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I learnt the scholar's craft through my membership of the British Communist Party (BCP). Born into a working-class family in Deptford, London, I joined the party and the Young Communist League (YCL) in 1969, aged 17. Crucial to that life-changing decision was the party's opposition to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Like many idealists of my generation I was captivated by the Prague Spring and Czechoslovak leader Alexander Dubček's slogan of 'socialism with a human face.' I was also moved by the Czechoslovak people's peaceful resistance to the invasion, which I found far more edifying than rioting bourgeois students in Paris.[1]

The BCP's position on the invasion convinced me that it was no longer beholden to Moscow and was serious about pursing an independent and democratic road to socialism.

An important early role model was the party intellectual Monty Johnstone,[2] who was estranged from the leadership because of his trenchant criticism of Soviet leaders and his association with New Left figures such as the British Marxist Political Scientist, Ralph Miliband, and the former Polish Trotskyist and Soviet affairs commentator, Isaac Deutscher. A multi-linguist who amassed a huge personal library and archive, Monty was generous with his time and resources, and always rigorous in argument and in his treatment of evidence. His research was thorough and his articles famously replete with supporting footnotes. I learnt from Monty to criticise your opponents' strongest arguments not their weakest, and that it was ok to be partisan but not ok to be biased.

It was through Monty and my peers in the YCL that I gravitated to those in the party seeking serious, critical engagement with the successes and failures of 'actually existing socialism.' This critical approach to the Soviet experience was a hallmark of the Eurocommunist wing of the Communist movement in the 1970s and 1980s whose politics later informed Soviet

[1] For my retrospective view of the Prague Spring see: "The long-term failure of the Prague Spring," *The Irish Examiner*, 20 August 2018, https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/views/analysis/the-long-term-failure-of-the-prague-spring-863184.html. In the 1970s I was an active member of the Committee to Defend Czechoslovak Socialists (from the repression of the post-invasion "normalisation" of the country).

[2] Monty was a Lecturer in Social and Liberal Studies at a Further Education College in Woolwich, London. In the early 1970s he gave up his job to become a full-time writer and activist. He was supposedly writing a book on people and parties under socialism but it never saw the light of day. Many of his articles appeared in *Marxism Today* (available on the internet). Monty died in 2007. Eric Hobsbawm wrote an obituary for *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/aug/23/guardianobituaries.obituaries2.

leader Mikhail Gorbachev's efforts to democratise the USSR. Like Gorbachev, we were true believers in the possibility of a popular, consent-based socialism.[3]

I also worked closely with Monty as a member of the party's Trotskyism Study Group (TSG), which was devoted to researching, criticising, and debating our competitors on the far left. In my case this included such Trotskyist icons as Robin Blackburn, Tariq Ali, and Ernest Mandel, the leader of the so-called Fourth International. TSG members were committed to measured critique, not crude polemics or character assassination.

Though my father had been in the YCL in the 1930s, my family was not particularly left-wing: both parents were mainstream Labour Party voters. But my father did take an interest in politics and home was always full of newspapers such as the Labour paper *The Daily Herald* and *The Daily Mirror* – a left-leaning tabloid that in the 1960s published popular journalism of the highest quality.

I was fortunate to pass the 11th plus and to attend one of the Grammar Schools that were reserved for those deemed academically able. At Addey &Stanhope GS I received a good all-round education and displayed an early aptitude for argument, but my school career was not a great success. I matriculated with just four 'O' levels and left school at the age of 16 for a job as a clerk with the Greater London Council. Happily, my employer gave its young members of staff a day off each week to pursue their education. It was through that facility and by attending evening classes four nights a week that I gained the necessary qualifications for higher education.

My grades weren't good enough to get into a university but I was offered a place at North Staffordshire Polytechnic, which was fine by me. I was the first member of my extended family to stay on at school beyond the age of 15, let alone attend an institution of higher education. At that time little more than 5% of the British population studied for a degree. For me, going to North Staffs Poly was a giant leap in social mobility.

