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Historians of the world unite! Eric Hobsbawm and the Communist Party Historians Group, 1946-1956

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Abstract: How do historians become historians? Some might say that all it takes is dedication to the profession and a talent for reading archival sources. But the reality is rather more complex. Eric Hobsbawm – one of the most famous historians of the twentieth-century – is a perfect example of this. His journey from a bright doctoral student to a global household name was not inevitable; instead, it involved a complex web of friendships and contacts that enabled him to speak knowledgeably to (and about) a huge range of audiences. In this article, I explore one of the most important aspects of his historical apprenticeship: his membership of the Communist Party Historians Group. This became one of the pre-eminent forums for the development of Hobsbawm's ideas in the 1940s and 50s – and, through the richness of its discussions, left a lasting impression on Marxist historiography.

Keywords: Eric Hobsbawm; Marxist history; Communism.

Resumo: Como os historiadores se tornam historiadores? Alguns podem dizer que tudo o que é preciso é dedicação à profissão e um talento para ler fontes arquivísticas. Mas a realidade da profissão é bem mais complexa. Eric Hobsbawm – um dos historiadores mais famosos do século XX – é um exemplo perfeito disso. Sua jornada, de um brilhante estudante de doutorado para um nome conhecido globalmente, não foi inevitável; na verdade, esse percurso desenvolveu-se em meio a uma teia complexa de amizades e contatos que lhe permitiram falar com desenvoltura para (e sobre) uma enorme gama de audiências. Neste artigo, eu exploro um dos aspectos mais importantes de seu aprendizado histórico: sua participação no *Communist Party Historians Group*. O grupo foi um dos fóruns mais proeminentes para o desenvolvimento das ideias de Hobsbawm nas décadas de 1940 e 1950 – e, pela riqueza de suas discussões, deixou uma impressão duradoura na historiografia marxista.

Palavras-chave: Eric Hobsbawm; história marxista; comunismo.

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Along with a little intelligence and a lot of perseverance, it takes three things to make a good historian. First, overlapping groups of friends to offer emotional support, read work, and provide intellectual sustenance. Second, some well-defined enemies who can be invoked in arguments and disagreements. And, finally, a wide network of contacts that can be used to build collaborations, test ideas, or simply offer an invitation to a conference in a glamorous location. Hobsbawm was fortunate that he had all three of these things in abundance during his formative years from the end of the war to the early 1960s. He was friends with some of the brightest minds of his generation; he was firmly located on one side of an emerging cultural Cold War; and he had, by the end of this period, a bulging address book of contacts who admired his work and his entrepreneurial skills. His publication record may have been rather slim – in today's competitive academic environment, he would have been pulled up for his lack of productivity – but he was constructing a formidable base from which to launch his career.

It is important, however, not to read Hobsbawm's career backwards. He was not, as many obituaries and tributes seemed to suggest, always destined for greatness. In the 1950s, he was just another member, albeit a rather bright one, of his generation of post-war Marxist historians. He was friends with most of them and they shared similar interests in the origins of capitalism, the Industrial Revolution and the history of the labouring classes. Moreover, theirs was an explicitly political project. The subsequent focus on several unique individuals has rather obscured the fact that, in the immediate post-war years, the world of Hobsbawm and his peers revolved around British – and, to a much lesser extent, European – Communism. The 'Communist' in the phrase 'Communist historians' was not a simple adjective; it was the very essence of their identity. With the rupture of 1956, part of this commitment dissolved. But, for a decade or more, it was quite genuine and had a real impact on Hobsbawm's worldview.

The place where this was most clearly visible was in his involvement with the Communist Party Historians Group (CPHG), which reconvened from 1946 onwards. But there were many others, including his dense interpersonal links with British Communists during and after the war, and his post-war involvement with Central European exile communities in London. These together defined a substantial proportion of Hobsbawm's daily activities, as well as his friendship circles. This is not to say that he was always a slavish follower of the party line, although he certainly allowed himself to be manipulated. Nor was he unable to engage positively with non-Communists, as is clear from many of his early academic projects, including the journal *Past & Present* and his writing on primitive social movements. But it is important to capture some of the weight of party life in the 1940s and 50s. Even for an undistinguished activist like Hobsbawm, Communism was a totalising ideology. It dominated the intellectual orientations of its members and it instilled certain reflexes that were extremely hard to shake off. Despite his many attempts at reconciling his intellectual openness with the rigours of ideological discipline, in this period, more than any other in his life, Hobsbawm was a party man and his friends were party people.

