

IS: Historiography and mythology¹

By Sean Matgamna

ERIC Hobsbawm somewhere discusses one of the oddest conundrums in labour historiography, one paralleled now in the historiography of IS/SWP: the 20th century reputation of the Fabian Society as far-sighted pioneers of independent labour representation — the gap between what was and what is afterwards widely accepted as having been. The facts flatly contradicted the Fabians' reputation. They *opposed* independent working-class politics for as long as they could, pursuing a policy of 'permeating' the Liberal Party with ideas about state and municipal enterprise. They 'come in' late to the movement for a Labour Party. Yet, by the time the Party was a force in national politics, their reputation as the vindicated pioneers was enormous. How come? Many Fabians were journalists and writers, and they "permeated" and shaped much of the subsequent historiography.

The gap between the *Socialist Review/International Socialists* [SR/IS] group's 'posthumous' reputation and the facts of their history is of the same magnitude. I think it owes much to the same sort of cause. Former ISers write, reminisce, rationalise, romanticise, retrospectively select and reconstruct. From Gus MacDonald, who edited the youth paper *Young Guard* in the '60s and is now head of Scotland's commercial TV network, downwards (or upwards), such people are extremely numerous in the media. Many who have moved on politically but remain 'left' tend to glorify IS — themselves when young — in retrospect, clinging to the self-image they once had, even when they feel obliged to add criticism of what it has become — that is, vindicate what they themselves now are.

The SWP itself has over decades worked at honing and polishing and refining, and bowdlerising, to create a heroic myth of its own origin and early glories. And why not? What, as the cynical Stalinist once asked, is history after all but current politics and current organisational needs read backwards?

But the revolutionary movement has to be the true and full memory of the class. If history is not recorded accurately, then we cannot learn the lessons of our own experience, and the experience of the movement. We cannot develop. Awareness, intelligence, capacity to integrate experience declines. The experience of the Healyites here is a grim warning for the SWP too. By falsifying, and then again falsifying, at every turn, the SLL rendered themselves incapable of learning from their own history. It was one of the causes of their utter political destruction.

Those who falsify history, or hone and pare the unruly truth into pretty stories, cultivating myth on the soil of induced amnesia, put out the retrospective eyes of the movement. They corrupt the consciousness of those who need to learn from history if they are not to repeat it.

In Ian Birchall's history², published by the SWP, there are many lies, mostly lies of omission. Birchall's is "history" reduced to a simple,

uncomplicated story, to the sort of thing that might in an earlier age have furnished believers with short texts for rendition in poker-work or fretwork for display on living room walls.

Socialist Review/IS was sane, rational, balanced, realistic, modest. They were, above all else, as they continuously boasted, "modest" — self-assertively, preeningly, proudly, arrogantly, Pecksniffianly, overweeningly modest. They had a full, authentic, free-flowing Marxism, with a membership, and an overall high political culture, to match. They had learned from Rosa Luxemburg. In contrast to all others, they got it right about Stalinism. The theory of state capitalism, their talisman and lodestone, kept the group uniquely on a steady, consistently working-class course. The story is usually told as if there is only one state capitalist theory, which emerged in 1948 from the inspired brain of Cliff. IS got it right about the revival of capitalism in the '60s. SR/IS stood out for these qualities against all other things Trotskyist or Trotskyisant. They were in a league of one and in a class of their own.

In reality SR/IS was a group whose relationship, in the '50s and early '60s, to the more enterprising Healy organisation which tried to organise broad activity in the labour movement, was that they would 'intervene' in their activities — Labour Party and trade union — to make propaganda. They would score points. Often ridiculous points. (Some of the incidental things they said were, I think, right against the Healyites, as on German rearmament, for example.)

In its much-romanticised great days of the '60s, IS was distinguished from other 'Trotskyists' — and, probably, from the SR group of the '50s — by the middle-class and upper-bourgeois background of many of its members and by the, sometimes deliberately flaunted, and even camped-up, bourgeois ethos that saturated it. It was, indeed, in a *class* of its own!

It operated on the assumption that capitalism was stable and expanding and would remain so, not "forever", but for now and the foreseeable future.

In a 'credo' published at the beginning of 1961 for an international audience³, the Editorial Board of IS presented its operational assumptions.

"Let us admit it: workers have lost some of the consciousness of class over the post-war years... They have lost some of the cohesion, some of the power of concerted collective action which alone can snatch mankind from the brink of disaster... the socialist movement presents a picture of lifeless orthodoxies... and sects feeding off each other... There is no point bemoaning these facts, or thinking that the socialist tradition is valueless simply because our lives happen to span a period of reaction. Capitalism is in a surge of expansion. We can do nothing about it and little in the short run to stop the setback to the socialist movement that stems from it... Our actions cannot be on a heroic scale only. A slogan, any slogan, is unlikely to catch the imagination of millions and crystallise mass action..."

This bit of middle-class despair-mongering was 'balanced' by grand but vague and unfocused conclusions about what in this world socialists could hope to do:

"Our job is simpler and more difficult: to help formulate and clarify the consciousness of class, the feeling of self-reliance, of constituting an alternative centre of power and government *the world over...* [their emphasis]."

The IS 'credo' was published just after the great December 1960-January 1961 general strike in Belgium. Cliff would use the May 1968 French general strike, which was spontaneous, but surely not qualitatively different, to signal a "return to Bolshevism". The only lesson they learned from Belgium was that '*Jeune Garde*', the name of the Belgian Young Socialists' paper, was a good name. Thus *Young Guard*.

