COMPLICATED AND OVERLAPPING MOTIVES: THE POLITICAL LIFE AND ART OF CLIFF ROWE 1904–1989

By

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Abstract

This thesis critically reappraises the life and work of Cliff Rowe (1904–1989)**,** an artist and Communist whose six-decade career has been largely overlooked in British art history. Best known as a founder of the Artists' International – later the Artists' International Association (AIA) - and a lifelong member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), Rowe's career exemplifies the tensions of socially engaged art. His work reveals a constant negotiation between artistic integrity, political commitment, and historical circumstance, offering insights still relevant to debates on art and political activism.

The study draws on Rowe's journals, letters, essays, and autobiographical fragments, supplemented by oral histories, archival sources, and secondary scholarship. Acknowledging the author's personal connection as Rowe's son-in-law, it reflects on the ethical and methodological challenges of writing from within a family, while showing how biography can illuminate broader cultural and political forces. Rowe's art is treated as both visual testimony and historical evidence, revealing the interplay between personal conviction, ideological discipline, and audience reception.

The chapters proceed chronologically but are also thematic. Early chapters explore Rowe's formative years, his transformative stay in the Soviet Union, and his role in establishing the Artists' International and AIA. Subsequent chapters examine his wartime activities, his struggles with CPGB cultural policy during the Cold War, and the crises of the 1950s that forced him to reconsider his political and artistic commitments. An epilogue reflects on his later attempts to redefine socialist art outside Party orthodoxy.

By situating Cliff Rowe within the context of twentieth-century British cultural politics, this study contributes to scholarship on the CPGB, the AIA, and the broader history of left-wing art, while also highlighting the contemporary significance of attempts to reconcile artistic practice with political ideals. It argues that Rowe's career resists simple categorisation and should be understood as symptomatic of the dilemmas faced by many left-wing artists and writers during this period. Neither a straightforward Party propagandist nor an apolitical practitioner, Rowe embodied the 'complicated and overlapping motives' that characterised politically engaged cultural work. His persistence, despite compromises and contradictions, brings into focus the tensions between hope and disillusionment, conviction and doubt that shaped the experience of artists and intellectuals on the left. The choices he made illuminate the broader difficulty of artistic and political commitment in conditions where clear moral courses of action were not always available, and compromise was sometimes unavoidable.

CONTENTS

List of abbreviations

AI	Artists' International
AIA	Artists' International Association
AKhR	Association of Artists of the Revolution
AKhRR	Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia
ARP	Air Raid Precautions
AUEW	Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic)
ETU	Electrical Trades Union
FAU	Friends Ambulance Unit
GARF	The State Archive of the Russian Federation
IBRA (MBRKh)	International Bureau for Revolutionary Artists
ILD	International Labour Defence
IURW (MBRP)	International Union of Revolutionary Writers
IZOGIZ	State Publishing House for Visual Arts
Kh.M	The State Free Artists' Studios
MOSSKh	Moscow Region of Soviet Artists
NCCL	National Council for Civil Liberties
NMLH	National Museum of Labour History
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
OGPU (GPU)	United State Political Directorate
OST	Society of Easel Painters
PHM	People's History Museum
RAPKh	Revolutionary Association of Proletarian Artists
RCA	Royal College of Art

RGALI	Russian State Archive of Literature and Art
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History
RSDLP	Russian Social Democratic Labour Party
SCR	Society for Cultural Relations Between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR
TASS	Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section (AUEW)
TUC	Trades Union Congress
VOKS	All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad

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Finally, my greatest debt is to my wife, Sandra Thornberry, whose wealth of anecdotes about her parents, thoughtful feedback on my writings, and constant support and encouragement have been indispensable.

Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree at this or any other university. Where I have drawn upon the work of others, this is fully acknowledged in the text and bibliography.

Ethical approval for research undertaken in this thesis was obtained from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC) reference number FASSLUMS-2024-0544-RECR-4.

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COMPLICATED AND OVERLAPPING MOTIVES: THE POLITICAL LIFE AND ART OF CLIFF ROWE 1904 - 1989

INTRODUCTION

Cliff Rowe (1904–1989) is not a name most people associate with British art history, and that in itself is telling. For someone whose work spanned nearly six decades and touched on some of the most important social and political movements of the twentieth century, Rowe has been curiously absent from the major narratives.[1] Best known as a founding member of the Artists' International, later the Artists' International Association (AIA), Rowe was a painter, designer, illustrator and lifelong member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), whose work continually balanced artistic expression with political commitment. My thesis is a critical appraisal of Cliff Rowe's life and work, exploring how his art and political beliefs were influenced by the historical context in which he operated. It argues that Rowe's complex negotiation between ideology, artistic expression and that wider historical context offers insight into the role of socially engaged art in both past and present political struggles.

Writing about Cliff Rowe presents challenges for me as he is my late father-in-law. As others have observed in *Scholars and Their Kin* (Stephane Gerson, Ed., 2025), writing history from within the family brings a unique mix of emotional, ethical, and methodological complications. One cannot entirely separate the roles of researcher, relative, and custodian of memory. Yet as Gerson's contributors illustrate, using family narratives can illuminate wider social and political forces, especially during periods of uncertainty.[2] Much of the material I've drawn on comes from Rowe himself - his journals, letters, essays, and fragmentary autobiographical writings. Some of this material is contemporary but much of it was written in the 1980s as he looked back over his life. These reflections are rich and revealing, but they are also shaped by the distance of age, by a lifetime of political and personal struggle, and by an understandable need to make sense of contradiction. Memory is always partial, and hindsight has a way of smoothing rough edges. As someone who knew and liked Rowe, I've had to balance affection with critical distance. My aim has not been to take his account at face value, nor to question it at every turn, but rather to place his voice - shaped by its moment and its motivations - into a broader historical and political context. It has required careful ethical judgement - respecting the privacy of individuals still living,

[1] At the time of writing a newly-published study of the Ai/AIA has gone a long way towards correcting this neglect. See Andy Friend, *Comrades in Art,* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2025).

[2] Stephane Gerson, ed. *Scholars and their Kin*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2025), pp. 1 - 5.

acknowledging the sensitive nature of some material, and representing Rowe with honesty but without intrusion. This is set alongside a wealth of primary and secondary material that provides context for Rowe's own accounts and allows for a balanced assessment of his life and work.

Because of my closeness to my subject, a particular challenge has been a question that is inevitable in any biography: how much emphasis should be placed on Rowe's personal life, especially his relationships with women. If this were primarily a psychological study of Rowe the man, such material would be highly relevant. However, as I outline below, my approach adopts a broader scope, seeking to situate the tensions between Rowe's aesthetic vision and his political commitments within the context of the major events of the twentieth century. References to his personal life are therefore included only where they are relevant to this wider narrative.

While reading Daniel R. Meister's essay on the 'biographical turn,' I was struck by how clearly his arguments illuminated some of the choices I had already made in writing Rowe's life, albeit without consciously framing them in those terms.[3] Meister advocates a 'middle path' between seeing the individual simply as a product of historical forces, and casting them as an heroic exception to their time. That seems to me to describe the tension I felt throughout, writing about a man deeply shaped by the social and political movements of his age yet also making decisions that were distinctly his own. Meister's notion of a 'critical narrative', rigorous but empathetic, attentive to contradiction and complexity, also resonates with what I have tried to achieve - neither hagiography nor cynical deconstruction, but a recognition of both Rowe's agency and his constraints. Meister's reminder that biography can speak to both scholarly and general audiences has reassured me that my aim - to write something honest, critical, and accessible - is, at least in spirit, aligned with the best of what historical biography can offer.

This study is neither a conventional biography, nor strictly an art-historical or political account, but rather a synthesis that draws upon all three. In situating Cliff Rowe within the shifting cultural and ideological terrain of the twentieth century, I've drawn on a range of historiographies: British interwar and Cold War art histories, studies of Soviet cultural policy and aesthetics, international Communist histories, and, crucially, the evolving scholarship on the Communist Party of Great Britain. This latter includes the 'official' histories written by Noreen Branson, who knew Rowe

[3] Daniel R. Meister, 'The Biographical Turn and the Case for Historical Biography,' *History Compass* 16, no. 1 (2018): e12436.

personally, and John Callaghan.[4] There are also archive-informed accounts by historians including Francis Beckett, Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy,[5] and the works of Kevin Morgan et al who, in their own 'biographical turn', have provided fresh insights into Party culture and the lives and motivations of individual members.[6] For his explorations of CPGB attitudes to the many manifestations of culture, Andy Croft has been a valuable source.[7] How this historiography has evolved over the years is described by Kevin Morgan in his contribution to the comprehensive bibliography of the CPGB published in 2016.[8] The literature on the Artists' International Association, especially the work of Lynda Morris and Robert Radford, has also been foundational,[9] as has Christine Lindey's substantial contribution to our understanding of 20th century socially engaged British art and the impact of the Cold War.[10] The list is not exhaustive, but it reflects the composite nature of this project: part art history, part political history, part personal and cultural investigation. In the absence of a sustained secondary literature on Rowe himself, these broader bodies of work have helped provide the necessary context through which to interpret his life, practice and commitments. Though they do not fully account for Rowe, they help form the structure for my analysis. Rather than give a detailed summary of these multiple historiographies here, the footnotes and bibliography provide information on these essential sources.

Among the range of primary sources, including memoirs of contemporaries and other archival material, is a source of particular relevance to my subject - the records of the British state. Rowe's commitment to radical politics and his involvement with the CPGB inevitably drew the attention of the Security Service. Although his own file has not been released, his name and personal file number (P.F. 40831) appear occasionally in the KV series of declassified MI5 files held at the National

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[4] Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985); *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1941-1951*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997); John Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict. The CPGB 1951-68*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2003).
[5] Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within. The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*, (London: John Murray, 1995); Keith Laybourn & Dylan Murphy, *Under the Red Flag. A History of Communism in Britain*, (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999).
[6] Kevin Morgan, Gideon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007); John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan and Alan Campbell, eds. *Party People Communist Lives. Explorations in Biography*, (London Lawrence and Wishart, 2001).
[7] Andy Croft, ed. *A Weapon in the Class Struggle. The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain*, (London: Pluto Press, 1998); Andy Croft, *The Years of Anger. The Life of Randall Swingler*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2020).
[8] Kevin Morgan, 'Historiography of the CPGB', in Dave Cope, *Bibliography of the Communist Party of Great Britain,* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2016).
[9] Lynda Morris and Robert Radford, *The Story of the AIA. Artists' International Association 1933-1953,* (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983); Robert Redford, *Art for a Purpose. The Artists' International Association 1933-1953,* (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press,1987).
[10] Christine Lindey, *Art for All. British Socially Committed Art from the 1930s to the Cold War*, (London: Artery Publications, 2018); *Art in the Cold War*, (London: The Herbert Press, 1990).

Archives. In response to persistent enquiries from Rowe's daughter, Sandra Thornberry, MI5 initially denied the existence of a file on her father, only later admitting one had existed but had since been destroyed. However, Rowe features in the files of other Party members from as early as 1931, often in surprising or incidental ways. These fleeting references offer valuable glimpses of Rowe's political networks and activities not recorded in any official or personal archive, including his own autobiographical writings. That his file was withheld or destroyed suggests concern over the sensitivity of the information, reputational risk, controversial surveillance methods, or politically inconvenient content. In this way, the silence surrounding Rowe's MI5 file offers its own insight into how cultural dissent was perceived and managed by the British state.[11]

A further challenge for me lies in reading the visual evidence of Cliff Rowe's art. As Sarah Barber notes in her chapter on fine art as an historical source in *History Beyond the Text*, artworks can be read both 'depictively,' as statements about what they show, and 'implicationally,' as revealing the broader cultural, emotional and social context in which they were produced and received.[12] Throughout this thesis, I have treated Rowe's art as a kind of testimony, both intentional and inadvertent, about the personal and political pressures of his time. I also recognise that the viewer brings their own assumptions to the work, and that meaning emerges through a triangular interaction between artist, artwork, and audience. This triangularity, which Barber emphasises as intersubjective and context-bound,[13] is especially useful in interpreting an artist like Rowe, whose personal convictions and political affiliations shaped, and were shaped by, the reception of his art.

In appraising Cliff Rowe's life and work, we need to keep three things in balance: the artist himself - his aesthetic choices, personal instincts, and inner conflicts; his enduring commitment to the British Communist Party and his support for the Soviet Union; and the major political events of the twentieth century that tested and shaped those commitments. These three elements form a kind of triangle, a guiding framework I return to throughout this study. At the centre of this triangle is the artwork itself - the drawings, paintings, murals, and prints - where these tensions often surface most clearly, and which I use as a key source for understanding Rowe's story. The triangle, an adaptation of Sarah Barber's triangular model of assessing art as historical evidence, is not a strict formula but a

[11] For an exploration of the State's approach to dissenting artists and writers see Richard Knott, *The Secret War Against the Arts: How MI5 Targeted Left-Wing Writers and Artists 1936-1956*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword History, 2020).
[12] Sarah Barber, 'Fine Art: the Creative Image', in Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, eds. *History Beyond the Text*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 21.
[13] Barber, 'Fine Art', p. 19.

heuristic tool for exploring how personal feeling, ideological discipline, and historical forces come together in the work of a politically engaged artist.

To understand Cliff Rowe's development as both an artist and political thinker, we begin with his early life, where the emotional, social, and moral foundations of his later commitments were laid. He was born in 1904 into a family precariously clinging to the white-collar lower-middle-class in Edwardian Wimbledon, a place then undergoing rapid urban and social change. His early childhood was marked by loss and constraint. When his mother died, her absence created a vacuum that was quickly filled by a deeply religious evangelical aunt. She became the dominant force in his upbringing, imposing a strict moral code and emotional austerity on Rowe and his three siblings that left little room for warmth or spontaneity. His father remained a distant presence, overshadowed by the aunt's authority. The household Rowe grew up in was not unloving, but it was governed by rules, rigidity, and a refusal to indulge weakness, emotional or otherwise. It is tempting to draw a direct line between this upbringing and his later Marxism, but that would be too simplistic. What we can say is that certain recurring themes in Rowe's life - resistance to imposed authority, an instinctive siding with the underdog, and a belief in self-discipline as a source of dignity - were already present in his youth. He was an observant child who, even then, seemed aware of the weight of injustice and the ways power could be exercised unfairly, and which he wrote about later in life. This sensibility carried over into his creative work as an artist.

Rowe's artistic training began at the Wimbledon School of Art and continued at the Royal College of Art, where he chafed against the constraints of traditional academic instruction. Drawn to more emotionally driven forms of expression, he helped found the Emotionist Group, which rejected both the technical rigidity of academic realism and the decorative detachment of the Bloomsbury aesthetic. Though Emotionism was short-lived, it marked an early assertion of Rowe's belief that art should be emotionally authentic, though at this stage there was no suggestion that it should also be socially engaged. This was to change when he encountered the Communist Party and, for him, the revelations of the Marxist interpretation of the world and his place in it.

A major turning point in his life came in 1932, when, after encountering the CPGB, he travelled to the Soviet Union. Frustrated by Britain's economic and political state and inspired by the idea of seeing socialism in action, he hoped to contribute to the Soviet project. What he encountered there was more complex and troubling than he had anticipated. On one hand, he was energised by the creative possibilities of Soviet publishing, theatre, design and public support for art. On the other, he was disturbed by the increasing suppression of artistic freedom, particularly the denigration of revolutionary Constructivist art in favour of the emerging doctrine of Socialist Realism, and the

growing cult of Stalin. He also witnessed the casualties of rapid Soviet industrialisation and collectivisation, particularly the dreadful famine in Ukraine. It was in Moscow that he first encountered the conflict between his own aesthetic and what was required of him politically when he was commissioned to provide a painting for an exhibition to celebrate the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Red Army.

These experiences did not lead him to abandon communism, but they introduced a critical awareness that stayed with him. When he returned to Britain, he became a leading figure in the Communist Party's cultural activities and a co-founder of the Artists' International, but with a growing recognition that ideals alone were not enough. He never forgot the contradictions he witnessed in the Soviet Union, and they would go on to help shape his political and artistic choices for the rest of his life. In a sense, this Soviet episode exemplifies the broader dilemmas of politically engaged art - how to maintain integrity and truthfulness when one's chosen political community demands conformity and suppression of doubt. This dilemma recurs throughout Rowe's career, and it is one of the reasons his art remains relevant today. His Soviet sketches, optimistic in tone but also indicating hardship and suffering, foreshadowed the honesty that often sat uneasily alongside Party loyalty. His later works, including a series of deeply personal pictures of his wife Doris during her final illness, show just how committed he remained to an idea of art as ethical address. These were not political images in the traditional sense, but they were no less rooted in his understanding of human dignity and resistance.

The chapters move chronologically but are also thematically structured. Chapter 1 focuses on Rowe's early years, the emotional terrain of his childhood and adolescence, and the development of his artistic talents. Chapter 2 explores his formative time in the Soviet Union and the impact it had on his evolving world view and his commitment to Communism. Chapter 3 covers the formation of the Artists' International as a revolutionary cultural organisation and its evolution into the broad based Popular Front anti-fascism of the Artists' International Association, highlighting both its achievements and the ideological compromises demanded of Rowe and his comrades. Chapter 4 looks at Rowe's experiences during the Second World War, his struggle to reconcile his commitment to the AIA with shifting Party policy on the war, his experiments with his art, and his work with the ARP during the London Blitz. Chapter 5 examines the post-war years and the impact of the Cold War on CPGB cultural policy and on the unity of the AIA. Chapter 6 deals with the rising tensions within the CPGB, culminating in Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and the Hungarian crisis of 1956. The final section of this Chapter is in the form of an Epilogue which considers the last decades of his life and his efforts to redefine socialist art outside the constraints of official Party aesthetics.

Writing in 1980, Rowe described both the exasperation and exhilaration involved in this quest:

> I am a person of complicated and overlapping motives and consequentially one who perennially believes that all problems have a simple and direct solution, which only the obstinacy of events and my fellow creatures render difficult or obscure! In practice, of course, I find that in any real problem both my reactions and the facts are saturated with exasperating conflicts and entanglements. But I never seem to learn, though there are times when I realise that this is the inherent fascination of life, without which I would be bored to extinction.[14]

This ironic self-portrait is key to understanding the tension that defined much of Rowe's artistic and political practice: a yearning for order and justice, constantly challenged by the messy reality of lived experience. His reflection refutes any notion of him as a rigid ideologue, revealing instead a man animated by struggle - between belief and doubt, conviction and nuance - a depiction echoed in the title of this thesis.

Writing about Rowe today, one is struck by the relevance of his story to our own time. The world in which Rowe lived - a time of ideological polarisation, economic crisis, and resurgent nationalism - bears disturbing resemblances to our own. Fascism in varying guises is once again on the rise. Wars rage across continents. Cultural and educational institutions are under attack, and the notion of art as a space for social reflection is increasingly contested. The 'culture wars' of today echo many of the debates Rowe faced, albeit in different registers. His belief that art should serve a social purpose, his struggle to remain true to his values in the face of political demands, and his insistence on the dignity of working people are all themes that resonate with renewed urgency.

Rowe was never a hero in the conventional sense. He made compromises and sometimes got things wrong. He stayed loyal to a Party that too often failed to live up to its own ideals. But he also persisted. He kept asking what it meant to live a principled life. He kept making art, believing that politics and aesthetics could inform and enrich each other, even if the results were sometimes awkward or incomplete. For me, this is where his significance lies. Not in the purity of his vision, but in the courage of his persistence. This thesis is not a definitive account of Rowe's life or work, nor is it an attempt to rescue him from obscurity simply for the sake of it. It is, rather, a critical exploration of a man who tried to bring together the emotional truth of art and the ethical demands of political life. In a time when both are under strain, that effort deserves to be remembered.

[14] Cliff Rowe, *Camden Confession*, c.1980. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.

CHAPTER 1 THE YOUNG ARTIST

Introduction

This chapter discusses the early life of Cliff Rowe and the influences and experiences leading up to his first encounters with the Communist Party. While it does not follow that childhood experiences necessarily shape later life, they clearly cast shades that continue for decades to come, and Rowe in his writings certainly considered some of those experiences to be formative.

Born in 1904 in the London suburb of Wimbledon, a place undergoing rapid urbanisation and social transformation, Rowe emerged from a childhood defined by economic precarity, emotional repression, and a rigid moral structure. Raised in a household overshadowed by the early death of his mother and the unyielding authority of a deeply religious aunt, Rowe developed a fierce individualism, sharpened by familial hardship and a combative schoolyard ethos. Yet even in these difficult beginnings, a creative spark was evident, one that would later be kindled by both formal training and ideological conviction.

At fourteen, Rowe gained entry to Wimbledon School of Art, marking a route out of his constrained upbringing. His later admission to the Royal College of Art seemed a further step forward, but he soon became disillusioned by its conservative curriculum and disengagement from the avant-garde movements sweeping Europe. Rejecting classical tradition, he helped found the Emotionist Group, embracing modernist ideas linking creativity, emotion, and freedom.

A turning point came in 1931, when Rowe, struggling professionally and financially, entered the Workers' Bookshop in Covent Garden hoping to sell a political poster. This chance encounter sparked a lifelong engagement with Marxist thought and revolutionary politics. Art, for Rowe, became more than personal expression - it became a means of collective struggle. This ideological shift transformed his outlook. From a belief in artistic autonomy rooted in his working-class pride and disdain for authority, he moved toward a vision of art as a tool for social justice. Marxism offered him a framework to understand the systemic roots of the inequality and suffering he had witnessed throughout his life, and an alternative to the individualist ethos that had defined much of his early development. This reorientation would shape the rest of Rowe's life, anchoring his creative practice within the broader currents of 20th-century political and cultural transformation.

