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Hogsbjerg, CJ (2010) *Brian Pearce (1915-2008)*. Oxford University Press (OUP).

<https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbq010>

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OBITUARY

Brian Pearce (1915-2008)

The famous remark attributed to Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1956, that ‘historians are dangerous people...capable of upsetting everything’, touched on an important truth. Even if the bureaucratic dictatorship over which he presided could hardly claim to have been the first ruling elite in history to have discovered the inherently potentially subversive nature of historical study, the fateful year of 1956 reaffirmed this when Khrushchev’s own words and actions provoked a rebellion against the infallible authority of the Kremlin in, among other places, the Historians’ Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). One leading figure at the heart of that revolt was Brian Pearce, and Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’ at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and his ordering of the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 would be fundamental in the making of Pearce into one of the most ‘dangerously capable’ British Marxist historians of his generation.

Twenty two years earlier, in 1934, in the midst of the worst period of capitalist crisis which had only served to confirm his early revolutionary and socialist ideas, Pearce had joined the Communist party as a first year history student at University College, London. His talents and abilities as an historian were apparent early on, though perhaps his confidence was slightly knocked when he just missed out on the first class degree he (and, indeed, the party) clearly hoped he would achieve. Nonetheless, he undertook doctoral research into sixteenth-century England with the authoritative biographer of Queen Elizabeth I, JE Neale, though the outbreak of the Second World War saw him abandon his thesis to volunteer and train as an army officer.¹ Pearce seems to have developed an early taste for military history, and after serving in Northern Ireland, India, Burma and Malaya, Pearce was invited to work on the government’s official History of the War (1946). Back in London post-war, Pearce combined work as a civil servant in the education and training department of the Treasury (where he began to learn Russian), with various forms of party work. In particular, the erudite Pearce played an important and influential but somewhat overlooked role in the early modern section of the newly formed Communist Party Historians’ Group. As David Parker notes, Pearce ‘shared with [Christopher] Hill and the History Group’s doyenne Dona Torr a passionate desire to establish a definitive view of the English Civil War of the 1640s as a bourgeois revolution that conformed to their reading of the Marxist classics.’²

The Historians' Group were an outstanding constellation of Marxist intellectuals, but they well understood that there were some periods and topics of history that it was quite inappropriate for them to study. The history of the labour movement in Britain after 1920 was a notoriously problematic area, for it inevitably would necessitate analysis of the not altogether glorious role played by the CPGB itself during the General Strike of 1926 and subsequently. In 1949, when Pearce privately wrote and circulated around the party an article marking the twentieth anniversary of the appointment of Harry Pollitt to the position of general secretary of the CPGB, he was quietly disciplined by an apparatchik. 'It was not, he said, that there was anything incorrect in what I had written: on the contrary...but the story could be misunderstood and used against the party' if in the hands of [Trotskyist] 'enemies', Pearce recalled.³ Yet Pearce acquiesced with such prohibitions, even when, to his subsequent shame, in 1954, he agreed to use the euphemism 'given an opportunity to develop elsewhere' instead of 'deported' with respect to the local Chechens and Ingushes in a propagandist pamphlet on Northern Ossetia.⁴ Such a work of 'Official History' had come his way after his visit to the Soviet Union with Andrew Rothstein in 1953 with the British-Soviet Friendship Society, but Pearce would return disillusioned with the 'actually existing socialism' he had seen being built there. Pearce's friend on the Daily Worker (where Pearce had worked briefly as copytaster in 1950), Alison Macleod, recalled him telling her about one experience while on a long train journey from Moscow to the Caucasus. Stalin was dead, and it was suddenly reported that the loyal Stalinist everyone had once expected would replace him, Beria, had just been shot after a secret trial. 'Everyone on the train was reading Pravda with interest – an unusual spectacle. Brian went up and down the train, trying to find someone willing to talk about Beria's execution. He failed.'⁵

Yet it was not until the crisis of 1956 which posed point blank the question of taking sides with either Russian tanks or the revolutionary workers' councils thrown up in Hungary that Pearce, like many other Communists, finally decided to break with the party and in his words 'shake off the incubus of Stalinism'. Some of the complexities of the political and intellectual transition which saw Pearce become a Trotskyist during the year of 1957 have already been explored by scholars, but it naturally involved much reading and study of Trotsky's writings and the literature of the Trotskyist movement. In a parting shot to his old party, which he had in fact already left in both spirit and deed before he was expelled, Pearce noted that 'one of the things I most regret about my 23 years in the Communist Party is that I allowed myself to be miseducated into helping in the vilification of Trotsky and his ideas...only through what you call "Trotskyism" can people who have rightly become disgusted with Stalinism be saved, so to speak, for Marxism'.⁶

