention, held in London in 1840, and hosted antislavery lecturers from America. She later supported the Italian nationalist movement. The roots of Rawson's internationalism lay in evangelicalism, and this was also a factor in the work of the translator **Sophia Susannah Taylor (1817–1911)** who, between 1862 to 1896 was one of the most prolific and accomplished translators of theological literature – mainly from German - in the Victorian period.

From a Quaker family, the pacifist and humanitarian **Ruth Fry (1878–1962)** began her relief work during the South African war, after which she helped to reconstruct Boer communities. During the First World War she was general Secretary of the Friends War Victims Relief Committee, which was distinctive in bring relief to European civilians (as opposed to combatants). She visited Bolshevik Russia during the famine of 1921-3 but by then the methods of her organization were seen to be antiquated, though her focus on the psychology of conflict and poverty came to be seen as model for organizations working with traumatized populations. Responses to famines in the Soviet Union link two other subjects in the update. The mother of the Welsh journalist **Gareth Richard Vaughan Jones (1905–1935)**, had worked as a nanny in Hugheskova (Donetsk) in the Ukraine, and from her he gained a fascination with Russia. Travelling widely in the Europe during the 1920s, he was a Germanophile, but underestimated the Nazis. During his visits to the Soviet Union he witnessed the privations and atmosphere of fear, and exposed the famine in Ukraine. On a trip to China in 1935 he was captured by kidnappers and killed. Jones's writings on the Ukraine famine were attacked by the Liverpool-born, Cambridge-educated *New York Times* journalist **Walter Duranty (1884–1957)**, who had lived in Paris before the First World War and was in the Soviet Union where he reported on the

early years of the Bolshevik regime. He gained the trust of Stalin, who accorded him interviews. Duranty's reports on forced industrialization and collectivization won him the Pulitzer Prize, an award later controversial for his denial of the Ukraine famine. After 1940 he settled in the USA and died in Florida.

After the First World War, the Aberystwyth-born son of a philosophy professor **Elias Henry Jones (1883–1942)**, who had joined the Indian Civil Service and served in Burma, published an immediately popular prisoner-of-war escape narrative and critique of spiritualism, *The Road to Endor*. Taken prisoner by the Turks at the fall of Kut (1916), he survived a 700 mile march, followed by imprisonment in Anatolia, where he and an Australian fellow prisoner affected to be spiritualists to deceive the Ottoman commandant, who was persuaded to move them to Constantinople where they feigned insanity and gained their release. He wrote the account of his escape while recuperating at his father's Scottish home. A shadowy figure who moved between continents during his lifetime, **Ernest George Hayward Osborn (1891–1957)** was born in New Zealand, the son of London-born immigrants, became a schoolteacher and journalist, but after getting into debt went to Japan, then Seattle. A failed attempt to establish a radio broadcast station in Tokyo led him to Shanghai, where he founded a radio corporation and transmitted China's first commercial broadcast (23 January 1923). After further ventures in Manila, Singapore, and Manchuria, he settled in Britain where he was twice imprisoned for fraud, was declared bankrupt, and died penniless in Shoreditch.

From earlier periods, the self-styled prophet **Abraham Whitrow (fl. 1689-1714)**, rose to prominence as a key figure in the *rapprochement* between the Philadelphian English Dissenters and the 'French Prophets', an émigré group of millenarian French Calvinists in Britain. A central

player in the dramatic failed public resurrection of Thomas Emes, in the presence of some 20,000 people, Whitrow later became a notorious figure. The traveller and author **Anthony Knyvett (1577? – 1649)**, is significant for producing the earliest extensive account of Brazil made by an Englishman. He sailed with Thomas Cavendish's fleet for the South Seas at the age of fourteen in 1591. Abandoned off the coast of São Paulo due to sickness he was enslaved by the Portuguese for eight years. In this time he travelled extensively through the Brazilian hinterland in Portuguese service, or escaping to find refuge with indigenous tribes. His account of these experiences was published by the geographer Samuel Purchas in 1625.

In contrast to those global lives, two articles reflecting bicentenaries of events in the turbulent years after 1815 are intensely local in scope. The first, on **The Pentrich Rebels** (*act.* 1817), surveys the participants in a rising centred on the Derbyshire village of Pentrich in June 1817, who believed that they were taking part in a nationwide revolution. The Peterloo massacre of 1819 was the defining point in the radical career of **John Knight (1762-1838)**, who was born in a hamlet on the border between Yorkshire and Lancashire. Inspired by the French revolution, he became involved in the democratic movement in early nineteenth-century Manchester. Arrested and imprisoned in 1817, he continued to be active after his release and took part in the celebrated reform meeting at St Peter's Fields, Manchester (16 August 1819), which was dispersed by the yeomanry cavalry, resulting in eighteen deaths and hundreds of wounded.