Early life

Clifford Hooper Rowe,[15] born at number 284 Haydons Road in Wimbledon on 18 February 1904, grew up in a town transformed from a rural village into a bustling London suburb. This rapid expansion, driven largely by the extension of the railway system, saw Wimbledon's population rise dramatically from 2,693 in 1851 to nearly 55,000 by 1910.[16] The railway not only reshaped the physical landscape but also created a clear social divide. To the north lay 'old' Wimbledon, characterized by estates and large houses, while the south, known as 'Wimbledon down the hill', developed into an industrial hub along the River Wandle, with extensive new housing built around Haydons Road, a key link to Merton.[17] The influx of families into this new southern district reflected both local migration from London and arrivals from more distant regions such as the West Country, Scotland, and Ireland. By the 1901 Census, the area displayed a socially mixed population. Lower-middle-class and working-class residents predominated, including shopkeepers, clerical workers, railwaymen, builders, and general labourers. Housing ranged from modestly owned homes to rented rooms in multiple-occupancy dwellings. Alongside these groups, remnants of earlier 19th-century expansion remained visible, with larger properties accommodating members of the professions - doctors, lawyers, and teachers - who continued to reside along Haydons Road.[18]

Despite its suburban character, Wimbledon nurtured a strong radical tradition in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. William Morris, the socialist designer, established his factory at Merton Abbey Mills in South Wimbledon, collaborating with artist Edward Burne-Jones.[19] The area also produced several artists active in the women's suffrage movement, including Evelina Druce, Kate Sidford, and Hilda Bather. The most prominent figure was Rose Lamartine Yates, who led Wimbledon's branch of the Women's Social and Political Union—among the most militant in the country. She organized large open-air rallies on Wimbledon Common, often disrupted by hostile crowds, sometimes leading to near riots.[20] The actor and cleric Patrick Fawcett recalled as a child seeing Edith Begbie, a noted militant suffragette, being escorted by police through jeering opponents, while her home was later

[15] Until he went to Russia in 1932, Rowe used 'Hooper' as his first name, after which he used 'Clifford' or 'Cliff'. I have employed this as a convention when introducing his artworks and published writings.
[16] Merton Borough Council, *1801-2001 Census Figures*, https://www.merton.gov.uk/council-and-local-democracy/statistics-and-census-information/1801-2001-census-figures. Accessed September 2021.
[17] Patrick Fawcett, *Memories of a Wimbledon Childhood 1906-1918*, (London: John Evelyn Society,1981), p.18.
[18] 'Census return for Haydons Road, Wimbledon, Surrey'. 1901 Census. Public Record Office, PRO RG13/660. http://www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed: July 2021.
[19] 'William Morris', William Morris House, https://williammorrishouse.org.uk/william-morris Accessed September 2021.
[20] The Wimbledon Society, 'Art Collection', https://wimbledonsociety.org.uk/museum/our-collections/art/ . Accessed August 2021.

vandalized with abusive slogans. Fawcett also remembered a mysterious 'lady Artist who roamed Wimbledon in sackcloth and sandals', her home reportedly painted with strange imagery.[21] Another exotic artist resident was a Belgian, Alois de Laet. He came with his family to Wimbledon as a war refugee in 1914. He was an anarchist and had been a member of a radical artists group in Antwerp called 'The Chapel'. During the Great War his house became a centre for Belgian refugee artists known as the 'Flemisch Club'.[22]

Figure 2: Haydons Road looking northwards c.1900. Cliff Rowe's home at number 284 is around the corner on the right-hand side. Merton Borough Council.

To this area in 1900 came Richard Rowe and his wife, Eliza. Richard came from Liskeard in Cornwall, the son of a coal merchant, and worked as a mercantile clerk in London. Eliza Penhey was from Twickenham, where her father was in the victualling trade. Richard and Eliza had married in Battersea in 1898 and in 1900 settled in Wimbledon at 284 Haydons Road. Their new home was a seven-room flat above a shop that became 'Rowe and Penhey, Stationers', a business inherited and jointly owned by Eliza and her younger sister, Florence, who also lived in the flat. The shop was run by the two sisters while Richard pursued his own career as a clerk with a wholesale drapery company in London. Apart from Clifford Hooper there were three other Rowe children - Phyllis (born 1900), Stanley (born 1903), and Alan (born 1906).[23]

[21] Fawcett, 'Wimbledon Childhood', p. 12.
[22] Wimbledon Society, 'Art Collection'.
[23] 'Census return for Haydons Road, Wimbledon, Surrey'. 1911 Census. Public Record Office. PRO RG14, Schedule 289. http://www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed July 2021.

Tragedy struck the family when Rowe was eight years old. His mother was struck down with cancer and, after a protracted period of suffering, died at home. It had a devastating effect on the young Cliff. He wrote later:

> In those days they didn't believe in giving relief for pain. She locked herself in her room for six months so that we would not see her agony and death. No one told us. We took it for granted she didn't want us.[24]

His aunt took the children into the room and made them pray beside their dead mother. Rowe later recalled the shock of seeing her emaciated body, mouth still open. While the children mumbled their prayers, the beginnings of Rowe's life-long antipathy to religion were set:

> I promised God that I would hate him like scum all my life and when I was dead, go to his throne and kill him. When we got outside, we boys had a silent pact against everybody.[25]

This experience strengthened what Rowe describes as 'considerable esprit-de-corps' that had already developed among the four children. Although there was a strict hierarchy among them based on age, this 'natural though savage order' was mitigated by the fact that Rowe 'was the physical superior, and my youngest brother the mental superior, of the three brothers'.[26] All the Rowe children attended the same school, Queen's Road Elementary School, a short distance from their home in Haydons Road.[27] Rowe was not slow in asserting this physical superiority, both inside and outside the home. At school it was the practice to challenge the best fighter of a neighbouring or visiting school. Rowe recalled enduring frequent schoolyard fights - not out of malice, but as a working-class rite of passage - and credited his success to sheer endurance rather than size or strength.[28] Scorn and petty cruelties were the norm among the siblings, with Alan, as the youngest, bearing the brunt. On one occasion Rowe beat his younger brother because he believed that he had been going through his private possessions, a heinous offence among the siblings. Alan continued to deny the offence despite his punishment. Rowe believed him but continued with the beating, incensed more by his brother's defiance than by the original crime.[29] Inside the house, conflicts were

[24] Cliff Rowe, draft letter to Jane Connard. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers. This is one of a number of draft letters addressed to the actor Jane Connard, with whom Rowe had a long relationship. They are undated but contextual references indicate they were written in 1957.
[25] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[26] Cliff Rowe, 'Diary 1958'. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers. This is a long reflection on his early life written by Rowe in an unused 1958 Diary. Contextual references suggest it was written c. 1960.
[27] Cliff Rowe, 'Autobiography', 1984-85, p. 1. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers. This is a 5000-word typewritten account by Rowe which may have been his first attempt at a longer project intended for publication.
[28] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[29] Rowe, 'Diary 1958'.

constant, but any outside criticism united them instantly, forging a fierce, protective solidarity, right or wrong, against the outsider with unwavering, merciless resolve.[30]

After the passing of their mother, her sister Florence - 'Aunty Flo' - became the dominant figure in the lives of the Rowe children. Shortly after Eliza's death, their father had offered to marry Florence, giving rise to much ribald commentary from the boys.[31] She indignantly refused but did take on the role of mother to the children, an arrangement the father was happy to accept. Her own childhood experiences developed in her a stern and rigid moral code and sense of duty which required her to take the place of her dead sister. She was intensely religious, 'in the narrowest sense', and sought to impose her views on the children in a battle of wills that dominated their early years. She was a stern but just presence, treating everyone equally and expecting the same resilience from others that she demanded of herself. She did not punish the children physically but her tongue-lashings were sufficient to discipline the children when required. Her life was guided by a set of uncompromising principles, rooted in self-denial and independence. Though her sharp tongue and emotional reserve made her difficult to love, her tireless devotion, fairness, and refusal to indulge in self-pity earned the respect and admiration of those around her. It was not affection, but a deep sense of obligation and awe at her strength that kept Rowe and his siblings in line.[32]

Rowe believed that her religious zeal was rooted in a fear of sex, possibly based on her own childhood experience, a repression communicated to the children and leading to serious emotional consequences for them all later in life. Religion, for her, served as an unconscious escape from sexuality, her deep fear of sex matched only by her fervour for faith. To her, sex was inherently corrupt while religious devotion was pure and virtuous. As for love, it was not just ignored but dismissed entirely - regarded, if thought of at all, as something weak, delusional, and symptomatic of emotional immaturity.[33]

Florence was also antisemitic, illustrated by an incident when Rowe was ten years old. He had a childhood sweetheart, a Jewish girl slightly older than him. They used to walk to school hand-in-hand until one day they were spotted by his aunt. Unusually for her, she created a public scene (a grave offence in her eyes), shouting with rage for him to 'leave that Jewish slut alone, and to have nothing to do with dirty Jews'. Rowe tried to reassure the girl, but she had heard the aunt and would not

[30] Rowe, 'Diary 1958'.
[31] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[32] Rowe, 'Diary 1958'.
[33] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.

walk with him again. Reflecting on this experience in the light of his of his later political commitment, Rowe wrote that he 'did not need communism to tell me that antisemitism is wrong'.[34]

While Florence ran the shop during the day, the children used the opportunity of her absence to assert their freedom from her control, only to have it reimposed when she reappeared:

> We ran wild whenever she was not present, but when she was there, restrained by the strictest code of morals and behaviour conceivable. It was a combination of absolute authority and complete licence guaranteed to reinforce that by which we ruled each other. We were steeped in anti-social uncooperative behaviour yet bound as with iron by self evolved and imposed rules … The rules that other children lived by were nothing to us, and those imposed by others to be thwarted.[35]

An example of this anti-social behaviour was when the three brothers vandalised the local church, strewing vestments around the nave, pouring communion wine on the floor, and hiding the Boys Brigade uniforms in an outhouse. It caused a local scandal, and the perpetrators were quickly discovered. Retribution from Aunt Flo duly followed but when the local vicar tried to take things further, the family closed ranks. Despite her devotion to the church, Florence refused to allow him to confront the boys when he called, and their father ordered him to leave the house.[36] Soon after this incident Cliff's father attempted to fashion a new existence for his family. He entered a relationship with a woman whom Rowe describes as 'a prostitute' and took the children to live with her in Brixton. The arrangement did not work well. According to Rowe, she starved and mistreated them when their father was at work, while indulging her own son who was the same age as Cliff. The only proper food they received was on the weekends when they trekked from Brixton back to Wimbledon to be fed by their aunt. Matters came to a head when the Rowe children turned on the woman and physically attacked her and her son. When he returned from work their father beat them but, recognising that this new life had become impossible, returned the children to Wimbledon and back into the care of Aunty Flo.[37] Why Rowe choose to describe the woman (whom his father later married) in the way he did is puzzling, as he regarded such use of language as evidence of a type of middle-class morality that he heartily despised. It possibly reflected an emotional state, still raw so many years after the death of his mother, and bitterly hostile to someone seeking to replace her.

[34] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[35] Rowe, 'Diary 1958'.
[36] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[37] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.

The economic position of the Rowe family was always precarious. Despite the fact that his father was in a secure job, and income came from the shop, the children also had to work. From the age of seven Cliff had an early morning milk round for which he was paid 2/6 a week. He enjoyed the work but found it particularly hard going in winter. At 5.00 in the morning he had to climb the gate in the dairy, recover the key from under a stone, unlock the padlock, push out the milk cart loaded with churn and cans, then re-lock the gate and climb back over again. Everything was cold, especially so for a small boy with bare hands, bare legs and no coat. However, he was not downhearted by these experiences. He learned to appreciate being alone and to enjoy the sounds and sights of his surroundings as the dawn broke over the houses of Wimbledon.[38]

The most dispiriting aspect of the work was having to deal with suspicious customers on the lookout for evidence of being given short measures. And the truth was that, to his shame, he sometimes had to do just that. For all the delivery boys, milk that was accidently spilled or lost had to be paid for out of their earnings, as their employer would not accept that it had not been pilfered.[39] A year later, Rowe changed his job for a newspaper round covering the more prosperous middle-class areas of Wimbledon. The work was easier but involved having to negotiate heavily sprung iron gates, not easy for a young child. There was also the danger from the dogs running loose in the grounds or snapping at his fingers when he pushed the newspaper through the letterbox. He soon developed a means of exacting revenge. His technique was to attract the dog's attention by rattling the letterbox, taunt the animal by poking through the tip of the rolled-up newspaper, then, when the dog had been roused to a frenzy, smartly push the paper into its snout when it attempted to bite the intruder. The most satisfying aspect of this encounter was listening to the enraged animal tearing the newspaper to shreds and relishing the retribution it would suffer when the house owner discovered its crime.[40]

A notable aspect of Rowe's accounts of his early life is the complete absence of any reference to how he developed his artistic talents. These must have been evident while he was still at elementary school as they enabled him to gain entry to Wimbledon School of Art when he was just 14 years old, suggesting that the curriculum at Queen's Road went beyond the basic education to be found in most public elementary schools at the time. An intriguing possibility is that the refugee artist Alois de

[38] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[39] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[40] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.

Laet, who lived around the corner from Queen's Road school at 18 Craven Gardens, may have helped provide art classes at the school.[41]

An art education

Wimbledon School of Art, now part of the University of the Arts, London, was founded in 1890 and initially housed within the Wimbledon Technical Institute on Gladstone Road in South Wimbledon. Its first principal, Alfred James Collister, a respected landscape painter from the Isle of Man, became Rowe's teacher during his time there. Rowe attended from 1918 to 1922, a period he later recalled with warmth and gratitude, particularly for the solid foundation in drawing and art technique he received under Collister's guidance. However, Rowe also came to question the limitations of the School's approach. Grounded in the Renaissance tradition, its teaching emphasised technical precision and formal discipline. When Rowe encountered the work of Cézanne, Monet and other French modernists, it opened his eyes to a different artistic language, one that Collister did not value. Although an accomplished draughtsman and watercolourist himself, Collister dismissed these artists as lacking skill, unable, according to Rowe, to see the rigour in Cézanne's use of colour to shape form or the intentional abstraction in Matisse's simplified figures. Rowe respected and admired Collister, crediting him with securing his scholarship to the Royal College of Art, but he was also disheartened by his mentor's refusal to engage with the new artistic ideas that were beginning to shape his own vision.[42]

Although critical of his art education, Rowe was profoundly influenced by the prevailing ethos of the art school, one that reinforced the individualism engendered by his own sometimes brutal self-assertion within his family. He described the ethos as a blend of intense self-discipline during work hours and a spirit of nonconformity at all other times. Students were driven by the belief that unwavering focus and dedication would inevitably lead to success, a mindset that reflected an extreme form of capitalist individualism. The practical demands of making a living, or the basic need for financial stability, were largely ignored. It was simply assumed that an artist should be willing to endure poverty for as long as necessary, with the expectation that recognition, once achieved, would resolve all financial concerns. Rowe observed that neither he nor his peers could see how convenient this outlook was for the capitalist class, which benefitted from their unpaid labour and idealistic pursuit of art detached from material realities.[43]

[41] Wimbledon Society, 'Art Collection'.
[42] Cliff Rowe, 'Exercise Book 1', c.1980. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers. This is one of a number of old school exercise books he used to record his thoughts and recollections on a wide range of subjects.
[43] Rowe, 'Exercise Book 1'.

Rowe, however, was only too well aware of 'the harsh realities of earning a living'. While many of his fellow-students had families prosperous enough to support them, he still had to work. He obtained a job as a 'scullery boy' for a well-off Catholic family in Wimbledon. He worked 7.00 to 8.30 every morning, polishing cutlery and cleaning boots and shoes. The work was easy, but he particularly hated having to clean the shoes of the priests who were frequent visitors to the house, the 'fat black lice' as he called them. Everything he did was inspected closely. If his work was not to the lady's satisfaction, it had to be done again. He had to take great care that nothing was lost as he would be accused of stealing. He endured these humiliations stoically: 'I was proud and fourteen, but I learned to burn pride out of me'.[44] He later got a job as a stable boy with a local coaching company. He no longer had to deal with priests but now had to contend with the changing moods of horses - 'Vicious brutes! Always waiting for the chance to bite me'. One aspect of the work he did find enjoyable, though, was watching the coachmen refurbish their vehicles. In particular, it was their patience in building up layer upon thin layer of lacquer to achieve a high gloss finish on the woodwork.[45] He was to use this aspect of working life in his later industrial paintings in depicting the care and concentration shown by skilled workers in their everyday tasks.

In the meantime, his aunt's shop, like so many local businesses, was suffering the effects of the post-WW1 economic slump. Such was the dire financial position at home that in 1920 Rowe had to work full-time while in his third year at Wimbledon School of Art. In order to continue his studies he re-enrolled as a part-time evening class student so he could work during the day.[46] It was there that Rowe met Ronald Ossory Dunlop, a part-time mature student who was to have a profound influence on his development as an artist. Dunlop's background was very different to Rowe's. He was born in Dublin in 1894 to an upper middle-class family closely connected with the Irish literary and artistic revival of the late 19th century. After the family settled in London, he attended a boarding school in Saffron Walden where he excelled at art and, at a very early age, decided that this was where he would make his career. His father had other ideas for his son, and when he left school at age 18 sent him to Manchester to learn about the printing trade. There he assisted the lithographers with the design of posters and tickets while at the same time attending evening art classes at Manchester Art School.[47] In 1915 the Dunlop family moved again and settled in Wimbledon in a large house on Sunnyside, in the middle-class area of 'old' Wimbledon.[48] The following year Ronald was conscripted

[44] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[45] Oral testimony by Sandra Thornberry c. 1980.
[46] Royal College of Art. Special Collections. Student File: 'Rowe, Clifford Hooper'.
[47] R. O. Dunlop, *Struggling with Paint*, (London: Phoenix House, 1956), p. 28-29.
[48] *1915 Electoral Register, Surrey, England*. http://www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed July 2021.

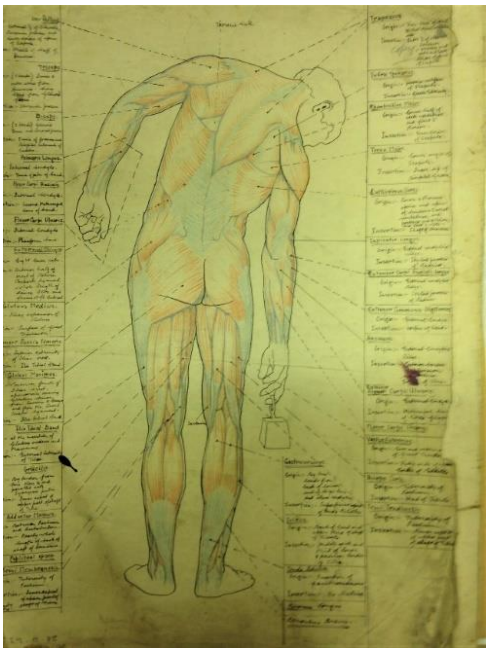
into the army but because of his family's Quaker background he was exempted from combat service provided he joined the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU).[49] He served out the war in England in the FAU and on his demobilisation in 1919 he returned to live with his family in Wimbledon.

He obtained employment as a graphic designer but was still intent on a career as an artist. He decided to become a freelance commercial artist to support himself while he painted in his spare time in a studio he had set up in the basement of the family home in Wimbledon. He enrolled for evening classes at the Wimbledon School of Art, where he met Cliff Rowe, whom he described as one of 'a few very vital personalities … boys and girls of seventeen or thereabouts'. He shared Rowe's appreciation of A J Collister, whom he described as 'one of the few great teachers of art of the last generation'.[50] Despite his own conservatism in art, Collister did not prevent his students from experimentation and Dunlop, Rowe and other 'vital personalities' established their own art club. They met weekly in Dunlop's studio in his parents' house to share their work and discuss the meaning of art, particularly the ideas of Roger Fry whose book of essays on Post-Impressionism and aesthetics had just been published.[51] This group, 'full of ideas and keen as mustard about art', formed the beginnings of what later became the Emotionist Group.[52]

With Collister's support and encouragement Rowe achieved a Surrey County Council scholarship to study at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in South Kensington in 1922, the youngest student to date to have achieved this.[53] He entered the RCA at a time when the institution was in transition from having a curriculum dominated by design art to one capable of providing a higher-level art education. In particular, there was a need to produce better quality art teachers for the new art schools emerging across the country.[54] The artist William Rothenstein had been appointed in 1920 to oversee this change. He believed that a key part of this transition was improving the quality of the student intake to act as a catalyst for creativity in the College. He wrote to the President of the Board of Education in 1920 that the RCA had not consistently attracted the most capable students. In his view, a handful of gifted individuals was needed to elevate the standard of the entire college, and future art teachers, in particular, needed to 'come into contact with the most gifted and mentally

[49] 'The Men who said No: Conscientious Objectors 1916-1919'. https://menwhosaidno.org/men/men_files/d/dunlop_ronals_ossory.html. Accessed July 2021.
[50] Dunlop, *Struggling with Paint*, pp. 37-38.
[51] Dunlop, *Struggling with Paint*, p. 38.
[52] Roger Fry, *Vision and design,* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920).
[53] Rowe, 'Exercise Book 1'.
[54] Mary M. Lago and Karl Beckson, eds. *Max and Will. Max Beerbohm and William Rothenstein. Their Friendship and Letters*, (London: John Murray, 1975), p. 73.

alert among their contemporaries' to receive a truly meaningful education. [55] It is highly probable that Cliff Rowe's record at Wimbledon School of Art had identified him as one of those 'gifted and mentally alert' students so essential to Rothenstein's strategy.



Figures 2 & 3: Hooper Rowe, *Two Body Studies*, 1923. Pencil on paper.

The earliest surviving examples of Rowe's work date from his time as an RCA student - two labelled studies of male anatomy dated 26 April 1923 and 1 May 1923 (Figures 2 and 3). An intriguing aspect of the second figure is that it was further labelled (at a later date) in Russian, suggesting that he used them in Moscow to help him learn the Russian language.

Rowe's experience of the RCA was one of deep frustration. He had entered with high expectations and wanted to plunge into painting, but in his first year found himself, he believed, going over the same ground he had covered at the Art School. His impatience is well illustrated by the comment in his student record by his tutor in Architecture, a compulsory course at the RCA in the first term, who described Rowe as:

> Influenced by extreme schools of modern painting. Anxious to modify architectural styles without the necessary knowledge. Distinctly bored with the whole subject which is nevertheless an excellent discipline for him.[56]

[55] Letter, William Rothenstein to H. A. L. Fisher, 8 June 1920, quoted in Lago and Beckson, *Max and Will*, pp. 72-73.

[56] *Student File: Rowe, Clifford Hooper*, Royal College of Art Special Collection.

Rowe expressed his frustration to Rothenstein, who replied that he would only be allowed to start painting 'after a year'. Before the year was up, Rowe took matters into his own hands and, in an act of public defiance, set up his easel in the corridor and began to paint. Along came Rothenstein to see what he was up to:

> I was experimenting with formal shapes. He raised his eyebrows and said, 'Do you see it like that?' I said 'No'. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. 'Why do it that way then', he said, and strolled away.[57]

This incident seems to have crystallised for Rowe all that he found wanting at the RCA. Rothenstein, he believed, was essentially a reactionary who had grafted a knowledge of Impressionism on to his basic classical method to produce an approach to making art which was 'admirably logical' but also 'rigid and tedious' which he expected everyone to follow.[58]

> But I became convinced of the importance of the changes going on in France and beginning to be accepted by people like Quentin Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant, and that my path lay in this direction.[59]

As a result, he left the RCA after just one academic year. This decision was arguably a missed opportunity. Had he remained, Rowe could have benefitted from Paul Nash's inspiring teaching and worked alongside talented peers such as Percy Horton, Eric Ravilious, Eric Bawden and Peggy Angus.[60] These artists not only gained later acclaim but also became major figures in the Artists' International Association, where Rowe would reconnect with them. His early departure may have delayed his engagement with this influential creative circle.