On the ground in Britain the organisation drew far-reaching conclusions — mirroring the Croslandite Labour right wing then, just as after 1979 it would, with its 'theory' of "the downturn", mirror Eric Hobsbawm and *Marxism Today* — and — theories about Stalinism, aside — it was these, above all, that distinguished them from, for example, the Healyite SLL. In the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS), for example, they operated on a perspective of long-time boom and long-time coexistence with the Labour bureaucracy.

1 As in the previous article ["A funny tale agreed upon?", *Workers' Liberty* 41] I will, where appropriate, tell the story in terms of my own experience. The author was in IS and represented the Trotskyist Tendency on its National Committee from November 1968 to December 1971.

2 *The Smallest Mass Party in the World — The SWP 1951-79* (1980). Birchall repeats the IS leadership's equivalent for the Trotskyist Tendency (TT) of the policeman accusing his target of headbutting his truncheon, that the TT caused "a serious disruption of IS's work in a number of areas". No, we didn't! I will discuss the IS leaders' response to the TT, by way of the policy of splitting branches — what the TT called "ghettoisation". While Birchall's account is evasive and, in the last reduction untrue, he does not repeat the ridiculous — but very widespread — story — Higgins repeats it — that the TT wanted the repartition of Ireland in 1969. This may be — unless my memory is badly at fault — because he himself was in or around the "Democratic Centralist" group — Constance Lever, Noel Tracey, Fred Lindop, etc. — which backed our IS conference resolution on Ireland offering only a few, no doubt sorely needed, drafting amendments.

3 In vol 3, no 1, 1961 of the *Review*, at the Imre Nagy Institute, Brussels.

An error of memory crept into "A funny tale agreed upon" [WL41]. There had, as I wrote, been an IS conference majority against what in mid 1971 became the NC line of opposition to the European Community. But it was less 'overwhelming' than my recollections of it led me to write, and the anti-EC minority had been more substantial. Everything else was as I described it and the inexactitude does not invalidate any of the conclusions. There was an IS conference decision; the NC majority and the IS "machine" did what I described it as doing.

HEGEMONISED, like all the Marxist groups, only more so, by the success of reformism in the 1940s and 1950s, the group's "Luxemburgism" meant ideas such as this: as Luxemburg did not leave the social democrats until late — 1918 — so revolutionaries will not leave the Labour Party until the revolutionary workers are on the streets. For example, the 1959 edition of *Rosa Luxemburg*⁴:

"Rosa Luxemburg's reluctance to form an independent revolutionary party is quite often cited by Stalinists as a grave error and an important cause for the defeat of the German revolution of 1918. They argue that Lenin was opposed to the revolutionary left's adherence to the SPD and continuing association with Kautsky. There is no truth at all in this legend. [This passage was expurgated from the 1968 edition.]"

Not only Stalinists considered it a grave error! Lenin, July 1921: "We know the history of the Second International, its fall and bankruptcy. Do we not know that the great misfortune of the working class movement in Germany is that the break was not brought about before the war? This cost the lives of 20,000 workers..."

Luxemburg understood the German Kautskyite 'Centre' sooner than did Lenin. It was a question not of who said what first, but of a mature summing-up by Lenin and the Communist International of the defeat of the German revolution. When Cliff dismissed this he was dismissing not a Stalinist legend but the *Leninist theory of the party*, in its most finished — Communist International — form. The point, however, is that Cliff — in 1959! — refused to draw serious Marxist conclusions from the experience of the German left.

As late as the crisis in the LPYS on the eve of the Wilson government, a central leader of the group, John Palmer, could hold out these perspectives for the Labour youth movement, in which IS had the leadership of the non-SLL left, and firmly rejected the idea of head-on conflict with the bureaucratic political leaders of reformism:

"The onus is on the YS to find a relationship with our Party which will radically reduce those frictions and clashes which are leaving such a bitter heritage in the ranks of young people joining the YS. *One thing must be made clear above all*. There is no future for the YS outside the Labour Party; our only hope is to find a relationship even more close to it than at present, but one which will allow us essential freedom as a youth movement."⁵

A tall order if a fighting socialist youth movement is meant. The right-wing Labour leaders would soon be in government, carrying out vicious attacks on the working class. The point is that *Young Guard* had a rather cosy view of the future. At issue with the SLL — then — was not staying in or leaving the Labour Party, but whether or not Marxists should organise a small combat party.

Until they developed a perspective of rank and file industrial work, in the mid '60s, IS did not believe much could be done or attempted. Capitalism was stable, and would remain so for many years. In the mythology IS was being realistic, as against the SLL. In fact, they were no more realistic in their assessment than the SLL — different, erring on the other side, but not more realistic.

If the Healyites were scrap-happy and, like the SWP today, bent on needless self-isolation from the existing broad labour movement, IS was not a 'sane and sensible' revolutionary alternative to the SLL, but their rightist, quietist, middle-class mirror-image. This in the mythical histories is "the propaganda period", when nothing else was possible but propaganda. They neglect to point out that the governing ideas of the group were a large part of the reason why anything else was impossible.

Believing that capitalism was — for now — indefinitely expanding and stable, they were bitterly disappointed after 1964 that the Labour government did not deliver reforms to the working class. They drifted out of the Labour Party, where they had the leadership of the LPYS, more or less, after 1967 without a fight.