This close relationship between intellectual and political activity was not, of course, anything new. Already as a student in the 1930s, Hobsbawm had found himself rubbing shoulders overwhelmingly with people close to the Communist Party. His triple life as a Cambridge Communist, a London student activist, and a global revolutionary in Paris ensured that his friendship circles mostly remained within the parameters of the party. He spent much of his spare time, including

vacations, involved in Party-related activities. Inevitably, the outbreak of the war damaged Hobsbawm's links with the global Communist movement. He could no longer travel abroad and many of his erstwhile student contemporaries were killed or incarcerated. His confinement within the British Isles meant adjusting his horizons to the more modest British context, where Communism was extremely weak, especially during the awkward two-year period from August 1939 to June 1941 when the Soviet Union was in an official alliance with Nazi Germany. Not that Hobsbawm raised any public objection to this counter-intuitive alignment between fascism and communism, which shocked thousands of Communist activists across Europe. He was even willing to publish material in support of Stalin's position. In early 1940, he co-authored a short CUSC pamphlet entitled 'War on the USSR?' with Raymond Williams, who would later become one of Britain's foremost Marxist cultural critics.[1] This apologia for the Soviet occupation of Finland and for Stalin's policies was hardly the most virulent of pro-Communist propaganda, but it showed that Hobsbawm was someone who could be relied upon to toe the party line.

Hobsbawm's call-up to the British army in February 1940 did little to inflect his Communist sympathies. On the contrary, it was during and immediately after the war that he became most deeply tied to the social world of British Communism through his friendships, contacts and the intellectual community of the Historians Group. At an intimate level, his most meaningful romantic relationship during the war was with Muriel Seaman, an orthodox Communist whom he eventually married in 1943. He spent most of his leave with her and London-based members of the Party. When he was not involved in the drudgery of teaching elementary German to recalcitrant officers, he was discussing the war and Party strategy with his wife and his close acquaintances, like Christopher "Kit" Meredith and Derek van Abbé.[2] The fragmentary telephone intercepts, opened letters and Communist Party office wiretaps that have survived in Hobsbawm's secret service files offer evidence of regular conversations with his dear Cambridge friend and dedicated party member, Margot Heinemann.[3] And he retained close links with the CPGB party hierarchy in King St (he was, for example, asked to draft a "10 page document on Army reorganisation" in the autumn of 1942). Even the one solitary letter to his wife that was intercepted by MI5 in the spring of 1945 was largely a discussion of the local and global political situation at the time.[4] The few words of tenderness could not hide the fact that theirs was a relationship dependent on and embedded within the social universe of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

Like most of his peers, Hobsbawm's main priority in the immediate postwar years was to make up for the 'lost' time of the war, during which political and intellectual commitments had been placed in a sort of suspended animation. He now had to build new connections, as well as reconstruct the networks of which

1 Anonymous [Eric Hobsbawm & Raymond Williams], 'War on the USSR?' (London: University Labour Federation, 1940), Marx Memorial Library YA08/WAR. Williams recalled writing the pamphlet in WILLIAMS, Raymond. *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. London: New Left Books, 1979, p. 42-3. There is some confusion, however, over exactly which pamphlet it was that Hobsbawm and Williams worked on and when 'War on the USSR?' was written. For overlapping opinions, see EVANS, Richard. *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*. London: Little; Brown, 2019, p. 180-1; BARROW, Logie. "Letter". In: *Labour History Review*, v. 18, n. 3, 2015, p. 293-5.

2 See for instance the few pieces of correspondence between Christopher "Kit" Meredith, Derek van Abbé and Eric Hobsbawm in People's History Museum Archive, Manchester (henceforth PHM) CP/IND/MISC/12.

3 See for instance 'Lascar Extract' (25 November 1942) and 'Holborn 4071: Eric HOBSBAUWM rang up Margot Heineman' (2 July 1944), TNA KV 2/3980.