I went to college to study Sociology (the radical student's subject of choice in those days) but switched to International Relations (IR) in my second year. There were just eight IR students—the biggest subject group on the Polytechnic's BSc (Econ.) degree programme, which was validated and examined by the University of London. It was a good group and I learned a lot from my fellow students and from course leader Tony Thorndyke and the other IR staff - Keith Hayward, Trevor Taylor, and John Coutouvidis, the team's International Historian, who specialised in Polish history. It was John's classes that appealed to me the most. He demonstrated the importance of the detail of diplomatic history and how it could be conveyed in an interesting and evocative way.[4]

While I was interested and engaged by the academic study of IR, Marxism remained my main pre-occupation. I was a diligent student but most of my time and energy was consumed by politics: organising, campaigning, demonstrating, striking, picketing, propagandising, and attending hundreds and hundreds of meetings. This frenetic activity had its immediate goals and purposes but was sustained by a much grander vision: the total transformation not just of society but of human nature. Overthrowing capitalism was the least of it; we imagined a mass popular participatory democracy that would emancipate and empower everyone.

Exciting, too, was my discovery of the so-called Wisconsin School of American Diplomatic History, particularly the writings of William Appleman Williams and Lloyd C. Gardener. As an undergraduate I wrote a long essay on U.S. isolationism during the interwar period. Taking my cue from Gardner and Williams, I argued that between the wars the United States

[3] For my most recent retrospective on Gorbachev see: Geoffrey Roberts, "Fall of the Berlin Wall: Discontent is evident once again, 30 years on," *The Irish Examiner*, 4 November 2019, https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/views/analysis/fall-of-berlin-wall-discontent-is-evident-once-again-30-years-on-961589.html

[4] John is still going strong: https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/history/historian-links-rise-isis-broken-475454.

was expansionist not isolationist, as American decision-makers continued to pursue the 'Open Door' policy. "The Open Door did not end in 1941," I concluded. "It still continues to be the guiding thread of American foreign policy. The foundations were laid in the interwar period, but the real construction of the American Empire took place after 1945. However, like all empires the seeds of its own destruction grew with it."

The essay was read by a U.S. diplomatic history specialist from the neighbouring University of Keele. He applauded my enthusiasm but was not impressed by my over-reliance on Gardner and Williams or by my failure to appreciate fully the specificity and differences between the 1920s and the 1930s as decades in American foreign policy.

This encounter with the American revisionists, combined with my reading of the debate on cold war origins, led to the formulation of my graduate research topic. While I accepted the revisionist version and critique of the U.S. role in the origins of the Cold War, it seemed to me that their opponents had the better of the argument when it came to Soviet foreign policy. My ambition was to write an empirically and theoretically grounded revisionist history of Soviet foreign policy and the origins of the Cold War. Such a project would bring together my interests in Marxism, IR, History, and Soviet Studies.

My preferred option for graduate study was Birmingham University's Centre for Russian and East European Studies. CREES had a good postgraduate programme, including *ab initio* teaching of Russian, and its staff were critically sympathetic to the Soviet project. The problem was that the Centre didn't have a foreign policy specialist able to supervise my thesis. Instead I went to the London School of Economics, which, because I had graduated top of my class, had offered me a scholarship in its Department of International Relations. My supervisor was Geoffrey Stern, a self-confessed pro-western Cold Warrior. Geoff wasn't a great scholar (he described himself as more journalist than academic) or much of a supervisor. But we got on well personally and I was happy to be left alone to pursue my political interests. To be fair to Stern, he came through when it really mattered, not least when, many years later, I submitted my Ph.D. thesis.[5]

When I became an academic in the 1990s I self-identified as an International Historian. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, I thought of myself as a radical Soviet Studies scholar who was interested in all aspects of the USSR's history, politics, and society. Within the Communist party I was a member of its Committee for the Study of the European Socialist Countries.

