

Building the Party

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A FAIR NUMBER of *New Politics* readers will have read one or more of Tony Cliff's books, or perhaps even seen him deliver one of his stem-winding speeches. For more than half a century, Tony Cliff (1917-2000) played a leading role in the movement to rebuild the international far left in the wake of Stalinism and fascism. He was a proponent of the theory of Soviet state-capitalism, a biographer of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, and a central figure in the development of the International Socialist tendency. In person, he was charming and charismatic, but as a political organizer he could be utterly ruthless.

Born and raised in a small village outside Haifa, Palestine, Tony Cliff came from a prosperous Russian family with strong Zionist beliefs. His given name was Ygael Gluckstein; Tony Cliff was one of several pseudonyms he adopted over the years. Cliff's father worked in the construction industry, and Ian Birchall reports that, "his business partner at one time was Yehiel Mikhail Weizmann, the youngest brother of the first president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann." Cliff began reading the socialist classics in his early teens, and joined a small Marxist group in Palestine at the age of sixteen. One comrade from those days remembers him as a "youth with an inner fire...a boy/old man who drew happiness not from the love life of youth but from complete dedication to the revolutionary cause." Even then he was known as a "brilliant, riveting speaker" with an animated sense of humor. By the time Cliff was twenty, he was a dedicated Trotskyist, committed to building the Fourth International.

Life as a revolutionary socialist in pre-Israel Palestine was difficult indeed. For one thing, there was a dearth of leftist analyses on the history and politics of the region. For another, the British authorities were determined to stamp out any group that called for Arab and Jewish unity or advocated on behalf of the working class. Cliff actually spent a year in prison for distributing leaflets that denounced British imperialism. According to Birchall, "food was served in a large cauldron, and to get a piece of meat prisoners had to plunge their arm" into the steaming pot. A variety of diseases were "widespread in the jails," but "medical inspections were perfunctory." In addition, British intelligence officers often tortured prisoners by sticking pieces of wood under their fingernails, hanging them by their hands, or exposing their feet to open flames. Even after his release, Cliff was initially placed under house arrest and then subjected to intensive surveillance.

State repression was only one obstacle that the small circle of Trotskyists in Palestine was forced to contend with. Objective political conditions were another. By the 1930s, Jewish migration to the area was steadily rising. Zionist ideas were popular among these new migrants, regardless of their location in the class structure. At the same time, many Arabs were nationalist in their orientation, and increasingly hostile to any form of cross-ethnic solidarity. Cliff's first contribution to the radical left came in the form of essays on Middle Eastern politics, several of which circulated widely among socialists in North America and Western Europe. These pieces expressed both the strengths and the weaknesses of Cliff's Marxism. On the one hand, they were written in a lucid, straightforward style, and were stuffed with facts and figures that their author largely culled from the business press. They attempted to grapple with the real world. At the same time, they often concluded with lofty calls for the establishment of a "Republic of Workers and Peasants of the Arab East" that assumed that a looming economic crisis would erase deeply-rooted social differences and generate an era of revolutionary transcendence. This combination of empirical fastidiousness and rash political optimism would become a hallmark of Cliff's approach.

Cliff moved to England in 1946, accompanied by his wife Chanie Rosenberg. They had met when Cliff gave a talk at the left-Zionist kibbutz where Chanie lived and worked. (As Birchall wryly notes,

the “meeting itself was not a great success”; Cliff spoke for hours and hours, “and his Hebrew was often incomprehensible to the audience of new immigrants.”) Chanie Rosenberg was born and raised in South Africa, and her passport allowed her to relocate to Britain. Her father “had a visa for Britain which he did not need,” which he passed along to Cliff. They first traveled to Paris, to meet with leading members of the Fourth International. Unfortunately, Cliff’s glasses fell into the Mediterranean during their voyage to Europe, so he couldn’t see very well. It was in England — armed with a new pair of glasses — that he embraced the theory of state capitalism that had already been propounded by C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, among others. Cliff’s writings on the Soviet Union provided a “wealth of concrete examples” along with “constant references to the Marxist classics.” He did a better job of demolishing the orthodox Trotskyist position than he did of countering the “bureaucratic collectivist” analysis of Max Shachtman and his supporters, and there was a sloganeering, one-size-fits-all quality to many Cliff-inspired state capitalist polemics. But, as Cliff later noted, “if the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class, then you cannot have a workers’ state without the workers having power.”

Securing permission to stay in England proved difficult, and for a period of four years, 1947 to 1951, Cliff lived in Ireland, whose authorities viewed “the Jews of Palestine” as “fighting a struggle for national liberation from British colonial rule.” Chanie remained in London and worked as a teacher, earning seven pounds a week. As Birchall writes, “Chanie’s income had to support both of them, Cliff’s lifestyle was frugal: his normal diet was bread, jam, a bar of chocolate and an egg each day.” By the time he was able to return to England, the country’s main Trotskyist group had broken into several factions, and Cliff’s small band of supporters decided to launch their own organization. Their first meeting was held in the fall of 1950, with “21 people in attendance, representing a total membership of 33.” Calling themselves the Socialist Review Group, they mainly reached out to manual workers and Labour Party activists. One of their most notable recruits was Duncan Hallas, who would play a pivotal role in the IS, and subsequently the British SWP, during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Birchall’s account of the group’s formative period is mostly level-headed, which makes his hagiographic comparison of Cliff and Hallas all the more disconcerting: “If Cliff resembled Lenin in his remorseless focus on the political, Hallas took after Engels in his vast range of interests in the natural and social worlds.”