4 Eric Hobsbawm to Muriel Seaman (15 April 1945), TNA KV 2/3980.

he had been a part before the war broke out. There is no better example of this tight relationship between friendship, politics and intellectual engagement than Hobsbawm's intimate involvement with the Communist Party Historians Group. His membership of the CPHG went on to define his work and that of an entire generation of Marxist historians. Indeed, so great was its influence on subsequent historiography that something of a mythology has emerged around it, one to which Hobsbawm himself contributed by writing the first history of the group in 1978.[5] There have been two over-arching problems with much of the sympathetic literature about the CPHG: first, it has tended to focus overwhelmingly on members who became famous at the expense of those who did not have the same academic pedigree; second, and largely as a result of the group's partial decomposition in 1956, it has stressed the intellectual 'independence' of various members in relation to the party line.[6] These retrospective assessments have obscured the degree to which the group's origins lay within the social and political universe of postwar British Communism.

Hobsbawm's own account is partly responsible for the collective amnesia about the CPHG's origins. He began his history of the group in 1946 and claimed, rather boldly, that there was "no tradition of Marxist history in Britain".[7] This was not exactly true. Already before the war, the Party had begun to reconsider the role of intellectuals as part of a more general move to expand its appeal under the new Popular Front policy.[8] This was inevitably encouraged by the vast student mobilisations of the late 1930s. The emergence of a discrete group of Party scientists and the enormous success of the Left Book Club – a subscription book service set up by Victor Gollancz in 1936 – offered further evidence of the importance of ideas and intellectuals in the revolutionary struggle. It is true that the study of history was not at the forefront of this movement but, as Antony Howe has clearly shown, the Communist Party had repeatedly taken an interest in history from the mid-1930s onwards. Even before the war, there was a "vigorous" party history group run by Dona Torr and Robin Page Arnot. And history featured prominently in wartime discussions over the future direction of the Party. Various abortive attempts to set up a Communist "History Faculty" in 1941-2 petered out, but party members were more successful in setting up a "Past and Present" book series.[9] This was edited by the ancient historians V. Gordon Childe and Benjamin Farrington, and published by Corbett Press, a subsidiary of the Party publishers Lawrence and Wishart. It would become a popular outlet for the writings of later CPHG members.[10]

5 HOBSBAWM, Eric. "The Historians' Group of the Communist Party". In: CORNFORTH, Maurice (ed.). *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1978, p. 21-47.

6 For contrasting critical perspectives on the CPHG, see KAYE, Harvey. *The British Marxist Historians: an introductory analysis*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984; SAMUEL, Raphael. "The British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980". *New Left Review*, n. 120, mar.-abr. 1980, p. 21-96; SCHWARZ, Bill. "'The people' in history: the Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-56". In: JOHNSON, Richard et al. (eds.). *Making Histories: Studies in history-writing and politics*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007 [1982], p. 44-96; "The Historian as Marxist: The Group". In: HIMMELFARB, Gertrude. *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals*. London: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 88-112.

7 HOBSBAWM. 'The Historians' Group', p. 22.

8 BRANSON, Noreen. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985, p. 204-19.

9 This was not related to the academic journal *Past and Present*, set up in 1952 by Hobsbawm and others.

10 On the prehistory of the CPHG, see HOWE, Antony. "The past is ours: the political usage of English history by the British Communist Party, and the role of Dona Torr in the creation of its Historians' Group, 1930-56", unpublished PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2003, p. 416-26. I am extremely grateful to Tony for helping me to understand this early period and for his comprehensive biographical knowledge.

World War Two gave a renewed impetus to the various initiatives to fix a Communist historical narrative that would be fit for mass consumption. As was the case with Communist parties across Europe, the war allowed the CPGB to recruit many new members who were sympathetic to the role the Soviets had played in the defeat of Nazism. At its peak in 1943, the CPGB could boast of 56,000 members, a huge increase from the c.18,000 recorded in 1938-9. This fell away a little after the end of the war, but there were still more than 42,000 members on the party rolls in April 1946.[11] Even for a political entity so closely dependent on the diktats of Moscow, such an exponential expansion forced a rethink in strategy. This process was hastened by the dissolution of the international Communist umbrella organisation, the Comintern, in 1943; the emergence of the 'People's Democracies' of Eastern Europe in the late 1940s; and the subsequent announcement by the CPGB of a 'British Road to Socialism' in January 1951.[12] As the CPGB became ever more focused on its explicitly "national" character, it needed to find a specifically British narrative to sustain its new ideological line. And, given the centrality of historical progress to Marxism-Leninism, it was only a matter of time before the party hierarchy began to pay more attention to how history was being written. Hence, the Historians Group was very much a product of the Party that sustained it. In time, it became a forum for semi-independent discussions about history and historiography, but at its outset it belonged firmly within the orbit of Party cultural policy. Historians were mobilised by the CPGB to fight the "battle of ideas" in the same way as writers, filmmakers and musicians.[13] They were expected to use their talents – essentially, reading and writing – to support the revolutionary cause. In short, they were Communists first and historians second. As Hobsbawm observed in his 1978 account, the Historians Group was "if not exactly a way of life, then at least a small cause" and members "segregated themselves strictly from schismatics and heretics".[14]