The Committee's convenor was Dennis Ogden, who taught Soviet Politics at the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL). Dennis had worked as a translator in the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s and then served as the Moscow correspondent of the party's paper, *The Daily Worker*. His claim to journalistic fame was that in 1961 he had broken the news of the first manned Soviet space flight the day before it actually happened. He loved to tell the story of how the KGB followed him around Moscow for months trying to discern the name of his source in the Soviet space programme. Dennis was also a good friend of Donald Maclean and the former spy's anointed biographer.[6]

In the early 1970s Ogden ran an informal seminar at PCL that brought together party members and fellow-travellers who were involved academically or professionally in Soviet and East European Studies. In 1976 the party leadership legitimised this group and turned it into an official committee. For a couple of years the Committee published a journal—*Socialist*

[5] Stern died in 2005. Fred Halliday wrote this obituary for *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/oct/19/guardianobituaries.mainsection.

[6] Dennis died in 2004. The final chapter of his unfinished memoirs, which relates his time in Moscow in 1954-1955, was published in Geoffrey Roberts, ed., *Stalin: His Times and Ours* (Dublin: Irish Association for Russian and East European Studies, 2005). A copy of the memoir may be found on my webpages on academia.edu, as can many of my own articles. We considered Maclean one of us—a Eurocommunist and a critic of the Soviet system. Dennis did not write the biography, partly because he didn't receive all the necessary documentation from Maclean before he died in 1983 and partly because he didn't really approve of Donald's spying.

Europe—of which I was the editor. Kevin Devlin, a Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty analyst, wrote an astute review of the first two issues:

> "Solidarity and criticism: as we have seen, two voices sound in the pages of *Socialist Europe*. It will be interesting to see which will prevail in future issues, or whether they will continue to coexist discordantly."[7]

On the Committee itself the balance of forces heavily favoured critical voices like myself, Monty, and Dennis. Indeed, in issue 4 of *Socialist Europe* we published an interview with the Soviet dissident, Roy Medvedev.[8] The interview had been conducted in Moscow by Mark Harrison, a young Lecturer in Soviet Economic History at Warwick University. A dedicated activist as well as a fine scholar, Mark was another important role model. Worried that the Soviets would refuse him a visa, Harrison wanted to publish the interview anonymously but we were overruled by the party leadership.

In November 1977 I was the Committee's consultative delegate to the party's 35th National Congress where I gave a speech citing an Amnesty International report that there were 10,000 'Prisoners of Conscience' in the USSR. I was also involved in a lobby to prevent the passing, without discussion, of a 60th anniversary resolution lauding the Great October Revolution and the Soviet Union as the leader of a 'mighty socialist family.' I was a foot soldier in this particular struggle but it fell to me to make the final (failed) challenge from the floor of congress. The moment was captured by an award-winning Granada TV series *Decision: British Communism*, a fly-on-the-wall documentary about the party's adoption of a new edition of its programme—*The British Road to Socialism*.

Party leaders were scandalised by my role at the congress, particularly since I was working full-time for the party's National Student Committee as the organiser of the 10th Communist University of London (CUL). CUL was an annual 9-day event in July that offered students Marxist-inspired counter-course alternatives to mainstream academic courses. The Socialist Countries committee, for example, ran the Soviet Studies courses. It was the highlight of the year for Communist students. At its peak in the mid-1970s CUL attracted more than a thousand full-time participants and hundreds of others to particular events. It was a magnet for the growing number of leftist academics in Britain in the 1970s. At CUL 10 the plenary speaker was Eric Hobsbawm, who spoke about intellectuals and class struggle.

The day after the congress I was cornered and berated by a group of party leaders, including Jack Woddis, the International Secretary, who called me a fool. A few days later, however, Jack took me into his office and apologised, saying he didn't really think I was a fool, merely that I had behaved foolishly.

