

‘Gamekeeper Turned Poacher’: Frank Chapple, Anti-Communism and Soviet Human Rights Violations

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On 10 April 1985, some 300 delegates from around the world gathered in London to consider reports of human rights violations in the Soviet Union. The International Sakharov Hearings, named after the prominent physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov, put the Soviet authorities ‘on trial’ for breaching human rights provisions set out in the 1975 Helsinki Accords.¹ The 1985 event was the fifth edition of these hearings, after previous events in Copenhagen, Rome, Washington and Lisbon.² The hearings included presentations from those who had experienced Soviet abuse first-hand – for instance the dissident Ludmilla Alexeyeva and the lawyer Dina Kaminskaya – as well as foreign specialists on the Soviet Union.³ The list of participants also provides a snapshot of prominent British activists who campaigned to raise awareness of Soviet abuses. They included Michael Bourdeaux and Sir John Lawrence, founder members of Keston College, which was devoted to the study of religion in communist countries; Allan Wynn, the Chairman of the Working Group on the Internment of Dissenters in Mental Hospitals; the playwright Tom Stoppard; the physicist John Ziman; and Peter Reddaway, an academic central to this broader network.⁴

¹ *The Times*, 10 April 1985, 2.

² *The Times*, 9 April 1985, 13.

³ Allan Wynn (ed.), *The Fifth International Sakharov Hearing Proceedings* (London, 1986).

⁴ See Mark Hurst, *British Human Rights Organizations and Soviet Dissent* (London, 2016), M. Hurst, ‘Slowing down the going-away process’ – Tom Stoppard and Soviet Dissent’, *Contemporary British History*, 30 (2016), 484–504; Jenny Robertson, *Be Our Voice: The Story of Michael Bourdeaux and Keston College* (London, 1984); Michael Bourdeaux, *One Word Of Truth: The Cold War Memoir of Michael Bourdeaux and Keston College* (London, 2019); Allan Wynn, *Notes of a Non-Conspirator: Working with Russian Dissidents* (London, 1987); John Ziman, ‘The Republic of Science’, *New Scientist*, 16 February 1978, 422–3; and Peter Reddaway, *The Dissidents: A Memoir of Working with the Resistance in Russia, 1960-1990* (Washington, D.C., 2020).

After two days of presentations, the hearings concluded that the material presented suggested ‘a considerable deterioration of the human rights situation in the USSR, as reflected both in its law and in its practices’, a situation that was ‘worse now than in 1975, when the Helsinki Accords were signed’.⁵ Whilst this conclusion had no legal clout, the collected expertise and experience of those involved meant that the hearings and its conclusion were noted in the press. Given the background of the contributors to the hearings, this conclusion was perhaps of little surprise. However, amongst the chorus of committed activists denouncing the Soviet government one individual stands out – the trade union leader Frank Chapple.

Chapple was approached to take part in the hearings through the efforts of Bill Jaeger, a prominent member of Moral Re-Armament, an organization concerned with promoting discussion between adversaries, albeit with a history of anti-Communist activity.⁶ During a visit to the United States, Jaeger met Tatiana Yankelevitch, Sakharov’s step-daughter, and her husband Efrem – Sakharov’s personal representative in the West involved in organizing the hearings. During this meeting, potential participants for the hearings were discussed, and Jaeger mentioned Chapple, whose recent appointment to the House of Lords, gave him a ‘very good platform to say things to the nation’, an appealing trait for the organisers.⁷ Jaeger’s suggestion was endorsed by the Yankelevitches, who sent a letter of invitation on to Chapple via Jaeger.⁸

A major aim of these hearings was to publicly highlight Soviet abuses, drawing on the reputation of those involved to attract the attention of the press. This can be seen in the role of

⁵ ‘Resolution of the panel’ in Wynn (ed.), *Sakharov Hearing Proceedings*, 162.

⁶ Clara Jaeger, *Never To Lose My Vision: The Story of Bill Jaeger* (London, 1995). See Philip Boobbyer, *The Spiritual Vision of Frank Buchman* (University Park, PA, 2013) 132–43 ; *The Times*, 2 March 1961, 9; and *The Times*, 30 March 1961, 5.

⁷ Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (hereafter MRC), MSS.387/6/CH/74, letter from Bill Jaeger to Frank Chapple (19/02/1985).

⁸ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/74, letter from Efrem Yankelevitch to Frank Chapple, 1 February 1985.

Simon Wiesenthal in chairing this event. The prominent ‘Nazi hunter’ drew a ‘slavering pack of newsmen’ to the hearings concerned for comment on the case of the Nazi physician Josef Mengele, who had been put on trial in absentia in Jerusalem earlier that year. Commenting instead on Soviet matters, Wiesenthal used the media spotlight to praise Sakharov as ‘the greatest humanitarian of our time’, thereby giving the dissident’s position much welcomed publicity.⁹

Owing to his public profile, Chapple also drew attention to the hearings although he was, by his own admission, an ‘awkward bugger’.¹⁰ Upon accepting the invitation, he noted with caution that ‘the political divisions in the UK are such that if you have people from one political persuasion you find objections from the rest...Indeed, including me on the panel would almost certainly guarantee that other Trade Union [sic] people would not want to sit on the panel’.¹¹ To some, Chapple was ‘Britain’s most awkward and antagonistic Trade Union [sic] leader; to others he [was] the most courageous of them all’.¹² The *Daily Mirror* columnist Paul Routledge described him as a ‘sharp lad with a merciless grasp of the labour movement...[who] ran his union like the mafia’.¹³ Despite this, Chapple’s peerage made him an outcast for many on the left, particularly as it was granted to him by the Conservative Margaret Thatcher in 1985, a period of particular political tension.¹⁴ One critic even went as far to state that ‘Frank Chapple has given a new word to the English language. From now on, a Chapple will mean a traitor to the working man’.¹⁵ This moniker had resonance for some, as

⁹ *The Guardian*, 3 February 1985, 12; *The Guardian*, 11 April 1985, 3; *The Guardian*, 13 April 1985, 9.

¹⁰ See Geoffrey Goodman’s obituary of Chapple in *The Guardian*, 22 October 2004.

¹¹ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/74, letter from Frank Chapple to Efrem Yankelevitch, 22 February 1985.

¹² Frank Chapple, *Sparks Fly! – A Trade Union Life* (London, 1984), publisher’s text inside front cover of dust jacket.

¹³ *Daily Mirror*, 29 October 2004, 29.

¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 2 January 1985, 13.