But, in fact, even if they had been right about the prospects for capitalism, for Marxists in Lenin's and Trotsky's school, their conclusion about what socialists should do and try to do, and about the nature of the organisation socialists should be building *within the mass labour movement*, simply would not follow. Marxists would build a serious organisation in the limited struggles, in preparation for when conditions broke.

The wild lurchings of Cliff in 1968, 'back' to Lenin and back to building a Leninist party; the scattering, in a tremendous convulsion of the group, of some of the "libertarian" forces IS had assembled; and the transparently contrived nature of the arguments and rationalisations that accompanied the lurch of '68 — these were the measure of the nonsense spun in IS's pseudo-Luxemburg period.

UNtil 1967/'68 the cadres were assembled on a vehement anti-Leninism. The operational idea of the organisation was that Leninism had bred Stalinism. Committed to being citizens of the existing labour movement, they were governed by the idea that any revolutionary initiative or leadership — in practice, almost any initiative by revolutionaries — risked or committed the sin of "substitutionism", and had to be avoided lest the bad example of Bolshevism — and, nearer home, the SLL — be succumbed to. Such ideas were deeply rooted in the group after '59/'60.

By hints and half-thoughts, Cliff's writings of this period⁶ postulated a serious connection between Bolshevism and Stalinism. For Cliff, like the mouse in the proverb, there is no animal bigger than the cat — the Healyite cat at that point. And what was said or hinted about Bolshevism and Stalinism was really designed to say something about the Healyites. It depends on hints and ambiguities, but the effect is clear. For example:

"However, if the state built by the Bolshevik Party reflected not only the will of the Party but of the total social reality in which the Bolsheviks had now found themselves, *one should not draw the conclusion that there was no causal connection at all between Bolshevik centralism, based on a hierarchy of professional revolutionaries, and the Stalinism of the future*." [note: IS summer 1960] [emphasis added].

What was this causal connection? Cliff does not — can not — spell it out, merely connecting it *in general* with the phenomenon of 'unevenness':

"From this unevenness in the working class flows the great danger of an autonomous development of the party and its machine, till it becomes, instead of the servant of the class, its master. This unevenness is a main cause of the danger of substitutionism". "The history of Bolshevism prior to the revolution is eloquent with Lenin's struggle against this danger...". "*Bolshevism*" surrendered to it in the end? Centralism and a machine amount to an inherent tendency to substitutionism.

But neither the Bolshevik party nor *its* machine ever became the master. Stalinism did not flow evenly from organic changes in Bolshevism. It was its dialectical negation. It rose on the mass graves of Lenin's Bolsheviks, against resistance, to the death, by those who had led the October revolution, Trotsky and others.

None of it was seriously argued or intellectually weighty against Trotsky's refutations of such ideas, and it was not, in Cliff, developed into a bravely clear and unambivalent position. But, beyond the writings, in the group and on the ground, the half-hearted stuff in Cliff came crude and raw to mean — in the LPYS, for example — a bundling of Bolshevism into the same bag as Stalinism, its murderer.

IN reality, to a massive extent, the group's history is the history of incoherent zig zags and numerous "quick change" operations. These were always the result of Tony Cliff's brainstorming, perceived opportunities, or factional needs, or the pet ideas of others who had captured Cliff's support. They were made — and still are made — with solipsistic disregard for logic or consistency. Or for what was said yesterday.

To take a most startling example: Cliff broke with the SR's conventionally Trotskyist ideas on Leninism and became an anti-Lenin "Luxemburgist" — anti-Leninist "Luxemburgism" until then had had its British home in the ILP⁸ — in '58/'9 in a mechanical, albeit panicked, response to the growth and magnetic pull of Healy's supposedly "Leninist" organisation. The SR group had mimicked and echoed the Healy organisation, even to word for word repetition of its slogans, such as — against nuclear weapons and US bases — "Black the bomb, black the bases" [black meant workers should refrain from all work on such things]. All but two or three of the members of the Socialist Review group voted — the vote was soon reversed — to join the Healy organisation.

And Cliff "moved back to Lenin" in '68 almost certainly because of the "opportunities" for group aggrandisement that then existed, concerning which much depended on the Healyite SLL's effective political hara-kiri over a long and excruciating period of increasing craziness. In an exact and perfect parallel to his appropriation of the ILP's anti-Lenin "Luxemburgism", Cliff after '68 would begin to appropriate and

⁴ Tony Cliff *Rosa Luxemburg* [dated 1959, actually published early 1960].

⁵ *Young Guard*

⁶ Tony Cliff, "On Substitutionism", *IS Journal* summer 1960; *Rosa Luxemburg*, 1959/'60.

⁷ Even, to take a well-documented example, when they found themselves in the leadership of a shop stewards committee at the crisis-ridden ENV engineering works in west London. *IS Journal*, summer 1967.

⁸ The evidence for what happened in '58/'59 is mostly to be found in *Socialist Leader*, the paper of the Independent Labour Party, then a small, sectarian group [in *SL* 29.9.59, for example].

over years systematically adopt much of the “build the party” neo-Oehlerite culture of the ‘60s Healy group.

What is now “Cliffism” was then pre-crazy Healyism. The whole present SWP system — of substituting a fetish, “build the revolutionary party”, for real politics; of subordinating all questions of working class politics, and all responses to the real class struggle, to the exigencies of organisation-building; of running the organisation as a tight, systematically sealed-off cult — all this was pioneered in Britain by the Healy group, to the early derision of IS, which foolishly then equated it with Leninism, Bolshevism and unfalsified Trotskyism.