The surviving records suggest that the idea for a history group was driven forward in 1945 and 1946 by three young Communist historians: Christopher Hill, Daphne May, and Dona Torr.[15] The main aim, at least initially, was to bring together a group of historians who could suggest revisions to AL Morton's seminal *People's History of England*, originally published in 1938. Morton's volume had been enormously successful, and the Party were hoping to use it as a basis for a Communist history of Britain. But it needed some "adjustments" to bring it into line with the prevailing Marxist orthodoxy. Hill, May and Torr had already written extensive criticisms of Morton's book during the war, but they wanted a larger group of historians who could assist in the process of "revision". They also hoped such an initiative would take on a more formal character. With a shifting party line and plenty of new recruits, the immediate postwar period seemed like an ideal moment to embark on a more sustained discussion about what an appropriate British Marxist history might look like and how it might best be advertised to the world.

11 For a detailed analysis of CPGB membership figures in this period, see THORPE, Andrew. "The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945". *The Historical Journal*, v. 43, n. 3, 2000, p. 777-800.

12 *The British Road to Socialism. Programme adopted by the Executive Committee of the Communist Party*. London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1951.

13 Indeed, the CPHG is perhaps best seen as part of the "cultural history" of British Communism. For examples of such history, CROFT, Andy (ed.). *A weapon in the struggle: the cultural history of the Communist Party in Britain*. London: Pluto Press, 1998.

14 HOBSBAWM. "The Historians Group", 25, 23.

15 HOWE. "The Past Is Ours", p. 439-48.

It is not clear exactly when Hobsbawm was invited to join this emerging historians' collective. He does not appear to have played any major role in initiating it, which no doubt explains the rather truncated story he told of the group's formation in his 1978 account. He was also in the army when it was first discussed in late 1945, although he would probably have heard something about it from his numerous Communist friends. What we do know is that he was involved with the very first meeting of the group, which was a Historians Conference held on 29 and 30 June 1946 at the Workers' Music Association on Great Newport Street in London. The minutes of this meeting are sparse, but its purpose was clear enough: the first agenda item was a "discussion of A. L. Morton's 'A People's History of England', organised "on the basis of written suggestions for revision, sent in advance and circulated to those attending the conference". Various historians were subsequently assigned parts of Morton's text for revision; in the case of Hobsbawm, this meant chapters 14-17 of the book, which dealt with the rise of the British working class, colonial expansion, and World War One.[16] Hobsbawm must have known that this task was ideological "rectification" wrapped up as constructive criticism, but he was happy to go along with it and ultimately produced one full A4 page of corrections.[17]

The second Historians Conference, which took place over three days in late September 1946 at the New Scala Restaurant on Charlotte Street, followed a similar pattern to the first. 36 people attended, and the first day was devoted to an in-depth critique of Morton. Discussions on the second and third days turned to other matters. One was the long-term future of the group. There was clearly both Party support and individual enthusiasm for the establishment of a more regular, formalised Historians' Group and it is a sign of this intent that participants decided to constitute a committee to administer the group. Hill was elected as chairman, May as secretary, and Hobsbawm as treasurer. This was also the moment when four separate 'sections' of the group were established to treat specific periods: "Ancient History", "Medieval", "16th-17th Century", and "19th Century". Over time, these sections took on a crucial importance as the main forums for discussion of historiographical questions. Finally, members set out some of the key priorities for the years to come. These included a "bibliography of Marxist historical writings in English"; plans for relevant commemorative anniversary (especially the centenary of the 1848 revolutions); the need to develop "foreign contacts"; the importance of adult education and school textbooks; and the challenge of publicising the work of the group in party journals such as the *Daily Worker* and *Modern Quarterly*. There was also a general sense that some members of the group should take responsibility for responding to inaccurate representations of Marxism, Communism, and Marxist history in the "bourgeois" press. It says something about Hobsbawm's reputation at the time that he was one of three members – along with Jack Tizard and Jack Lindsay – who was put in charge of the "Polemics Committee". It was obviously a task with which he felt a certain affinity since he actively fulfilled his duties as an indignant letter-writer in the late 1940s and 50s.[18]

