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# A Proletarian Classics?

23-24 October 2021



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Please note: all times are expressed in BST. The workshop is virtual (MS Teams).

23 October 2021		
10.00-10.15	Welcome	Henry Stead, Elżbieta Olechowska and David Movrin
10.15-11.30	The Ancient Proletarian Hero	Scott Lyall Miryana Dimitrova Oleksii Rudenko Caitie Bugler (Chair)
14.00-15.15	Classicists and Communism in and beyond the Soviet bloc	Elżbieta Olechowska David Movrin Emilo Zucchetti Michael Carroll (Chair)
15.30-16.30	Greek Tragedy and the Left	Natasha Remoundou Claudio Sansone Giovanna Di Martino (Chair)
24 October 2021		
10.15-11.30	Leftist Ancient History	Eivind Seland Vittorio Saldutti Anton Baryshnikov Jon Hesk (Chair)
14.00-15.00	Animating the past, classicising the future	Barbara Goff Hanna Paulouskaya Rhiannon Easterbrook (Chair)
15.30-16.30	Round table – Future Directions	Edith Hall Gregory Lee Neville Morley David Movrin & Henry Stead (Chairs)

## The Ancient Proletarian Hero

- 'And so with the moderns': Radical Futures, Classical Pasts in the work of J. Leslie Mitchell/Lewis Grassic Gibbon

Dr Scott Lyall (Edinburgh Napier University)

Shortly after the publication of *Spartacus* in 1933, Leslie Mitchell wrote to his friend the poet Helen Cruickshank who, along with many contemporary critics, had been troubled by the descriptions of violence in his novel: 'Yes, horrors do haunt me. That's because I'm in love with humanity. Ancient Greece is never the Parthenon to me; it's a slave being tortured in a dungeon of the Athenian law-courts; ancient Egypt is never the pyramids; it's the blood and tears of Goshen; ancient Scotland is never Queen Mary; it's those serfs they kept chained in the Fifeshire mines a hundred years ago. And so with the moderns.' With a main focus on *Spartacus*, this paper examines the author's treatment of the ancient world in various fiction and non-fiction texts written under the names J. Leslie Mitchell and Lewis Grassic Gibbon to argue two related points: first, that Mitchell's and Gibbon's work exemplifies a radical but complex response to modernity, modernism and civilisation through his readings of the classics and the ancient past; and second, that, for the Scottish author, the solution to civilisation's ills did not uncomplicatedly lie with international communism.

- Crushing the imperial(ist) eagles – nationalism, ideological instruction and adventure in the 1980s Bulgarian comic story 'Spartak'

Dr Miriyana Dimitrova

*Daga* (the Bulgarian word for 'rainbow') was the first Bulgarian comic magazine, launched in 1979 and regularly published until 1992. Its remarkably westernized aesthetic made a huge impact on an entire generation and its ubiquitous popularity still sends ripples of nostalgia among former teenagers. Included in its variety of stories (history, sci-fi, literary classics) is an action-packed account of Spartacus' exploits. Running for ten consecutive issues (1979-1982), the story spans over the hero's entire life: from a more fanciful narrative of his early years in Thrace to the better known events in Italy including the revolt in Capua, the series of clashes with the Roman army and his heroic death. My paper will explore the plotline, characterization and visual aspects of 'Spartak' in order to elucidate the significance of Spartacus for the Bulgarian young readers as a role model and a national hero (born near the river Strymon in modern day Bulgaria) who embodies the proletarian anti-imperialist struggle. Paying attention to the comic's similarities and differences with the ancient sources as well as comparing it with a new graphic novel based on *Daga's* story, published in 2020, I will probe the function of Spartacus as a well-crafted vessel for ideological instruction and entertainment.