In terms of the facts, SR/IS history such as this needs a lot of explaining. Birchall simply repeats Cliff’s rationalisation and the “good”, as distinct from the real, reasons, at each point in the story, with a feeble little bit of academic’s pseudo-criticism here and there to show independence. If what was said on day two flatly contradicts what was said, done and polemicised about on day one, that is fine. Conditions were “different”, or not ripe, then, on day one; they were ripe on day two. Who should know about ripeness and unripeness, about the time to sow — and what — and the time to reap? The shaman knows. Cliff knows. On day one, it was necessary and right to “bend the stick” in whatever direction Cliff was facing that day. The same on day two, on day ten... and always. “Forever and ever. Amen.”

Birchall’s account is essentially history told, so to speak, in the first person. The name of the author is Ian Birchall, but the “I” is Tony Cliff. At every stage in the story, what was, just has to be so. Just so. Everything was always more or less for the best in the best of all tendencies. If this were pop music it would be a corseted, toupéed, heavily made-up, self-infatuated, middle-aged man singing “My Way”!

Birchall achieves his effects by selection and suppression, and by ignoring what does not fit the artistic needs of a mythmaking bard, spinning imaginary political genealogies. He gets maximum favourable contrast for IS by measuring it repeatedly against the habitually, though variably, silly IMG of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, minimising the IS group’s decades of interaction with the Healy group.

Typically, Birchall mythologises: IS’s opposition in 1965 to a Labour government regulated Incomes Policy “left it almost completely isolated from the rest of the left”, he says. Which left? Not, apart from the IMG-ingestion, any part of the *revolutionary* left! But the relevant — and implied — left for comparison here *is* the Marxist left. This is a representative example of the tricky play with definitions, on which so much depends. While making much of IS virtue in opposing Incomes Policy, Birchall is silent about Michael Kidron freakishly accepting that trade unions should be involved in the Tory National Economic Development Council [*Socialist Review*, December 1961; letter by Sheila Leslie, March 1962].

The SR group — which was, at the start, just a Trotskyist group with a particular analysis of the USSR — and IS *did* have virtues. It was an organisation in which real discussion was possible and in which differences of opinion coexisted, and where issues were discussed as often as dogmatised about, in marked contrast to the organisations of post-Trotsky “Trotskyism” and to the IS/SWP from the early ‘70s. It did do what it could to maintain a working class orientation; it did insist on the need for commitment to working class action in face of the soul-rotted “academic Marxism” of the late ‘60s and ‘70s.

Yet the ‘virtues’ were not always what you might be led to deduce from the SR/IS theoretical positions. Paradoxical though it is, the root-and-branch anti-Stalinist “state caps” in the ‘60s found it much easier to cosy up to the CP and the CP-influenced peace campaigners and Labour left than the Trotskyists who believed in “defending the Soviet Union” ever did. We were more combative and usually more vociferous against “Stalinism”. It was IS that was able in 1965 to publish a book⁹ carrying a preface by a Stalinist trade union official, Reg Birch. The IS group in 1968 could contain people soft on varieties of Stalinism: the Manchester branch lost much-prized engineering workers — who resigned because the group condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia!

I CITE these examples only to establish broadly for the reader just how unreliable the “conventional history” of the Group is. I will return to some of these points...

But it isn’t only Birchall — or Jim Higgins. You get essentially the same laudatory and, as I will show, in terms of history, fantastic, version of SR and ‘60s IS in the non-official accounts and in the work of ‘critics’, for example, in the useful account of SR/IS published by Martin Shaw, a one-time member turned hostile.¹⁰

Most fantastic of all — but in its way useful — in the realms of IS historiography is the long account of ‘60s IS published by Christopher

Hitchens as a review of two SWP publications under the title “In the Bright Autumn of My Senescence”.¹¹

Hitchens left IS in the mid ‘70s, and now works the licensed-rebel side of the street in bourgeois journalism, as a columnist for *Vanity Fair* and on other publications. He dislikes the organisation after he left it, when his feelings about himself separated from his feelings about the organisation. But God, how he loved it before, when he was young and an indescribably wonderful part of an incomparable organisation!

“The essential [IS] precepts descended from Luxemburg rather than Lenin. They consisted of three or four central tenets. These were that, contrary to the babble of smart-asses like Crosland, Britain was still a class society in every sense of the term... That the capitalist system had only temporarily stabilised itself.

“While in a conflict like Korea the only principled policy was that of a plague on both houses, in the case of Vietnam one should openly declare for the Vietcong while regretfully bearing in mind... I found that I rather liked the pessoptimism of this, with its implication that one could with perfect honesty keep two sets of books. The best thing to do was to work, and think, without illusions. ‘Without illusions’, indeed, was a signature phrase of The Group. In the coming years, I was to do many things, and hold many positions, ‘without illusions’. It was a good induction, and a good training.

“We gleefully joined battle with the hippies and flower-power jerks and all the Guevara pin-up factions. Want to talk *real* politics? Want to get in touch with authentic struggle? If you’re serious, come along and talk to us.