Pearce's desire to 'save' other former Communists for revolutionary politics now manifested itself in four years of impeccably logical and often devastatingly powerful writing and commentary on a wide range of topics. His pioneering essays from this period on the often strained relationship between the Communist party and the wider British working class movement give a glimpse of some of the possibilities for advances in knowledge and understanding which were possible once a member of Communist Party Historians' Group won the freedom to study the history of the party itself. Though perhaps inevitably slightly tinged in places with the distinctly catastrophist perspectives of the Trotskyist sect around Gerry Healy which Pearce had joined (a perspective not dissimilar to that of the Communist International during its 'Third Period' phase which had so appealed in his youth), these articles clearly broke new ground.⁷

Yet among all those members of the Communist Party Historians' Group who revolted against Stalinism in 1956, Pearce was tragically to remain somewhat alone in pursuing such heretical lines of inquiry. After 1961, Pearce's sense of independence as a scholar took on yet further meaning when he left Healy's Socialist Labour League, but the inspiration of the birth and defence of 'Soviet power' in the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War continued to fire and fascinate him. Picking up the mantle left by Max Eastman, Pearce put his deep knowledge of Soviet history together with his natural faculty for languages to emerge as the leading translator of Leon Trotsky.⁸ From the 1960s onwards, Pearce made a name for himself far beyond the ranks of the far left as a superbly gifted translator from French and Russian, with a fastidious attention to detail and meaning, which won him the Scott-Moncrieff prize three times. Through such work Pearce made a lasting contribution to scholarship in general, and Marxist scholarship in particular.⁹

In later years, his passion for the 'oracular truth' together with his dry laconic wit remained undimmed. With a keen nose able to detect even the mildest whiff of hypocrisy and with what his fellow Russianist Evan Mawdsley called his 'ear for those historical disharmonies which demand investigation', Pearce continued to challenge even the most obscure myths of Soviet history invented by what Trotsky once called 'the Stalinist school of falsification'. Alongside his translation work, Pearce gave papers, penned review articles and even wrote a characteristically provocatively titled and themed monograph *How Haig Saved Lenin* (1987).¹⁰ While 'How Trotsky Saved Pearce' would constitute an equally provocative title for any future study of his own life and work, many scholars of British Communism or Russian history will doubtless feel they owe him a certain debt of gratitude. Pearce's legacy remains an inspiring one for any historian who wants to 'upset everything' today.

Christian Høgsbjerg

Word count: 1,386.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ One article testifies to Pearce's early historical researches, 'Elizabethan Food Policy and the Armed Forces', *The Economic History Review*, 12: 1/2, 1942, pp. 39-46.

² David Parker (ed.), *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution. Debates of the British Communist Historians 1940-1956*, London, 2008, pp. 10-11. See also Parker's obituary of Pearce, 'His Marxism never in doubt', *Socialist History Society Newsletter*, December 2008.

³ Quoted in John McIlroy, 'A Communist Historian in 1956: Brian Pearce and the Crisis of British Stalinism', *Revolutionary History*, 9:3, 2006, p. 89.

⁴ Terry Brotherstone, '1956: Tom Kemp and Others' in *History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism*, ed. Terry Brotherstone and Geoff Pilling, London, 1996, p. 316. The pamphlet in question appeared as *A People Reborn* (1954) though the only author credited was Andrew Rothstein. See also Terry Brotherstone, 'History, Truth, Context and Meaning: Two Memories of the 1956-57 Crisis in the Communist Party of Great Britain' in 1956 and *All That*, ed. Keith Flett, Cambridge, 2007, and Brotherstone's obituary of Pearce in the *Guardian*, 11 December 2008.

⁵ Alison Macleod, *The Death of Uncle Joe*, Woodbridge, 1997, p. 43.

⁶ From Pearce's December 1957 letter to the Appeals Commission of the CPGB, quoted in 'The Brian Pearce Dossier', *Revolutionary History*, 9:3, 2006, p. 143.

⁷ Some of the original articles were republished together with a piece by labour historian Michael Woodhouse. See Brian Pearce and Michael Woodhouse, *Essays on the History of Communism in Britain*, London, 1975. Much of Pearce's work from this critical period, including some of his popular weekly 'Constant Reader' columns for the Trotskyist Newsletter, can be found on the 'Brian Pearce Internet Archive', <http://www.marx.org/archive/pearce/index.htm>.

⁸ See in particular Pearce's beautifully annotated five-volume collection of 'The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky', *How the Revolution Armed*, London & New York, 1979-81.

⁹ After losing his various professional jobs with the CPGB, Pearce taught English as a foreign language at the London Municipal Institute from 1957 to 1977. The University of Aberdeen has the main collection of Pearce's papers, but Pearce donated material widely, including for example, the Leeds Russian Archive held in the Brotherton Library.

¹⁰ Evan Mawdsley, 'Foreword' to Brian Pearce, *How Haig Saved Lenin*, New York, 1987, p x. Pearce was a longstanding member of the Study Group of the Russian Revolution in Britain, and contributed regularly to their journal *Sbornik*, and its successor *Revolutionary Russia*, while also penning book reviews for a range of journals including *The Slavonic and East European Review*.