The encounter with Rothenstein may have sparked Rowe's decision to leave the RCA but it was not the only factor involved. While a student, he was commuting daily from Wimbledon and no longer had the time for the jobs that helped support his studies. His scholarship covered his fees and materials, but with no income from work, he was entirely dependent on his Aunt Florence for his board, lodging and other living expenses. He found it hard to justify this to himself in the light of his disenchantment with the RCA. If he was to learn nothing new, what was the point?[61] The influence of Ronald Dunlop may have been another factor. Apart from evening classes in Manchester and

[57] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[58] Cliff Rowe, 'A New Visual Socialist Language', 1984, p.1. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[59] Rowe, 'Exercise Book 1'.
[60] Ray Watkinson, *Fighting Spirits: Peter Peri and Cliff Rowe*, (London: Journeyman Press, 1987), p. 13; Andy Friend, *Ravilious & Co: The Pattern of Friendship*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), pp. 29 – 33.
[61] Rowe, 'Exercise Book 1'.

Wimbledon, Dunlop had had little formal art education, to which he took a somewhat dismissive attitude. He believed it wasn't essential but its value lay in experiencing a shared environment with other student artists. What mattered most was 'the constant personal contact with others striving after a similar end, the atmosphere absorbed, the discussion and talks and outings and visits to art galleries.'[62] In the light of this, it is not difficult to envisage the advice Dunlop may have offered Rowe. The nascent Emotionist Group, with its camaraderie and lively discussion of the new developments in the practice and theory of art, could provide Rowe with the creative and personal support he found lacking at the RCA.

Rowe now followed Dunlop's example and in 1923 went to work as a graphic artist in a London advertising agency, Saward, Baker and Co., in Chancery Lane.[63] The 1920s saw a major expansion of the advertising industry, particularly in London, when estimated national spending on advertising increased from £31m in 1920 to £57m in 1928.[64] There were many opportunities for young artists and for the first time in his life Rowe was earning a modest but regular income that enabled him to leave Wimbledon and settle in his first flat in Earls Court.[65] Rowe later described the joyful sense of liberation he experienced at this move, freed from the narrow rigidities of Aunt Florence's moral code. He enthusiastically embraced the hedonistic lifestyle of the post-Great War London art world, forming a number of relationships with women about which he wrote later with surprising candour. He described how the war had upended England's social order, stripping away Victorian and Edwardian restraints, and exposing what had long been concealed; established conventions collapsed, unleashing a tumultuous release of energies, most explosively in the realm of sexuality, as old moral barriers gave way in a frenzy of liberation:

> Conversation and behaviour, hitherto decorous, became brazen and unconstrained. Bottle parties were invented, crammed night after night and burst into sex orgies. The sexual edicts of marriage were laughed to shreds. It was an assault hurling down the fortresses of masculine youth…[66]

However, he found the work in the advertising agency too dispiriting and after two years he left and, following Dunlop's example, became a freelance graphic designer. The living was precarious, and sometimes he was forced back to Wimbledon when he could not afford to pay for his accommodation, but it gave him more time to paint. Like Dunlop, his ambition was to achieve

[62] Dunlop, *Struggling with Paint*, p. 21.
[63] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 1.
[64] T. R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain*, (London: Heineman, 1982), p. 145.
[65] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 1.
[66] Rowe, 'Diary 1958'.

sufficient recognition to enable him to support himself completely through his art. There then occurred a tragic event which was to have a profound effect on Rowe and his outlook on life - the suicide of his younger brother, Alan.

By 1926, Alan Rowe, just 20 years old, was working as a clerk in a shipping company in Port Said in Egypt. In March that year he returned to England on leave and stayed at the family home in Wimbledon. He met with Cliff and described a dilemma in which he found himself. While in Port Said he had become engaged to a young Egyptian woman from a wealthy family but at the same time he had carried on a correspondence with a woman in England with whom he had previously been involved, and who was now married. Once back in England he wanted to resume his relationship with her and now did not know what to do. He explained to Cliff that he felt obliged to honour his word to his Egyptian fiancée and her family, but he could not let go of his passion for his former lover. Cliff became irritated at his brother's indecision, as it seemed to him to infringe the harsh code of their upbringing that scorned any hint of sentimentality, a code still strong in him despite his own liberation from Wimbledon:

> I told him to go for what he wanted and to hell with the conventions… I could not have given him worse advice and felt the disquiet of it. It challenged him, his masculine pride. Whereas he had come to me humble for help, I had forced him to become falsely proud. It has always seemed to me that this was the catalyst that brought the seething mixture to the critical point of transformation and made it inevitable. How many times have I wished that I had never said those insensitive words, so few, so deadly… [67]

A few days later, Alan shot himself in front of his lover, in her own home. He used a revolver that Cliff knew he possessed. The guilt that Rowe felt about what he judged to be his own responsibility stayed with him for the rest of his life. The tragedy shattered the close-knit unity the Rowe siblings had always maintained in the face of adversity. It also led to a significant change in Cliff's own attitude to life. Because of the dramatic circumstances of Alan's death, his inquest was widely reported in the London and provincial press. A few days after the inquest, when Rowe entered the office of a client for whom he was working, he encountered a hostile atmosphere. One person confronted him, saying: 'I say that suicide is cowardice, nothing but cowardice'. This was a direct challenge, and 'the code' demanded that Rowe, ever pugnacious in the face of a threat, should retaliate physically. But he did not, and this incident marked a profound shift in his sense of values. A 'link in the iron chain of the code' had been broken:

[67] Rowe, 'Diary 1958'.

> The code fell away as if helpless with astonishment, and I saw in an instant the universal ramification of the power of ideas and their utter helplessness once their pride and credence were taken from them. Since that day I have had no time for Victorian moralization of any kind. The Victorian code deified pride. It was social sham, a wooden hollow dummy dressed up with honour, booted with fortitude and crowned with nobility, but stuffed with hypocrisy, greed and cruelty, yellow-bellied, blind eyed, dirty mouthed, mean featured, watery kneed, crooked fingered, spineless backed, flat chested, fat arsed and foul odoured.[68]

From now on, Cliff Rowe would live his life according to his own beliefs, shaped by his own experiences.

The Emotionist Group

From 1923 the informal group of friends from Wimbledon School of Art began to style themselves 'Emotionists'. It was initially composed of artists but soon grew to include poets, writers, actors and musicians, many from Dunlop's wide circle of friends, and it is clear that Rowe played a significant role in bringing the group together. There was no formal launch or Emotionist manifesto, and the term 'Emotionism' was rather ill-defined. In essence, it was the belief that in all creative endeavour, be it in art, literature or drama, the well-spring of creativity lay not in the intellect but in the emotions – 'the inevitable and necessary fundamental to artistic creation'.[69] In 1927 the Emotionists came to public attention with their first exhibition, held in shop premises they had acquired in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, which they named the Hurricane Lamp Gallery. The choice of location was a happy one, probably deliberate on Dunlop's part. Cheyne Walk and its surrounds was well known as a favoured residential area for the leading figures in the London art and literary world. Living nearby were the painters Philip Wilson Steer, Walter Sickert, Ethel Walker and Philip Connard, and Henry Tonks, principal of the Slade School of Art. Another notable resident was the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. The interest some of these figures showed in the works on display in the Hurricane Lamp Gallery window helped to increase public recognition.[70]

The first Hurricane Lamp exhibition was greeted with mixed reviews, and some puzzlement, by the London art critics. The *Daily Herald* report, 'Emotional Art in Chelsea', and its sub-heading 'The Newest Cult', reflected a somewhat populist disdain towards new art movements:

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[68] Rowe, 'Diary 1958'.
[69] Dunlop, *Struggling with Paint*, p. 39.
[70] Dunlop, *Struggling with Paint*, p. 41; *The London Directory 1925*, (London: Kelly's). http://www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed: September 2021.

> The artists of Chelsea have broken out again. After years of serenity, following the perplexing cubists and the vorticists, Chelsea is at it again. This time it is the 'Emotionists'…

The *Herald* critic was much intrigued by the work of one particular artist on display, Mr. Hooper Rowe:

> A little riverscape entitled 'Red Funnel' held my attention for some time. It looked exactly like a portrait of three emotional chocolate creams reposing on an elongated blot. Expecting something similar, I turned to inspect the sketches of the same artist, Mr. Hooper Rowe. I blinked. Then I rubbed my eyes and blinked again. The sketches were marvellously rhythmical dancing girls that revealed the artist's high power of draughtsmanship … Strange beings, our moderns.[71]

One of the features of the exhibition was the presentation of poems written by Emotionists and scattered alongside the artworks on display. One of these was an 'Emotional Poem Portrait' written by Dunlop, and addressed to Rowe:

> Square—square—edgey.
> A ramrod that quietens over
> And gently puckers—
> With tender eyes that hold quietness
> Under their softness.
> And blackness and firm dust
> That slackens
> But then the square, squareness.[72]

The poem gives a fascinating insight into the relationship between the two artists. Dunlop observes Rowe with a mix of admiration, fascination, and tenderness. It hints at a complex relationship where emotion, aesthetics, and perhaps homoerotic desire come together. 'I don't know what Mr. Rowe thinks of it', wrote the *Herald* correspondent. 'His reply - if he makes one - ought to be entertaining.'[73] *The Spectator* critic was also bemused, observing tartly that 'If Mr. Dunlop were old enough to have used a ramrod he would realize how unsatisfactory one would be that puckered'.[74] However, he too was impressed by Rowe's drawings, though distinctly unmoved by his paintings:

[71] *Daily Herald*, 9 May 1927.
[72] *Daily Herald*, 9 May 1927.
[73] *Daily Herald*, 9 May 1927.
[74] *The Spectator*, 20 May 1927.

> Once inside, they will do well to ask for Mr. Rowe's drawings in chalk; one conveyed with incredibly few lines, recurring like the twists of a rope, the languor of a female figure extended on the ground. Here was real beauty, and the rhythm of other drawings was supple and springy. But frankly I could make nothing of Mr. Rowe's paintings and still less of Mr. Dunlop's.[75]

Perhaps the most sympathetic review of the exhibition came from *The Times* critic, Charles Marriott, who at least appreciated the intentions of the Emotionists in promoting what they saw as a radical approach to art:

> Oddity, when it is spontaneous, is generally attractive, and there is something about the exhibition of the 'Emotionist' group of artists and writers which compels sympathy. The suggestion is that of a band of young people taking the boldest possible line and daring the market with their souls. 'Emotionist', by the way, does not seem to mean more than that they work by feeling rather than by taking thought, for there are no signs of gush about the exhibition.[76]

As to the artwork on display, Marriott's opinion was that Dunlop 'appears to be the more accomplished painter', while Rowe's paintings 'Nude' and 'Candlelight' were 'also to be commended'. He was, however, rather puzzled by the poetry that was 'lying about'.

The Emotionists' next exhibition at the Hurricane Lamp took place in September 1927. A photograph taken that day captures the fun element of Emotionism that was not always apparent in its more earnest public presentations (Figure 4). It shows Rowe and Dunlop, dressed as masked desperados in a publicity stunt in Cheyne Walk to promote the exhibition, hanging from their necks are what can be assumed to be their own paintings.

[75] *The Spectator*.
[76] *The Times*, 18 June 1927, p. 9.

Figure 4: 'Mr. Rowe and Mr. Dunlop, two masked artists', Fox Photos, 1927.

Figure 5: R.O. Dunlop (left) and Cliff Rowe, 1927. Private collection

Another photograph of the two artists, without their disguises, was taken on the same day and found among Rowe's papers after his death in 1989. In this, we see two individuals who seem to fit the popular conception of artists, with their dishevelled clothes, Dunlop's loose cravat and Rowe's goatee beard, all signifying a Bohemian lifestyle (Figure 5). The friendly pose, with Dunlop's arm draped around Rowe's shoulder, emphasises the personal closeness between the two celebrated by Dunlop's poem about his friend.

The September Emotionist exhibition again drew mixed reviews, with the report in the *Westminster Gazette* being typical, a blend of puzzlement about the ideas of Emotionism, and disdain for the art:

> I discovered a new 'ism' in art this morning, at the little Hurricane Lamp Gallery, in Cheyne Walk, where seven young artists are showing their works. It is called Emotionism, and is defined as 'an endeavour to charge forms with the currents of living and vital feeling.' These young people call themselves the Emotionist Group, and the name of the gallery indicates that it is in the middle of a storm. As a matter of fact, I did not find the paintings very exciting. Mr. Hooper Rowe and Mr Dunlop, the joint founders, contribute most of the best ones, which are all of the palette-knife persuasion.[77]

At least one provincial journalist was a strong supporter of Cliff Rowe, particularly highlighting his Cornish roots. The *Western Morning News*, eager to claim him as a Cornish artist, praised his contributions to the Emotionist Group's exhibition. Although sceptical of modernist art, the reviewer admired works such as *Cornwall*, *Red Roof*, *The Barn*, and *The Gate*, describing them as evocative and rooted in the 'old Celtic spirit,' which would resonate with 'every true Cornishman.'[78] In a subsequent review of Emotionist drawings, the newspaper praised the Emotionist group's seriousness, lack of pretension, and meaningful approach, contrasting it with what they saw as the shallow showmanship of other modernist movements. The review lauded Rowe's dedication and integrity, noting that his fifteen exhibited works met the 'high standard he has set himself.'[79]

Aware that they perhaps needed to be clearer in explaining their ideas, the Emotionists produced an 'Explanation of Emotionism' which was sent out with the invitations for their next exhibition at the Hurricane Lamp in January 1928. It appears that the 'explanation' had the opposite effect to the one intended, as is evident from the reviewer from the *Westminster Gazette*, having fun in quoting some of the impenetrable prose in the document:

> They hold that 'an emotion which is neither purely of the mind, the heart or the instincts does most deepen a man in Life and open the door to creative activity with its natural forms, its clarifying and symbolising the variable humanity which it expresses on a super-human plane'… The project took shape 'one night between Chelsea and Wimbledon' when the Expressionists (sic) 'all together decided that what interested us and what we considered vital apart from our peculiar creative activities and yet bound subtly and indissolubly to our

[77] *Westminster Gazette,* 27 September 1927.

[78] *Western Morning News*, 1 October 1927.

[79] *Western Morning News*, 9 November 1927.

> creative activities, was estimating the life value of other creations not on moral or technical grounds but on a scale of greatness which we found to be an awareness of the reactions between Life, the most human part of it, and the creation of life on the creative unconscious level, which is art'. It must have been an unusually exciting night![80]

The *Nottingham Journal* thought it was all 'beautiful nonsense'[81], but *The Times'* critic Philip Marriott continued to be supportive, though he too doubted the efficacy of 'Explanation of Emotionism'. He also pointed to the limitations of oils as a medium for an artist wishing to convey the essence of an immediate emotional experience:

> To a certain extent the emotions of the group are clogged by the medium – so that you have to dodge the paint to see the picture. With this reservation the exhibition may be praised as a lively collection of direct sketches in oil. In one or two instances, 'Nude' by Miss Ethel Walker, and 'Blue Dress' by Mr. Hooper Rowe, responsive execution has been controlled by a feeling for design, with a gain to the convenience of the eye.[82]

But perhaps the most cutting criticisms came in the 'London Letter' in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal.* The charge laid at the Emotionists was that for all their claims, the new art they were striving to produce was itself somewhat *passe*. Not only that, they were doing a disservice to contemporary artists who had brought a disciplined modernism into the mainstream of British art:

> There is nothing to say about their pictures except that the artists seem to have only just come under the influence of a movement that was wearing threadbare in Italy and France twenty years ago. Their slogan that emotionism on canvas is 'intuitive flashes – deep aliveness' means nothing. Their thesis that form and technique have no merit compared with emotion ignores the fact that the modernists, who have attained a reputation in the teeth of bitter attack, have developed a very virile and characteristic technique, however much it may be decried. 'They have missed the train,' is how I overhead an artist of the most advanced school summarise the explosions of the Emotionists.[83]

In February 1928 the Emotionist Group launched the first issue of *Emotionism*, a 48-page arts and literary magazine featuring visual art, poetry, prose, and even music, a chorale by Aileen Dunlop

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[80] *Westminster Gazette,* 20 January 1928.

[81] *Nottingham Journal,* 20 January 1928.

[82] *The Times*, 23 January 1928.

[83] *Aberdeen Press and Journal,* 21 January 1928. This is likely to have been a syndicated column probably taken up by other provincial papers.

(Ronald's sister). The red-and-black linocut cover (Figure 6) was designed by Rowe, with artworks reproduced as half-tone illustrations.[84] Contributing artists included Rowe, Dunlop, Norah Davies, and Flora Dunlop, while poets included Peggy Ashcroft and Philip Henderson. Several contributors, including Rowe and Dunlop, offered both art and poetry. The magazine aimed to appear bi-monthly.

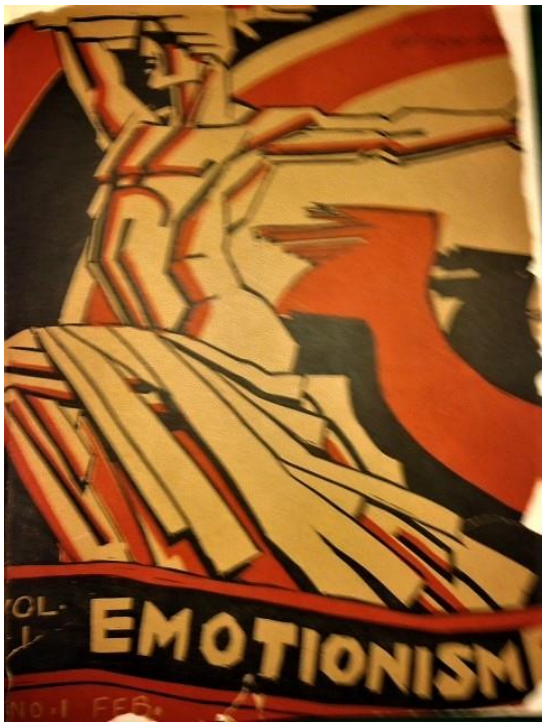

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Figure 6: Hooper Rowe. *Emotionism,* 1928*.* Linocut cover design.

Rowe's cover features a woman in classical dress, her form rendered with sharp, silicate-like slabs that suggest both danger and strength. The image contrasts starkly with Rowe's other female figures in the magazine—soft, curved forms also shown in the Hurricane Lamp's first exhibition and praised by a *Daily Herald* critic (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7: Hooper Rowe. *The Dancers (1)* 1928.

Figure 8: Hooper Rowe. *The Dancers (2)* 1928.

[84] Emotionist Group, *Emotionism Number* 1, February 1928.

These gentle, flowing depictions suggest grace and movement, highlighting the disturbing, inorganic tension of the cover image and demonstrating Rowe's contrasting approaches to representing the female form.

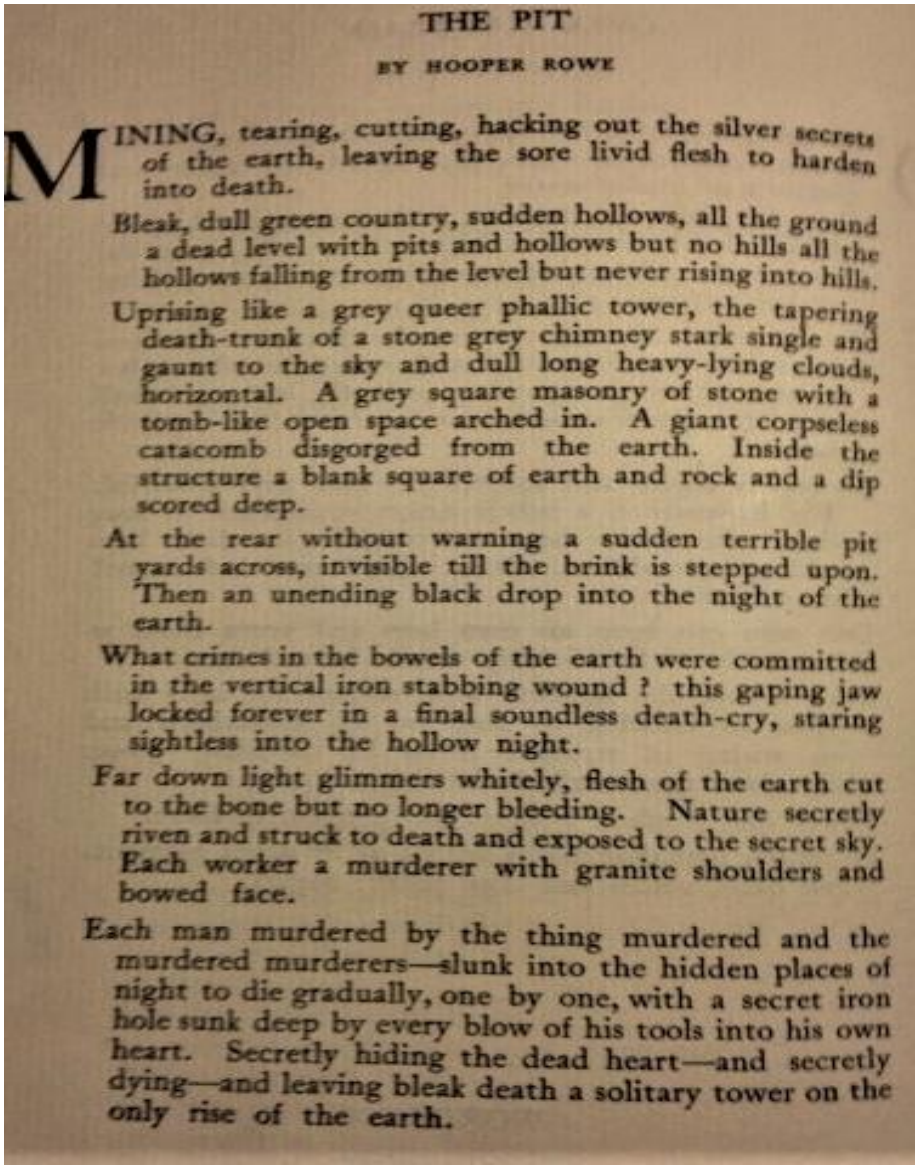
Rowe's oil painting *The Blue Dress*, shown in the second Emotionist exhibition and praised by critics, was also included in *Emotionism* (Figure 9). Like his 'Dancers', it contrasts sharply with the harshness of his linocut cover, instead displaying a striking sensuality. Though the image survives only in monochrome, the title suggests a vivid blue. This may be a provocative reference to Sir Walter Westley Russell's more famous *The Blue Dress* (1910), with its depiction of bourgeois comfort emblematic of the sentimental Edwardian art Rowe so despised (Figure 10). Adding to the provocation, Russell lived just a few doors from the Hurricane Lamp on Cheyne Walk, making it likely he saw Rowe's painting displayed in the gallery's window.[85]

Figure 9: Hooper Rowe. *The Blue Dress*, 1928. Monochrome image. *Emotionism*.

Figure 10: Sir Walter Westley Russell. *The Blue Dress,*1911. Oil on canvas, 100.5 x 75.3 cm.

Rowe also contributed two poems to *Emotionism*, 'The Pit' and 'Over the Plain'. 'The Pit' (Figure 11) is clearly inspired by an abandoned Cornish tin mine - 'hacking out the silver secrets of the earth', 'the tapering death trunk of a stone-grey chimney stark and single'. The imagery is of brutal wounding, of violation and death, of 'crimes in the bowels of the earth'. But the perpetrators, the criminals, are themselves 'murdered by the thing murdered', each blow to wounded earth turned back on the man who delivers it.[86]

[85] *The London Directory 1925*, http://www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed September 2021.
[86] *Emotionism Number 1,* p. 3.