“There was a fair bit of talent in and around The Group in those days. Aside from Cliff there was Paul Foot, a masterly orator who specialised in the ridiculing of Labourism and the exposure of crooks and fascists. Then Alasdair MacIntyre, who could tell Kautsky from Korsch. Michael Kidron, a sardonic sophisticate with a refined taste in political economy. John Palmer, a polymathic journalist capable of synthesising the latest news into crystalline agitational prose. Eamonn McCann, a street-fighter from Derry with amazing literary gifts and Nigel Harris, who knew about the Third World and could write about it without sentimentality. Peter Sedgwick, the conscience of us all and the satirist of the ideologues. Plus a network of self-taught trade-unionists who could talk about Spain, about the tricks of their craft, about the time they had produced socialist leaflets in Germany for the prisoners of war on forced labour, about the difference between Bordiga and Gramsci, about anything.

“And in debate with other clubs or other factions, we never had to worry that our speaker would come off second. We went looking for arguments, sensing that others were trying to sit them out, or avoid them altogether.”

This is narcissism raised in intensity to the power of spontaneous multiple orgasm!

Yet Hitchens’s piece is itself valuable documentation of IS’s real history. Here you have an undiluted rendition of the extraordinary self-image of large parts of the IS middle-class cadre at the end of the ‘60s. In fact, much of it had as its real substance, politics the mere outlet, the effortless, inbred, alpha dog superiority and visceral self-approbation of the big bourgeoisie.

All this, and its *ideology*, is there in superabundance in Hitchens. What is not there is any remotely realistic account of the group and its politics and its role in socialist affairs and in the labour movement as they really were.

9 Cliff and Barker on Incomes Policy, 1965.

10 Shaw: “The ‘SR group’ came to represent the polar opposite to the SLI: realistic in economic perspectives, able to explain the failures of Labour bureaucrats as well as to condemn them... the SR group was the most coherent, open and Marxist alternative to the dominant ‘orthodoxy’ of the ‘SLI’...” *Socialist Register*, 1978.

There is evidence in Shaw of some aspiration to truth-telling: he simply doesn’t *understand* very much about the whys and wherefores of the things he chronicles. There is curious evasion in his treatment of the prolonged ‘69/70 IS discussions on Ireland. He was in the organisation then, but he merely says that he ‘accepts’ Ian Birchall’s account. There is probably a name for lying by citing an ‘authority’ you know to be untrustworthy: “Lying by proxy” perhaps.

11 *London Review of Books*. It is surely very strange to find Tony Cliff described thus by Christopher Hitchens in January 1994 — Cliff, who has turned IS/SWP into a rigid, quasi-religious sect which expelled people for even questioning the SWP’s brief lurch into campaigning for a general strike in 1992 — from the lowest point of class struggle this century to a TUC-led general strike in one step! —

“He wanted people to reason on their own. He came back to me... when I read Irving Howe’s memoirs of the New York *Trotskyist* milieu... his description of Max Shachtman...” “In the cramped quarter of the seat he seemed uneasy as ideologue and leader”. And a lot more. Nothing is said about what IS/SWP has become *as an organisation*; what, in fact, it had become before Hitchens’s mid ‘70s break with it... But why should anyone expect these people to be understanding now, in the Bright Autumn of Their Senescence, when they really did not understand all that much in Their Verdant Spring of Prime Alpha Dog Puppyhood?

THERE is one way, as easy as it is pertinent, to test whether the mythmakers' picture of IS is true on either the Hitchens/Birchall or Shaw level: if so, how then to explain what happened to the Manchester segment of this peerless organisation? Workers' Fight — what became the Trotskyist Tendency of IS — walked into Manchester IS in October/November 1968 and in a few weeks took over the biggest¹² IS branch in the country (one moreover with a four or five year history behind it)?

And we, be it remembered, and the mythmakers insist on it, were primitive sectarians talking gibberish on many things, and 'disruptive' too. How could such a thing happen?

Didn't all those much advertised and fondly remembered qualities of the IS, the "IS tradition", IS theory, IS practice, and the typical IS alpha dog member, count for anything against us? If not, why not? It is a plain matter of fact that they didn't; and, moreover, it is a well documented fact that the IS organisation had to take special, non-political emergency measures to curb the Trotskyist Tendency, culminating in 1969 in the creation of ghetto branches. In Manchester that was done against the recorded vote of over 75% of the branch, the majority not Trotskyist Tendency members, all of whom then chose to be ghettoised themselves rather than submit to the diktat of the Cliffite centre and the branch minority, and ghettoise the Trotskyist Tendency.

If the golden legend of SR/IS is true, that is surely remarkable. In fact, it becomes almost inexplicable.

I know that history offers precedents where barbarians from the steppes or the dark forests invaded and overwhelmed much higher civilisations. So, the massed ranks of Workers' Fight came out of the proletarian wilds of Manchester, like Pol Pot out of the jungle, and swamped the island of Marxist political civilisation that was Manchester IS?

There were only four of us in Manchester Workers' Fight, and 51 or 55¹³ in the IS branch! And the old IS branch was part of a national organisation 1,000 strong, and Workers' Fight of one with nine — possibly 10 — members.¹⁴

Does history have another example of such a catastrophe for civilisation in which so many of the civilised were overwhelmed by so few of the barbarians?

To mock the IS stalwarts' Malvolian conceit, and possibly giving expression to my own, I would recall that in one of his pamphlets Dan DeLeon had compared the disciplined revolutionary socialist party he was advocating to the Spanish soldiers of Francisco Pizarro, numbering about 150, who in the 1530s had invaded and conquered the vast Inca empire (covering present-day Peru and much of Chile). I would of course, conscientiously recall, and the parallel with IS in 1968 didn't need to be stated, that Pizarro's little army had horses, guns, the force of Inca superstition and the chaos of a recent Inca civil war working for them, and the luck and audacity to capture the Incas' king-god, Atahualpa. That joke, I fear, fell far below the then regulation IS "modesty". Was it that we were, indeed, a group such as DeLeon had in mind?