¹⁵ *Daily Mirror* 10 October 1985, 6.

shortly after his death in 2004, an article in *The Socialist Worker* described him as a man with ‘an air of arrogance and sheer menace about him’ who ‘won’t be missed much’.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Chapple was a powerful union leader who commanded wide support from his union’s membership for nearly two decades, becoming the President of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in 1983. Beneath his aggressive style, and the ideological divisiveness that this encouraged, lay an important figure in the British union movement aware of his political influence. Calum Aikman has deftly noted that Chapple’s ‘pugnacity and love of argument often concealed a subtle mind’ which was put towards protecting the interests of his union’s members at all costs.¹⁷

Chapple’s involvement in casting judgment on the Soviet Union alongside activists, academics and a Nazi hunter highlight the challenges of assessing support for human rights in the context of broader ideological tensions in the twentieth century. This assessment of Chapple’s case sheds light on the multifaceted network of activists campaigning to highlight Soviet abuses in the 1970s and 1980s, the complexities of formal and informal Anglo-Soviet relations in the Cold War, and the historiographical difficulties in assessing trade union support for human rights issues in the Cold War.¹⁸ Chapple’s support for human rights issues in the

¹⁶ The Walrus, ‘Good riddance, Franco’, *Socialist Worker*, 30 October 2004, available at <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/3062/Good+riddance,+Franco>.

¹⁷ Calum Aikman, ‘Frank Chapple: A thoughtful trade union moderniser’ in P. Ackers and A. J. Reid (eds), *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2016), 213.

¹⁸ Sarah Davies, ‘The soft power of *Anglia*: British Cold War cultural diplomacy in the USSR’, *Contemporary British History*, 27 (2013), 297–323; Anne Deighton, ‘Don and diplomat: Isaiah Berlin and Britain’s early Cold War’, *Cold War History*, 13 (2013), 525–40; Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, 2013); Natalia Kapitonova, ‘Visit of Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Nicholas Bulganin to Britain in April 1956’, *Cold War History*, 14 (2014), 127–52; and Mark Smith, ‘Peaceful coexistence at all costs: Cold War exchanges between Britain and the Soviet Union in 1956’, *Cold War History*, 12 (2012), 537–58.

Soviet bloc was intertwined with his own political history, in which he shifted from supporting the utopian ideals of communism in the 1940s, through a period of ideological challenge in the 1950s and 1960s, before his anti-communist ideals became more firmly entrenched in the 1970s and 1980s. For many on the British left, events such as the 1956 Hungarian Uprising challenged their ‘faith’ in Soviet communism, but Chapple’s renunciation was especially acute. His transition from communist party gamekeeper to political poacher offers an insight into the impact that the Cold War had on British trade union politics, further developing a broad literature surrounding this topic by drawing attention to human rights issues in this period.¹⁹

This article has two aims. First, it will set the background of Chapple’s ascendancy to prominence in the union movement, outlining how his ideological transition gave him political power, highlighting some of the difficulties in assessing his history. The difficulties in navigating between historical events and personal reflections on the past is far from unique to Chapple’s case, but the context of his ideological transition and the implications it had for his motivations to support human rights issues in the Soviet Union makes his case particularly interesting. Instead of ruining his reputation, Chapple’s ideological *volte face* gave him political credibility, and arguably shaped his political legacy.

¹⁹ John Callaghan, ‘The Cold War and the march of capitalism, socialism and democracy’, *Contemporary British History*, 15 (2001) 1–25; John Callaghan, ‘The left and the ‘unfinished revolution’: Bevanites and Soviet Russia in the 1950s’, *Contemporary British History*, 15 (2001), 63–82; Phillip Deery, “‘The secret battalion’: Communism in Britain during the Cold War’, *Contemporary British History*, 13 (1999), 1–28; Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933–1945* (Aldershot, 1995); Nina Fishman, ‘The Phoney Cold War in British trade union, white collar unionism and the politics of the British left, 1947–65’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 13 (2002), 412–48; John McIlroy, Nina Fishman and Alan Campbell (eds.) *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism: Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, 1964–1979* (Monmouth, 2007); Willie Thompson, ‘British communists in the Cold War, 1947–52’, *Contemporary British History*, 15 (2001), 105–32; Andrew Thorpe, ‘Locking out the communists: The Labour Party and the Communist Party, 1939–46’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25 (2014), 221–50.

Second, this article will identify how Chapple's support for victims of human rights violations in the Soviet bloc dovetailed with his attacks on communist supporters in the labour movement, an issue that clearly drew on his ideological history. Despite the historic ties between British trade unions and their Soviet counterparts, there were prominent trade unionists who sought to highlight Soviet persecution, drawing on their own disillusionment with Soviet communism in the process. The way in which British trade union leaders such as Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine engaged with the Soviet Union has been the subject of critical reassessment in recent years, highlighting the subtleties of these transnational ties.²⁰ Alongside a concern for the suffering of others, Chapple's earlier interactions with Soviet communism played a significant role in influencing his later concern for human rights issues in the Soviet bloc. A consideration of these broader, and often more subtle motivations thus draws attention to the intersection between human rights activism and the politics of the British left – a space rightly highlighted as deserving of further scholarly attention.²¹ In doing so, this article argues that support for these activist efforts was motivated by both contemporaneous human rights concerns and internal trade union politics, offering a fresh perspective on the contexts of transnational campaigns in the Cold War.

Political foundations

Born in 1921 in a flat above his father's boot and shoe repair shop in the 'poverty-stricken East End slum' of Shoreditch, London, Chapple considered his childhood to be 'lucky' by the standards of the day.²² Chapple left school at 14 and was taken on as an apprentice by an

²⁰ Andrew Adonis, *Ernest Bevin, Labour's Churchill* (London, 2021); Jim Moher, *Walter Citrine, Forgotten Statesman of the Trades Union Congress* (London, 2021)

²¹ Matthew Evans, 'Trade Unions as Human Rights Organizations' *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 7 (2015)

²² Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 21. See also G. Goodman's obituary of Chapple in *The Guardian*, 22 October 2004.

electrical firm, becoming a member of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) in 1936. This was notoriously difficult given the restrictions on new members that this skilled union would accept due to high levels of unemployment.²³ His membership of the ETU became an integral part of Chapple's politics, which was also being influenced in this period by parties on both ends of political spectrum. Whilst his mother 'used to vote Tory, like her family' and his father was uninterested in politics, the family's shop was 'the centre of discussion for everything under the sun – from pigeons to politics'.²⁴ In this environment, Chapple met a policeman who had been spellbound by a speech by Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Chapple noted in his 1984 autobiography *Sparks Fly!* that, 'many years later, when the time came for me to make political decisions, that casual back-of-the shop chat became decidedly relevant. It helped to push me along a political road which was at first exhilarating, but which I later came to abhor.'²⁵

Chapple joined the CPGB in 1939, and remained an active party member for nearly two decades.²⁶ In a letter to the US embassy in March 1963 – a document that accounts for his CPGB membership in the context of his plans to obtain a visa to visit the United States – Chapple noted that he had joined the party because it seemed to be 'the only political organisation conducting any activity of an anti-Fascist character'.²⁷ Chapple had been attacked by members of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) active in the East End of London, who 'terrorised [his] neighbourhood with their regular marches in uniform to the beat of banging drums and clashing symbols'.²⁸ Whilst he describes being 'pushed' towards the CPGB by the

²³ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/10, F. Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy', 18 March 1963. See also Goodman's *Guardian* obituary of Chapple.

²⁴ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 22

²⁵ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 22.

²⁶ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 29.

²⁷ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

²⁸ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 25. See also Goodman's *Guardian* obituary of Chapple.

political climate of the day and the desire to stand up against the BUF, it is difficult to ignore the ‘pull’ of communist ideals – something likely omitted from this account for pragmatic reasons.