THE PIT

BY HOOPER ROWE

MINING, tearing, cutting, hacking out the silver secrets of the earth, leaving the sore livid flesh to harden into death.

Bleak, dull green country, sudden hollows, all the ground a dead level with pits and hollows but no hills all the hollows falling from the level but never rising into hills.

Uprising like a grey queer phallic tower, the tapering death-trunk of a stone grey chimney stark single and gaunt to the sky and dull long heavy-lying clouds, horizontal. A grey square masonry of stone with a tomb-like open space arched in. A giant corpseless catacomb disgorged from the earth. Inside the structure a blank square of earth and rock and a dip scored deep.

At the rear without warning a sudden terrible pit yards across, invisible till the brink is stepped upon. Then an unending black drop into the night of the earth.

What crimes in the bowels of the earth were committed in the vertical iron stabbing wound ? this gaping jaw locked forever in a final soundless death-cry, staring sightless into the hollow night.

Far down light glimmers whitely, flesh of the earth cut to the bone but no longer bleeding. Nature secretly riven and struck to death and exposed to the secret sky. Each worker a murderer with granite shoulders and bowed face.

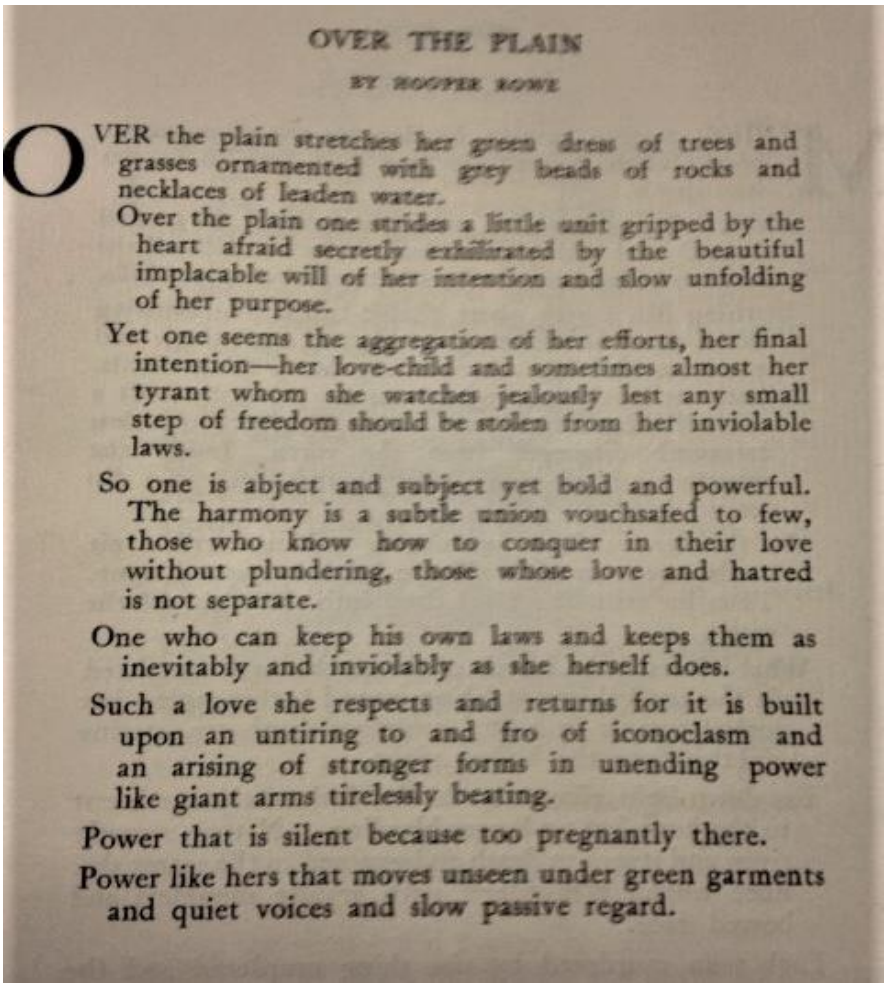
Each man murdered by the thing murdered and the murdered murderers—slunk into the hidden places of night to die gradually, one by one, with a secret iron hole sunk deep by every blow of his tools into his own heart. Secretly hiding the dead heart—and secretly dying—and leaving bleak death a solitary tower on the only rise of the earth.

Figure 11: Hooper Rowe. *The Pit,* 1928. *Emotionism.*

'Over the Plain' (Figure 12) is a more personal statement of Rowe's conception of Emotionism. It is about the individual's relationship to nature, here personified as a woman clad in the green mantle of the earth and bedecked with the jewellery of pool and rock . As in 'The Pit', man is seen as being in opposition to Nature while yet being a part of her, an insight that is a source of strength, a higher state of emotion:

> So one is abject and subject yet bold and powerful.
>
> The harmony is a subtle vision vouchsafed to few,
>
> Those who know how to conquer in their love without plundering,
>
> Those whose love and hatred is not separate.[87]

[87] *Emotionism Number 1,* p. 4. See also Appendix: Cliff Rowe's Emotionist Poetry.



OVER THE PLAIN

BY HOOPER ROWE

OVER the plain stretches her green dress of trees and grasses ornamented with grey beads of rocks and necklaces of leaden water.

Over the plain one strides a little unit gripped by the heart afraid secretly exhilirated by the beautiful implacable will of her intention and slow unfolding of her purpose.

Yet one seems the aggregation of her efforts, her final intention—her love-child and sometimes almost her tyrant whom she watches jealously lest any small step of freedom should be stolen from her inviolable laws.

So one is abject and subject yet bold and powerful. The harmony is a subtle union vouchsafed to few, those who know how to conquer in their love without plundering, those whose love and hatred is not separate.

One who can keep his own laws and keeps them as inevitably and inviolably as she herself does.

Such a love she respects and returns for it is built upon an untiring to and fro of iconoclasm and an arising of stronger forms in unending power like giant arms tirelessly beating.

Power that is silent because too pregnantly there.

Power like hers that moves unseen under green garments and quiet voices and slow passive regard.

Figure 12: Hooper Rowe. *Over the Plain,* 1927. *Emotionism.*

Emotionism also contained the first published attempt to provide a meaning for the term. Written by Dunlop, it called for art to be rooted in lived experience, not intellectual detachment. It demanded full engagement of heart, mind, body, and soul, centred on an inner emotional core. True creativity, he argued, arose from within - stirred, focused, and breaking through into form that expresses inner life, not decorative style. Emotionism rejected irony and surface polish, embracing emotional depth and authenticity. It was both a method and ethos, insisting that meaningful art comes from the courage to feel deeply and truthfully.[88] According to Dunlop there were two issues of *Emotionism* though only a copy of the first edition appears to have survived.

The Hurricane Lamp's 1929 Spring exhibition was its last, for shortly after the gallery had to close, leaving Dunlop to meet the outstanding bills. With the closure of the gallery came the end of the Emotionist Group itself. Dunlop attributed the failure of the Emotionism to a lack of resources

[88] *Emotionism Number 1,* p. 1.

rather than any inherent flaws in its concepts. Without influence or the business skills to sustain the movement, Emotionism struggled to establish itself. Ultimately, despite its potential as a passionate artistic creed, the group failed to endure and disbanded, leaving only its vision of heartfelt creativity.[89] From a personal viewpoint, Dunlop felt the whole enterprise was worth it, both for the experience it gave him and for the contacts he made with the London art dealers which enabled him to build a reputation.[90]

It is certainly true that the Emotionists were ridiculed, sometimes mercilessly so, but this is the experience of much contemporary art. A group can fail but its ideas can still take hold. This did not happen with the Emotionists and the criticism that they did not offer anything that was new or challenging has merit. They have left little trace the history of modern British art. Apart from the newspaper reviews, the main source of information about the Emotionism comes from Dunlop's autobiography. Despite his support, *The Times* critic Charles Marriott does not mention it in his 1938 book on contemporary art, *A Key to Modern Painting*,[91] nor does it feature in the most recent scholarly work on inter-war British art.[92] The most striking omission, though, comes from Cliff Rowe himself. He played a leading role in the Emotionists in the five years from its inception to its demise, but despite this there is no mention of the group or of Dunlop in any of his published or unpublished writings. The only indication of his connection with Dunlop and the Emotionists in his archive is the photograph of the two artists found in his desk after his death. It is probable that, after his embrace of Marxism and his years of loyalty to Communism, he was loth to draw any attention to his part in promoting what he would have seen as a somewhat self-indulgent expression of bourgeois ideology. However, he never fully abandoned Dunlop's dictum that 'You must *love* what you wish to create', and the full realisation of the truth of this only came to Rowe towards the end of his life.

Rowe and the London Galleries

The expansion of the British Empire had seen a growth in the importance of London as a centre for the art market.[93] In the post-Great War period it overtook Paris in importance as a world centre, in particular catering for a new kind of art buyer. The pre-Great War buyer of art had typically been wealthy and upper-class. Those interested in buying art in the 1920s were more likely to be young

[89] Dunlop, *Struggling with Paint*, pp. 39-40.
[90] Dunlop, *Struggling with Paint*, p. 41.
[91] Charles Marriott, *A Key to Modern Painting*, (London: Blackie & Son, 1938).
[92] Frances Spalding, *The Real and the Romantic. English Art Between Two World Wars,* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2022).
[93] This is explored in detail in Pamela Fletcher and Anne Helmrich, eds. *The rise of the modern art market in London, 1850-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

and middle-class, more concerned with buying art that fitted their home circumstances. The *Sunday Times* art critic Frank Rutter, considered this development in an article in 1921:

> The London flat dweller, who is the typical representative of the middle-class of today, has no space for large pictures and is rarely in the mood for or in the position to pay a big price. Yet being educated up to a certain standard of taste, he is anxious to avoid the furniture shops' engravings and to find something personal and distinctive to hang on his walls.[94]

The reference to furniture shops indicates that already the large London department stores, for example, Heals, and Waring and Gillow, provided art galleries attached to their outlets in the West End where middle-class buyers could augment their new purchases with fresh new artworks conveniently on display. The notion of art as a commodity to be bought and sold in an expanding market was widely accepted by the time Cliff Rowe, now operating on his own following the end of the Emotionist Group, entered this arena.

Figure 13: Hooper Rowe. *Still Life, c.*1929. Oil on canvas, 44 x 54 cm.

Rowe's attempts to get his work into London gallery exhibitions seems to have met with initial success. The Redfern Gallery's Summer Salon of 1929 was a major event in the art calendar and featured many better-known artists including Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, John Nash, and Eric

[94] Frank Rutter, 'Modest Work for Modest Means', *The Sunday Times* 3 October 1921, quoted in Andrew Stephenson 'Strategies of display and modes of consumption in London art-galleries', in Fletcher & Helmrich, *Art market in London*, p. 98.

Ravilious. Ronald Dunlop was also among the exhibitors, and it was probably through his established connection with the Redfern that Rowe's single painting was included (Figure 13). This was one of the works favoured by Marriott of *The Times*, who wrote in his review that 'Rowe's small still life is a pleasant exercise in paint, and it certainly has the true painter's quality'.[95]

However, this promising beginning in the world of the London galleries was soon cut short. Just weeks after the Redfern's exhibition closed, the Wall Street Crash changed the economic base of the art market. As share values plummeted in the following months, so did the value of art. From the mid-1920s art had increasingly been seen as a better investment than stocks and shares, and even as late as September 1929 the *Evening Standard* art critic Roy Welenski was urging 'the collector of moderate means who wants oil paintings that are cheap now and likely to increase in value' to invest in young British artists.[96] The art market went rapidly into slump. With fewer buyers and increased competition from more established artists, Rowe was finding it increasingly difficult to get his paintings accepted by galleries that were themselves now struggling to stay viable. He was not helped by the fact that he was not fully confident in his own art. He was still experimenting with styles and subjects, still seeking that form of painting expression that was essentially *his*. This lack of confidence is illustrated by an incident that he later recounted:

> I remember visiting a gallery to submit my own work, but when I got there I heard the two directors discussing the work of another artist. One was saying to the other: 'There's nothing personal in the work, is there? He has no personal style. I don't think we can do anything with it'. I did not unwrap my work but simply left the gallery. I was convinced I would get the same treatment. 'Personal', at that time, almost always meant a new technical gimmick which the gallery owners could call original and so sell the work.[97]

Neither was he helped by his sensitivity about his working-class origins, in which he took a prickly satisfaction. His first serious relationship with a woman, an upper-class writer older than himself whom he does not name, had ended partly because she made fun of what he called his 'Cockney accent'.[98] Despite (or possibly because of) his working-class pride he did not have the confidence to

[95] *The Times*, 13 August 1929.
[96] Quoted in Andrew Stephenson, 'Strategies of Situation: British Modernism and the Slump c.1929-1934', *Oxford Art Journal* , 1991, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1991), p. 31.
[97] Cliff Rowe, 'Personal reasons for drawings and paintings on industrial subjects: particularly workers at machines', c. 1980, pp. 34-35. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[98] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.

promote himself in the London art milieu, unlike his friend Dunlop who was able to abandon his commercial work to live on his earnings from painting.[99]

In late 1930 the opportunity arose for Rowe to make his breakthrough. The Goupil Gallery included several of his paintings in its winter Salon. Among these were six night scenes of London locations lit by street lamps, which received praise from the critics. According to Rowe, Marriott of *The Times* devoted his whole column to an appreciation of his paintings,[100] while Frank Rutter at *The Sunday Times* wrote that 'Mr. Hooper Rowe shows a rich talent for design and a rich medley of colour in "Broadwell E.C." and "Night in Castle Street"'.[101] On the strength of these positive reviews the owner of the Goupil Gallery, Cicely Marchant, offered Rowe his own one-man show to take place in the Spring of 1931. This was to be Rowe's big chance, and unfortunately for him, he fluffed it. The Gallery was expecting more of the night scenes that had caused such a stir, but Rowe was now concentrating on still life paintings, and these he sent to the Goupil. An irate and disappointed Cicely Marchant confronted him in the street outside the Gallery, saying that she had told everyone to expect night scenes, and still life paintings were not what she wanted. Angry and humiliated, Rowe withdrew his artworks from the show.[102] This incident had a lasting effect on Rowe and it was one that he refers to on a number of occasions in his personal papers. He felt deeply hurt by what he saw as a rejection but also dismayed by the realisation of what he would have to do if he was to succeed in the London art market:

> To me there was no difference between night and day scenes as far as quality went, and this was confirmed by the critics. However, I could see the proprietor's point of view. It was a question of having a sales pitch and she had concluded that I should have seen that point. It clearly meant that if I were to sell then I must have a new angle that would either be or seem to be original and it clearly did not matter which. That decided me that there was no difference between selling painting and selling commercial art. Each was governed, when it came down to brass tacks, by the conditions of the marketplace. It seemed to me that of the two the commercial art was the more honest if more frankly a matter of what paid off.[103]

He decided that he would no longer try to get his work exhibited and instead to concentrate on his commercial work to earn a living, and paint in his spare time. He would rather compromise on what

[99] Dunlop, *Struggling with Paint,* p. 43.
[100] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[101] *The Sunday Times,* 21 December 1930.
[102] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[103] Rowe, 'New Visual Socialist Language', p. 4.

he had to do to live in order to be free to paint what he wanted.[104] Worse was to follow. At that time he was in a relationship with a young woman who worked as an usherette in a West End cinema. She was helping to support him financially until he could make a name for himself as an artist. After the Goupil incident Rowe told her that she would have to continue to support him. After a heated argument she came round to his one-room lodging when he was out and 'put her foot and scissors' through over 40 of his paintings, including those he had withdrawn from the Goupil exhibition.

> When I saw it, I looked for one that was right all through, the only one. It had not escaped. I couldn't get that one painting out of my head.[105]

What that one painting was is unknown but it seems to have preyed on Rowe's mind for many years to come. The destruction of the rest of the works serves to explain why so little of Rowe's work from the 1920s and early 1930s has survived.

Rowe's decision to focus on commercial work came precisely at a time when the effects of the Depression were beginning to have an impact on the commercial art world as well as the fine art market. There were now far fewer opportunities for freelance work as companies cut back on advertising expenditure or went out of business altogether. Not only that, as the sales of fine art fell, there was greatly increased competition from established artists who now entered the commercial art world, with artists such as Paul and John Nash, Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson and Edward Burra moving into book illustration, poster design and interior decoration.[106] In such circumstances Rowe found it difficult to earn anything approaching a living and suffered accordingly:

> The physical deprivation of lack of food was easy to bear compared to the humiliation of facing angry landladies, which included sudden moonlight flits to avoid such encounters, and the depression when every attempt to get work failed… The lowest point for me came when I found that I was no longer able to draw or paint for lack of materials. I simply could not afford the necessary paper, pens, brushes, canvases and paints, and was reduced to working with boot polish on discarded newspapers.[107]

It was when his morale had reached its lowest point that his luck changed or, as he put it: 'Fortune never turns up until she is sure that her victim is well past the utmost limits of despair and

[104] Rowe, 'New Visual Socialist Language', p. 5.
[105] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[106] Andrew Stephenson, 'Strategies of Situation', p. 34.
[107] Rowe, 'Exercise Book 1'.

impotence and has finally given up'.[108] A chance encounter in Covent Garden led Cliff Rowe to the Communists.

Meeting the Communists

Cliff Rowe's first encounter with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) marked a turning point in both his political and artistic life. Disillusioned by his limited success in the capitalist art world and deeply committed to his ideals of artistic integrity and personal responsibility, Rowe was drawn to the Party not through ideology alone but through a desire to reconcile his individualism with a broader social purpose. His experience with the Goupil Gallery had served to reinforce what he described as his 'extreme individualism':

> I literally believed that 'where there was the will there was always a way'. Everything depended on one's own brains and ability and in the last resort on the intensity of one's desire. Politicians were contemptible place seekers, trade unions substitutes for individual will, and every form of organised opinion and action a means of reducing everyone to a dull and lifeless uniformity.[109]

His lack of success in making his way in the art world was, in his eyes, a personal failure. He was not trying hard enough and was lacking the personal commitment needed to make his mark. It was at this time, probably in 1931 (Rowe does not give a date), when his morale was at its lowest, that he first met the CPGB. Rowe's account of this encounter, and subsequent developments, was given in interview in 1983 to Robert Radford who, together with Lynda Morris, was gathering material for a travelling exhibition celebrating the Artists International Association, of which Rowe was a founder member.[110] He expanded on this account in an unpublished manuscript written around 1985 entitled 'Approach to Realism', a partly autobiographical account of his views on art and politics. In this account (written with the benefit of over 50 years of hindsight), Rowe reveals the conflicting forces, never quite resolved, that were to shape his life as a politically engaged artist.

That first encounter was a matter of happenstance. While walking in Covent Garden, Rowe discovered a socialist bookshop and was intrigued by a poorly-designed poster promoting the unity of socialist theory and practice. Even though he had no knowledge of the ideas behind the poster, he created a better design which he presented to the shop owner. The owner, impressed, purchased it

[108] Rowe, 'Exercise Book 1'.
[109] Cliff Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', c. 1985, p. 15. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[110] Lynda Morris and Robert Radford, *The Story of the AIA, Artists International Association, 1933 – 1953*, (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), p. 8.

for 7/6.[111] The bookshop was the CPGB's 'Workers Bookshop' which occupied the ground floor of the Party's headquarters in King Street, and the 'owner' was Jack Cohen, organiser of the Young Communist League and a member of the CPGB executive committee with responsibility for Party publications.[112] He must have been impressed with Rowe's work because shortly after Rowe was visited by Pat Dooley, a left-wing Irish Republican who was a leading member of the CPGB. Dooley, a charismatic figure known for his fiery street-oratory, greatly impressed Rowe and became a life-long friend:

> I have always been grateful to Pat, whose enthusiasm and sincerity was so infectious… He was one of those remarkable characters, totally honest and frank, who can make instant friendships, and I took to him at once.[113]

At this time the CPGB did not go out of its way to recruit from what it saw as middle-class occupations so it is probable that it was Rowe's working-class background, as well as his evident skill as a designer, that persuaded the Party that it was worth the time of so senior a member as Dooley to cultivate him. Dooley took on the task of developing Rowe's political education and visited him several times. On one occasion he gave him a copy of the Communist Manifesto to read. In Rowe's words, 'the scales dropped from my eyes':

> Marx turned my capitalism individualism on its head by his explanation of the material origins of social history and organisation, which put economics at the very foundation of all development, a view borne out in practice by my own sheer experience of what lack of money inevitably meant, stifling all individuality let alone individual effort, in all but the most exceptional circumstances.[114]

More design work followed, including cover designs as well as posters. However, at this stage he was unwilling to commit himself totally by joining the Party, insisting that he would only work where he agreed with the content (a stipulation he was unlikely to have made to his other clients). He made it clear to Dooley that, though he was not opposed to the Party, he was not in favour of 'being tied by membership to any view'.[115] He still held on to his individualism, believing that the individual must ultimately decide where their loyalties lie, thinking and acting independently, and accepting full responsibility for the consequences of their belief.[116] Dooley was 'patience itself' though, according to

[111] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 16.
[112] 'Jack Cohen', TNA KV 2/1059, The National Archives, Kew, London.
[113] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 16.
[114] Rowe, 'Exercise Book 1'.
[115] Rowe, 'Approach to realism', p. 21.
[116] Rowe, 'Approach to realism', p. 21.

Rowe, he probably regarded his stance as 'naïve egotism'. However, he appreciated that art was central to Rowe's his life and gave meaning to his existence, and that any political commitment had to be consistent with this. Dooley understood that commitment could not be solely an intellectual exercise, it must involve the artist totally or his work would suffer.[117]

Notwithstanding his growing interest in Marxism, Rowe was still trying to succeed as an individual artist in the world of the capitalist art market. Despite his experience with the Goupil Gallery, he continued to exhibit where he could and was also presenting his art to audiences outside London through the travelling exhibitions of the 'Twenties Group'. This was an informal circle of young British artists supported by the gallerist Lucy Wertheim, a passionate supporter of modern British art, giving them exhibitions, patronage, and promotion at her London gallery.[118] At the same time, Rowe was now becoming increasingly dissatisfied with his commercial work. Whereas previously he had seen it merely as a means to earn a living so that he could continue to paint, he now saw it as 'supporting capitalist exploitation of the people by brainwashing them into buying goods that were rarely ever what they were cleverly purported to be'. He concluded that he had to take a more active part in the class struggle:

> I knew then that I had to get out of my room and among the people, and the first step in that action was to join the C.P. and rid myself of isolation. I would not give up my right and need to make my own decisions, but any differences could be resolved within the Party. I would no longer be the separated observer watching others in action while keeping my own feet out of the mud and blood of the struggle and believing myself the impartial observer because I was neutral. The neutrality was false. I was involved whether I liked it or not.[119]

His belief that 'differences could be resolved within the Party' was one which was to cause him difficulties in the years to come. However, he was still not wholly convinced and hesitated before joining the Party. Instead, he resolved that 'somehow, I would go to the Soviet Union and see for myself how the revolution worked out in practice'.[120]

It wasn't long before Rowe's connection with the Party came to the attention of the security services. An MI5 report of November 1931 noted that Jack Cohen, who was under Special Branch surveillance, was observed leaving the side door of 27 Endell Street carrying a 'print or sketch'. The only occupant of this address was 'an artist named Hooper Rowe', and it was possible that 'this artist

[117] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 21.
[118] Lucy Carrington Wertheim, *Adventure in Art*, (Eastbourne: Towner Gallery, 2022), pp. 90, 94-95.
[119] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 22.
[120] Rowe, Approach to Realism, p. 22.

is working for the CPGB'.[121] Before long a personal file on Cliff Rowe was opened by MI5. This file (P.F. 40831) has never been made public though it is referenced in other personal files released to the National Archives.