Not quite! When we fused with IS, Workers' Fight had been in existence two years, and as a public recruiting organisation for a year. Though our Trotskyist political tradition — and what we made of it — was greatly superior to the pauper's broth of eclecticism and middle-class faddism we confronted in IS, our resources, knowledge and confidence were narrow, limited by age and experience.

Well then, the explanation must be — 'like unto like'. IS had recently doubled in size, pulling in a lot of politically uneducated people. Workers' Fight must have taken advantage of the fact to recruit clueless youngsters, who had not had time to absorb the rich IS political culture. No: it was the cadre of the branch who came over to the Trotskyist Tendency. Within a couple of months we won over almost without

exception the entire cadre of IS's biggest branch. (And had Atahualpa lived in Manchester, we might have done even better, but, unfortunately, he lived in Stoke Newington.)

The sole, important exception was Colin Barker, and he was only a partial exception: in the first months, on every single question except the "class character" of the USSR and its "defence against imperialism", he agreed with us and, in his honest desire to come to terms with IS's past, in effect, though with increasing reluctance, made propaganda for what were — such was the logic of the situation in the branch — our politics.

Author's Doppelganger: So, it was Workers' Fight Hitchens really had in mind when he described IS, above? Ye were wonderful?

A warming idea! But it will be healthy to remember and underline the not unimportant fact — though it can only deepen the mystery Manchester IS in '68 must pose to the devotees of the IS myth — that what we won them to was in part, because we were wrong in our theoretical understanding of Stalinism, a *false* alternative to IS's — false — theories.

THE basic explanation for what happened is that there had been a long, preceding, pre-'68, political convergence between post-Trotsky "Trotskyism" and IS, and between *Workers' Fight*, which on Stalinism was not quite typical of post-Trotsky Trotskyists, and IS. On its side, IS had already by 1968 — when everything was thrown into the melting pot by Cliff's sudden declaration "for Leninism" — made so many catch-penny shifts in the direction of post-Trotsky "Trotskyist" politics — it was a process that would go on, making them, still "state caps", into caricature "Pabloites", eventually into backers of even Saddam Hussein — that many of its people did not know whether they were coming or going. After many incoherent shifts, on Vietnam, for example, IS was in transition to becoming the organisation of "kitsch Trotskyism with doctrinal quirks" it was by the '70s. Travelling the other way — too slowly, far too slowly, but travelling — Workers' Fight intersected it.

Workers' Fight from the beginning always drew the sharpest — we said Trotsky-consistent — anti-Stalinist political conclusions within the degenerated and deformed workers' states schemas.¹⁵ The Trotskyist Tendency believed it was the duty of revolutionary socialists to work for a "political revolution" and for the liberation of the oppressed nations in the Stalinist states. We followed Trotsky — so we thought — and "Defended the Soviet Union against being overthrown by imperialism" — that was how we put it and all we meant by it — but we did not see it then, in the world of the 1960s, in which the USSR was one of the two great world powers, as being of any immediate, political consequence: it was, we insisted against the IS majority, "an important orientation issue".

If you do not know the political atmosphere of the time and the way IS related to the inchoate, populist revolutionary milieu, it will seem strange, but the Trotskyist Tendency was much harder, more consistent and more heartfelt in its hostility to all species of Stalinism than were large swathes of the "state capitalist" organisation with which we had fused.

In the three years of the fusion there was not one single practical, political issue concerning Stalinism in which differences arose between the Trotskyist Tendency and the IS majority. Where, arguably, we were "soft" — on Vietnam, letting "anti-imperialism" blunt our anti-Stalinism — so was IS, and, large parts of it, more so. It was a time when some of IS's leading 'libertarians' could be seen — I saw Peter Sedgwick — snake-dancing on Vietnam War demos chanting "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh//We shall fight and we shall win." The words would have choked me.

12 I have to rely on memory here. It is possible one of the London branches was marginally bigger.
13 Records vary.

14 Three of us, Rachel Lever, Phil Semp, myself, and an unstable youth, Graham Atkinson, left Militant in October 1966. In the subsequent year we produced the magazine *Workers' Republic* as part of the Irish Workers' Group, while doing local and industrial work — notably in the docks. *Workers' Fight* No.1 appeared in October 1967. For the first six months of its existence, *Workers' Fight* was blighted by our involvement in a fierce faction fight in the Irish Workers' Group (in which IS was also centrally involved, on the other side).

On the eve of fusion, we had nine members in Manchester. One, Trevor Fox, died in his mid-20s in an accident. Four left Workers' Fight rather than fuse with IS. Two of those who fused with IS, Linda and Harold Youd, had joined Workers' Fight in early 1968, after spending nearly a decade in the Young Communist League/CP. Harold founded the National Ports Shop Stewards Committee — which the CP immediately seized.

Leaving Trevor Fox and Rachel Lever aside, the whole pre-fusion Manchester group, those who did not fuse with IS, as well as Harold and Linda Youd, who did, had come out of the YCL/CP, and were people I'd known for nearly a decade from my days in the same organisation.