By this time my three-year scholarship at the LSE was over and my research on the origins of the Cold War had not progressed very far. One problem was the lack of sources. The Soviet archives were firmly closed and little or nothing had been published from them. The other problem was lack of theory. As a Marxist I was committed to constructing a theory of Soviet foreign policy as well as an empirical account. I had started to construct such a theory as an undergraduate. It was a valiant effort but it foundered in the face of an insuperable obstacle: while it was possible to construct a model, schema, or analytical framework that captured or characterised certain features or trends in Soviet foreign policy, that did not explain what had actually happened.

[7] K. Devlin, "British CP Launches Journal on Eastern Regimes," RFE-RL RAD Background Report/191, 9 September 1977. In the 1970s and 1980s Devlin wrote a number of balanced and well-informed reports on the western Communist parties. I was an avid consumer of RFE-RL reports and of the USIA-funded journal *Problems of Communism*, which together with the Prague-based *World Marxist Review*, kept me abreast of developments in the international communist movement.

[8] Mark Harrison, "Interview with Roy Medvedev," *Socialist Europe* 4 (1978): 3-5.

There was a simple but subversive solution to this problem: abandon such theory construction. The turning point for me was an article I wrote for the fourth and final issue of *Socialist Europe*, which was heavily influenced by the writings of the Marxist revisionists Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst (dubbed Hinders and Hurts by their critics).[9] In a contribution to a discussion about Santiago Carrillo's book *Eurocommunism and the State*,[10] I rejected all forms of economic determinism and class reductionism and argued that the Soviet system could only be understood in terms of the specificities of its concrete functioning as a polity, economy and society.[11]

In the late 70s and early 80s I worked with Paul and Barry on a short-lived socialist journal-cum-book series called *Politics & Power*,[12] and it was an article by Hirst on R.G. Collingwood's philosophy of history that provided the starting point for my current stance on matters theoretical.

Collingwood, Hirst pointed out, was concerned to theorise the activity of historians and to identify history as a distinct field of investigation. For Collingwood, history was an account of past human action, which is the product of human thought. "Collingwood is committed to a view of history as the history of human thought because it is the product of definite individual human actors. Nations, states, classes etc., are merely hypostatisations of related human actions. Nations exist only in so far as individual actors thinks in terms of nations, construct their situations of actions in terms of them and act accordingly." Collingwood also believed that people "are free in that their thought is not the product of causes, whether natural or psychological…Reason is an independent activity of mind, not a psychological thought-process occasioned by any cause."[13]

The problem of lack of sources was resolved by a change of research topic. At the end of my second year at LSE I had to produce a paper to justify an extension of my grant for a third year. So I wrote what was meant to be a preliminary chapter on the Nazi-Soviet pact. Stern was suitably impressed and I decided to devote the whole thesis to the pact. Ever-optimistic, I planned to complete the thesis by the end of 1978 – a projection that was interrupted by my stewardship of CUL. Subsequently I broadened the topic to include a more detailed account of Soviet foreign policy in the 1930s.

You have to remember that in the 1970s the Soviets published thousands of documents from their diplomatic archives. There was also a growing Soviet historiography, some of whose authors had direct access to those archives. The available documentation was still quite limited but it was now possible to write evidence-based histories of 1920s and 1930s Soviet

[9] Hirst worked in the Politics and Sociology Department at Birkbeck College, University of London. Paul died in 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/jun/20/guardianobituaries.highereducation. Hindess was a sociologist at the University of Liverpool and then moved to the Australian National University in 1987. He died in 2018, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03085147.2018.1503449.

[10] S. Carrillo, *Eurocommunism and the State* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977). My contribution to the discussion of the book in *Socialist Europe* may be found on academia.edu.

[11] In the 1970s I was heavily influenced by the writings of the Italian Marxist thinker and early communist leader, Antonio Gramsci, but the key source for my break with Marxist reductionism (and, indeed, with all such social scientific reasoning) was Athar Hussain, Tony Cutler, Barry Hindess, and Paul Hirst, *Marx's 'Capital' and Capitalism Today* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

[12] Diana Adlam et al., *Politics & Power One: New Perspectives on Socialist Politics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); *Politics & Power Two: Problems in Labour Politics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); *Politics & Power Three: Sexual Politics, Feminism and Socialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); *Politics & Power Four: Law, Justice and Politics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982).