At a more general level, this second 'Historian's Conference' in the summer of 1946 marked the beginning of a formalised entity known as the Historian's Group. This was both an organisation in and of itself, and an umbrella organisation,

16 CROFT, Daphne. "Minutes of the Historian's Conference, 29-30 June 1946", PHM CP/CENT/CULT/5/11.
17 HOWE. "The Past Is Ours", p. 488. See also the papers in MRC 937/6/2/1.
18 The details in this paragraph come from 'Minutes of Historian's Conference, September 27, 28 and 29, 1946', PHM CP/CENT/CULT/5/11.

nominally in charge of co-ordinating the activities of the different chronological or thematic sections. The minutes of its committee meetings – meticulously recorded by hand in a series of notebooks – testify to the frequently tedious work of making sure that the CPHG continued to function. There were substantial logistics involved in planning section meetings, arranging larger "conferences", and organising outreach activities (for example, in schools). To ensure a regular flow of funds, members had to pay a subscription, but not all of them kept up their payments. Moreover, it was not easy to get people to attend meetings, and those who did were not always happy at the exigencies of the party line. In early 1948, the CPHG committee decided that all section members should show their Party membership cards at the start of each meeting. In April, Hobsbawm reported to the committee that members of the 19th Century section "had objected to having a show of Party cards on the grounds that the Historians Group was not strictly a Party organisation" and that such a policy would "discourage comrades from inviting sympathetic non-Party people…" Predictably, this complaint was roundly "repudiated", but it indicated that, even at this early stage, there were tensions between those like May and Torr, who saw the group through a strictly ideological lens, and those like Hobsbawm, for whom this was supposed to be a forum for productive (if orthodox) discussion.[19]

Given the substantial investment of time and energy on the part of those involved, it is only natural to ask what members' motivations were for joining the group. There is no consistent answer to this question. At its height in the late 1940s, the CPHG had 120 or more members, although this dwindled to about 60 in the mid-1950s. Such diversity meant that different people participated for different reasons. Still, there seem to be three broad reasons why historians joined. For the unsung heroes of the CPHG – many of whom were women like May, Torr and Betty Grant – this was another one of their Party responsibilities. They were interested in the subjects under discussion and contributed actively, but they could occasionally be sceptical of the academic pretensions of some members. For those who were not in – and not planning to enter – academia, the CPHG was an opportunity to keep in touch with the latest insights of British Marxist historiography and potentially contribute a more down-to-earth perspective to the otherwise highly theoretical debates.[20]

Lastly, there were those who were already professional academics or on their way to becoming ones. For this segment – which comprised figures like Hill, Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, John Saville and Victor Kiernan – the CPHG was more than simply an extension of their Party work. They used it to learn more about their respective disciplines and to sharpen their analytical swords. This was particularly true of the slightly younger cohort of which Hobsbawm was a part. Hill was the exception since he was one of the only Communist historians in Britain to have a stable job at Balliol already during the war, but all the others were at the start of their careers and/or seeking employment. CPHG committee meetings, party conferences and small-group section discussions offered them the opportunity to exchange ideas. In Hobsbawm's case, this was of unusual importance because he could not lay claim to any credentials as a historian of early-modern or modern Britain when he joined the group in 1946. His original plan had been to write a PhD

19 'Seventh meeting of the Committee of Historians Group held in London, 10 April 1948', PHM CP/CENT/CULT/5/11.