Upon joining the CPGB, Chapple was given a list of comrades in his ETU branch and instructed to support their efforts to become elected union representatives by all means available.²⁹ The attempt to dominate the trade union movement by positioning communists in as many elected positions as possible was a staple of the CPGB’s political strategy, an approach described by Glyn Powell as ‘largely unarticulated and politically inarticulate’.³⁰ John Callaghan is less critical, noting that as a tactic, ‘it was remarkably simple and remarkably attuned to British institutions’. By gaining a foothold, the CPGB could use trade unions as a vehicle to influence mainstream politics, a tactic unlikely to have significant political impact but a manageable aim nevertheless.³¹ The intertwining of union and party politics became clear to Chapple when he attended CPGB meetings in the London Docks in the early-1940s, recalling that ‘the majority of Communists who attended these meetings were also ETU members’.³² Chapple, however, appeared unconcerned by this tactic at the time, as in late-1942 he took up a full-time position within the CPGB as an organiser for the Young Communist League.³³

Despite actively promoting communism as a party member in the 1940s, Chapple later maintained that his political beliefs had been challenged by his experiences during the Second World War. Following his conscription in April 1943, Chapple made use of his skills as an electrician during his posting in the Army’s Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

²⁹ Chapple, ‘Letter to US Embassy’.

³⁰ Glyn Powell, ‘Turning off the power: the electrical trades union and the anti-communist crusade 1957–61’, *Contemporary British History*, 18 (2004), 5.

³¹ John Callaghan, ‘The plan to capture the British Labour Party and its paradoxical results, 1947–91’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40 (2005), 709.

³² Chapple, ‘Letter to US Embassy’.

³³ Chapple, ‘Letter to US Embassy’.

Whilst stationed in the north German city of Lübeck, Chapple was surprised to find Russian prisoners of war reluctant to be repatriated back to their communist homeland, only later discovering that many feared they would be executed as traitors or deserters. Whilst the lack of a common language was a problem, through a ‘mixture of English and broken German, Chapple also spoke to Soviet soldiers who asserted that life would be better if they stayed in Western Europe rather than returning home – something that Chapple later claimed had ‘special importance’ for him.³⁴ After the war, Chapple remained politically active in Lübeck: collecting money for the *Daily Worker* and supporting the German Communist Party by passing on to them the ‘occasional jerry can of British Army petrol – a precious commodity for them’.³⁵ Upon his redeployment to Osnabrück, Chapple once again offered his support to the German Communist Party. These efforts were noted in a letter of commendation sent to the CPGB by the German Communist Party on 24 April 1947 which thanked Chapple for his help in their political work.³⁶ This political activity raises questions about the immediate impact of Chapple’s interactions with those who had first-hand experience of the Soviet Union, and its claimed ‘special importance’ in shaping his perspective on the communist state.

Upon returning to Britain in 1947 after being ‘demobbed’, Chapple’s support for the CPGB continued. He transferred his Union branch from Gray’s Inn to London Station Engineers No. 10 where he became the assistant branch secretary.³⁷ Gray’s Inn ‘already had sufficient members of the Communist Party for the purposes of the party’, so Chapple was better placed elsewhere to aid CPGB efforts in the ETU – a move that sits somewhat in contrast

³⁴ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 37-41.

³⁵ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 41.

³⁶ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/6, letter from the Osnabrück branch of the German Communist Party to the CPGB, 24 April 1947.

³⁷ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 48.

to his later recollections of his wartime experiences.³⁸ From this new branch, Chapple swiftly rose through the ranks of the CPGB and the ETU.³⁹ He became a member of the CPGB's Party Advisory Committee in London between 1948 and 1957, whose purpose was to coordinate 'the activity of all Communist Party members of the ETU in the London Area in enacting the policy and aims of the Communist Party'.⁴⁰ Alongside this, Chapple was invited in 1949 to attend meetings of the National Advisory Committee, a body that coordinated Communists in the ETU at a national level, by Frank Haxell, the General Secretary of the ETU and a CPGB member.⁴¹ Through membership of these committees, Chapple saw the CPGB's attempts to manipulate the ETU first-hand, recalling that meetings were held 'just before the quarterly meetings of the Union [so] we could keep fresh in the minds of the members attending the meetings the names of the persons to be nominated for office and the resolutions which we wished to have moved'.⁴² The political line between the ETU and the CPGB became so blurred in this period that Chapple recalled that 'changes in the policy of the union always arose as a result of discussions which had taken place at the National Advisory Committees of the Communist Party'.⁴³

Leaving the party

By the mid-1950s, Chapple's ascendancy in the CPGB began to stall. He was one of several members removed from the National Advisory Committee in July 1954 on the orders of Haxell

³⁸ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

³⁹ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 47.

⁴⁰ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

⁴¹ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

⁴² Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

⁴³ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

who, according to Chapple, was attempting to purge his opponents from positions of power. Perhaps as a result of this isolation, Chapple began to publicly disagree with the leadership of the ETU, claiming in later years that it had become clear to him that the role of the Advisory Committees was 'to act as a rubber stamp for the policies thought up by a select group of people at the Communist Party's Headquarters'.⁴⁴ Although invited to continue to attend Advisory Committee meetings in early 1958, Chapple refused – an act of dissent that led to his suspension from the CPGB whilst an investigation into his conduct took place.⁴⁵

The timing of Chapple's 'stall' in the CPGB in the mid-1950s is worth noting. The echoes of the death of Stalin, the fallout of the 'Doctor's Plot' and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising tested the faith of many communists. This was a period when communism became 'the God that failed' for many, with the events taking place in Hungary leading many on the British left to renounce their faith in the communist experiment.⁴⁶ Callaghan notes that this 'cost the [CPGB] many of its best militants and around one third of its membership', and shocked the resolve of the remaining faithful.⁴⁷ Chapple later recalled his anger at reports of Soviet brutality in Budapest, particularly his inability to do anything to assist Hungarian workers in their hour of need.⁴⁸ It was these events that led him to resolve that 'not only must I break with the Party but I should try to draw out of the Party with me as many other members as I could'.⁴⁹ For Chapple, these events, combined with personal attacks against him by communist ETU officials, became the 'straw that broke the back of my belief in communism', seeing that 'the

⁴⁴ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

⁴⁵ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

⁴⁶ Richard Crossman (ed.), *The God That Failed* (London, 1949).

⁴⁷ Callaghan, 'The plan to capture the British Labour Party', 724.

⁴⁸ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 52.

⁴⁹ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

theories of communism, i.e. Marxism and Leninism, [were] in fact the sources of the practices which I grew to abhor'.⁵⁰

Assessing Chapple's motivations in this period is a remarkably challenging task for historians, as his reflections on this period were written after he had broken with the CPGB, offering a perspective on the period that is coloured by later events. This is an issue far from unique to Chapple, but an intriguing one nonetheless, given the layers of identity, ideology and memory at play in this instance. His doubts in communism came in a period when many on the British left were renouncing their 'faith', but the key documents on this period were written in a later period when he had established himself as a prominent anti-communist figure, especially his autobiography *Sparks Fly!* and the account of his involvement in the Communist Party sent to the US Embassy. Chapple recognized the challenges in assessing this period, describing his US Embassy account as 'either the mutterings of a village idiot or the efforts of somebody trying to hide his murky past – neither of which, I assure you, is my intention'.⁵¹ This is not to discount the value of these sources in assessing this political transition, but to highlight the need to tread carefully with their claims given later events.