During this time Rowe met Misha Black (1910-1977), someone who became a close friend, later knighted for his work as an architect and industrial designer. He came from a wealthy Jewish family in Baku, then part of the Russian Empire, and although his formal training was somewhat scanty, he was developing a reputation as an innovative young designer in one of Britain's first design consultancies.[122] Like Rowe, he was close to the CPGB but not a member, as the Party only recruited from UK nationals.[123] Together they worked on the design of a CPGB pamphlet that is one of the few known examples of Rowe's work for the Party from this time. Titled *The Spirit of Invergordon*, it was an account written by Len Wincott of the 'Invergordon Mutiny', when in September 1931 2,000 sailors at the Invergordon naval base went on strike in protest at a 25% cut in their pay as part of the National Government's austerity measures. Wincott was one of the strike leaders who soon after joined the CPGB.[124] The design was unsigned but its joint authorship is confirmed by a letter written the following year from Rowe in Moscow to Misha Black and intercepted by MI5.[125] The drawing of the sailor ('a picture of a gaunt, Bolshevik bluejacket' according to an MI5 officer)[126] is very much in the style shown in Rowe's later work, suggesting that the lettering and the other graphic work was done by Black (Figure 14).

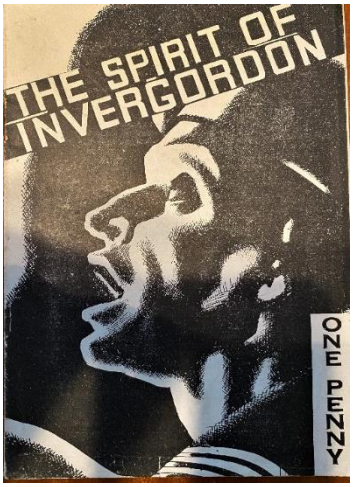


Figure 14: Cliff Rowe and Misha Black. *The Spirit of Invergordon,* 1931. Cover design.

[121] TNA KV 2/1059.
[122] University of Brighton Design Archives, https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/royaldesigners/2016/06/06/misha-black/ Accessed June 2024.
[123] John Lloyd, 'Peter Peri: 1899 – 1967', in Watkinson, *Fighting Spirits*, p.33.
[124] Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp. 68-69.
[125] 'Len Wincott', TNA KV 2/509. This is the only evidence connecting this widely-distributed pamphlet with Rowe and Black.
[126] TNA KV 2/509.

By now there had been further developments in Rowe's personal life. He had formed a relationship with May Tilney Miles, a medical doctor, and already married. It is not known if she was at this time a member of the CPGB but a reference in another MI5 file noted that in 1934 she was a trustee of the Marx Memorial Library in Clerkenwell, so it is likely that they met through political association.[127] In April 1932 she left her husband and moved in with Rowe, now living at 44 Old Gloucester Street in Bloomsbury, where she too became a person of interest to MI5, with her mail, along with Rowe's, being intercepted.[128] Her husband petitioned for divorce on the grounds of adultery, naming Rowe as co-respondent, and a summons to attend the Divorce Court was duly issued.[129] The two lovers did not appear, for by now they were both on their way to Russia. There is a sense of haste about the couple's departure, with Rowe applying to the Passport Office just days before the issue of the summons,[130] and friends organising an auction of his paintings and drawings at his flat to raise money for the fare.[131] In all his writings Rowe makes only one brief, and somewhat impersonal, reference to his companion:

> I was greatly helped by Dr. May Miles who accompanied me on this voyage of discovery. She stayed about six months and then returned to England.[132]

The couple made the journey as part of a seven-day tourist trip arranged by the 'Society for Cultural Relations Between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR' (SCR for short), founded by British intellectuals sympathetic to the Soviet Union. and linked with the Russian-based VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad).[133] From 1931 onwards it provided organised tours of the USSR. Rowe planned to forego the arranged sightseeing and instead use the time available to find work in Russia.[134] It is probable that May Miles had the same intention, and as a medical doctor she would have had little difficulty in obtaining employment. In all, the evidence suggests that for both of them it was not a tourist trip, but an emigration to start of a new life in the USSR. This emigration

[127] 'Emile Burns', TNA KV 2/1760.
[128] 'Humphrey Slater', TNA KV 2/2325.
[129] Divorce Court File 3693. *John Miles v. May Tilney Miles, with Hooper Rowe as co-respondent. Husband's petition for divorce.* The National Archives (Kew), J 77/3039/3693.
[130] TNA KV 2/2325 . MI5 seems to have been aware of Rowe's intentions. Particulars of his application were requested of the Passport Office on 18 May, the results later removed to Rowe's personal file.
[131] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 24.
[132] Rowe, 'Exercise Book 1'.
[133] Emily Lygo, 'Promoting Soviet Culture in Britain: the History of the Society for Cultural Relations Between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR, 1924-1945'. *The Modern Language Review* 108, no.2 (2013): pp. 571-96.
[134] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 24.

marked the next decisive step in Rowe's transformation, offering him the opportunity to witness at first hand the ideals and realities of the socialist society he sought to serve.

CHAPTER 2 ROWE'S RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE

Introduction

This chapter examines Cliff Rowe's time in the Soviet Union in 1932–33, a formative period in his artistic and political development. Arriving in Moscow full of expectation, he entered a city of contradictions: a showcase for revolutionary ambition and cultural innovation, yet also marked by hardship, repression, and disillusionment. The avant-garde vision that had animated early Soviet art was being rapidly displaced by the state-imposed doctrine of Socialist Realism. Constructivism, once the vanguard of revolutionary culture, was being denounced as 'formalist' and incompatible with the needs of the proletariat. Rowe, who admired the movement's fusion of abstraction, design, and political purpose, viewed this suppression with dismay. In line with the new doctrine, he painted a major canvas for a celebratory Red Army art exhibition, though he was unhappy with the aesthetic compromises he had to make to produce it.

He also became aware of the harsher aspects of Soviet life: the pervasive shortages, the hardships endured by ordinary citizens, the grinding bureaucracy, the oppressive presence of the GPU, and the cult of Stalin that increasingly overshadowed public life. His journeys beyond Moscow - to Ukraine during the early months of the famine, and later to Georgia and the Black Sea coast - added further depth to his impressions. The peasants, workers, and idlers he observed fascinated and unsettled him in equal measure, his journal entries oscillating between criticism, admiration, and grudging respect. These experiences did not only inform his artistic output but also reinforced his commitment to revolutionary politics. In Moscow he met with cultural officials and fellow artists from around the world, discussing ways of promoting anti-fascist and proletarian art internationally. On his return to London, he played a key role in founding the Artists' International, a Comintern-aligned cultural organisation that sought to mobilise artists in the struggle against war and fascism.

Arriving in Moscow

Cliff Rowe and May Miles arrived in Moscow in late May or early June 1932, having journeyed from the Port of London via Hamburg and Leningrad. Largely due to the Great Depression which had engulfed most of the capitalist world, the USSR was regarded as a desirable destination for thousands of foreign workers seeking employment and escape from destitution. The rapid industrialisation engendered by the Five-Year Plan created opportunities, particularly for skilled workers, in what was seen as the only major country where the economy was expanding. It is estimated that by the time of Rowe's arrival over 42,000 foreigners, mostly from Germany and the

United States, were working in Moscow and the new expanding industrial centres.[135] This influx of foreigners had added to the demands on housing and services in the capital where the population had increased by over half since 1926 and now stood at over three and a half million.[136]

Utilities, transport, and other services struggled to cope with this influx, but the biggest impact was on housing. Overcrowding was a major problem for the Moscow authorities, with foreigners competing with Soviet citizens for what accommodation was available. In 1932 the designated living space per capita was 9.5 square metres but by 1935 this had fallen to 5.5 square metres.[137] The Soviet government sought in 1932 to contain the population expansion in Moscow and other cities by introducing a limited number of internal passports for residents. Those who did not qualify for a passport had no access to rations and could be ejected from the city.[138] Just before Rowe and May Miles arrived the authorities sought to limit the population further by requiring all foreign visitors to have return tickets and barring them from seeking employment,[139] as Rowe was to discover when he went seeking work:

> At the labour exchange I was told that an edict had come through. No more jobs in Moscow. People were living five to a room and thousands more coming in. Australians, Americans, Germans and others were trying for jobs, with unemployment in their own countries… I went up to a very tall Russian with a huge black moustache and an oak walking stick. I asked him how to get by the edict. He looked down and said: 'There is no way past the edict. Our villages desperately need technicians but life is hard in them and everyone wants to be in Moscow'. I kept on looking at him. He looked at me. Then a very slight smile came into his eyes. 'Get a room', he said, and walked off. [140]

Rowe's 'tall Russian', as he found out later, was Mikhail Borodin, a renowned Bolshevik who at one time was the Comintern's chief agent in China. Now out of favour, Borodin had been demoted to heading a section of the Commissariat for Labour which dealt with foreign workers, which was why he was present at the labour exchange. [141] Rowe followed his advice but getting a room in Moscow was by no means easy. Such was the state of overcrowding in the city that the best that could be

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[135] Andrea Graziosi, 'Foreign Workers in Soviet Russia, 1920-40: Their Experience and Their Legacy, *International Labor and Working-Class History* 33 (1988), p. 40.
[136] Nobuo Shimotomai, *Moscow Under Stalinist Rule, 1931-34* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), p. 7.
[137] Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 67.
[138] Studer, *Cominternians*, pp. 67-68.
[139] Tim Tzouliadis, *The Forsaken. From the Great Depression to the Gulags: Hope and Betrayal in Stalin's Russia* (London: Abacus, 2008*),* p. 14.
[140] Cliff Rowe, draft letter to Jane Connard.
[141] Dan N. Jacobs, *Borodin: Stalin's Man in China*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 315.

hoped for was to get a part of a room occupied by someone else.[142] Somehow, though, Rowe managed to find a whole room in the short time he had available. It is possible that this was because he was with May Miles who, as a qualified doctor in an area of short supply, would have been given preferential treatment. Having overcome the accommodation challenge, Rowe could now concentrate on finding employment.

Working in Moscow

Rowe's next port of call was VOKS - *Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi sviazi s zagranitsei* **-** the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad, which had its Moscow office on Trubnikovsky Street. The visit on 15 June is recorded in the VOKS daybook, which also notes Rowe's membership of the SCR:

> No.7 Rowe – England. Artist. Member of Cultural Contacts` Society. Wants to be employed in USSR. Had a talk with Comrade Kravchenko. [We] sent him to IZOGIZ to Malkin and to Ginzburg, who is an architect. [143]

Alexey Kravchenko (1889-1940), was an artist and designer who had organised exhibitions of Soviet art abroad on behalf of VOKS, and was on the board of the newly-formed Moscow Region of Soviet Artists (MOSSKh).[144] IZOGIZ (*Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo)* was the State Fine Art Publishing House and Boris Malkin (1891-1938) its director.[145] The architect Moisei Ginzburg was a Constructivist and best-known for his designs for the Narkomfin Communal House, built in Moscow in 1930.[146] This is the first indication of Rowe's contact with Russian Constructivism, the radical art movement that flowered in the years following the October Revolution and was to have a profound influence on his approach to art and design.

Despite these promising contacts there was no immediate employment for Rowe, and his time on his visitor's visa was running out. However, as with the chance encounter that first brought him to the CPGB, fate came to the rescue. On his last day, he took a chance and visited a publishing house near Red Square. To his surprise, the manager recognized his work from covers he had illustrated for the CPGB and offered him a job as a graphic designer for the English language publications. Rowe

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[142] Mary M. Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 81.

[143] GARF *(Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* – The State Archive of the Russian Federation*),* 'VOKS daybook', F. 5283. Op. 8. D. 140. L. 7.

[144] Art Investment.RU, www.artinvestment.ru-auctions-biography. Accessed June 2018.

[145] Boris Malkin, 1891- 1938, https://prabook.com/. Accessed June 2018. Malkin was a former Left Social Revolutionary who joined the Bolsheviks in 1917, becoming one of the first editors of Izvestia.

[146] Richard Pare, *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915-193*5 (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2011), pp. 168-173.

wondered whether this encounter was coincidence, fate, or simply reality meeting his need, and he stayed in the job for eighteen months.[147] Rowe's new employer was the *Izdatel'skoe tovarishchestvo inostrannykh rabochikh v Soyuze SSR,* the 'Co-Operative Publishing House of Foreign Workers in the USSR'. It had been established in March 1931 with the remit to provide foreign workers and students in the Soviet Union with Marxist-Leninist educational and political literature.[148]

Although nominally under the jurisdiction of the People's Commissariat of Education, the *Tovarishchestvo* (as it was commonly known) operated as the publishing arm of the Comintern (the Communist International whose headquarters was in Moscow),[149] and large numbers of its books and pamphlets were sent for distribution abroad. Rowe's route into working for the *Tovarishchestvo* was by no means unusual. Violet Lansbury, the daughter of the British Labour politician George Lansbury, held a senior position at the publishing house and wrote in her memoirs that many of the foreigners working there had originally come to Moscow as tourists and simply decided to stay on.[150] Given that the publishing house was such a well-known destination for foreign hopefuls, Rowe's encounter with it may not have been entirely a matter of happenstance, and it was more likely that he was directed there.

The *Tovarishchestvo* was located just off Red Square in a former convent in a part of the old city known as *Kitaigorod* or 'Chinatown'. Rowe has written little about his time there but a strong sense of what it was like is provided by others who worked in the English language section. Edmund Stevens, a young American radical who was employed as an editor in 1934 described his first impressions of offices and hallways that 'felt and smelt as if they had never been properly cleaned and aired since the revolution', and of body odour and tobacco smoke that seemed to blend with the lingering faint traces of incense from its nunnery days.[151]

He noted the prevalence of Brooklyn accents among the English-speaking staff, a reflection of the fact that many were American second-generation Russian and Polish Jews who had returned to build the new socialist society in their ancestral homeland. One such was Mary Leder, whose parents had returned to Russia in 1931. She took up a post in 1934 and has provided one of the most detailed accounts of life at the *Tovarishchestvo*. For her it was a lively, interesting place, composed largely of

[147] Cliff Rowe, Exercise Book No. 1, c.1980. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[148] GARF, Resolution on the establishment of 'publishing association of foreign workers in the USSR' F. 9590.Op.1d.1.
[149] Leder, *My Life*, p. 82.
[150] Violet Lansbury, *An Englishwoman in the USSR*, (Glasgow: The University Press, 1940), p. 237.
[151] Quoted in Cheryl Heckler, *Accidental Journalist: The Adventures of Edmund Stevens 1934-1945*, (Colombia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 36.

idealistic young people from many different cultures and countries who shared the same fervent belief in socialism and the importance of their work.[152] At the same time, the work culture she experienced could be described, in modern parlance, as 'toxic'. It was strictly hierarchical, with the top tier composed exclusively of members of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) whose role was to provide political guidance to the lower echelons. Bullying was rife, disguised as 'political criticism', and sexual harassment by senior managers was the norm.[153] Two English-born brothers, Joe and Bram Freiberg, described by Leder as 'the prima donnas' of the English section, belonged to the elite group. As members of the Social Democratic Federation in Britain they had been active in radical politics in London in the early part of the century. After the October Revolution they moved to Moscow and were involved in the founding of the Comintern.[154] Leder described them as 'tyrannical, demanding, and impatient, especially Bram, who was better educated than his older brother and more openly arrogant'.[155]

However, Rowe's experiences of the *Tovarishchestvo* were more positive, writing later that he received 'nothing but kindness and fairness where I worked'.[156] His impression of Bram Freiberg was very different to Leder's, noting that 'he was particularly generous and kind to me and did much to further my political education by leading classes in Marxist Leninism in his spare time'.[157] This, of course, may be a gendered response.

During his time at the *Tovarishchestvo* Rowe produced a wide variety of designs for pamphlets and books. His work was influenced by the Constructivist approach to design with its imaginative use of dual colours, its striking employment of photomontage and its bold integration of lettering into the overall design. He believed that these techniques were far in advance of anything he had seen in Britain, especially in children's book illustration. Artists and architects such as Tatlin, El Lissitzky, Popova, Malinovsky, and Mayakovsky had pioneered a radical break from naturalism, embracing asymmetry, fragmented and reassembled images, symbolism, formalist design, and dynamic typography. Their work emphasized movement and change, creating a new form of realism so

[152] Leder, *My Life*, p. 94.
[153] Leder, *My Life*, p. 85.
[154] Ian Patterson, 'The Translation of Soviet Literature; John Rodker and PresLit', Rebecca Beasley and Philip Ross Bullock, eds. *Russia in Britain 1880-1940: From Melodrama to Modernism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 191.
[155] Patterson, 'Translation of Soviet Literature', p. 85.
[156] Cliff Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 25.
[157] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.

distinct from naturalism that, according to Rowe, the Soviet authorities failed to recognize it as realism at all.[158]

However, by the time Rowe arrived in Russia the Constructivist influence on Soviet art had waned and was giving way to the new orthodoxy of Socialist Realism. Despite this, in poster design and in the *Tovarishchestvo*, the Constructivist design ethos managed to survive and even thrive. Rowe believed this was largely because the simplification of form and the use of a limited but bold colour palette saved considerably on the costs of printing and, moreover, made for more effective propaganda.[159] A major influence on his own approach was the work of Gustav Klutsis, with his pioneering use of photomontage in poster design (Figure 15), where the manipulation of the image combined with a political slogan and the bold use of colour 'can express the required theme, force the photo, the slogan, and the colours to serve the purpose of the class struggle, force the photo to tell a story, to agitate, to explain'.[160] It is not known if Klutsis produced designs for the *Tovarishchestvo* but some of the unsigned artwork for pamphlet covers suggest he did (Figure 16).

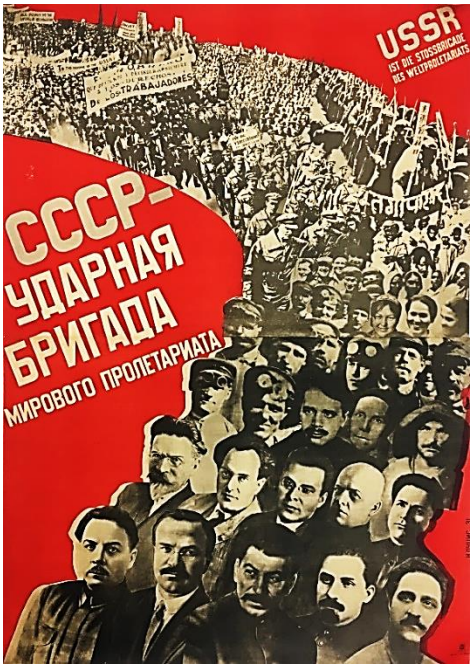

Figure 15: Gustav Klutsis, *The USSR is the Shockworkers' Brigade of the World Proletariat,* 1931. Poster,

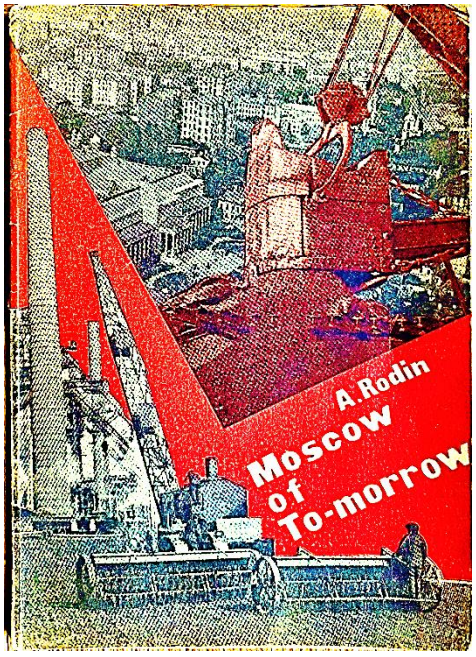

Figure 16: Gustav Klutsis (?). *Moscow of tomorrow,* 1932. Cover design.

[158] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 27.
[159] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 27.
[160] Gustav Klutsis, quoted in Maria Gough, 'Back in the USSR: John Heartfield, Gustav Klucis, and the Medium of Soviet Propaganda', *New German Critique*, Summer, 2009, No.107, p. 138.

Klutsis' influence can be seen In Rowe's cover design for the pamphlet with the somewhat unheroic title of *The First Business Accounting Brigade* (Figure 17), where Rowe creates both an intimacy and a dynamism with his use of the flat colour industrial scene background, overlapping photographs and the diagonal typography so typical of Klutsis. The same influence is also apparent in his cover for *The 9th Congress of Trade Unions* (Figure 18) where the varied typography that dominates alongside the photograph.

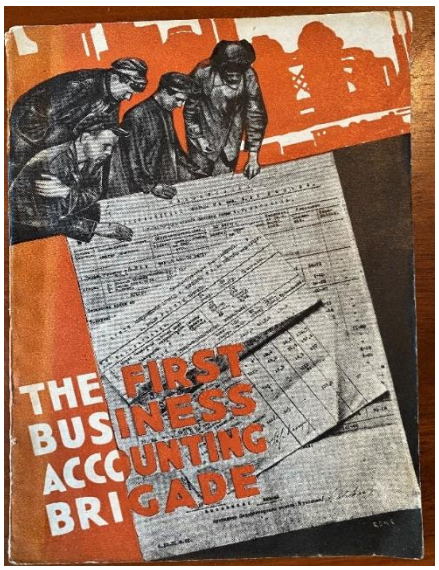

Figure 17: Cliff Rowe. *The First Business Accounting Brigade,* 1933. Cover design.

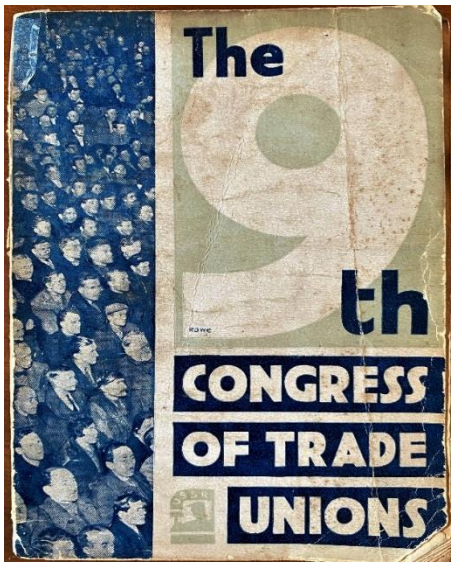

Figure 18: Cliff Rowe. *The 9th Congress of Trade Unions,* 1933. Cover design.