15 We had stated our basic position as follows in the Irish Workers' Group against a combination

in which, as it happened, Tony Cliff had lined up his followers alongside Stalinists, Deutscherites and Guevarists:

"The Stalinist states and Cuba [are] deformed and degenerated workers' states. We insist sharply on a consistent Trotskyist understanding of what this degeneration means for the workers in these states: we are not liberal Stalinists, Deutscherites or 'Pabloites' — but Trotskyists. We stress the need for a deep-going workers' revolution in these states — as does the Preamble to the IWG Constitution. We declare that any interpretation of the deformed workers' states theory that denies the need for a "supplementary" workers' political revolution, one with very deep-going social reorganisation, which must accompany the smashing of the parasitic Stalinist bureaucracy — any interpretation that denies this, or questions it, or leaves the question open, amounts to a capitulation to Stalinism, and therefore is a Deutscherite breach with all but the "letter" of Trotskyism. It entirely cuts away the revolutionary side of the workers' state designation. For us the essence of Trotskyism is first and foremost a reliance on the working class as the protagonist of history — and not on the bureaucracy and its hangers on or on the various nationalist petty-bourgeois formations which spring up. This for us is what divides revolutionary Marxists from the Left Stalinists and Deutscherites and the various brands of Deutscherism known as 'Pabloism'."

More will be said about what our “workers’ statism” amounted to.

If the mythmakers’ picture of IS were ever true — and it wasn’t — it was no longer true by the late ’60s; and if it was true then of the group’s publications, *International Socialist* and *Socialist Worker* — and that claim, though better founded than claims for the organisation, will not bear close examination either — then an enormous qualification has to be made: none of it was remotely true of IS as a whole. Theory, such as it was, and developed Marxist culture, such as it was, was the possession of a thin stratum of the group. The ranks had their own culture; demagogues mediated between the group and the mandarins, of which the first was Cliff, and after him John Palmer, Paul Foot and, after his resurrection in 1968, Duncan Hallas.¹⁶

The Trotskyist Tendency offered politics which I now think were wrong on key points of general theory but which — it is a statement that remains to be substantiated — on everything, from anti-Vietnam war work to industrial work to “building the revolutionary party”, seemed to many in IS to be — and on the whole were — more coherent than IS’s politics, because they *made more sense of the political activities and political attitudes which attracted people to IS, that is of what IS was doing*, than did the official group politics and the often desperate rationalisations for opportunist twists and turns that characterised Cliff.

For example: when, in 1968, Cliff decided to become a ‘Leninist’ again and advocated a “democratic centralist revolutionary party”, it was a response to the unexpected, quick growth of IS and to the fact that the SLL, getting crazier and crazier, was ceasing to be a serious competitor. But he presented it as a conclusion he drew from the May ’68 French general strike: yet he had drawn no such conclusions from the great Belgian strike seven years earlier... He issued a second edition of *Rosa Luxemburg* in which, without explanation, and changing only the summary paragraph, he came out for Lenin against Luxemburg where in the first edition he was for Luxemburg against Lenin!¹⁷

You can’t be sure about such things, but probably the decisive, first stage in the Trotskyist Tendency’s winning over Manchester IS was a branch meeting just after the fusion where I head-banged with Tony Cliff on this and other aspects of the revolutionary party question — which the Trotskyist Tendency thought was the decisive question. He refused to admit that he had been mistaken *at any point*, though he was flatly contradicting what he had been saying for a decade: his difficulty was in trying to satisfy both the old IS “libertarians” in the branch, who

accused him of betraying them and the IS tradition, *and* those who were inclined to agree with him now, but were bewildered by the past position, on which the group as it was in 1968 had been built. Such squirming could not but bring discredit in the eyes of self-respecting, thinking IS members. We — on the “party” question — offered them coherent answers and a tradition with sense and continuity in it.

To conclude: there is no evidence that the much advertised political and ideological lucidity was ever true of the group at any point in its real — as distinct from mythical — history. Far from the real picture of IS corresponding to the organisation’s self-glorifying mythology and PR stuff, the picture fondly repeated by ex-members in varying degrees of political decrepitude and amnesia, by 1968 IS was organisationally and intellectually — first and foremost *intellectually* — a chaos.

I will substantiate this statement by examining how things stood in the area where IS/SWP claims to have been most right and where we were certainly theoretically wrong — the nature of the Stalinist states and the network of political questions growing out of that.

Doppelganger: Not the hard abstract stuff! Nobody will read it! At least liven it up with a Jim Higgins-style funny story.

Nobody could make the theory of Russian state capitalism funny. Even those who think it a joke have never found it funny.

Doppelganger: Tell them the story about being witchhunted in the Irish Workers’ Group as a “secret state cap” — by a faction in which Cliff’s supporters were the weightiest group, but had been lined up by Cliff to support the Deutscherite, soft Stalinist, Guevarist, anti-state capitalist witch-hunters — on the — correct — calculation that they would afterwards have control of the organisation.

They’d never believe it! They’d think I was making it up. I’m not sure I believe it!

Doppelganger: Yes they would — use the documents! Lighten up! You were too close to it. I bet they’d laugh their heads off.

No. Without discussing “the hard, abstract stuff” — state capitalism, bureaucratic collectivism, degenerated workers’ state — it is impossible to make sense of the story. All I can hope to do is try to make the issues as clear as possible. I will attempt to do that in the next *Workers’ Liberty*.

16 The peculiar relationship of theory and practice, of prattle to praxis, in IS was described thus in a document of the Trotskyist Tendency in mid ’71:

“IS has a pretty solid body of theory and is nearer than almost all the ‘orthodox’ Trotskyist groups to a ‘party’ in the sense of being a rounded ‘whole’ — however small and however far from being able to play the role of a revolutionary party in relation to the class. The ‘orthodox’ groups are all to a far greater extent than IS mere factions that have failed to become anything wider.