Whilst Chapple's faith in the CPGB faltered, his rise in the ETU continued. In 1957 he took up a position on the union's Executive Council during a period when concerns about communist manipulation in the union came under intense public scrutiny.⁵² Leading figures in the ETU such as Les Cannon were removed from positions of authority after they challenged suspicious election results in the mid-1950s. Cannon resigned from the CPGB shortly before the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, stating his conviction that there was 'no place for the Communist

⁵⁰ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

⁵¹ Chapple, 'Letter to US Embassy'.

⁵² Lloyd, *Light and Liberty*, 396.

Party now', which clearly did not sit well with CPGB members in the ETU.⁵³ At the time, Cannon was employed as an Education Officer at the ETU's training college in Esher, a facility described in the *Daily Mail* as the union's 'Little Moscow', highlighting public awareness of communist influence in the union.⁵⁴ Following Cannon's CPGB resignation, the ETU closed this facility in May 1957, citing financial pressure and making him redundant in the process. In response, Cannon joined with the Labour MP Woodrow Wyatt to expose the CPGB in an episode of the BBC's Panorama programme aired in December 1957.⁵⁵ These criticisms were mirrored by unrest amongst ETU members, who passed a motion at its 1957 annual conference criticizing the union's leadership for its lacklustre response towards both the shooting of workers in Poznan and the Hungarian Uprising.⁵⁶

Frustrations amongst the ETU membership were reported widely in the national press alongside forthright calls for an investigation into the union's election practices, and anti-communist sections of the union began to organise in secret meetings to challenge the leadership.⁵⁷ Despite this, communists managed to maintain their grip, and Frank Foulkes, the ETU's president, publicly claimed in May 1958 that his union's 240,000 members were united in supporting its leadership.⁵⁸ A pro-Soviet line was also evident in the union's work, such as

⁵³ Powell, 'The Electrical Trades Union and anti-communism', 7.

⁵⁴ *Daily Mail*, 1 May 1957, 7.

⁵⁵ *Daily Mail*, 16 May 1956, 9; Lloyd, *Light and Liberty*, 408–9; David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957–1959* (London, 2013), 98.

⁵⁶ *The Times*, 4 June 1957, 6.

⁵⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 18 January 1958, 5; *Daily Mail*, 19 May 1958, 7; *Daily Mail*, 26 November 1958, 8; *Daily Mail*, 17 December 1958, 7; *The Times*, 23 September 1958, 4. As a newspaper with a pronounced anti-communist line, the *Daily Mail* provided detailed coverage of divisions within the ETU (as illustrated by the subsequent references).

⁵⁸ *Daily Mail*, 20 May 1958, 5.

the May 1958 call for ETU members to take action to prevent nuclear missiles being stationed in Britain.⁵⁹

Perhaps bolstered by public criticism of the CPGB's involvement in the ETU, the context of public concerns in the ETU's leadership and Cannon's example, Chapple resigned from the CPGB after 19 years of membership in November 1958. In statements to the press, he made it clear that he felt 'socialism cannot be fostered by a party whose structure is undemocratic and whose organisational form is conspiratorial' – a clear attack on the organization of the CPGB rather than its underlying ideology, somewhat protecting his own shifting political position. Chapple's resignation was significant for the ETU as he remained on the Executive Council, meaning that communists no longer held a majority amongst the ETU's leadership.⁶⁰

Chapple and Cannon's criticisms of the ETU's leadership carried particular clout because of their prior CPGB membership. As the *Daily Mail's* Leslie Randall noted in December 1959, 'the TUC must take serious notice of the charges because Mr Chapple can speak from inside knowledge. He was himself a member of the Communist Party until a year ago.'⁶¹ Chapple's intimate knowledge of the CPGB became a great strength in his attacks against them. As John Lloyd noted, 'Not only did [Chapple] know most of the personalities concerned; not only had he been a participant in the committee and organization of the communists; he knew the way they thought; he knew the 'holy texts' of Marxism. He was as 'scientific' about political ideas as they were.'⁶² Any illicit support that Chapple may have received from former party comrades to get him to a prominent position in the ETU was seemingly ignored, and his transition marked him out as an individual with valuable

⁵⁹ *Daily Mail*, 3 May 1958, 7.

⁶⁰ *Daily Mail*, 26 November 1958, 1.

⁶¹ *Daily Mail*, 9 December 1959, 1.

⁶² Lloyd, *Light and Liberty*, 411.

knowledge, rather than a character with a dubious past. The act of changing allegiance wiped the slate clean, allowing Chapple a fresh start with an arguably heightened position of authority.

The fallout of the increasingly public spat between communist and anti-communist sections of the ETU was brought into sharp focus in its 1959 General Secretary election, contested by the incumbent Haxell and John ‘Jock’ Byrne. Despite polling taking place in December 1959, it took until February 1960 for the results to be announced, sparking rumours that the ballot had been rigged in favour of Haxell.⁶³ Aware of the damage that outright ballot-rigging would cause, the TUC gave the ETU’s leadership an ultimatum: take action in the courts to refute allegations of malpractice or undergo an independent inquiry on the matter.⁶⁴ This was a thin threat, as a similar ultimatum had been served two years previously with little consequence.⁶⁵ Sensing an opportunity, Chapple and Byrne announced in May 1960 that they were taking legal action against the ETU leadership to ‘redress the grievances of members’ over the issue of ballot-rigging.⁶⁶ The subsequent 38-day court case found 5 of the 12 defendants guilty of breaching the ETU’s rules and preventing the election of Byrne – an outcome described as ‘an historic judgement’ in *The Observer*.⁶⁷ Cannon and Chapple played a central role in the case, with an article in *The Spectator* noting that ‘if it had not been for the information possessed by Frank Chapple and Les Cannon...the action could never have been brought to the conclusion of Mr. Justice Winn that the ballot for General Secretary had been ‘rigged’’.⁶⁸

⁶³ *The Observer*, 2 July 1961, 32; *The Times*, 12 December 1959, 10.

⁶⁴ *Daily Mail*, 22 March 1960, 9.

⁶⁵ *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1958, 7.

⁶⁶ *The Times*, 10 May 1960, 10; *Daily Mail*, 10 May 1960, 13.

⁶⁷ *The Observer*, 2 July 1961, 32; For more on the ETU electoral fraud, see Powell, ‘The Electrical Trades Union and anti-communism’, 11–13; and C. H. Rolph, *All Those in Favour? An Account of the High Court Action against the Electrical Trades Union and its Officers for Ballot-Rigging* (London, 1962).

⁶⁸ *The Spectator*, 4 August 1961, 165.