20 Howe has made a heroic attempt to reconstruct the list of CPHG members beyond the core group of well-known historians. See HOWE. "The Past Is Ours", p. 457-78.

thesis on colonialism in North Africa and, even though he had abandoned this by the end of the war, he did not have any track record of research in British history. He did, of course, learn a great deal about the nineteenth-century British labour movement over the course of his doctoral research from 1946 to 1949, but the CPHG was an essential informal counterpart to his formal learning.

The range of debates to which Hobsbawm was introduced through the CPHG was intimidatingly large. To summarise briefly, there were four key historiographical debates that occupied the Group for its first decade. The first was the nature of British absolutism. As the pre-eminent specialist of this period – and the most established historian in the 16th-17th Century section in which most of the discussion on this subject took place – Hill was the main instigator. The crux of the debate revolved around the question of whether the English Revolution of the 1640s was, in any sense, a "bourgeois revolution" and, if so, whether one could characterise pre-revolutionary England as "feudal".[21] This naturally fed into a second, and now well-known, debate about the "transition" from feudalism to capitalism. The catalyst for this was the publication of Dobb's seminal *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946). This posited a developmentalist model of economic progress that became the point of reference for almost all British Marxist historians and launched a long-running debate about the root cause of the transition from feudalism to capitalism.[22] It helped that Dobb had been involved with the CPHG from the start: he was a regular attendee at section meetings and he often gave short introductions to different sessions, in which he would lay out the main economic issues.[23] Even so, his book – and the debate it provoked – reinforced the centrality of his ideas. And, with the publication of a further series of articles by Dobb and others in the journal *Science and Society* in 1950, the so-called "transition debate" became one of the most important points of contention in Marxist theory in the UK and far beyond.[24]

The third debate that drove forward many of the exchanges within the CPHG concerned the definition of the English "people" and the writing of English history. At first, this was closely tied to the process of revising Morton's *People's History*, but these initial reflections soon gave way to broader debates about popular "radicalism" in English history. The result was a systematic effort to restore to prominence figures and events that could demonstrate the strength of a radical tradition in English politics and broaden the focus of Communist politics away from class alone towards a more expansive notion of the "people".[25] The fourth

21 These debates have been republished, with an extensive introduction, in PARKER, David. *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution: Debates of the British Communist Historians, 1940-1956*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2008.

22 DOBB, Maurice. *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1946. Hobsbawm claimed that *Studies* was the "major historical work" which would "influence us [CPHG members] crucially" and "formulated our main and central problem". HOBSBAWM. "The Historians Group", p. 23.

23 SHENK. *Maurice Dobb*, p. 113.

24 SWEEZY, Paul M.; DOBB, Maurice. "The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism". *Science & Society*, v. 14, n. 2, 1950, p. 134-67. On the context behind Sweezy and Dobb's initial exchange, see SHENK. *Maurice Dobb*, p. 146-155. On the global impact of the transition debate, see CHABAL, Emile. "The voice of Hobsbawm". In: *Aeon* (8 October 2018), https://aeon.co/essays/how-eric-hobsbawm-helped-shape-the-global-marxist-imagination.

25 Schwarz discusses some of the possible individual reasons for this interest in "the people". These included the literary hinterland of some members (like Hobsbawm, Kiernan and later EP Thompson), which encouraged them to displace (Marxist) cultural critique from the literary realm into history. See SCHWARZ, "'The people' in history", p. 54-64. There was also a strong impetus from within the CPGB to create appropriate English 'heroes' of the Communist movement. On this, see HOWE, Antony. "'Our only ornament': Tom Mann and British Communist hagiography". *Twentieth Century Communism*, v. 1, n. 1,

major debate, which became more clearly articulated as time went on and brought together elements of the other three, was about the history of British capitalism. The key challenge for the group as a whole was to create a coherent history of capitalism in Britain, from the "transition" of the 17th century all the way through to the mid-twentieth century. This was the subject of a major CPHG conference in 1954, in which the most prominent members of the Group explored the main contours of the "rise and decline of capitalism" in Britain.[26]