- Spartacus vs Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus: Early Soviet Search for the Ancient Proletarian Hero

Oleksii Rudenko (Central European University, Vienna)

A brief note in the *Encyclopaedia of the cities and villages of Ukraine* narrates a peculiar story of the name selection for the recently founded village and associated kolkhoz in Eastern Ukraine in the 1920s. Quite unexpectedly, the land surveyor proposed to name it in honour of ancient rebellion leader Spartacus, translated from Greek as 'invincible'. While Spartacus' name was not a wonder for the Soviet toponymy in the 1920s-1930s, this particular translation and idea by the local official elucidate how the Soviets imposed a proletarian image on the figures from ancient Greek-Roman history. Two other rivals of Spartacus in this Soviet search for ancient proletarian heroes were Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus and Marcus Junius Brutus. However, Gracchus and Brutus did not receive as much attention as Spartacus did throughout Soviet history because of their aristocratic descent which did not correspond to the bolshevik needs. Thus, in this paper, I will try to deduce the key principles of early Soviet discourse towards figures of classical antiquity, implementation of that discourse in mass performances with particular attention to cinema and theatre, and perception of newly established image of ancient heroes in popular culture.

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### Classicists and Communism in and beyond the Soviet bloc

- Communism – No such Word in Polish. Classicists Facing a New Reality Under Soviet Domination: the First Post-War Years.

Prof Elżbieta Olechowska (Univeristy of Warsaw)

The communist ideology was imposed in Poland by a historically hostile superpower and there were few Marxist sympathisers among Polish classical scholars decimated during WW2. How these few fared in this uneasy situation could be better understood on three such examples, all outstanding intellectuals: Kazimierz Majewski, an archaeologist, Mieczysław Brożek, a classical philologist, and Oktawiusz Jurewicz, a Byzantologist.

- Five-Year Plans, Explorers, Luniks, and Socialist Humanism: Anton Sovre and His Blueprint for Classics in Slovenia

Prof. David Movrin (University of Ljubljana)

Very recently, about a year before the pandemic struck, personal archives of Anton Sovre (1885-1963) were rediscovered, and they eventually made their way to the National and University Library in Ljubljana. During the fifties, Anton Sovre was the undisputed *éminence grise* of the field of classics in Slovenia and among the fascinating

new sources now available to researchers is an essay on “Perspective Development of Classical Philology” from 1959. The document was written in the tradition of the Five-Year Plans, and its rhetoric is often amusing. Its content, however, shows strategic thinking, which was confirmed by the decades that followed.

- Palmiro Togliatti and Frank W. Walbank: Reactionism, Nationalism, and the Teaching of Roman History in the Interwar Period

Dr Emilio Zucchetti (University of Newcastle)

The teaching of Classics in the Fascist and Nazi schools has received quite a substantial attention over the years (e.g., Morandini 2014; Caroli 2015; Roche 2018), with a particular interest in the representation of *romanità* (Giardina/Vauchez 2000; Nelis 2011; Moon 2015). In a short note written in Spanish in 1941 and published posthumously in *Rinascita*, in 1965, Palmiro Togliatti reflects on the main falsifications inflicted on Roman History by the Fascist education system after the adoption of the *Testo Unico di Stato* (1930-1; Vitello 2021 offers a thorough historical re-appreciation of the *appunti* but does not reflect on the pedagogical aspects). Similarly, in an article published in *G&R* in 1943 under the pseudonym “The Examiner”, Frank W. Walbank reflected on his experience as examiner of students taking the Higher School Certificate, the system in place before the institution of A-levels in 1951. Walbank noted from their exams that most schoolboys taking Sixth Form Ancient History (and likely to be, thus, exclusively public-school boys) had learned a reactionary version of Roman history, designed to depict the populares as troublemakers, the common people as a fickle and violent mob, and Augustus as the perfect leader (a tendency that can also be verified in 1930s British scholarship).

This paper aims to compare and contrast the considerations expressed by the two communist thinkers with the textbooks of the time, as well as tracking common points and differences with ancient historical education in Francoist Spain, Salazarist Portugal, Third Republican France, and Nazi Germany. In thus doing, we hope to give a preliminary account of the different ways in which different nationalist traditions interpreted and re-used Roman and Greek history in their nation-building efforts in the Interwar period.