This judgement led to a number of changes in the ETU's leadership, most notably the appointment of Byrne as General Secretary, a post he duly took up in July 1961.⁶⁹ One of Byrne's first actions in office was to appoint Chapple and Cannon as special assistants.⁷⁰ This new leadership sought to mark a clean break by banning CPGB members from holding formal positions in the union, with *The Guardian* noting that the union was 'working up to a major purge'.⁷¹ Haxell was ostracized by the CPGB, who insisted he take full responsibility for the affair and resign from the party.⁷² Foulkes failed in his appeal to overturn the outcome of this case in 1962 and in farcical circumstances was forced to chair the proceedings of his own expulsion from the union.⁷³ The trial also affected the ETU's relationship with the wider union movement. The TUC General Secretary George Woodcock declared a need to take action against any fraudulent practice in union elections, stating 'I don't think what has happened is a reflection of the [trade union] movement but of the individuals who seek to misuse it for purposes which have nothing to do with trade unionism'.⁷⁴ Woodcock put forward a resolution to the 1961 TUC conference requesting the expulsion of the ETU, which passed with a majority of over 6,500,000 – an act that was followed by the Labour Party in October that year.⁷⁵ Woodcock considered this a 'painful business', but redemption was offered to the union once it was cleansed of corruption, something the ETU's new leadership sought to address.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Powell, 'Turning Off the Power', 6.

⁷⁰ Powell, 'Turning Off the Power', 6; *The Guardian*, 3 October 1971, 10.

⁷¹ *The Guardian*, 2 January 1962, 1; *The Guardian*, 4 January 1962, 1.

⁷² *Daily Mirror*, 4 December 1961, 1.

⁷³ *The Guardian*, 1 February 1962, 1; *The Observer*, 3 June 1962, 1; *Daily Mail*, 4 June 1962, 11; *The Guardian*, 9 July 1962, 1; *The Guardian*, 10 August 1962, 14.

⁷⁴ *1961 TUC Report* (London, 1961), 302. See also *The Guardian*, 6 July 1961, 7.

⁷⁵ *1961 TUC Report* (London, 1961), 312; *The Guardian*, 5 September 1961, 1; *The Guardian*, 3 October 1961, 2.

⁷⁶ *The Guardian*, 5 September 1961, 8.

The new leadership was given a vote of confidence in 1963 when ETU elections consolidated their position – most notably Cannon’s election to the union’s presidency in September ahead of two communist challengers.⁷⁷ This was reiterated in July 1964, when the ETU’s members were balloted about the proposed ban of CPGB members from holding union office. Cannon noted to the press that ‘it will be up to our 280,000 members to decide once and for all whether we should keep the Communists out of power in our union for ever’.⁷⁸ The ballot was a clear endorsement: 43,000 members of the union voted in favour of the ban, compared to 16,500 against.⁷⁹ As a result, Rule 10, Clause 3, Sub-section (d) banned ETU members who held CPGB membership from holding any representative positions, including that of a conference delegate.⁸⁰ Commenting on the ban in *Sparks Fly!*, Chapple noted that:

Bans and proscriptions on trade unionists, whatever their political views, are nothing to celebrate – they are at best a necessary evil – but my personal experience of the Communist Party has led me to one conclusion: that communists should not hold office in any trade union. They will use the power and influence they gain to further the interests of the Party as a priority and to undermine, if not overthrow, genuine democracy.⁸¹

Although aware that it was morally questionable, Chapple’s rationale for the ban drew on his previous experiences in the CPGB, which gave him authority in this instance, rather than incriminating him. This rule was unsuccessfully contested in the High Court in March 1965, and subsequently forced twenty full-time ETU officials to resign from the CPGB.⁸² The ban also impacted the policy of the ETU, which underwent a subtle ideological shift in this period.

⁷⁷ *Daily Mail*, 22 March 1963, 11; *Daily Mail*, 11 September 1963, 11; *Daily Mail*, 12 December 1963, 10.

⁷⁸ *Daily Mail*, 13 July 1964, 7; *The Guardian*, 8 August 1964, 3.

⁷⁹ *Daily Mail*, 9 September 1964, 1.

⁸⁰ Willman, Morris and Aston, *Union Business*, 187; and MRC MSS.387/6/CH/16, *End The Ban* (London, 1979), 2.

⁸¹ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, p. 93.

⁸² *Daily Mail*, 4 January 1965, 7; *Daily Mail*, 30 March 1965, 10.

In 1965, for example, it tabled an amendment to a TUC motion on the Vietnam War, which sought to remove an anti-American implication in a motion calling for ‘the withdrawal of all foreign troops’ from Vietnam – a subtle but notable change from previous years.⁸³

Leading the union

After suffering a stroke in 1961, Byrne’s involvement in the ETU was limited, and he did not seek re-election in 1966.⁸⁴ Chapple temporarily took up Byrne’s mantle and became widely tipped to replace him in the 1966 election.⁸⁵ Given the events of 1961, this was a particularly sensitive election and union officials were keen for this ballot to be above any suspicion – something that nearly failed owing to a fear of mislaid ballot papers.⁸⁶ Chapple won this election and took a position at the top of the union that he went on to occupy for nearly two decades. Chapple’s first years in post were dogged by political infighting and, in some cases, physical violence. In October 1967 he was ‘manhandled’ during an incident at the ETU headquarters where demonstrators took over the canteen, and ‘mutineers’ sought to form a breakaway union concerned that ‘Chapple and Cannon have the members in a tighter grip than the Reds they deposed ever had’.⁸⁷ The pair were also the target of attacks from the Soviet newspaper *Trud* (Labour), which claimed that the ‘Cannon-Chappel [sic] group’ were the first to praise the ‘anti-worker’ actions of the Harold Wilson’s government and accused the pair of secretly filming factory meetings so that ‘trouble-makers’ could be identified and punished.⁸⁸

⁸³ *The Guardian*, 24 August 1965, 2.

⁸⁴ *The Guardian*, 11 March 1965, 5; *The Guardian*, 5 December 1969, 4.

⁸⁵ *Daily Mail*, 31 January 1966, 9.

⁸⁶ *Daily Mail*, 7 June 1966, 10; *The Times*, 7 June 1966, 10; *The Guardian*, 7 June 1966.

⁸⁷ *The Guardian*, 24 October 1967, 4; *The Times*, 18 October 1967, 10.

⁸⁸ MRC MSS.387/6/CH/43, Extracts from report from V. Sisnev, ‘Saboteurs in the working-class movement’, *Trud*, 14 March 1969, See also *The Times*, 1 November 1967, 1.

Soviet interest in the ETU highlights the international implications of their efforts, and that their actions were being noted behind the Iron Curtain.

Amidst these challenges, Cannon and Chapple consolidated their position through inquiries into disturbances and instructed ETU members to not associate themselves with an opposition group they condemned as ‘an alliance of communists and Trotskyists planning to form a breakaway organisation’.⁸⁹ By June 1968 these efforts were paying off, as Cannon was re-elected as President of the ETU with over 15,000 more votes than his nearest rival Frederick Morpew, who notably campaigned ‘with communist support’.⁹⁰ This result did not nullify the communist wing of the union, who continued their protests against Cannon and Chapple. In response to a protest in August 1968, Chapple noted that ‘the interesting thing about these demonstrations is that they have been taking place since our ballots stopped being rigged and the executive committee is no longer controlled by communists. Where were the demonstrators when the rigging was going on?’⁹¹

Following ‘a long courtship’ in the late 1960s, the ETU merged with the Plumbing Trades Union (PTU) to form the amalgamated Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU), a union with a larger membership – the fifth largest union in the country at the time – and, as a result, greater clout in the union movement than ever before.⁹² At the same time, Chapple’s position shifted following Cannon’s premature death in December 1970. Before his death, Cannon recommended that the leadership of the union be consolidated in one position, rather than the dual positions of authority that Chapple and Cannon had carried

⁸⁹ *The Guardian*, 16 July 1966, 3; *The Guardian*, 16 October 1967, 14.