Rowe did not simply follow the Klutsis model but also embraced other Constructivist influences. His cover for *Tales of the Soviet Fleet* (Figure 19) references the work of Moishe Ginzburg (whom he had met shortly after his arrival) and Alexander Rodchenko. His image of the superstructure of a Soviet warship is inspired by the balcony design for Ginzburg's Narkomfin building combined with the mast and spars suggested by Rodchenko's abstract three-dimensional figures.[161] His most striking image, perhaps, is his design for the cover of *Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism* (Figure 20). Here he de-constructs the hammer-and-sickle and re-casts the sickle as a question mark in what he described as 'the fragmentation and re-assembling of images', a motif typical of Constructivism.[162]

[161] Magdalena Dabrowski, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 30–40.
[162] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 27.

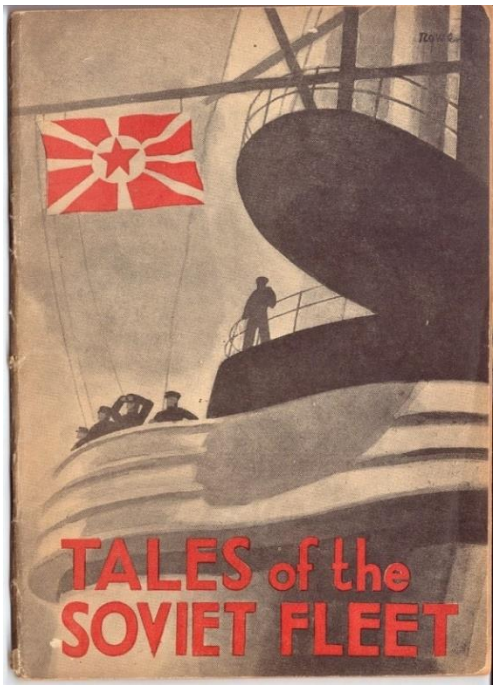

Figure 19: Cliff Rowe. *Tales of the Soviet Fleet,* 1933. Cover design.

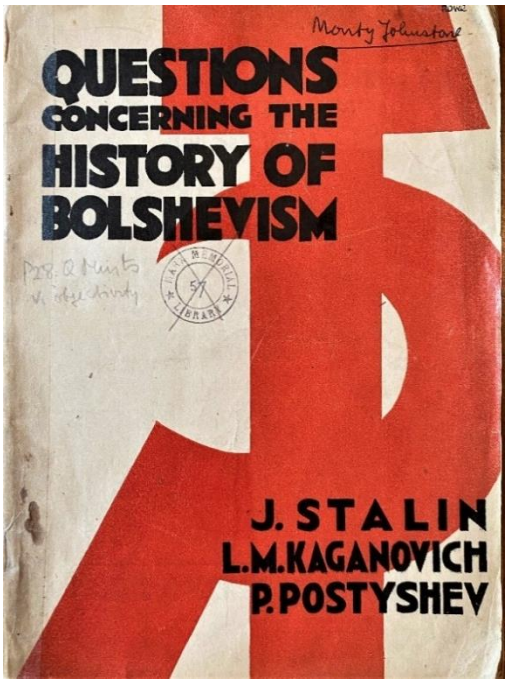

Figure 20: Cliff Rowe. *Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism,* 1933. Cover design.

Rowe does not give any information as to remuneration for his work but some indication can be gained from the experiences of Jack Chen, a Chinese-Trinidadian artist working in Moscow as a freelance cartoonist and designer at the same time as Rowe:

> I earned about 1,000 roubles a month. I received from 75 to 100 roubles for a cartoon or illustration; 300 roubles for a book jacket; 400-500 roubles for a poster.[163]

Chen felt he lived comfortably on this amount, and indeed Rowe does not indicate anywhere that he suffered from lack of money. It was shortage of goods to spend it on that was the problem.

In his personal papers, and in interviews, Rowe focuses on his role in the *Tovarishchestvo* when discussing his working life in Moscow but does not state that this was his only employment. He makes no mention of any work resulting from his meeting with Boris Malkin at IZOGIZ in June 1932 but recent research for an exhibition of British poster art at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow suggests that Rowe also worked in the art propaganda department of IZOGIZ, alongside Soviet poster artists'.[164] It is probable that Rowe, like many artists working in Moscow, had a number of roles. Working for IZOGIZ would have brought him into direct contact with such notable Soviet

[163] Jack Chen *Soviet Art and Artists*, (The Pilot Press, London, 1944), p. 36.
[164] Irina Nikiforova, *Advertising as Art: British Posters of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries,* (Moscow: The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, 2020), pp. 195-197.

poster artists as Gustav Klutsis, Dmitri Moor and Nikolai Dolgorukov, all of whom worked for IZOGIZ.[165] In this role Rowe would have been subject to more rigorous political control than he experienced at the publishing house. Such was the importance that the Soviet leadership attached to poster propaganda that in 1931 the Central Committee of the CPSU handed control of all such work to IZOGIZ, over which the Central Committee assumed direct oversight. It was to ensure that the quality of design and production was maintained, and that the correct political line was applied. Boris Malkin, who had interviewed Rowe when he first arrived in Moscow, was director of IZOGIZ and was in effect the employer of all Soviet poster propaganda artists.[166] The Pushkin research also suggests that Rowe's IZOGIZ experience and skills later helped him develop the Artists' International into 'a real Soviet agitprop' after he helped found the organisation on his return to London.[167]

One of the difficulties in confirming Rowe's participation in IZOGIZ is that no works of his have come to light, unlike for the publishing house where he signed all his designs. Generally, in poster production at IZOGIZ the names of individual artists, and the editors who had approved their designs, were printed at the bottom of each finished poster.[168] However, there was an exception to this practice. One group operated as a collective within IZOGIZ – the State Free Artists' Studios (*Khudozhestvenye Masterskie*), Kh.M for short. They operated a team approach to poster design and production where collective rather than individual authorship was the norm, with their work only identified by the Cyrillic 'XM' mark.[169] This was a mode of working that may well have appealed to Rowe, and it is possible that his contributions can be found among the many works attributed to this group.

Another significant group of which Rowe was a member was MOSSKh (*Moskovskii Soyuz Sovietskikh Khudozhnikov*), the Moscow branch of the Union of Soviet Artists, which had a section for graphic designers. Anyone who wished to engage in paid employment in art and design was required to join, and applicants were strictly vetted according to their ideological stance.[170] One has to assume that Rowe passed this test. Formed by the Central Committee's decree 'On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organisations' in April 1932, the Union of Soviet Artists was intended to unite the various artists' groups in the USSR. These often bitterly opposed and quarrelsome organisations,

[165] Alla Rosenfeld, *In the Service of the State: Nikolai Dolgorukov and the Art of Persuasion,* (New York: Merrill C. Berman Collection, 2020), p. 7.
[166] Gough, 'Back in the USSR', p. 158.
[167] Nikiforova, *Advertising as Art*, p. 196.
[168] Anita Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929–1953*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), p. 110.
[169] Poster Plakat*. Posters from the Soviet Union and its Satellite Nations,* https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/artists/artist-studios-kh-m. Accessed February 2023.
[170] Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art under Stalin*, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991), p. 87.

ranging from the Constructivists' Oktyobr group to the traditionalist Society of Easel Painters (OST) and encompassing the Association of Artists of the Revolution (AKhR), the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), the Revolutionary Association of Proletarian Artists (RAPKh), each claiming to be the true representative of revolutionary art.[171] The amalgamation of these groups did not immediately end the bitter feuding, and MOSSKh in its early days provided an ideal platform for their differences to be fought out in public. The artist Jack Chen gives a flavour of the often brutal debates between the contending factions:

> Reputations were torn to tatters or vindicated with equal passion. The 'Left' denounced the 'Photo-naturalists' as passive observers of life, with as much creative vision as an inanimate photo-lens. The 'Naturalists' replied with jeers about the lack of perception of the 'Left', the few remaining Expressionists, the Cezannists, and the Formalists. They mocked at the absurdities perpetrated by those 'realists' whose ideology outstripped their knowledge of anatomy. These were, then, the two extreme wings of the Soviet art world.[172]

Whether Rowe took part in these debates, or even witnessed them, is unknown. However, the issues raised as to what constitutes socialist art (and what does not) were ones that he was to grapple with during the rest of his life. It was at this time that the term 'Socialist Realism' began to gain currency in artistic circles. It was first coined by Ivan Gronsky, the editor of *Izvestia,* in an article in the *Literary Gazette* in May 1932:

> The masses demand of an artist honesty, truthfulness, and a revolutionary socialist realism in the representation of the proletarian revolution.[173]

By 1933, largely through the influence of MOSSKh, it became widely accepted in the Soviet art community that embracing 'revolutionary socialist realism' was essential for anyone seeking to advance their careers or even to gain a foothold as an artist, although it did not become prescribed as official orthodoxy in art and literature until 1934. Rowe later wrote approvingly of how individual workers showing talent in art were sponsored by their factory to train as professionals, in contrast to capitalist countries where scholarships were competitive and private means were necessary for those aspiring to an art education. However:

> I was disturbed by the fact that the tenets of Socialist Realism were so widespread and insidious that any artist or amateur producing work that that did not accord with the

[171] Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks. Volume 2: Authority and Revolution 1924-1932,* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), pp. 169-181.
[172] Jack Chen, *Soviet Art and Artists*, pp. 53-54.
[173] Quoted in Cullerne Bown, *Art under Stalin*, p. 89.

> parameters of this outlook would stand little chance of getting the opportunity of further training or of sponsorship.[174]

In addition to his work as an artist, Rowe was also employed part-time as an art teacher at the Anglo-American School in Moscow. This had been established to cater for the children of Anglophone parents who had come to work in Moscow. Situated on Great Vysovskii Street, by November 1932 it had 125 pupils, most of them American, as were the majority of the teachers.[175] One of those teachers was Anna Meblin, born in Belorussia in 1903 and whose Jewish family had emigrated to the US before the Great War.[176] She trained as a teacher in the US and, like Rowe, came to Russia in late 1932 on a seven-day tourist visa, curious to see the land of her birth. She obtained a post as an English teacher at the Anglo-American School.[177] There she met Cliff Rowe:

> He was working in a publishing house, doing illustrations and book jackets, and taught art at the school part time. I was romantic about artists and la vie boheme and found him very attractive. Although I had other suitors I had always sought romance and love. I did fall deeply in love and he seemed to respond.[178]

Rowe did indeed respond, but not in the romantic way that Anna desired. It was now early 1933 and May Miles had left for London. He concluded that to build a new life in the Soviet Union, he needed to achieve the stability of marriage and to start a family. He resolved to marry the first woman he met whom he liked and respected, irrespective of physical attraction. It was not the basis for a happy and stable relationship.[179] Rowe and Anna married on 12 May 1933.

Living in Moscow

Interviewed in 1982 about his time in Russia, Rowe observed that the country was 'in a hell of a state', with 'shortages of just about everything'.[180] However, having previously experienced material deprivation in London, he was not overly troubled by the severe shortages in the Soviet Union at the time. Paradoxically, he found them reassuring. Unlike in capitalist countries, where poverty felt harsher because of the stark contrast between rich and poor, in the USSR everyone shared similar conditions. Even the top officials lived no better than an average small-business owner in England.[181]

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[174] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[175] Tzouliadis, *The Foresaken*, pp. 16-18.
[176] 'Anna L Rowe'. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 August 1999. Obituaries.
[177] Letter, Anna Rowe (Meblin) to Jack Rowe, 1985. Anna retained Rowe's surname after their divorce in 1935. Copy of the letter kindly provided by Jack Rowe.
[178] Anna Rowe to Jack Rowe.
[179] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[180] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 8
[181] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.

In reality, he was better off than many Muscovites. He was able to eat in the publishing house's own canteen, and as a foreigner he had access to better rations through the *insnab* 'foreign provisions' shops. In addition, he would have been able to obtain scarce goods through the *torgsin* shops in exchange for foreign currency.[182]

Like many other foreign visitors at the time, Rowe believed that the deprivation he witnessed was a passing phenomenon, and that the planned socialist system of production would produce surpluses that would lead to a general improvement in standards of living.

> One felt that everything in the future was in the hands of everyone and that nobody could gain over anyone else. This was not a question of dull conformity masquerading as equality but the practise of the idea of 'From everyone according to his ability to everyone according to his need'.[183]

Yet despite his embrace of Marxism, he still found it difficult to reconcile what he saw around him with his still deep-rooted individualism. Adopting a completely opposite conviction was not just a matter of mental adjustment. Living in a socialist country on the same terms as its people clashed with his every ingrained habit and acquired behaviour, even though he was mentally ready and willing to change.[184]

The aspect of life in Soviet Russia that disturbed Rowe most was the burgeoning Stalin personality cult, which in 1932 was fast taking hold in the public sphere:

> Everywhere one went in cinemas, restaurants, railway stations, in all workplaces, in all leisure functions and places, and in millions of homes, one was confronted with political portraits or plaster busts of Marx, Lenin and Stalin, and by far the greater number of Stalin.[185]

He was troubled that artists were being mobilised to aid in the promotion of the cult so that at times their main occupation, particularly in Moscow, was painting banners and portraits of Stalin and other Party leaders for public display. Of this he had first-hand experience. As a member of an IZOGIZ *isobrigade (*art brigade) he participated in the preparation and design for the celebrations of the 15th anniversary of the October Revolution.[186] He wrote later of this display of the Soviet leaders:

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[182] Studer, *Transnational World of the Cominternians*, pp. 66-69.
[183] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[184] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[185] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[186] Nikiforova, *Advertising as Art*, p. 197.

> Their gigantic portraits were everywhere in the streets, the offices, the factories, the farms, and even in the homes. Not only in photographs and banners but in sculpted heads, and all aesthetically bad.[187]

Rowe asked a 'very intelligent young Russian' whether this was necessary. He was told 'with that patient kindness Party members were expected to adopt' that it was necessary because Russia's largely peasant population preferred a personal, father-figure symbol of power over impersonal institutions. Just as they once appealed to the Tsar as 'little Father,' Stalin became the new 'little Father' to inspire confidence in the new Socialist regime — much like Britain's own attachment to its monarchy.[188] Although Rowe felt he had to accept what he termed 'the logic' of this explanation, he was disturbed by its implications. It seemed to him to contradict the basic idea of the primacy of the 'collective will' and rather to assert the will of the few over the collective. But he put this down to 'the general dislike of the British for demonstrative idolisation of anyone'.[189] Rowe believed the idolisation of Stalin was imposed by the Party and state, not demanded by the people as his young Russian friend had claimed. However, he was also aware that openly questioning the idolisation of Stalin was risky, as it made one's loyalty and motives suspect.[190]

Like many foreigners in Moscow, Rowe was aware of the OGPU (abbreviated to GPU) [191] and its activities in suppressing 'suspect' ideas or motives. By 1932, repression had eased somewhat, and some believed the terror was ending, especially after its head, Genrikh Yagoda, was demoted. But early 1933 brought renewed mass repression. The trial of six British Metro engineers for alleged sabotage, reported by *Western Daily Mail* journalist Gareth Jones, marked the return of large-scale terror. Jones reported that under now-promoted Yagoda, the GPU intensified its crackdown, targeting all forms of opposition: Party members (many of whom were shot), the intelligentsia, peasants resisting collectivization, and nationalists in Ukraine, Georgia, and Central Asia. The GPU's power grew as a small clique around Stalin consolidated control of the party, silencing dissent even though many privately questioned the success of the Five-Year Plan.[192] Rowe wrote later that he had often been asked how much he knew about these events. His reply was equivocal, that he 'became

[187] Cliff Rowe, 'Personal reasons for drawings and paintings on industrial subjects: particularly workers at machines', c.1980, p. 6. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[188] Rowe, 'Personal Reasons', p. 6.
[189] Rowe, 'Personal Reasons', p. 7.
[190] Rowe, 'Personal Reasons', p. 7.
[191] *Ob'edinyonnoye gosudarstvennoye politicheskoye upravlenie* (United State Political Directorate).
[192] Gareth Jones, 'O.G.P.U.'s Reign of Terror', *Western Daily Mail*, 5 April 1933, https://www.garethjones.org/soviet_articles/reign_of_terror.htm Accessed February 2016.

aware later that many bad things were happening, but all I can say is that I never personally witnessed any of them'.[193]

Rowe's equivocal response reflects the psychological and ideological conflict faced by many Western Communists in the Soviet Union at that time. Confronted with evidence of repression and hardship, he, like others, employed what Arthur Koestler, who also travelled in Russia in 1932, called a mental 'sorting machine', rationalising abuses as the 'heritage of the past' while seeing progress as the 'seeds of the future'. [194] Fully acknowledging the 'bad things' would have meant Rowe questioning not only the Soviet regime but also his own deeply held convictions and political identity. His claim that he never personally witnessed atrocities gave him a kind of moral distance, a way to suspend judgment, suppress doubt, and continue believing in the broader socialist ideal despite the disturbing realities around him.

The Red Army Commission

In November 1932 Rowe was invited to meet the secretary of MOSSKh at the State Tretyakov Gallery to discuss a possible commission for an exhibition the following year to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Red Army. The exhibition, which was to include works from all the major Soviet artists approved by MOSSKh, would also have an international section featuring foreign artists, many of them living in the USSR, and Rowe was invited to represent Britain. The secretary, described by Rowe as 'a kindly woman', took him on a tour of the gallery to view the permanent exhibits, among which was Isaac Brodsky's 1928 painting *Speech by Lenin at a rally of workers,* depicting Lenin addressing a rally outside the Putilov works in May 1917. This huge canvas, painted in Brodsky's photo-naturalist style, clearly had pride of place at the Tretyakov. Though Rowe could admire the skill of the artist, this was a form of art which he despised, a throw-back, as he saw it, to the Victorian and Edwardian naturalist styles he had rejected while a student:

> She was clearly very proud of one painting. It showed Lenin addressing a crowd of workers from a street rostrum and had all the heroism and realism socialists associate with his name. In style it was extraordinarily photographic and tremendously competent and deserves its niche in the records of Lenin's activities. Though I admired it I could not like it and I must have conveyed my feelings to the Secretary. When I showed an interest in a more modern work she said a little bitterly: 'You foreigners always like only modern work'.[195]

[193] Rowe, Exercise Book 1. He made a similar response to me when I discussed this with him in 1980.
[194] Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing. The Second Volume of an Autobiography: 1932*-44, (London: Penguin Random House, 2019), p. 53.
[195] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.

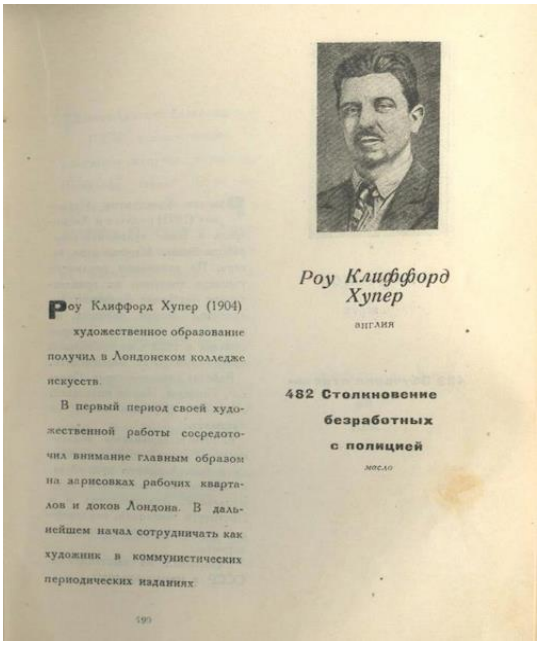
Actually, Rowe was unimpressed by the Russian 'modern work' on display, deeming it to be not really modern at all. However, by his lukewarm appreciation of the Brodsky painting he believed that he had failed some sort of test, that he had, as he put it, 'queered his pitch'. Despite her disappointment in Rowe, the secretary agreed to grant him the commission and signed the precious permit for obtaining art materials.[196]

The exhibition '15 Years of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army' was the major art event of 1933. Among the foreign contributors, reported by the art journal *Sovetskoe Iskusstv*o , were Franz Emsen from Germany, Bela Uitz and L. Griffel from Hungary, Helios Gomez from Spain, Erich Griffel from Austria, Hugo Gellert and Fred Ellis from the USA, Peter Alma from Holland, Takea Fuzhno from Japan, and representing Great Britain, 'Klifford' Rowe.[197]

The official catalogue gave a brief biography of Rowe (and an unflattering picture), stressing his paintings of London street and industrial scenes and his Communist connection (Figure 21):

> *Row Clifford Hooper* (1904) received his art education at the London College of Arts.
>
> In the early period of his artistic work, he focused mainly on drawings of workers' neighbourhoods and docks in London. Later he began working as an artist for communist periodicals.

His entry (catalogue number 482), titled 'Clash of the Unemployed with the Police', was puzzlingly listed as a linocut.[198]


Роу Клиффорд Хупер (1904) художественное образование получил в Лондонском колледже искусств.

В первый период своей художественной работы сосредоточил внимание главным образом на зарисовках рабочих кварталов и доков Лондона. В дальнейшем начал сотрудничать как художник в коммунистических периодических изданиях

Роу Клиффорд Хупер
англия

482 Столкновение безработных с полицией
масло

Figure 21: Cliff Rowe's entry in the official catalogue of the Red Army 15th anniversary exhibition, 1933.