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### Greek Tragedy and the Left

- Agitprop *Antigone*

Dr Natasha Remoundou (The American College of Greece)

This paper explores the rewriting of Sophocles’ *Antigone* by Irish poet, writer, and playwright Aidan C. Mathews, staged at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin in 1984 through a Marxist lens. The production of the loose adaptation set in ‘1980s BC,’

coincides with and protests against the passing of the Criminal Justice Act 1984, a bill that gave the Gardaí certain powers to detain and interrogate anyone suspected of criminal activity. In this context, Antigone is reimagined as a resident of the slums and shantytowns of the proletariat and a member of an acting troupe that has been performing the same role for millennia in a postnuclear pandemic-stricken Thebes/Dublin. Peteokles is a bourgeois-turned-rebel, Polyneikes is remembered as a communist terrorist who has been airbrushed from the records of the police state, Ismene reads Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, and the Chorus is the state oppressor. Based on archival material, I examine how the unpublished script opens up new ways, aesthetically and intertextually, to reposition *Antigone* within a radical Irish literary archive and ideological framework that offers a critique of 20th c. history, social conflicts and class struggles while making larger claims about the dialectical use of classics as a means of social transformation and resistance.

- Against Philology: Class Translation in Pasolini's *Orestia*

Dr Claudio Sansone (University of Chicago)

Pier Paolo Pasolini figures his translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* as a transgression, both against established principles of canonical taste and against the very practices of archaeology and philology. This paper focuses on Pasolini's work as a translator from the perspective of class translation. In other terms, I read the project of the *Orestia* as an attempt to translate a vision of ancient class into modern idiom. Pasolini insisted on the vernacular tone of his work in this translation, a decision that has attracted some skepticism and which I analyze both for its philological implications but also its political ones. I argue that Pasolini's translation serves as a class translation designed to repurpose what he perceived to be the birth of Greek democracy in terms useful to contemporary struggles. Training our attention to the translation of several difficult metaphors in the poems, I demonstrate that there are moments in his version of Aeschylus' trilogy that show us how Pasolini had to react against the classics and revolutionize the canonical texts in order to instill within them the possibility of future revolutionary thought.

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### Leftist Ancient History

- The Classical world in a Workers' Encyclopedia

Prof Eivind Seland (University of Bergen)

The Norwegian *Arbeidernes leksikon*, "Workers' Encyclopedia", was published in six volumes 1932–1936. It was inspired by the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, explicitly aimed at working class readers, and at establishing an alternative to the hegemonic discourse. The editors and many of the contributors belonged to the Communist Party of Norway

(NKP) or to the informal network of communist intellectuals, *Mot Dag* ("Towards Dawn").

In this paper I investigate the reception and representation of the ancient world in *Arbeidernes leksikon* on the basis of selected articles. Classical education was traditionally the domain of the upper classes. I argue that the *Workers' Encyclopedia* demonstrate that reorienting the reception of ancient history was considered important both in order to rewrite history according to Marxist doctrine and in order to establish workers' culture as a full-fledged alternative to bourgeoisie education. The classical past is not celebrated for its empires and rulers, but for the effort of the masses and their struggle for freedom.

- Ancient Athenian Democracy and Leftist Criticism of Stalinist Russia

Dr Vittorio Saldutti (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

"The political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor". With these words Marx described the Paris Commune of 1871, that, Marx continues, "was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short term [...] a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time". The political tradition of the Commune was inherited by the Russian soviets and inspired Lenin, who explained the role of those governing bodies as a "reversion to primitive democracy". Arthur Rosenberg, professor of Ancient History at Berlin University, tried in his book *Democracy and Class struggle in the Ancient World* to offer historical ground for the ideas developed by Lenin in *State and Revolution*, comparing ancient Athenian democracy to the contemporary German and Russian councils. During the Twenties, as a communist leader and MP, Rosenberg, recalling his ideas on Athenian democracy, criticised the political degeneration of the Russian workers' state. He stressed how Soviet Russia, having limited the power of the councils, had suppressed the governing body of every socialist direct democracy. The Dutch revolutionary Anton Pannekoek in his work *Workers' Councils* renewed at the end of World War 2 Rosenberg's criticism, resuming the image of ancient democratic Athens as forerunner of the socialist councils.