“Yet I agree with [your] statement that IS has contempt for theory. Why? Because the IS theory is the possession of a handful of mandarins, who function as both a group mandarin and as a segment of normal academic Britain. What theory there is, is *their* theory: they are quite snobbish about it. For the non-initiated popularisations will do.

“This, of course, is inseparable from a manipulationist conception of the organisation. The members don’t *need* to know the theories — the leaders can be relied upon — and demagoguery and word-spinning phrasemongers like Cliff and Palmer can bridge the gap. It is in this sense that IS has contempt for theory — *contempt for the Marxist conception of theory and its necessary relationship to the organisation as a leaven and tool of the whole group*. ‘Contempt’ is not the best expression for it, though, is it? The priestly caste most certainly have contempt — for the uninitiated — but their theory is their special treasure, their badge of rank, their test for membership of the inner elite. There *actually* is such open caste snobbery in IS — as you know... The second and real sense of IS’s ‘contempt for theory’ is in their *use* of theory, the function of theory, the relationship of theory to practice: there is no connection between the two for IS. Do you know that in last week’s debate [on the European Community] at the National Committee Cliff said *and repeated* that principles and tactics *contradict* each other in real life!

“This is *organically* connected, of course, with their mandarinism... It is an esoteric knowledge — for if principles contradict tactics and practice, if theory is not a practical and necessary tool, if theory and practice are related only in the sense that theory sums up (in one way or another) past practice, perhaps vivified with a coat of impressionistic paint distilled from what’s going on around at the time — but not in the sense that theory is the source of precepts to guide practice, to aid in the practical exploration of reality — why then, where is the *incentive* to spread theoretical knowledge? What is to prevent the polarisation of the organisation into the mandarins and the subjects of the demagogic manipulation of the mandarins and their lieutenants? What is to prevent the esoteric knowledge of the mandarins from being just one intellectual ‘in-group’’s defining characteristic, to be played with, juggled with, and to do all sorts of wonderful tricks with: after all, it is very rarely tested since it doesn’t relate to reality. Consider the state-capitalist theory... relating to China, Korea, and to Vietnam. Take those three *together*, look at the *history* of the group — *there is no possible consistency*. The theory is one thing — reactions to Korea in 1950 and Vietnam in 1967 entirely a matter of mood, impressions, pressures, etc., etc.

“...It is a question of the conscious method *versus* the clever juggling of people in the central IS leadership who are subjectively revolutionaries — but entirely bourgeois in their method of thinking and conception of politics. These people are very like the Lovestonites...”

[Excerpt from a document by the present writer given limited internal circulation in *Workers’ Fight*, 1971.]

17 An internal IS issue of *Workers’ Fight* carried a long article by the present writer on the whole question of IS and the revolutionary party:

“In *Luxemburg*, edition ’68, Cliff is a changed man! Nowhere is the result more startling than in the final paragraph of the chapter on Luxemburg and Lenin.

“1959 edition: “For Marxists in advanced industrial countries, Lenin’s original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg’s, notwithstanding her overstatements on the question of spontaneity.”

“1968 edition: “However, whatever the historical circumstances moulding Rosa’s thoughts regarding organisation, these thoughts showed a great weakness in the German revolution of 1918-19.”

“Of course people change their minds. When Marxists do so it would be good to know why and how. The important thing here too is method. A Marxist’s exposition is based on an analysis of the real world to which he brings certain conceptions: his conclusions are drawn from his analysis. Thus the train of thought is clear, the reasoning and considerations are designed to expound, to convince. In this case there is a mystery: one and the same exposition (without supplement) leads to opposite conclusions. Why? How *does* Comrade Cliff reach his conclusions? ...

“The IS attitude to the question of the Leninist Party has been... contempt for the idea of organising a small propaganda group as a fighting propaganda group.

“The current change — motivated allegedly on the May events in France but seemingly owing as much if not more to the happy coincidence that the Group had just too many members to make federalism comfortable: after all, what conclusions were drawn from the Belgian General Strike in 1961? — has resembled not so much a rectification of theory and practice by serious communists, as an exercise in the medieval art of palimpsestry.

“The leadership does not have a clear conception of the party that needs to be built. “Whether the IS group will by simple arithmetic progression grow into a revolutionary party, or whether the party will grow from a yet unformed group is not important for us” (Political Committee document, October 1968). *On the contrary, it is vital. If the strategy is one which expects any big changes from the shift to come in the already organised labour movement* (all experience in the past suggests that this is the likely way a real mass revolutionary movement will develop in a country like Britain) rather than by arithmetical accretion, then this decrees the need for us to build a *cadre* movement to be able to intervene. The lack of a clear strategy on the relationship of IS to the class and the organised labour movement is obvious. Consequently IS is being built as a loose, all-in type of group. Lacking a strategy the leadership looks always for short cuts.

“IS’s growth is largely the result of a series of unpredictable events — e.g. the suicide of the SLL — which have left IS as the only contender in the field and thereby transformed it from a discussion group without a future into a potentially serious revolutionary organisation. IS is thus going through a crisis of identity. It is not often that it is given to organisations to make a sharp turn, a second dedication. IS has this opportunity. It has still not decided definitively which way it will go.” [Easter 1969]

It did not occur to us that IS could evolve, as it did, into a saner variant of the SLL...