The theme for the international section was to be 'opposition to war and fascism'. A meeting between senior Red Army officers and the foreign artists was held to discuss their ideas for their contributions to the exhibition. Rowe had decided that he would take as his subject the recent hunger marches in Britain as reported in the CPGB newspaper, the *Daily Worker*. Over a violent October weekend in 1932 there had been a series of clashes between the marchers, organized by

[196] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[197] GARF, 'Seiichi poloten' [*Thousands of Canvases*], *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* [*Soviet Art*], 21 December 1932, p. 1.
[198] I am grateful to Sergey Fofanov, Senior Research Fellow at the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, for sending me this image.

the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, and the Metropolitan Police. At the meeting with the Red Army officers, Rowe argued that unemployment was 'the best recruiting sergeant for fascism'.[199] The officers liked the idea but wanted the setting of the picture to be somewhere recognisably English. Trafalgar Square was suggested as the location for the action. Rowe had envisaged painting a dramatic night scene described in the *Daily Worker* report which would show a policeman on a white horse clashing with a man and woman symbolizing the hunger marchers. The composition would contrast the bright white of the horse with the dark figure of the policeman, while the man and woman would be rendered 'in the muted, earthy tones of the working class'.[200]

Rowe, being 'much more concerned with the aesthetic quality of the painting than making its venue obvious', was reluctant to agree with the Red Army officer's proposal, not least because it would mean having to produce a much larger painting than he had intended to provide the detailed background of the Trafalgar Square location. It was a demand on his artistic integrity similar to that he had encountered with the London gallerists. However this time, despite his misgivings, he acceded to his patrons' wishes. His one comfort was that it was agreed that the painting would be a night scene. [201]

To create an emotional connection with his subject, echoing his earlier Emotionism, Cliff Rowe wrote a vivid 2,000-word account of a hunger march from the perspective of 'Joe,' an unemployed worker who closely resembles Rowe himself. [202] Using elements from Rowe's own life, the story follows Joe as he joins a London hunger march, reflecting on his hardships and culminating in a violent clash with police. At first, Joe feels awkward singing communist songs and remembers that, only months earlier, he would have dismissed such marchers as foolish. Losing his job changed his outlook. He recalls his job delivering milk, being forced by his manager to cheat customers, and the public humiliation of being caught and dismissed. Afterwards came futile job searches, worn-out clothes, strained family ties, and even suicidal thoughts. His discovery of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) gave him purpose, replacing despair with a belief in solidarity and struggle. As the march approaches Trafalgar Square, the police attack brutally, beating marchers and scattering the crowd. Many freeze in fear but Joe is overcome with fury. He attacks, dragging down policemen and fighting wildly, inspiring the crowd to rise and join the struggle.

[199] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 29.
[200] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 29.
[201] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 29.
[202] Cliff Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.1*, 1932. Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

All these elements – the *Daily Worker* reports, Joe's militant rebirth and the renewed determination of the marchers, are brought together in Rowe's enormous canvas, the largest he had done to date. His original title had been 'The hunger marchers enter Trafalgar Square' but the exhibition organisers thought that in Russian, 'Clash of the unemployed with the police' was more suited the action, and this is how it was titled in the catalogue (Figure. 22)

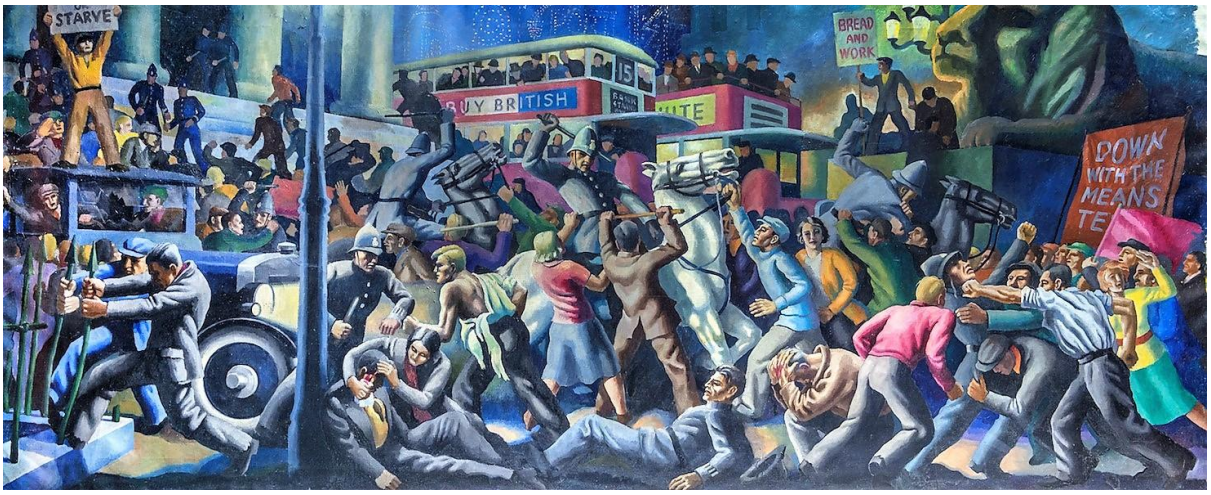


Figure 22: Cliff Rowe. *Clash of the unemployed with the police,* 1933. Oil on canvas, 137 x 329.5 cm.

In this dynamic and highly colourful work, measuring 137 x 329.5 cm., the Trafalgar Square setting is shown by the inclusion of one of Landseer's lions on the right, the steps and portico of the National Gallery on the left, and a ghostly hint of St. Martin-in-the Fields in the background. At the centre is the main action – a woman in the act of hauling down the policeman from his horse while a man attacks him with a stave. To the left is the figure of 'Joe', Rowe's alter-ego, muscular and masculine in his torn shirt. All around there is the mayhem of a riot, with both men and women piling into the police with evident gusto. What is particularly striking about many of these figures is that they are painted as individuals, not as types, and it is probable that Rowe has based them on people he knew. The woman on the far right urging on the marchers may be Anna Meblin, recognizable by the striking yellow cardigan Rowe had bought her from London. Nearer the centre is the figure of a woman in a saffron jacket who could be Mignon Garland, another American and Anna's closest friend in Moscow, who also knew Rowe.[203] While these two are clearly intent on engaging in the violence, another woman is depicted in a more nurturing role, attending to an injured marcher – could this be Doctor May Miles? Even the policeman lying injured on the ground is shown as an individual, in contrast with hard faced colleagues. Without his helmet, his symbol of authority, he is

[203] Letter, Anna Rowe to Mignon Garland, 23 June 1935. Mignon was a professional dancer performing with the Isadora Duncan Dance Company in Moscow. Copy of letter kindly provided by Jack Rowe.

but a frightened young man.[204] There are also strong elements of humour in the picture. Rowe uses the headlamps of a lorry driven by marchers as a light source to illuminate the main action. Its presence is based on a *Daily Worker* report of a lorry being commandeered by marchers in Oxford Street.[205] It was carrying a cargo of broom handles, and these are shown as weapons in the hands of the demonstrators. Just above the lorry can be seen the small figure of one of the marchers in the act of saluting, a reference to a *Daily Worker* description of an undercover policeman in the ranks of the marchers giving himself away by saluting a superior officer.[206] In front of the National Gallery are groups of policemen with drawn truncheons, ready to confront the marchers swarming up the steps – the most esteemed bastion of the British art establishment needing protection against a determined working class, an image that would certainly have appealed to Rowe.

The Red Army exhibition opened in the Central Park of Culture and Leisure in Moscow on 30 June 1933, and was visited by Stalin and other Politburo members, one of only two occasions when Stalin visited a public exhibition.[207] It is not known if he looked at the works in the international section, but his viewing of the Soviet works helped harden his opinions on what was to be acceptable art in the USSR.[208] After his visit Stalin hosted a meeting at his dacha attended by Kliment Voroshilov, head of the Red Army, and three of the exhibitors – Isaac Brodsky, Aleksander Gerasimov and Evgeni Katsman. Here he laid out his views on Soviet art and what it should depict:

> …the living person, living water, living grass, sky, living Soviet everyday life, the living Soviet person. We must organise cheerful exhibitions, full of sun, joy, children, women, healthy bodies, and human emotions. Enough of perverts in art, of gloominess, distress and depression, we do not need the poetry of decay and rot…we ought to be the poets of living, sparkling life.[209]

[204] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.1.*
[205] *Daily Worker*, 28 October 1932.
[206] *Daily Worker*, 32 October 1932.
[207] Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A study in the Alchemy of Power*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 136.
[208] Plamper, *Stalin Cult,* p. 143.
[209] Evgeny Katsman, quoted in Plamper, *Stalin Cult,* p. 143.

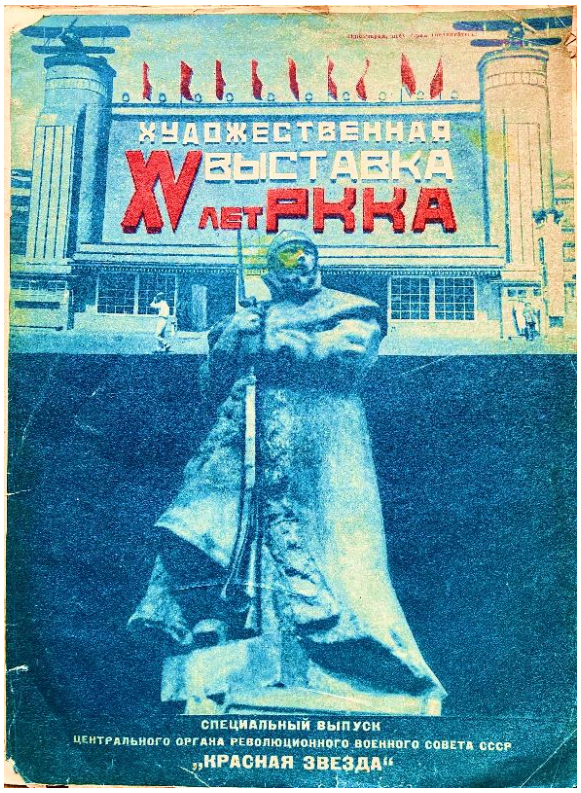


Figure 23: Art Exhibition. XV Years of the RKKA. Special issue of the central organ of the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the USSR, 'Red Star'. Commemorative brochure.

Later that year a commemorative exhibition brochure was published, with a striking cover showing a monumental sculpture, *The Sentry*, by Leonid Shervud (Figure 23). Stalin, who sat on the editorial board, personally choose the paintings to be included in the brochure.[210] Among these was Stalin's favourite, Mikhail Avilov's *The arrival of Comrade Stalin at the First Cavalry Army, Novoskoi 1919*, and Isaac Brodsky's *Address by Lenin on the departure of the Red Army to the Polish Front 1920.* Brodsky's painting, executed in the photo-naturalist style that Rowe so deplored, was based on an infamous photograph of the actual event where Leon Trotsky and Lev Kamenev, who had been present, had been airbrushed from the print. None of the foreign artists were featured in the brochure.

The exhibition was reviewed by Sergey Romov, a leading art critic for the periodical *Iskusstvo*. He was not greatly impressed by the foreign artists' works, deeming much of it insufficiently revolutionary in content and tainted by 'formalism', the catch-all term for modern experimental artwork. Rowe's painting, however, was singled out for praise:

> Not being imbued with sufficient enthusiasm for the revolutionary struggle, many of them decided on separate themes that are too formal, not revealing the totality of the ideological

[210] Chen, *Soviet Art and Artists*, p. 47.

> content… Here it is necessary to note the originality in colour and form of the picture of the English artist Rowe Hooper (sic), 'Clash of the unemployed with the police'[211]

Rowe, though, was not satisfied with what he had produced. It was far removed from his original concept and rendered in a form of realism for which he had little regard. He later felt that he had agreed too easily with what those Red Army officers wanted and should have held out for his own ideas. 'They wanted photographic realism, and that's what I gave them', he wrote.[212]

It was estimated that over one million people attended the exhibition in the first three months and that the Red Army paid over one million roubles for the artworks on show.[213] Rowe said later that he received 'a whacking great amount of money' for the Red Army commission.[214] At the end of 1933 the exhibition was moved to Leningrad, and after that most of its contents were transferred to the Museum of the Red Army and Fleet in Moscow. In 1963 Rowe's *Clash of the unemployed with the police* was gifted to the National Gallery of Ukraine in Lviv, where it still remains.[215]

A journey to Ukraine

The only contemporary accounts of Rowe's time in Russia are in two of his sketchbooks, one in the People's History Museum in Manchester (Russian Sketchbook No.1), the other in a private collection, (Russian Sketchbook No.2) recording trips he made to Ukraine and Georgia. They contain journal accounts and sketches of his experiences and may have been intended for later publication. The Georgia sketchbook is largely complete but unfortunately there are pages missing from the Ukraine account. They are undated but it is probable that the Ukraine trip was in the autumn of 1932 and the journey to Georgia took place in summer of 1933. Rowe also used spare pages in Sketchbook No.1 to jot down names, addresses, ideas and, in his preparation for his painting for the Red Army exhibition, his 2000-word prose piece.

Rowe's visit to Ukraine was made as part of a group, but because of the missing pages it is difficult to establish how this trip came about. VOKS provided a standard excursion to Ukraine for foreign visitors to showcase Soviet achievements and the successes of the Five-Year Plan which took in Kharkov, Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa and Kiev.[216] Although Rowe's group followed part of this route it is

[211] GARF, S. Romov, 'Krasnaia armiia v zhivopisi Iubileinaia vystavka 'XV let RKKA'' ['Red Army in Painting: The Exhibition for the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Red Army'], *Iskusstvo* [*Art*], no. 4 (1933): p. 47.
[212] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[213] Chen, *Soviet Art and Artists*, p. 46.
[214] Morris and Redford, *AIA*, p. 8.
[215] At the time of writing, discussions are taking place between Lviv and the Towner Gallery in Eastbourne for Rowe's painting to be loaned for a major exhibition to take place at the Towner in 2026.
[216] Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment,* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p. 259.

clear that it was not a VOKS trip, with its luxuries for foreign dignitaries. He describes difficulties they encountered in getting fed, long hours travelling on slow trains with hard wooden seats, and falling with exhaustion into a bunk bed at a hostel, having been excused the customary de-lousing because they were so tired.[217] It seems that the party was actually a group of artists, as Rowe at one point describes the difficulty they in obtaining permission to sketch inside a factory in Kharkov. During this time it was common practice for IZOGIZ to organise trips for city-based artists to bring them closer to the people, and this could have been one such excursion.[218]

The highlight of the trip was a visit to the newly-opened Lenin Dam at Zaporozhe (Zaporizhzhia), at the time the largest hydro-electric dam in the world. Rowe marvelled at the achievement and made a number of sketches of the dam and the parts still under construction (Figure 24). He described how the Party set out to build the world's largest dam on a barren steppe inhabited by people living much as they had 400 years earlier - illiterate, unskilled, and unfamiliar with machines. There were no roads, bridges, telephones, or modern industry. The task seemed impossible and was mocked by the West. Yet the Party mobilised an army of workers from every national minority, transforming them through education, discipline, and collective effort. The Communist youth organisation Komsomol, trade unions, engineers, and skilled brigades taught the illiterate to read, trained them in hygiene and teamwork, and introduced them to tools, machines, and construction techniques. Peasants who began by pushing barrows and mixing mortar progressed to driving locomotives, laying concrete, and erecting steel girders (Figure 25).[219]

Rowe wrote that the Party had demanded completion in five years but the workers pledged to finish in four - and did. Komsomol shock brigades worked tirelessly, inspiring others with their dedication. Materials and expertise streamed in from across the USSR and abroad, with the whole nation watching. On the empty steppe, a modern town rose beside the dam, a monumental triumph of Soviet vision, solidarity, and determination - and the heroes who made it possible:

> The heroes of Russia are no longer only those who face bullets but those who can face the impossible, the tasks that break down morale, that others give up in despair, the unrewarding heartbreaking tasks, and win every time, however many the failures.[220]

[217] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.1*. Rowe used the Russian names of the places he visited. I have maintained his practice and not used the modern Ukrainian designations.
[218] Poster Plakat, https://www.posterplakat.com/the-collection/artists/artist-studios-kh-m. Accessed February 2023.
[219] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.1.*
[220] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.1.*

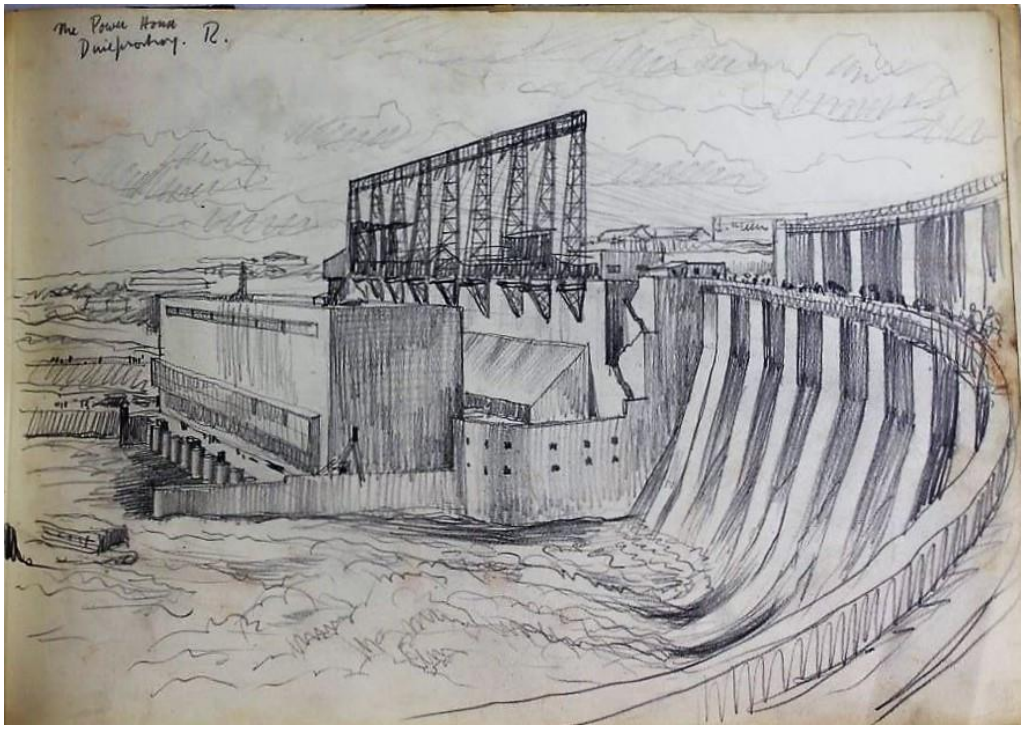


Figure 24: Cliff Rowe. *The Power House Dnieprostroy,* 1932. Pencil on paper.

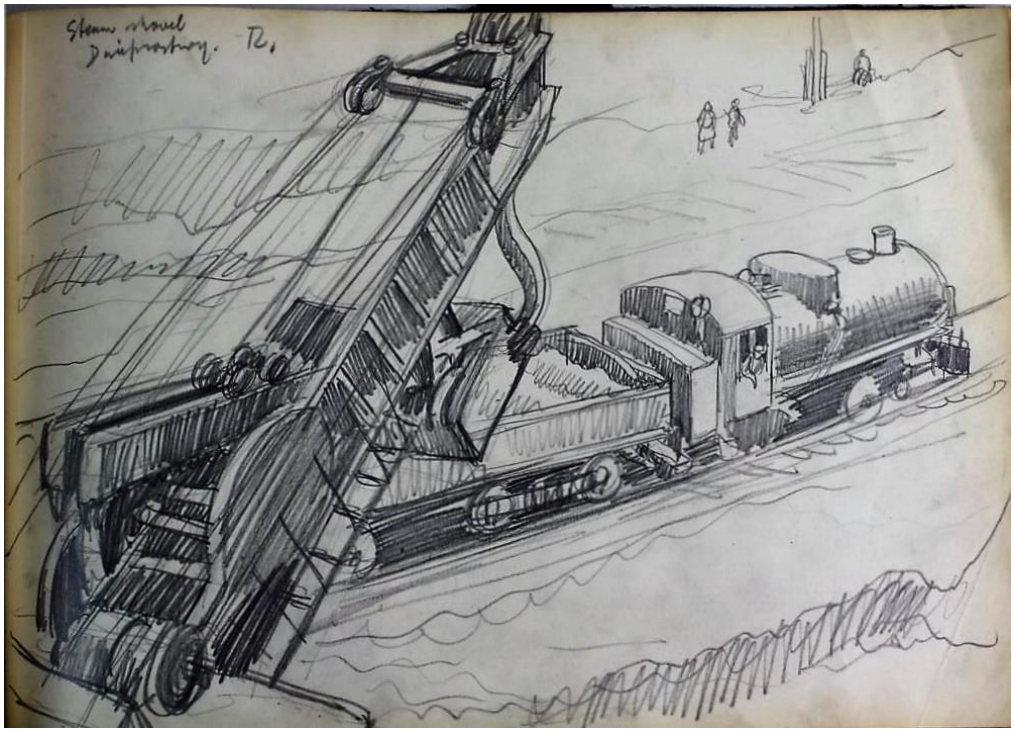


Figure 25: Cliff Rowe. *Steam Shovel Dnieprostroy*, 1932. Pencil on paper.

Such triumphalist claims could well have come from a State propaganda sheet and might condemn Rowe as yet another gullible foreigner seduced by the marvels of Soviet achievement while ignoring the human cost. Yet at the same time Rowe was also observing through the eyes of an artist, and his description of a peasant sitting opposite him on a tram in Dnipropetrovsk indicates an emotional engagement with his subject so very different from the bombast above. This romantic, almost Tolstoyan, vision of the noble peasant, somehow elevated by his lack of education, was certainly at odds with Rowe's professed Marxism:

> He is tall, hard and slim, so brown that he seems painted and is about 60 to 70 years old, while bearded in such a way that the beard seems to have grown before the man, so inseparable does it appear in the nature of his face. His eyes are very deep set, causing a considerable area of skin round the eyes to be paler than the rest of his face through the shade cast from his immense overhanging brows. The eyes are singularly beautiful, as are most eyes in Dnieprostroy, patient clear and simple as the day. His hands bear the imprint of his years of hard toil. He is most likely illiterate, but one is tempted, against logic, to believe he is all the better for it.[221]

Rowe's journey was made at the beginnings of the Holodomor – the dreadful famine that engulfed Ukraine in 1932-33 and reported by journalists Gareth Jones for the *Western Daily Mail* and Malcolm Muggeridge for the *Manchester Guardian*. According to Jones, it was brought about by a combination of a poor harvest, Stalin's campaign of forced collectivisation of agriculture, and the 'liquidation' of those peasants deemed to be *kulaks.*[222] Rowe does not make any reference to these events in his writings, although they may have featured in the missing pages of his journal. His drawings, however, indicate that he was more aware of the deteriorating situation than his writing indicates. *The boy and the herring* (Figure 26), shows a ragged boy crouched over a makeshift stove, blissfully inhaling the aroma of his meagre dish. This is not a depiction of determined workers

[221] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.1.*

[222] Gareth Jones, 'Russia Famished Under the Five Year Plan', *Western Daily Mail*, 17 October 1932, https://www.garethjones.org/overview/index.htm. Accessed February 2016; Malcolm Muggeridge, *Chronicles of Wasted Time Volume One: The Green Stick* (London: Collins, 1972). Later research points to a deeper and sinister cause of the famine - that it was an act of genocide perpetrated by Stalin to weaken Ukrainian nationhood. See, *inter alia*, Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror–Famine*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986; Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*. New York: Doubleday, 2017.