⁹⁰ *The Guardian*, 10 June 1968, 1.

⁹¹ *The Guardian*, 13 August 1968, 4.

⁹² Lloyd, *Light and Liberty*, 518–20; *The Times*, 4 August 1971, 13. In the early years following this merger, the amalgamated union is referred to in the press by varying acronyms. For clarity, this article will speak of the ‘EETPU’ when referring to the merged union.

as General Secretary and President respectively, which Chapple thought had worked only because of their ‘personal friendship’.⁹³ Following Cannon’s death, Chapple consolidated these roles, initially by occupying the presidency whilst the process to elect his successor took place.⁹⁴ Despite a vociferous challenge by Mark Young, the union’s national officer who had positioned himself as a ‘non-Communist’, rather than Chapple’s more combative ‘anti-Communist’, Chapple went on to win the election.⁹⁵ Not only did Chapple now occupy the two most senior positions in the union, cementing his position as its leading force, he did so whilst asserting his desire to continue to cleanse the union of communist influence.⁹⁶ As *The Times*’ Labour Correspondent Paul Routledge neatly observed in a report from the union’s 1971 conference: ‘rout of left clinches Chapple reign’.⁹⁷ Chapple recognized this too, noting that ‘I finally established myself at that conference as the man in charge of the EETPU’, a position that was consolidated through further electoral successes in 1971 and 1976, increasing his majority over his rivals on each occasion.⁹⁸ From challenging the leadership of the union in the late 1950s, Chapple had risen to an unprecedented position of power in the 1970s whilst asserting an anti-communist position, something that was supported by the EETPU’s members.

A new cause?

During Chapple’s rise to the leadership of the EETPU, human rights violations in the Soviet Union were gaining increased international recognition. Recent scholarship has emphasized the centrality of the 1970s as a period in which human rights as an area of wider activists’

⁹³ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 127.

⁹⁴ *The Times*, 10 December 1970, 10.

⁹⁵ *The Observer*, 28 March 1971, 18; *The Observer*, 16 September 1973, 4.

⁹⁶ *The Times*, 3 November 1971, 2; *The Times*, 4 November 1971, 2; *The Times*, 5 November 1971, 2.

⁹⁷ *The Times*, 6 November 1971, 2.

⁹⁸ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 126; *The Times*, 1 July 1971, 4; *The Guardian*, 29 June 1976, 4.

concern experienced their ‘breakthrough’, also providing it with greater political traction in international relations.⁹⁹ The persecution of individuals such as Vladimir Bukovsky, Zhores Medvedev and Alexander Solzhenitsyn was becoming increasingly known internationally, owing largely to the efforts of activist organizations distributing information to politicians, journalists and public figures.¹⁰⁰ Trade unionists were not overlooked by these activists, and groups such as Amnesty International, the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted and the Women’s Campaign for Soviet Jewry made particular efforts to lobby unions for their support. Given the EETPU’s history and Chapple’s fervent anti-communism, it is perhaps unsurprising that the union keenly responded to these overtures, with its members making frequent reference to abuses taking place in the Soviet bloc at TUC conferences.¹⁰¹ This is notable given that other human rights violations taking place in this period, including the suppression of trade unions in Spain and the persecution of the labour movement under General Pinochet in Chile, were seemingly overlooked despite being arguably closer to the interests of the EETPU’s members.¹⁰² Chapple addressed this in a December 1976 letter to Len Murray, the General Secretary of the TUC, noting that,

If it were for matters affecting Spain, Portugal, Greece, South Africa and the like, no stone of protest would be left unturned by the General Council to express contempt to those

⁹⁹ Eckel and Moyn (eds), *The Breakthrough*; Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge MA, 2014); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Hurst, *British Human Rights Organizations and Soviet Dissent*.

¹⁰¹ See *1968 TUC Report* (London, 1968), 582–3; *1974 TUC Report* (London, 1974), 492; *1975 TUC Report* (London, 1975), 493; *1976 TUC Report* (London, 1976) 561–2; *1977 TUC Report* (London, 1977), 507–10; and *1980 TUC Report* (London, 1980), 493–9.

¹⁰² Amnesty International, *Chile* (London, 1974); Amnesty International, *Political Imprisonment in Spain* (London, 1973). On Amnesty International’s campaigns on Chile, Spain and the Soviet Union in this period, see Tom Buchanan, *Amnesty International and Human Rights Activism in Postwar Britain, 1945 – 1977* (Cambridge, 2020), 184–92 and 197–203.

governments, and my union believes the General Council has one view for right wing dictatorships and another for the left.¹⁰³

Chapple's intent here appears to be an attempt to level the playing field, ensuring that Soviet abuses were considered by the trade union movement alongside abuses in right-wing regimes, although his involvement in anti-communist efforts in his union is also difficult to ignore here. This letter came days after Vladimir Bukovsky was released to the West in a high-profile prisoner exchange, suggesting that Chapple's concerns were also influenced by contemporaneous events, and a desire to capitalise on the momentum that they offered.¹⁰⁴

The malleable definition of human rights and the lack of political gravitas that it held before the 1970s 'breakthrough' mean that a clear assessment of how individuals understood the term in this period is inherently challenging. In Chapple's case, it is notable that the only specific references to human rights in *Sparks Fly!* relate to the Soviet Union. Human rights issues in Chile and Spain affecting trade unionists in the same period did not draw comment in the same fashion, suggesting that his interests in Soviet human rights went beyond an altruistic moral concern, drawing on his anti-communist views in this period.¹⁰⁵

Chapple was especially concerned about the *refuseniks*, Jews who sought to emigrate from the Soviet Union and were subsequently persecuted as a result. The *refusenik* cause drew international attention in the context of the Cold War, with the persecution of prominent *refuseniks* such as Anatoly Shcharansky being widely reported, again no doubt due to the efforts of Soviet Jewry activists promoting his case.¹⁰⁶ Chapple sent a number of letters to the

¹⁰³ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/17, letter from Chapple to Len Murray, 23 December 1976. See also Chapple, *Sparks Fly!* 168.

¹⁰⁴ Olga Ulianova, 'Corvalan for Bukovsky: A real exchange of prisoners during an imaginary war. The Chilean dictatorship, the Soviet Union and US mediation, 1973–1976', *Cold War History*, 14 (2014), 315–36.

¹⁰⁵ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!* 168

¹⁰⁶ Gal Beckerman, *When They Come For Us We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* (Boston, 2010); Hurst, *British Human Rights Organizations and Soviet Dissent*, esp. Chapter 3.