[13] Paul Quentin Hirst, "Collingwood's Relativism and the Purposes of History," in his *Marxism and Historical Writing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985). The cited passages are underlined by me in my copy of the book.

foreign policy that did not rely entirely on published sources and western archives. And the writings of E.H. Carr and Jonathan Haslam showed me how effectively published Soviet archival sources could be utilised.[14]

In 1979 a paper on the Nazi-Soviet pact that I had submitted to the Communist Party's History Group for publication was sent to Jack Woddis for review:

> "I feel in general that there is something lacking. It is, of course, correct that Marxists, including Marxist historians, should try to be objective and to deal with the facts as they are. I do not believe, however, that this obliges a Marxist historian to be non-partisan. The overall impact of the M.S. gives an impression of detached objectivity which at times almost gives the impression of complete neutrality between the various forces at work in the international arena. I have no doubt that Geoff Roberts has examined many documents but somehow the political essence of the momentous period of the 1930s and 1940s is lacking."[15]

Jack's strictures notwithstanding, the party had already published an article on the pact by me in its fortnightly magazine *Comment* in August 1979. This 40th anniversary article was my first published piece on the Nazi-Soviet pact. It had a political edge that is absent from my more academic writings on the pact. "The decision to sign the pact was probably right," I wrote, but it had some woeful political consequences when a diplomatic tactic was transformed into a political and ideological principle that sacrificed the anti-fascist struggle and communist integrity in the interests of Soviet security requirements.[16]

Actually, I was more than capable of partisanship. My first published articles were critiques of the politics of British Trotskyists.[17] When I read these articles now I wince at some of the terminology. The problem with getting too close to the Trots was that you began to talk like them.

Another partisan piece was a paper on "How the Peace was Lost: British Communism, 1941-1945." I was drawn to this period because it was the time of the Party's greatest success and because I had discovered that during the war the Party embraced what I called radical social democracy—a perspective of seeking social reforms and social progress within a state capitalist framework. In 1945 the Party campaigned for a progressive postwar coalition of Communists, Labour, Conservatives, Liberals and Radicals. This was a national counterpart to the peacetime grand alliance envisaged by Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill at the Tehran and Yalta summits. The parallel development in the United States was the 1944 decision of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) to dissolve itself into a looser Communist Political Association that would ally with the Democratic Party. Neither decision was the result of directives from Moscow. Indeed, the American move was a step too far for the Soviets, who engineered a reversal of the dissolution and an end to the reign of the Party's longstanding leader, Earl Browder.

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[14] For example, Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twilight of Comintern, 1930-1935* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-1939*, (London: Macmillan 1984).

[15] Woddis letter, 5 December 1979.

[16] Roberts, "To Appease or to Oppose: The Nazi-Soviet Pact," *Comment*, 18 August 1979. At the foot of the article it was announced that the History Group would publish a longer article by me on the Nazi-Soviet pact at the end of the year. That didn't happen because I was too busy with other projects to revise the draft that had been sent to Woddis. Jack's review contained a number of valid points of detailed criticism.

[17] Roberts, "The Politics of the International Marxist Group"; *Marxism Today*, February 1976; "The Strategy of Rank and Filism," *Marxism Today*, December 1976; "The CP, the SWP, and the Strategy for Socialism in Britain," *International Socialism*, June 1977; "Trotskyism and Revolution," *International* (Summer 1977).

In the British case the Party's call for postwar progressive national unity came to be seen as both embarrassing and unnecessary following Labour's landslide victory in the July 1945 General Election. My paper argued that while progressive unity was a tactical flop, there was a lot to be said for its underlying broad front politics and that a more consistent and persistent pursuit of an independent position relative to the Labour Party might have resulted in a stronger communist presence in postwar British politics.