Needless to say, the impact of these debates on Hobsbawm's subsequent intellectual development was profound. When he joined the CPHG in 1946, he was in the first year of his doctoral research. He could not plausibly claim any expertise in these four areas of discussion, except what he had picked up as a bright undergraduate and in his reading during the war years. Ten years later, everything had changed. Not only were many of the short articles he published in the press in the late 1940s devoted to subjects that were directly related to CPHG priorities (like the centenary of 1848 or the English socialist William Morris), but his academic work was powerfully shaped by the group's priorities. He produced his first ever academic publication – a collection of primary sources related to British working-class history – because of the group, and he later helped to create the journal *Past & Present* as a direct extension of the group's work. At a more intellectual level, he had, by the mid-1950s, published a ground-breaking article on the "general crisis" of the seventeenth century and several eloquent articles about moments of working-class protest in England, all of which were closely related to work done in the CPHG. A little later, in the late 1950s, Hobsbawm drew on the theoretical thrust of the CPHG's discussions on British capitalism to write the first of his 'total' histories, *The Age of Revolution* (1962). With such a rich range of avenues for research, it is easy to understand why Hobsbawm never had much interest in publishing and publicising his doctoral work on the Fabian movement. The CPHG and its discussions offered him a much larger and more exciting canvas on which to paint.

But the importance of the CPHG lay not simply in the intellectual stimulation it provided. There was also, on the part of Hobsbawm at least, a desire to recreate the lost world of interwar political and intellectual exchange. It would not be too much of a stretch to say that, for someone like Hobsbawm, the CPHG played the same function as the informal networks of knowledge and ideas that existed in left-wing circles in late 1930s Cambridge or the London School of Economics. These had brought together intellectual stimulation, deep friendship and political engagement, and it is obvious that Hobsbawm felt the same way about the CPHG. In his 1978 account, he was explicit about the interpersonal aspect of his engagement – "for most [the CPHG] was about friendship" – and there was more than a hint of (masculine) romantic nostalgia in the way he described the camaraderie that underpinned the group's activities:

[Group members] would make their way, normally at weekends, through what memory recalls mainly as the dank, cold and slightly foggy morning streets of Clerkenwell to Marx House or the upper room of the Garibaldi Restaurant, Laystall Street, armed with cyclostyled agendas, sheets of 'theses' or summary arguments. Saffron Hill, Farringdon Road and Clerkenwell Green in the first ten post-war years, were not a sybaritic or even a very welcoming environment. Physical austerity,

2009, p. 91-109.

26 'The Rise and Decline of British Capitalism, abstract of papers read and discussion at a Summer School of the Historian's Group of the Communist Party' (no date [1954]), PHM CP/CENT/CULT/10/1.

intellectual excitement, political passion and friendship are probably what the survivors of those years remember best….[27]

So vivid is the imagery in this passage that it is tempting to think that Hobsbawm was super-imposing his post-war experiences onto those of his undergraduate days. But there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this is exactly how he – and others – felt at the time. The Jewish Communist intellectual Chimen Abramsky, who was a CPHG member until the mid-1950s but later left the Party, hosted follow-on gatherings after the committee meetings in London. Hobsbawm and others would gather in his front room "to eat and talk into the night". The discussions covered a whole range of politically-motivated themes, including Marx himself and the "minutiae" of Marx's thought. Everything was washed down with hot cups of tea, patiently supplied by Abramsky's wife, Mimi.[28] Lionel Munby was another early member, who spent most of his subsequent career teaching history for the University of Cambridge Extra-Mural Department. In a lecture he gave about the CPHG in 1992, he concurred entirely with Hobsbawm's assessment of its strongly collective character. He added that it was an exceptionally equal environment, in which specialists and non-specialists alike could share their opinions.[29] In both these accounts, camaraderie appears as the defining characteristic of the "Golden Age" of the Historians Group.

What was true for Abramsky and Munby was not necessarily true for others, however. Some members expressed their dissatisfaction about the direction the CPHG was taking. They felt it was becoming too much like a university debating society. Morton, whose book had been torn to shreds by group members, confessed in 1947 to feeling alienated from the "academic young men" who were at the vanguard of the organisation.[30] Similarly, Grant lamented in 1954 that "non-university people are useless in a university-trained group".[31] In the same way that some of Hobsbawm's Communist peers at Cambridge in the late 1930s felt detached from the social worlds of the Cambridge University Socialist Club and *Granta* magazine because of their lack of cultural capital, Morton and Grant found it difficult to share their highly academic peers' romantic vision of intellectual revolution. There was a clash of styles, and those with less academic pedigree naturally felt marginalised. The fact that the CPHG's efforts to produce textbooks for a mass market mostly sank without trace only served to underline this point. They were right in thinking that the group was, for its most academically-gifted members, a vital stepping-stone and source of ideas, rather than an end in itself.