The Socialist Review Group faced an uphill struggle. Living standards were rising, and many, if not most, active trade unionists regarded the Labour Party as *their* party. Furthermore, the Communist Party was still quite strong in certain areas. Cliff poured his energies into building the SRG, but by the end of the decade it was still a marginal force, even in relation to competing groupuscules. Two things helped keep it going. The first was the high quality of its new recruits, including people like Michael Kidron, Peter Sedgwick, Jim Higgins, Alastair MacIntyre, and Paul Foot. The second was the decline of the Communist Party in the mid-1950s and the early stirrings of what would become known as the New Left. Some of Cliff’s best writings date from this period, including books and essays on Mao’s China, Rosa Luxemburg, the permanent arms economy, and the postwar boom. The group launched a new quarterly publication, *International Socialism*, in 1960, and renamed itself the International Socialists in 1962. For the next several years the fledgling group was able to develop a consistent approach, and attract new members, without behaving like a sterile sect. By the time a new radical generation burst on the scene, in the late 1960s, the IS was well positioned to relate Marxist ideas to students and young workers whose political outlook was decisively shaped by their disaffection with mainstream parties and by their opposition to the Vietnam War.

From the standpoint of intellectual history, the most interesting period in the development of the IS tendency came in the 1950s and 1960s. This was when Cliff seemed most open to new ideas, and most willing to collaborate with those whose sensibility differed from his own. For this reason, rival

tendencies viewed the IS group with suspicion, and in particular as being insufficiently Leninist in its approach. A decisive turning point came at the end of the 1960s when Cliff explicitly pushed IS in a democratic centralist direction. "A revolutionary combat organization," he wrote in an internal document in 1968, "needs a democratic centralist structure." As Birchall points out, the "IS group had traditionally been fairly lax organizationally. In the 18 years since the founding of the SRG there had been just three expulsions." Now Cliff was calling for a major overhaul in the group's internal life and political perspectives. Rather than seeing itself as a loosely organized tendency, it began to regard itself as the nucleus of a — or rather *the* — revolutionary party. The struggle to transform the group along vanguardist lines soaked up considerable energies in the 1970s, even as the class war was heating up. The membership expanded, but the group's rhetoric became more predictable. By 1977 it renamed itself once again, as the Socialist Workers Party, which reflected its revamped aspirations, as well as its growing presence on the left. Cliff spent the early part of the decade looking forward to a revolutionary crisis that would place the working class in power. By the late 1970s he was beginning to wonder whether the socialist left faced a protracted downturn. The Cliffites pulled off some successes in this period, most notably the Rock against Racism initiative, and the high-profile Anti-Nazi League. But they also lost some of their most capable and thoughtful members, through attrition and expulsion.

IAN BIRCHALL WRITES AT LENGTH about the SWP's subsequent ups and downs, from the bitter industrial disputes of the 1980s to the anti-capitalist protests of the 1990s. He also documents Cliff's tireless efforts as a pamphleteer, organizer, and public speaker. He emphasizes the extraordinary impression that Cliff often left on younger socialists, including former members who drifted from the organization but who nevertheless kept plugging away as trade unionists and social movement activists. He implicitly acknowledges, I think, that Cliff's approach became less innovative as the decades wore on. (The fact that the book's subtitle calls Tony Cliff a Marxist for *his* time, rather than *our* time, is pretty telling.) He even cites the justified complaint of one of the group's most impressive writers, Nigel Harris, that the "SWP in the 1980s had stopped producing new ideas." And he readily admits that Cliff "had a tendency to make favorites — and drop them." Indeed, several of Birchall's anecdotes make Cliff look callous in his dealings with longtime comrades. His book certainly offers a far less flattering portrait than the one provided by Cliff's autobiography, *A World To Win: Life of a Revolutionary* (2000), which I reviewed in NP #32 (Winter 2002).

From Birchall's perspective, of course, the key thing is not that Tony Cliff was imperfect, but that he never wavered in his socialist convictions, and never stopped building the party. As he pointedly insists in the book's conclusion, "Among writers of the anti-Stalinist left who built on Trotsky's heritage in the second half of the twentieth century, Isaac Deutscher, C.L.R. James, and Hal Draper produced books comparable in quality to Cliff's, but their organizational legacy was negligible." It's impossible to make sense of Cliff's Marxism, in other words, without also coming to terms with the strengths and weaknesses of the organization that he and his collaborators practically built from scratch.

As it happens, Tony Cliff played a formative role in my own development as an impressionable young radical. I saw him speak a dozen or more times, sometimes to small audiences and, on a few occasions, at mass rallies. He was a formidable orator — witty, insightful, and quick on his feet. Birchall's thoroughly researched biography brought back many fond memories. In fact, I spent a few happy afternoons with Tony Cliff and Chanie Rosenberg in their modest London home in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When I first met Cliff I was still in secondary school. At the time, I was thinking about getting a factory job, or a printing apprenticeship, after graduation. Cliff helped me get past my workerist ambitions. There are plenty of opportunities for useful political work on campuses, he pointed out. Besides, he added, you might even learn something.