Eric Hobsbawm's comment on the paper was that while I had written an "interesting historical polemic," I should dump the counterfactual speculation and go back to the drawing board.[18]

Eric was right that, as an historian, I needed to focus on what had actually happened not what might have been. But re-reading the paper I think it was a pretty good piece of research and that both the counterfactual and my empathy for the BCP's political position served to enhance historical understanding of the party's wartime experience. Also, Hobsbawm did not like the politics of the piece. He prioritised Communist-Labour unity whereas I emphasised the need to challenge Labour's hegemony on the left.[19]

By the mid-1980s I was ready for a serious engagement with Soviet diplomatic history but was weighed down by a full-time job in the Education Department of the National and Local Government Officers' Association and by continuing political commitments. In 1982 I was a candidate in local elections and in 1983 a candidate in the British General Election. I was a member of the party's Theory and Ideology Committee, I organised coach trips to the *Fête de L'Humanité* in Paris that was organized by the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) and collected money for striking miners. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s I gave talks to party organisations on subjects such as Class Politics, Revolutionary Strategy, Eurocommunism, the British State, the International Situation, the Northern Ireland Crisis, and 'Individual Rights in a Participatory Democracy.' In 'The Soviet Union: Why the Dissidents are Right,' a talk to the School of Oriental and African Studies Communist Society in January 1978, I argued that the dissidents had every right to their civil and political liberties, which were denied to them and all Soviet citizens by a repressive regime. I also detected a deep economic, ideological, and political crisis in Soviet society. But I had no inkling of the dramatic events that a decade later would sweep away the Soviet and Communist bloc.

By 1987 I had produced a draft of my thesis on "Soviet Russia's Pact with Nazi Germany." But after talking to Geoffrey Stern, I decided to publish a book first and then revise it as a thesis. Publication prospects were boosted considerably by Neal Ascherson's discussion of the manuscript of my "forthcoming and fascinating book" in his *Observer* column in October 1987. But publication was delayed to coincide with the upcoming 50th anniversary of the pact in August 1989. This proved to be fortuitous because the Gorbachev revolution was gathering speed and new documents were coming out all the time. The pact became a political issue within the USSR for the very first time, not least in the Baltic Republics, which had been occupied under its auspices in summer 1940. Events moved so fast that at the last minute I had to add an author's note to the book on "Glasnost and the Pact."

I dropped out of the CP in 1988. After nearly 20 years of incessant political activity I was done. The Eurocommunists had won the factional battle within the party but inherited a hollowed-out shell. Some of my closest friends and comrades, including my partner and editor, had joined the Social Democratic Party—a centre-left split from the Labour Party seeking to break the mould of British politics by electoral and social reform. I was not prepared to join them but I did not disagree with their decision. It was time to devote my energies to research and writing.

[18] Hobsbawm letter, 15 May 1980.

[19] An academicized version of my paper may be found here: http://xml.ucc.ie/chronicon/robfra.htm. My research was part of a project by the CP History Group to produce a book of essays on the history of the party, to be published by Lawrence & Wishart. The book never saw the light of day because publication was, I understand, vetoed by the party leadership because the essays were deemed too diverse and deviant.

The Unholy Alliance: Stalin's Pact with Hitler (1989) was published under my newly acquired 'nom de plume,' *Geoffrey* Roberts, which the publisher, Iradj Bagherzadeh of I.B. Tauris, thought sounded more serious than the too-friendly 'Geoff.' When I suggested adding my middle initial C he said no, that would be too American. Iradj wanted my next book to be about the battle of Stalingrad but I did not think anyone would be interested.[20]

Like most of my books, *The Unholy Alliance* was aimed at a popular as well as a scholarly audience. It was well-received. Particularly pleasing were compliments about my writing. I had struggled long and hard to find my writing voice.