Another problem was the difference in the degree of attachment to the party line. For someone like Hobsbawm, the CPHG was a place for passionate Communists to share their ideas; it was not meant as an exercise in historical distortion or hagiography. This most likely explains the decidedly cool relationship between Hobsbawm and Torr, who was one of the main instigators of the CPHG. Whereas Hill and Saville freely cited Torr as one of their biggest influences, Hobsbawm hardly mentioned her at all.[32] All the evidence suggests that he found

27 HOBSBAWM. "The Historians Group", p. 25.
28 ABRAMSKY, Sasha. *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*. London: Halban, 2014, p. 198-202.
29 MUNBY, Lionel. "The Communist Party Historians (History) Group" (1991-2?), PHM CP/HIST/2/6.
30 Morton to Morley, 9 May 1947, Marx Memorial Library, Morton Papers.
31 HOWE. "The past is ours", p. 478-9.
32 For a sense of how some CPHG members viewed Torr, see SAVILLE, John. "Introduction". In SAVILLE, John (ed.). *Democracy and the Labour Movement: essays in honour of Dona Torr*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1954. The main instigators of the volume were Saville, Hill and Dobb. Hobsbawm contributed a chapter but this was not through any special affection for Torr. On this, see especially Eric Hobsbawm to John Saville

her a rather testy and dogmatic character. He was impatient with her constant desire to toe the party line and they struggled to work together when Hobsbawm was given the task of editing the third volume of the Party-sponsored collection of primary source documents on British working-class history, entitled *Labour's Turning Point, 1880-1900* (published in 1948).[33] As he put it in an interview in 1990: "I found her a bit narrow-minded and I didn't get anything out of my contacts with her… My own view was that anything that she actually wrote on labour history wasn't very good".[34] Torr represented the antithesis of the romantic solidarity and critical engagement that Hobsbawm believed lay at the heart of the CPHG's ethos. At the same time, it was almost certainly Torr's proximity to the CPGB party hierarchy that protected the Historians Group from the shifting sands of postwar Communist policy.[35] As an elder stateswoman who commanded respect for her unwavering commitment to the cause, Torr could shield the CPHG from the kind of ideological scrutiny that proved so detrimental to other Communist cultural organisations, both in the UK and further afield. Paradoxically, it was the very trait that Hobsbawm found most unlikeable about her that ensured the CPHG remained the kind of space in which he – and others – could speak relatively freely.

In Hobsbawm's mind, it was this personal and intellectual freedom that made the CPHG such a valuable institution. Not only was it a forum for complex historiographical debate, it also exerted a powerful effect on individuals. For Hobsbawm, the CPHG was a vital bridge between the lost world of late-1930s left-wing politics and the uncertain postwar future. It played a key role in his intellectual development and it helped him forge a dense web of friendships that supported his academic and political activity in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Historians Group was a place where he could test his ideas and explore the relationship between Communist politics and academic history. While he was emphatically a Party member in this period, and firmly wedded to the principles of Stalinism, he nonetheless believed that he could combine political passion with rigorous history. All he needed was a devoted group of friends, mentors and peers to watch his back. Together, they could face their enemies and the onset of the Cold War, safe in the knowledge that they could rely on each other. It was only in 1956, when the global Communist movement threatened to tear itself apart in the face of its own contradictions, that Hobsbawm's faith began to waver. But, even then, he never forgot the importance of friendship for a healthy intellectual life. It was a reflex that ensured his academic survival.

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(4 August 1952), Hull History Centre U DJS/1/20. Related correspondence in this file indicates the depth of positive feeling for Torr that existed amongst other CPHG members.

33 HOBSBAWM, Eric (ed.). *Labour's Turning Point, 1880-1900. Extracts from contemporary sources*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1948. This appeared in the 'History in the Making' series, edited by Torr. It was, technically, Hobsbawm's first academic book.

34 HOWE, Antony. "Dona Torr". In: GILDART, Keith; HOWELL, David (eds.). *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Volume XII*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 279.

35 HOWE, 'The past is ours', chapter 6.