TUC in the 1970s about the *refuseniks*, calling for them to use their connections with their Soviet equivalent, the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU), to lobby the Soviet authorities on this matter and to offer practical support where possible. Chapple's persistence in this correspondence is notable. In November 1975 he requested that a TUC delegation deliver a petition on behalf of the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry to the Soviet embassy in London, noting that it had been signed by a 'large number' of TUC delegates and outlining the difficulties EETPU representatives faced in delivering this petition.¹⁰⁷ The TUC refused, stating that its intervention in this matter would have little benefit and recommending instead that the leadership of the EETPU send this petition directly to the Soviet government.¹⁰⁸ Chapple refuted this, highlighting what he argued was the great benefit of the TUC's endorsement, noting that 'such association by the oldest trade union movement in the world, with its long records of fighting for liberty throughout the world, would inevitably add weight to the petition, whose aims I am sure we all endorse'.¹⁰⁹ He pressed the TUC's executive on this issue, who in turn debated whether this was in fact a trade union issue, or if other organizations such as the Labour Party would be more suited to aiding Chapple and the EETPU in this instance.¹¹⁰ Chapple and his colleagues were adamant that the TUC should be pursuing this issue as a trade union matter, noting their concern over a seeming lack of attention to this

¹⁰⁷ MRC MSS.292D/947/3, Frank Chapple, 'Letter regarding the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry petition', 2 November 1975.

¹⁰⁸ MRC MSS.292D/947/3, Len Murray, 'Letter regarding Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry petition', 16 December 1975.

¹⁰⁹ MRC, MSS.292D/947/3, Frank Chapple, 'Response to Len Murray regarding Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry petition', 12 January 1976.

¹¹⁰ MRC, MSS.292D/947/4, Frank Chapple, 'Letter to Len Murray regarding Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry and Soviet Dissidents', 23 December 1976; MRC, MSS.292D/947/3, J. A. Hargreaves, 'Letter to Len Murray regarding Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry Petition', 22 January 1976.

issue. At the 1978 TUC annual conference, the EETPU's representative W. P. Blair stated with clear frustration,

It is with some regret that once again I am compelled, on behalf of my union to register its disappointment in connection with its attempt to convince the General Council to take some note of, and some steps about, our protest in connection with what is happening to workers in the Soviet Union because they are Jewish, where arbitrary dismissals are taking place...We shall continue to press for the assistance of the Committee. This must be the third or the fourth time I have been to this rostrum to speak on this subject.¹¹¹

Blair's exasperation echoed a broader clash taking place between Chapple and other unionists at the 1978 TUC conference. Commenting on the conference, *The Guardian's* Labour correspondent Keith Harper noted that the 'heated exchanges' between Chapple and TUC chairman Jack Jones exposed a split in the TUC's attitude towards reports of human rights violations in the Soviet Union, with Chapple's attempts to be publicly critical clashing with Jones's desire for a non-confrontational approach on the matter. Chapple's assertion that 'it seems to have escaped the TUC's attention that the repressive apparatus created by Stalin has never been dismantled' demonstrated his clear frustrations at the lack of action, and also perhaps a lack of tact given his own past CPGB membership during Stalin's rule.¹¹² The context of Chapple's desire to draw upon the TUC's historic 'fight for liberty' to support this petition whilst suppressing communist members of his own union is also worth noting, especially given the apparent contradictions of where liberty should and should not be fought for in this instance.

In this period, Chapple's ire was raised further by the news that Alexander Shelepin, the AUCCTU chairman, Politburo member and former head of the KGB, was to be welcomed to Britain by trade unionists in March 1975. The Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry wrote

¹¹¹ *1978 TUC Report* (London, 1978), 561–2.

¹¹² *The Guardian*, 8 September 1978, 20.

to trade unionists outlining their ‘disgust and revulsion that official English hospitality should be extended to this man’, strikingly adding that ‘an invitation to the former head of the KGB in the 1970s is akin to an invitation to a Nazi leader in the 1930s and 1940s’.¹¹³ Likewise, the Labour MP Greville Janner drew parallels between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in describing Shelepin as ‘without question the most unwelcome guest in this country since [Rudolf] Hess’.¹¹⁴ Chapple was similarly frank in his opinion of the former KGB boss, noting in the *Daily Record* that ‘the only experience Shelepin has of workers is throwing them in jail’.¹¹⁵ However, Chapple’s real venom on this matter was reserved for trade unionists; both those who welcomed Shelepin on this visit and those who refused to use his visit to put pressure on the Soviet authorities for their abuse of human rights:

When visiting Communist ‘trade unionists’ visit a Western country, their hosts are usually too polite, or too sycophantic, to tell them precisely what we think of the most repressive regime the world has ever known... Only if massive peaceful demonstrations, protesting about this visit and calling for the restitution of democracy in Soviet political and trade union life, take place will the visit have served any purpose.¹¹⁶

Chapple’s public criticisms were echoed in private correspondence. In a letter to Cyril Plant, the General Secretary of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation, Chapple noted ‘I have just read your nauseating rubbish in your journal about that butcher Shelepin. How an ex-KGB boss, who is appointed to keep control of the so-called trade union movement, becomes “Brother Shelepin” is beyond me.’¹¹⁷ Chapple argued that engaging with Shelepin offered him a platform to promote the Soviet Union and discredit the TUC, stating that ‘we do not believe

¹¹³ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/25, Women’s Campaign for Soviet Jewry, ‘Trade union letter’, 3 March 1975.

¹¹⁴ *Jewish Observer and Middle East Review*, 28 March 1975, 15.

¹¹⁵ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/25: clipping of *Daily Record*, 2 April 1975.

¹¹⁶ Frank Chapple in the *Daily Mail*, 25 March 1975, 6–7.

¹¹⁷ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/25, letter from Chapple to Cyril Plant, 25 April 1975.

you can reconcile free democratic trade unions with state controlled [sic] puppets, whether of the fascist or communist variety'.¹¹⁸

Whilst Chapple's concerns over British trade unionists engaging with Shelepin and the lack of action by the TUC on the Soviet Union clearly had merit, the context of his concerns is important. His past membership of the CPGB and the suppression of political views within the EETPU was only too apparent for its communist members, who became increasingly vocal about their concerns, petitioning for their rights by circulating materials that were deeply critical of Chapple's leadership. *The Ugly Face of Chapple's Union and How to Change it* was one such pamphlet produced by the anonymous EETPU 'rank and file' that was vicious in its criticisms of Chapple.¹¹⁹ It contained accusations that Chapple was in the pockets of corporate interests, dubbing him a 'confirmed marketeer', 'one track minded and bitter', and arguing that he was reliant on increasingly undemocratic methods to govern.¹²⁰ Such rhetoric is perhaps unsurprising, given that the pamphlet was dedicated to the 'fine rank and file socialists in the EETPU who struggled throughout their lives against everything that Frank Chapple stands for'.¹²¹

Whilst it is largely dedicated to union issues such as pay and unemployment, the most interesting aspect of *The Ugly Face* for this article is the section devoted to Chapple's political history. The pamphlet argues that Chapple had cynically remained a CPGB member until his election to the ETU Executive Council in 1957, implying that he had benefitted politically from his affiliation with the CPGB. Most critically of all, it argued that his 'reds-under-the-beds theme ... gives him the self-righteousness of a converted sinner' and that his concern for human

¹¹⁸ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/25, statement by Chapple on the 1975 visit of Alexander Shelepin, undated.