### **Marx and after: Communist lives**

In the bicentenary year of the birth of Karl Marx, who arrived in London in August 1849, the latest *ODNB* update adds a selection of lives of figures influenced in different ways by his writings. Significant for producing in 1850 the first English translation of the *Communist Manifesto*, **Helen Macfarlane (1818–1860)**, who used the pseudonym Howard Morton, had

been in Vienna at the time of the 1848 revolutions, working as a governess after her family's calico printing business in Renfrewshire had collapsed in the trade depression of the early 1840s. She was living in Fitzrovia when she wrote her translation, and went on to marry a Cheshire parson. A disciple of Marx, the German-born tailor **John George Eccarius (1818–1889)** travelled from Hamburg to London in 1846, and after 1848 spent the remainder of his life in the capital, becoming a naturalized British subject. A member of the first central committee of the League of Communists, he served from 1864 on the general council of the First International, whose proceedings he reported for *The Times* newspaper. Another Victorian who engaged with Marx, if not as an admirer of his formulation of socialism, was **Thomas Kirkup (1844–1912)**, the son of a shepherd in the Cheviot hills. He studied at Edinburgh university, and universities in Germany, Switzerland, and France, developing a scholarly knowledge of continental socialism unrivalled in Britain. Resident in Wimbledon, he contributed the entry on 'Socialism' to the ninth edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1887) which he expanded into his major work, *The History of Socialism* (1892). Its Chinese edition (1902) was read by Mao who accounted it, along with the *Communist Manifesto* and Kautsky's *Class Struggle*, among the three works which built up his faith in Marxism.

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was founded in the summer of 1920. Its principal architect was **Theodore Rothstein (1871–1953)**, born in Lithuania and briefly a student at Kiev University, who arrived in Leeds, Yorkshire in 1891 and, later moving to Hampstead, made a living as a socialist writer, and a critic of imperialism. Following the Russian revolution, he was a key link with the Bolsheviks, and returned to Russia permanently in 1922. One of the organizers of the new party was the Glasgow-born ironmoulder and autodidact **Tom Bell (1882–1944)**, who memorized Marxist texts 'paragraph by paragraph', and had a lifelong distrust of 'reformists' and intellectuals. The party's founder members included **Eden Paul**

**(1865–1944)**, a medical doctor who had been in practice in Branksome, Dorset before the First World War, and his partner **Cedar Paul (1879–1972)**, a convent-educated professional singer. Unconventional in dress and habit, they were prolific writers and translators. Promoting the idea of communist ‘ergatocracy’ (dictatorship by educated workers), they were enthusiasts for new ideas of rejuvenation, sexology and birth control.

Among the party’s early recruits was **Rose Cohen (1894–1937)**, born in Spitalfields the daughter of a tailor of Polish-Jewish descent. A clerk, she worked for the Labour Research Department until in 1923 she took employment for the Comintern in Moscow, and was executed there in November 1937, as a supposed British spy, in Stalin’s purges. Determined from the age of thirteen to become a writer, **Ivy Litvinov (1889–1977)**, born in Bloomsbury, was instead placed in employment by her stepfather as a clerk in the High Holborn headquarters of the Prudential Assurance Company until her marriage in 1916 to the translator and future Soviet People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Maxim Litvinov. Following her husband’s arrest and deportation in 1918, she moved to Moscow in 1922. She escaped the purges, returning to Britain in 1972. After wartime service as an army officer **Ralph Fox (1900–1936)** studied modern languages at Oxford where in 1921 he was the only student in the party’s Oxford branch. He spent much of the 1920s in literary and propaganda work, before becoming a researcher and librarian at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. During the Spanish civil war he enlisted in the International Brigades, and was killed in action in December 1936. Also studying at Oxford after war service, **Andrew Rothstein (1898-1994)**, son of the CPGB founder Theodore Rothstein, became the connecting link between Soviet institutions in the UK, such as the trade delegation and press agency, and the CPGB. After the Second World War, he was an ardent defender of Stalin and Stalinism, and in the late 1980s remained a critic of ‘revisionism’.

A voracious reader and autodidactic **Edmund Frow, (1906–1997)**, who served an apprenticeship as a toolmaker, joined the CPGB in 1924 and remained a member for 60 years. He met **Ruth Frow (1922–2008)**, who had joined the party in 1944, at a summer school in Hastings. United by a shared love of books, they created from the late 1950s the Working Class Movement Library as a public resource. The bibliophile and bookseller **(Arthur) Leslie Morton, (1903–1987)** encountered communism as a student at Cambridge and joined the CPGB in 1928, spending 35 years on the East Anglia District Committee. His *People's History of England* (1938) was sent to 40,000 Left Book Club members on its publication. The Viennese political economist and social theorist **Karl Polanyi (1886–1964)**, who came to Britain in 1933, was an adherent of Guild Socialism and versions of Christian socialism, but studied Marx's early works, and on the basis of his experiences in Britain produced his own critique of the market system and liberal capitalism in his survey, *The Great Transformation* (published in Great Britain in 1945). The father of **Marian Ramelson (1908–1967)** was a socialist and trade unionist engine-fitter in Leeds, and the long spells of unemployment which he endured drew her to the CPGB which she joined in 1930. After attending the International Lenin School in Moscow, she became the party's district organizer for the West Riding, and in 1939 became one of only two members of the CPGB central committee. She was displaced from both positions following her marriage in 1939, though in 1949 she travelled to Beijing as a party delegate and was the first Briton to greet the new Chinese People's Republic. Her husband **Bert Ramelson (1910–1994)**, was born into a Jewish family in the Ukraine, and brought up in Canada. Having joined the International Brigades in Spain and, by then a party member, he settled in Britain in 1939, becoming Yorkshire District Secretary in 1953. As National Industrial Organizer from 1965, he became a prominent figure during a decade of industrial militancy, and remained a party member until its dissolution in 1991. In contrast to the austere traditions of earlier generations of recruits to the party, the gay activist **Mark Ashton (1960–1987)**, who became general secretary to the Young Communist League in 1985, challenged the CPGB to respond to feminism, lesbian and gay liberation, and

the black community. He was a founder of the Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners, the support group established during the miners' strike in 1984-5.

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