- Tales of Rome, tales of people, tales for people: Alexander Nemirovsky and historical fiction in the Soviet Union

Dr Anton Ye. Baryshnikov (Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod)

Alexander Nemirovsky (1919-2007) was a prolific classical scholar with most of the efforts dedicated to early history of Italy and Rome. He was the first in Russian-speaking academia to study Nuragic culture. His work in Voronezh university was significant for Soviet and Russian scholarship; his students inspired by the teacher went on to become

distinguished scholars themselves. But Nemirovsky's legacy can not be limited to academic publications. He was a very talented poet and novelist. He wrote a number of popular non-fiction books that brought history and culture to the general reader. But it is the historical fiction novels that gained him nationwide fame. Nemirovsky wrote about the Punic wars and Tiberius Gracchus, contributing to the public image of ancient Rome and world history. Besides being high quality examples of prose read both by teenagers and adults, the novels provided readers with a Soviet view of the Classical past based on ideas of equality, value of labor, anti-imperialism and humanism.

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### Animating the past, classicising the future

- Revolution in Antiquity: the classicising fiction of Naomi Mitchison

Prof Barbara Goff (University of Reading)

The writer and activist Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999) came from a prominent establishment family, but was a member of the Labour Party and wife of a Labour MP. Her work was explicitly marked by the Russian Revolution, even when she wrote about antiquity. In the 1920s and 1930s she produced a number of historical fictions set in ancient Greece and Rome, highly regarded at the time. The works use the canvas of antiquity to experiment with many forms of political and social radicalism, with a challenging focus on female sexuality. I shall discuss four specific representations of revolution, which mobilise female agency in ways that are themselves highly unconventional. However, these representations also invoke the Fraserian figure of the dying king, who leads the revolution, to disaster, compromising the revolutionary energy. This tension speaks to Mitchison's own contradictory social positioning as a patrician radical. In 1972, however, the novel *Cleopatra's People* revisits the theme and stages a more successful uprising. This novel centres on the sacrificial queen instead of king, enlists a mass of people, and saves the revolution by hiding its personnel in Africa. The final excursion into antiquity found a way to press the history into useful service.

- Mythical Heroes at Work, or Greek Myths in Soviet Animation

Dr Hanna Paulouskaya (Univeristy of Warsaw)

There are perhaps surprisingly few animations made in the USSR which depict mythical characters as members of the working class. The most explicit reshaping of myths in this direction was done in Georgia in the 1930s and 1960s. These are animations directed by Lado Mujiri (*Colchis*, 1936) and Vakhtang Bakhtadze (*Narcissus*, 1964). In my presentation, I would like to analyse these films as well as a few others which imbue mythical characters with proletarian characteristics (*The Return from Olympus*, dir. Snezhko-Blotskaia, 1969; *Prometheus*, dir. Snezhko-Blotskaia, 1974; *The Rock of Sisyphus*, dir. Otari Dumbadze, 1980). The main aim is to explore the ways of re-



working and appropriation of the myths in the Soviet animations to make it more suitable for ideological purposes as well as more understandable for the young Soviet viewer.

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### Round Table – Future Directions

Prof Edith Hall (King's College, London)

Prof Gregory Lee (University of St Andrews)

Prof Neville Morley (University of Exeter)

Co-chaired by David Movrin (University of Ljubljana) and Henry Stead (University of St Andrews)