¹¹⁹ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/17, *The Ugly Face of Chapple's Union and How to Change It* (date of publication unknown, presumed mid-1976).

¹²⁰ *The Ugly Face of Chapple's Union*.

¹²¹ *The Ugly Face of Chapple's Union*.

rights violations in the Soviet Union was ‘hollow-sounding rubbish’.¹²² As a political attack, this was remarkably deft, raising questions about Chapple’s personal legitimacy and his ability to condemn the oppressive behaviour of a regime he once supported. Whilst individuals should rightfully be given the space to change their mind, the nature of Chapple’s political *volte face* was dramatic, and opened the space for these criticisms to be made. This raised questions about his political past and the full sincerity with which he was supporting Soviet human rights issues.

Chapple responded to *The Ugly Truth* by taking legal action against its printers, the *Socialist Worker*, arguing that it was libellous.¹²³ In the face of criticisms that raised challenging questions about Chapple’s past, shifting focus to the factual basis of the ‘rank and file’ claims deflected attention from particularly uncomfortable issues, delegitimized the nature of the claims made in *The Ugly Face*, and cast light away from a potentially sensitive area. Legal action did not stop the production of material by those critical of Chapple on this issue. The ‘rank and file’ published another pamphlet, *End the Ban*, in 1979 that focused specifically on the ban of CPGB members holding office in the EETPU. This pamphlet was more restrained in its anti-Chapple tone than *The Ugly Face*, presumably as a result of the previous legal action. It detailed the position of CPGB members within the EETPU arguing that the union’s rules were undemocratic, discriminatory and driven by ‘a whipped up anti-communist atmosphere’ in the 1960s, leading to a situation where, ‘democratic grass roots resistance had to be throttled’ for structural reforms to take place.¹²⁴ Once the ban came into force, this pamphlet argued, CPGB members had been so completely isolated in the union and forced to deal with ‘loaded propaganda’ against them that EETPU members could be ‘completely unaware of political

¹²² *The Ugly Face of Chapple’s Union*.

¹²³ MRC MSS.387/6/CH/17, High court writ between Frank Chapple and Socialist Workers Printers and Publishers Limited and S. W. Litho Printers Limited, 14 June 1976.

¹²⁴ *End The Ban*, 2 and 19.

discrimination in their union'.¹²⁵ Like *The Ugly Truth, End the Ban* also noted the 'persistent contradiction' of the EETPU's efforts to publicly condemn Soviet suppression of political freedom whilst its internal policies limited the political freedoms of its members.¹²⁶ Whilst the suppression of CPGB members in EETPU politics is far from equivalent to the levels of persecution experienced by Soviet prisoners of conscience, this parallel is striking. *End the Ban* goes further to assert that the union's leadership had focused almost entirely on events in the Soviet bloc, ignoring issues such as reports of violations taking place in Iran amongst other right-wing regimes. Such a focus was derided in this pamphlet as 'the crudest hypocrisy' and highlights the broad frustrations that critics of Chapple and the EETPU's anti-communist policy held in this period.¹²⁷

Conclusion

After his appearance at the 1985 Sakharov Hearings, Chapple received a letter from Irina Alberti, the editor of the Russian émigré journal *Russkaya Mysl* (Russian Thought), who noted 'I feel sure that many among our dissidents...will feel as thankful to you as I am, and even more so those who still live in the Soviet Union and with whom we are in touch'.¹²⁸ Chapple's place in the hearings was doubtless a result of his concern about human rights violations taking place in the Soviet Union. However, a nuanced approach is needed to understand his support for Soviet human rights, something that highlights the important role of the history of the British left in motivating the concerns of Chapple and his union on this matter. Support for these issues was not driven solely by altruism, but was also influenced by the historic interaction between British trade unionists and the CPGB – something that goes some way to

¹²⁵ *End The Ban*, 21.

¹²⁶ *End The Ban*, 11.

¹²⁷ *End The Ban*, 25.

¹²⁸ MRC, MSS.387/6/CH/6, letter from Irina Alberti to Frank Chapple, 14 April 1985.

explain Chapple's resolute focus on concerns in the Soviet bloc, rather than human rights internationally.

Chapple's position in the network of activists concerned with human rights violations in the Soviet Union is full of inherent complexities. His communist past and subsequent anti-communism make his support for initiatives such as the Sakharov Hearings complex to assess, something made all the more complicated by the picture that Chapple retrospectively painted of his involvement with the CPGB and subsequent ideological awakening. Chapple's claim that 'once I fully realised the sick and squalid past in which I had shared and the gross injustice our members suffered as a consequence, I had no choice' may have felt correct to him at the time of writing in the 1980s, but it does not capture the nature of his political transition or the impact that it had on his later efforts in support of human rights.¹²⁹ Despite retrospectively claiming ideological doubts from the mid-1940s onwards, Chapple's 1957 resignation from the CPGB suggests that this transition was not solely due to ideological concerns, but that pragmatism also played a role. This delay could be partly attributed to personal difficulties in leaving the party. This was no easy process, given friendships that were tightly interwoven with its activities – personal investments that were possibly exorcized from later accounts of this period. It is also possible that Chapple sought to reform the corrupt union from within, although this is difficult to prove conclusively. What is perhaps most interesting about Chapple's political transition is that it did little to affect his political credibility. If anything, this transition gave Chapple increased political clout, and allowed him to be recast as a leading anti-communist figure with particular authority; somewhat ironically because of his previous position as a communist. Attempts by his critics to draw attention to this failed to wound his reputation, again revealing much about the political climate of the day and the somewhat uncomfortable closeness that some British trade unionists had had with communism.

¹²⁹ Chapple, *Sparks Fly!*, 10.

Chapple's involvement with the Sakharov Hearings and concerns for human rights issues in the Soviet bloc also highlights that trade union concerns for human rights issues both reflected the growing interest in human rights in this 'breakthrough' period and were influenced by broader debates in the British labour movement on Soviet communism. In the case of the EETPU and Chapple, this was interwoven with the union's history of communist manipulation. Whilst not clearly articulated in public, the EETPU's focus on human rights violations in the Soviet Union doubtless drew on its past interactions with the CPGB. Chapple may have been the public face of this, but it is important to note that his anti-communist leadership of the EETPU was also supported by its members who consistently backed him in elections. This demonstrates that this approach had deeper roots in the union, and that support for these issues was about more than just a personal crusade by Chapple. The human rights 'breakthrough' of the 1970s was just one component of the concern for Soviet human rights violations from the British trade union movement, and the broader history of its interaction with Soviet communism also had a significant influence on the efforts to highlight Soviet human rights violations. Trade union tensions in the 1950s and 1960s echoed into human rights campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s, something that can be clearly seen in the support given to Soviet human rights campaigns by Chapple and the EETPU.