A couple of years later I turned the book into a thesis, which was examined by John Erickson and Philip Windsor. I then spent several years publishing articles based on new material from the Russian archives. These articles were consolidated in *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War* (1995).[21] All my research in this period was based on published documentation from the Russian archives. Since then, Michael Carley, in particular, has done invaluable research in the Russian archives on Soviet foreign policy in the 1920s and 1930s, but I have seen nothing new that would fundamentally change my interpretation.[22]

I moved to Ireland in 1992 to take up my first full-time teaching post, at University College Cork, and was too busy catching up on my academic career to join the archival goldrush to Moscow in the early 1990s. But I met Jochen Laufer at a seminar in Konstanz in June 1996 and he encouraged me to go to the Foreign Ministry (MID) archive in Moscow.[23] In November I took the plunge (Michael Carley was there, too). My topic was the Soviet Union, the Grand Alliance, and the Origins of the Cold War. At that time foreign scholars were not allowed to see the correspondence between Moscow and its embassies so I asked for files on internal preparations for the Moscow Foreign Ministers' Conference of October 1943. This tactic proved quite successful and I pursued the same strategy on subsequent research trips to Moscow.

For the multi-million masses of post-Soviet Russia, the 1990s were a time of trouble, misery, and strife, including in boom-town Moscow. For privileged foreign academics like myself it was a career-opportunity, a chance to access archives that you never dreamed of entering before the collapse of the USSR, and to make a name for yourself as a scholar.

[20] Eventually, I did write a book about the battle: Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad: The Battle that Changed History* (London: Longman, 2002). But, alas, Antony Beevor had beaten me to it.

[21] Roberts, *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War: Russo-German Relations and the Road to War, 1933-1941* (London: Macmillan, 1995). The book was commissioned by Geoffrey Warner as part of a series on the origins of World War Two.

[22] I returned to the Nazi-Soviet pact in Roberts, "From Détente to Partition: Soviet-Polish Relations and the Origins of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, 1938-1939," in C. Koch, ed., *Gab es einen Stalin-Hitler-Pakt? Charakter, Bedeutung und Deutung des deutsch-sowjetischen Nichtagriffsvertrags vom 23. August 1939* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2015).

[23] Jochen, who died in 2016, co-edited with G.P. Kynin and A. Filitov the most important collection of Soviet archival documents on Moscow's foreign policy during the Second World War and the early Cold War, *SSSR i germanskiĭ vopros, 1941-1949: dokumenty iz arkhiva vneshneĭ politiki Rossiĭskoĭ Federat͡sii* [СССР и германский вопрос, 1941-1949: документы из архива внешней политики Российской Федерации], 3 vols. (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia͡, 1996, 2000, and 2003).

MID was a difficult archive to work in, the biggest problem being that they wouldn't tell you what files they had.[24] In other Russian archives there were finding aids that enabled you to identify and request particular files. But over time I got what I needed—from MID and other archives—for my long-overdue revisionist history of postwar Soviet foreign policy.

I had worked out the parameters of my interpretation when I was at the LSE. There were those, I wrote then, who saw Soviet policy as expansionist and those who saw it as conservative and reactive. While the revisionists were right that the Soviets felt threatened and sought national security, there was also a revolutionary dimension to Moscow's foreign policy, which in the late 1990s I reformulated as the pursuit of a geoideological as well as a geopolitical sphere of security in Eastern Europe. This striving for a people's democratic Europe was radicalised by the onset of the Cold War in 1947 and resulted in a tightly controlled Soviet-Communist bloc.[25] However, my most recent work has stressed that as early as the late 1940s the Soviets were stepping away from confrontation with the West in pursuit of peace campaigns designed to mitigate and, indeed, end the Cold War.[26]

Having reinvented myself as a diplomatic historian I sought theoretical warrant for my practice as a historian, not just in Collingwood but in the analytical philosophy of history and the philosophy of action, in social science debates about methodological and ontological individualism, and in the writings of practitioners such as Carl Becker, Geoffrey Elton, Jack Hexter and Arthur Marwick. The result was a programmatic statement of my post-Marxist position in an article published by the *Journal of Contemporary History* in 1994: "Narrative History as a Way of Life" in which I sketched what I called the human action approach to the study of the past.[27]

In the field of IR, I turned to the works of the British theorist Charles Reynolds to validate diplomatic history.[28] Reynolds argued that the problem with IR theory was that it did not so much explain the empirical as use the empirical to instantiate concepts which predetermined what constituted the important facts of the real world. As Reynolds said, "an 'explanation'

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[24] In 2002 the MID archive published a detailed guide to the subject-matter of its various *fonds* (file series) but it was not for sale to the public. *Spravochnik po Fondam Arkhiva Vneshnei Poilitiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 1917-1962* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 2002).

[25] Roberts, "Ideology, Calculation and Improvisation: Spheres of Influence and Soviet Foreign Policy, 1939-1945," *Review of International Studies* 25:4 (October 1999): 655-673. My account of the Soviet role in the origins of the Cold War is contained in a number of books and articles but principally in *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (London: Yale University Press, 2006).

[26] Roberts, "Working towards the Vozhd'? Stalin and the Peace Movement" in S. Grant and J. Ryan, eds., *Re-visioning Stalin and Stalinism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

[27] Roberts, "Narrative History as a Way of Life," *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1999): 221-228. See also my "Postmodernism versus the Standpoint of Action," *History and Theory* 36:2 (1997): 249-260; "Geoffrey Elton and the Philosophy of History," *The Historian* 57 (Spring 1998): 29-31; and "J.H. Hexter: Narrative History and Common Sense," *Chronicon* 3 (1999-2007): 36-43, http://www.ucc.ie/chronicon/3/roberts.pdf.

[28] Charles Reynolds, *Theory and Explanation in International Politics* (London: Martin Robertson, 1975); *Modes of Imperialism* (London: Martin Robertson, 1981); *The Politics of War* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989); *The World of States* (London: Edward Elgar, 1992). Reynolds taught at Durham University and in the 1990s I met and corresponded with him about the matters discussed here. For my take on History and IR: Roberts, "History, Theory and the Narrative Turn in IR," *Review of International Studies* 32:4 (October 2006): 703-714. Also, my contributions to H-Diplo roundtables on Marc Trachtenberg's *The Craft of International History*, https://hdiplo.org/roundtables/PDF/CraftofInternationalHistory-Roundtable.pdf,and Richard Ned Lebow's *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, https://issforum.org/roundtables/3-7-a-cultural-theory-of-international-relations.

that cannot logically separate the things explained from the explanation is no explanation."[29] Reynolds's alternative to IR theory was the historical mode of explanation. The historical approach to the study of IR was superior, he argued, because the explanations of historians are subject to external empirical validation and the interpretations they propose are separate from the evidence itself.

Reynolds's methodological defence of history did not go far enough for me. The problem was that the validity of the testing procedure—interpretation of the evidence of reasoning in order to explain action—depends on a whole series of assumptions about human beings, their mentalities, their behaviour and relationships, and the contexts and conditions of their societies and how these impact on action. Charles thought that all that could be bracketed as practical, background assumptions that did not require validation. I thought that historians needed an ontological argument as well as an epistemological one. So I turned to the work of David Carr, Frederick Olafson, and others who argued that historians wrote narrative accounts of human action because that is what the world is actually like. Human beings are narrative creatures and historians are able to capture the practical narrativity that constitutes human existence because they are like that too.[30]

If my memory serves me right, E.P. Thompson once explained his break from the British Communist Party in 1956 by saying that when he reached a certain age he started to reason for himself. My experience of the post-1968 CP was radically different. It was within and through the party that I learned to reason and acquired my scholarly skills, ambitions, values, and identity.

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[29] Reynolds, *Modes of Imperialism* p.86.

[30] David Carr, *Time Narrative and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Frederick Olafson, *The Dialectic of Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). The writings of Carr, Olafson, and other contributors to the narrativist philosophy of history feature in my *The History and Narrative Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001).