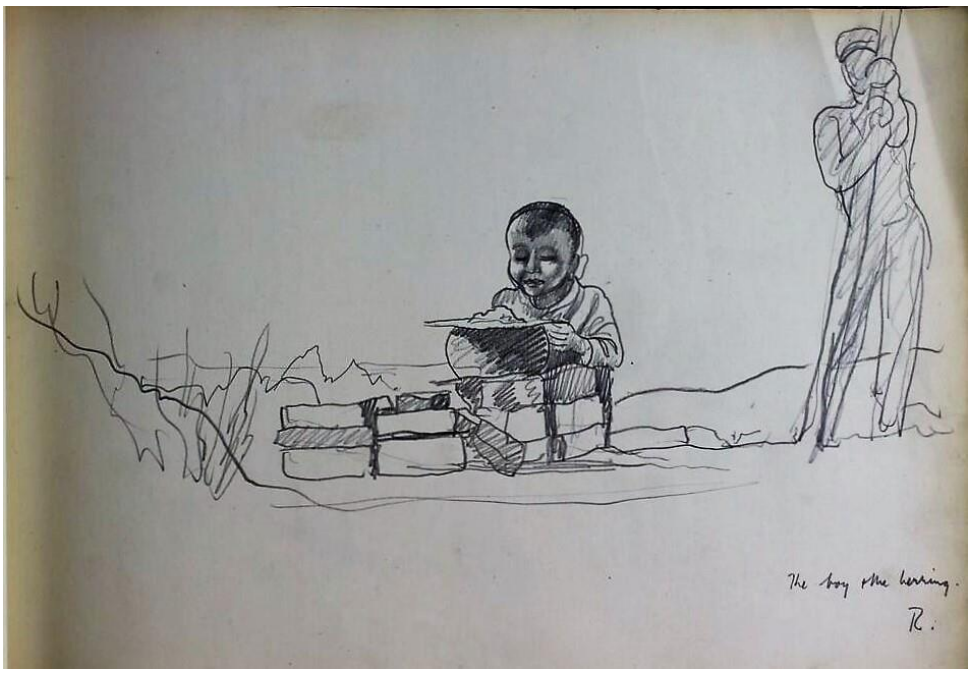


Figure 26: Cliff Rowe. *The boy and the herring,* 1932. Pencil, on paper.

striving against the odds, just that of a hungry child enjoying a brief moment of pleasure in an otherwise harsh existence. It is a very different form of heroism that Rowe captures in this sketch.

Figure 27: Cliff Rowe. *Peasants waiting for trains,* 1932. Pencil on paper.

The same can be seen in *Peasants waiting for trains* (Figure 27). At the time peasants seeking to travel by train were given the lowest priority and often had to wait days before they could secure passage. As famine took hold, such scenes became commonplace as desperate people sought to escape to the cities. The gaunt features of the woman sitting with her bundle on the ground point to

the starvation experienced by many. These figures, in various poses of boredom, tiredness and resignation, exemplify the stoic patience of the Russian peasant that Rowe found so inspiring.

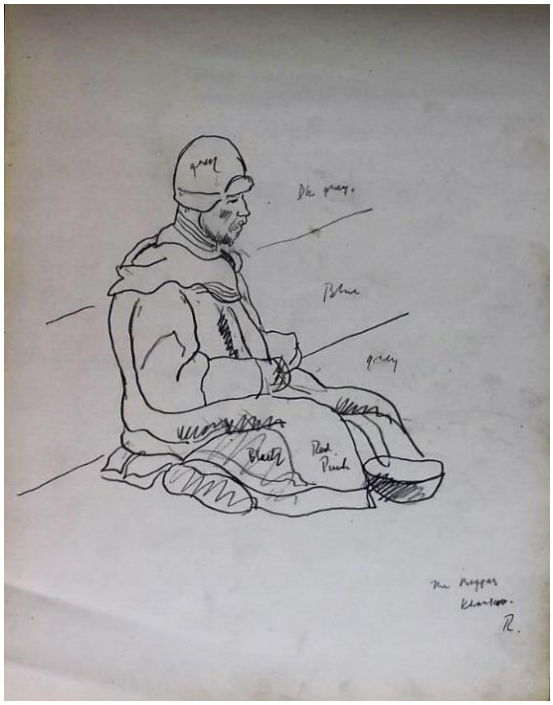


Figure 28: Cliff Rowe. *The Beggar Kharkov,* 1932. Pencil on paper.

The harshness of peasant life is also shown in *The Beggar Kharkov*, (Figure 28) a study of misery very much at odds with the picture presented in official propaganda, where there were no beggars in the Soviet Union. This sketch, with its colour notes, was clearly Rowe's study for a painting he intended to make later.

Figure 29: Cliff Rowe. *Kharkov. Lenin and the Peasants,*1932. Pencil on paper

Two other drawings show scenes that would not have been included in any official portrayal of life in Ukraine. There is a notable ambivalence in *Kharkov. Lenin and the Peasants* (Figure 29) showing a statue of Lenin on a pedestal, hand outstretched in classic pose. Such statues were common in public spaces throughout the USSR and this one was probably in the concourse of Kharkov railway station. Sitting at a table in front of the statue is a family of peasants, but what is notable is that they seem to be absorbed in their own affairs and are completely ignoring Lenin. Such a depiction would not have been tolerated in any approved portrayal of Lenin, where the audience is invariably shown as facing him or standing alongside him, never with their backs to him. In Rowe's drawing, Lenin might be seen as irrelevant to the concerns of this peasant family, a dangerous message at the time.

The last drawing in Rowe's Ukraine sketchbook is one that certainly would not have been made public. *Kulak Prison Kharkov* (Figure 30) is a bleak and unsettling reminder of the realities of Soviet state repression. The drawing is stark — heavy walls, watchtower, the guard rendered in simple, deliberate lines, with little embellishment. The emphasis is on the imposing structure: tall walls dominate the foreground, excluding the viewer and separating them from whatever horrors are inside. There is nothing inspirational or heroic being depicted in this sketch. It is a scene both sinister and depressing.

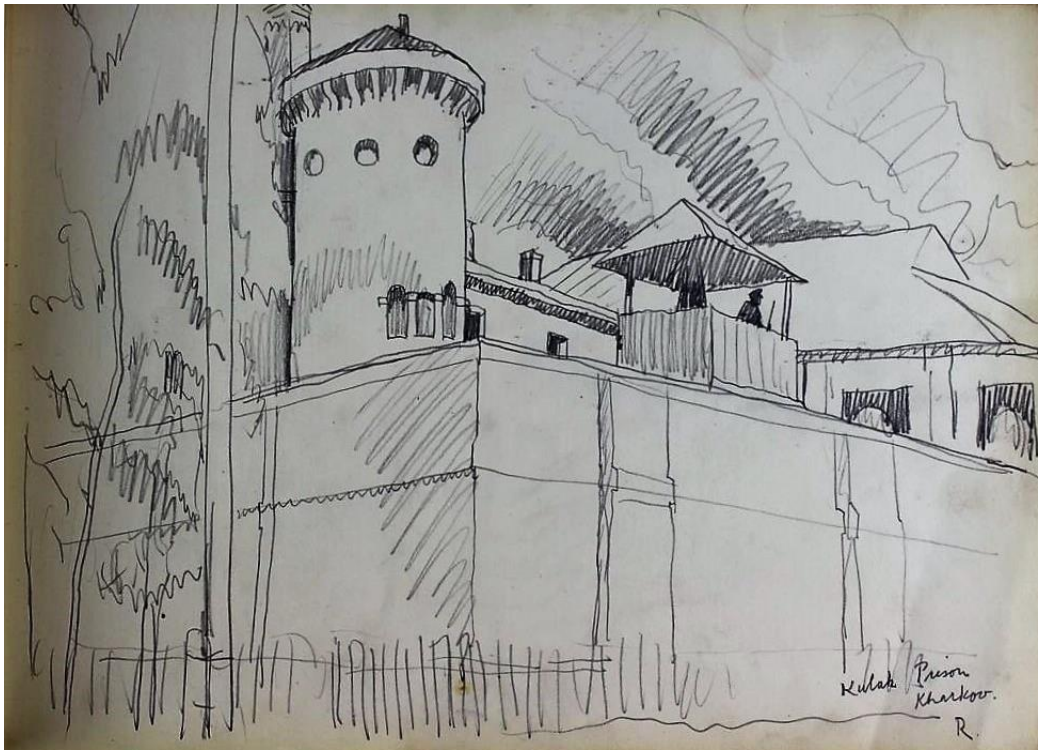


Figure 30: Cliff Rowe. *Kulak Prison Kharkov,* 1932. Pencil on paper.

It is impossible to say if anyone in authority ever had sight of these drawings. The sketch of Lenin would certainly have raised questions as to Rowe's intentions, while the prison drawing could have laid him open to the charge of espionage. If Rowe had been part of an IZOGIZ trip, then one can speculate that at least some of the other artists would have seen them. The consequences for him could have been serious if he had been reported to authority. What the drawings represent is an honest and emotional reaction to what Rowe saw around him, and their political implications may have been entirely inadvertent on his part. It was not just the drawings that could have placed Rowe in danger. Despite his adulation of the CPSU and the Komsomol, there is no mention anywhere of the leadership of Stalin, an omission unthinkable for anyone writing about the Five-Year Plan at this time. Was this deliberate on Rowe's part, an indication of his growing distaste for the personality cult? Or, in his naivety, did it simply not occur to him? As for his sketches, from the time of his early art training he had been aware of the immediate power of the drawing, a point he was later to make on more than one occasion:

> Drawings are often like signed confessions. Made more rapidly than paintings, they are generally more liable to spontaneous inadvertences. If one is lucky, the mistakes are happier than the conscious intentions, though impossible without them, and they provide a salutary warning to the artist to be both bold and modest. In any case, it is better to leave the drawings uncorrected.[223]

During that time in the Soviet Union, the 'inadvertences' of Rowe's Ukrainian drawings could well have cost him his liberty, even his life. With the benefit of hindsight, he may have had deadlier forms of 'signed confessions' in mind when he wrote those words in 1971.

A holiday in Georgia

Rowe's second journal covers a trip he and Anna Meblin made to Georgia and the Black Sea coast following their marriage in May 1933.[224] This was intended to be a holiday and the tone of the narrative differs greatly from that of the Ukraine journal. Many of his drawings still show his admiration for the technological achievements of the USSR but there are no paeans to the glories of the Five-Year Plan and the inspired leadership of the Party. In fact, there is no mention of the Party at all. Instead, his focus is very much on the ordinary, the day-to-day experiences of navigating the complexities of Soviet life. He writes much more about the people they meet – the peasants and the workers, the bureaucrats and the GPU men, the idlers and the con artists, the greedy and the

[223] Cliff Rowe, draft foreword to the catalogue *Quest for Camden: Drawings at the Rotunda Gallery*, 1971. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[224] Cliff Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2,* Cliff Rowe Personal Papers. Private Collection.

generous, the idealists and the cynics. Nowhere is there a glimpse of the model Soviet citizen. People complain about everything. Bureaucracy, complacency, spite and incompetence abound. There is petty criminality and hooliganism. But there is also kindness, friendliness, social solidarity, a strong sense of fun and optimism about the future.

They did not travel as part of an organised tour but instead elected to make their own way, in Rowe's phrase, 'to rough it', using the cheapest forms of travel and accommodation they could find. This seems to have necessitated, at every stop on their journey, negotiating access to food and lodgings, permits for onwards journeys and, in Rowe's case, permissions to draw and paint inside and outside factories and other installations. All this involved dealing with the local GPU office. Nevertheless, the fact that the couple were allowed to take this journey at all is indicative of the trust in which Rowe was held by the Soviet authorities, given the amount of freedom they were accorded.

The couple spent some time exploring the Caucasus region,[225] and it is possible that there was another journal, now lost, recording that part of the journey. The Georgia journal opens in Tiflis (modern day Tblisi) following a train journey from Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia.[226] Here Rowe visited a silk and a wool factory and produced his earliest surviving images of workers operating machinery, a subject and form of artistic expression that was to characterise his later work. His workers are not depicted in the heroic style usual in Soviet art, nor as being ground down by alienating technology, but as individuals quietly engaged in their tasks, at one with their machines (which are rendered in detail) and their environment (Figures 31 and 32).

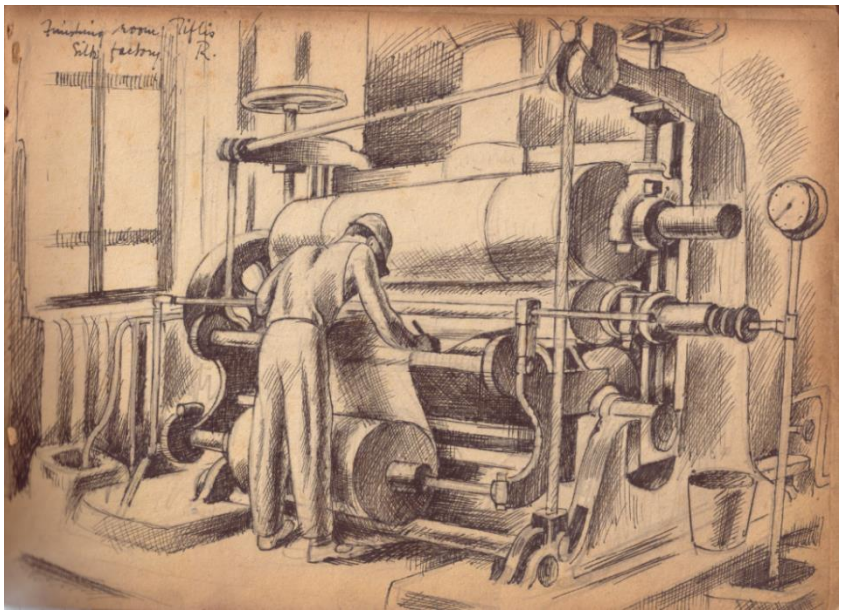


Figure 31: Cliff Rowe, *Finishing room. Silk Factory Tiflis,* 1933. Pencil on paper.

[225] Letter, Anna Rowe to Jack Rowe, 1985.
[226] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2*.

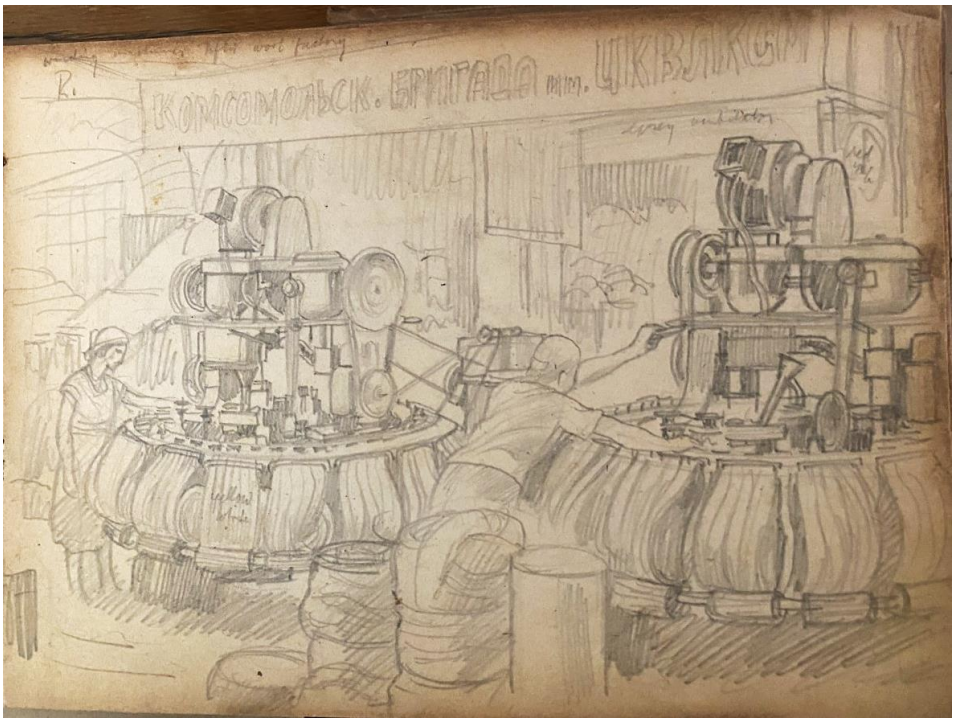


Figure 32: Cliff Rowe. *Winding machinery, wool factory Tiflis,* 1933. Pencil on paper.

The couple journeyed on to Batumi on the Black Sea coast, where, as at Dnipropetrovsk, Rowe focused on the large-scale development of modern industry and technology, in this case exemplified by the oil industry in Georgia. Rowe's drawings are accompanied by extensive colour notes, suggesting that he intended them as studies for later paintings (Figures 33 and 34). He made several attempts to paint on site at different locations, but such was the poor quality of the available art materials that he had to give up, a limitation that was to frustrate much of his attempts at painting while in the USSR.[227]

[227] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*

Figure 33: Cliff Rowe, *Batumi oil refinery*, 1933. Ink on paper.

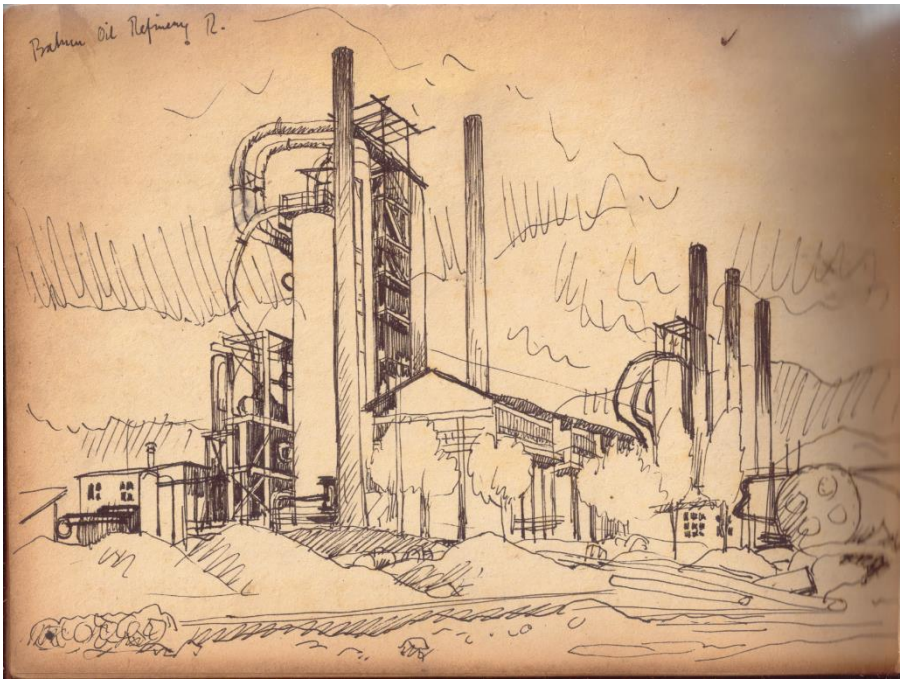


Figure 34: Cliff Rowe. *Batumi oil refinery,* 1933. Ink on paper.

As in Ukraine, he was also interested in people, and not just those engaged in the tasks of production. He was fascinated by what he called 'the idlers' lounging on the Batumi docks and their capacity for enjoying life while apparently playing no part in building the socialist society, like the 'Rubbernecks' (Figure 35):

> Dirty ragamuffin and harbour idlers are playing cards under rickety wooden shades, some sleeping flat on their backs on planks and pebbles. A fair very young and beautifully built man in indescribable rags is fast asleep in the hot sunlight on his back. Others swim in their long underpants. One young animal-like woman swims in a sackcloth covering. Marvellously bronzed young men and women stroll about. The men, with naked torsos burnt dark umber by the sun, lounge about in brightly coloured boats.[228]

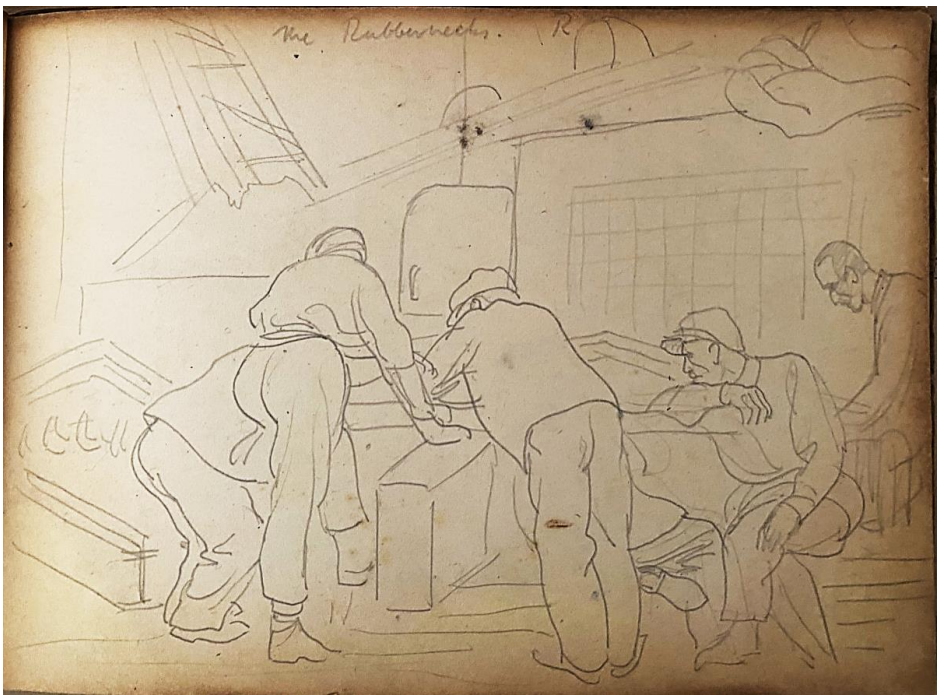


Figure 35: Cliff Rowe. *The Rubbernecks*, 1933. Ink on paper.

The somewhat idealistic and high-minded way he had described peasants in Ukraine was singularly absent in his portrayal of the poor in Batumi. He noted that there were fewer beggars than in Tiflis but those he did encounter were extremely persistent, something he found particularly annoying. He describes one occasion when he and Anna were sitting in a restaurant, an 'aggressive, filthy beggar woman' lingered outside and rushed in to grab leftovers as diners left. She even tried to snatch a glass of tea before it was finished. The waitress, unable to stop her, explained that the woman

[228] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*

refused to work. Both Rowe and Anna were infuriated by her behaviour. In just an hour, she seized more food than anyone had ordered and paid for, shamelessly disrupting everyone as she scavenged relentlessly from the tables.[229]

Neither did he feel much sympathy for two peasant women he encountered who had bought bags of food, supposedly for their families, but whom he believed were speculators who were buying up food in one place and selling it at a profit in another:

> These peasants are infinitely cunning … they usually have bundles of food and plenty of money in spite of their indescribable rags and simple manner.[230]

His descriptions of peasants boarding a ship at Batumi — as a 'mob', herded like cattle, cluttering the decks and clinging to their bundles — convey a sense of disdain. He portrays them as dirty, chaotic, and animal-like, evoking a clear social and cultural distance between himself and them. Yet, despite this condescension, he also acknowledges their resilience and toughness, noting how they could sleep anywhere under the most uncomfortable conditions.[231]

It is in his art that a more sympathetic view of the peasants is evident. His sketches of peasants waiting for the train, and standing barefoot at a street corner in Batumi (Figures 36 and 37), suggest the same stoic dignity as the peasants at Kharkov station:

Figure 36: Cliff Rowe. *Peasants waiting for the train, Batumi,* 1933. Pencil on paper.

[229] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*
[230] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*
[231] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*

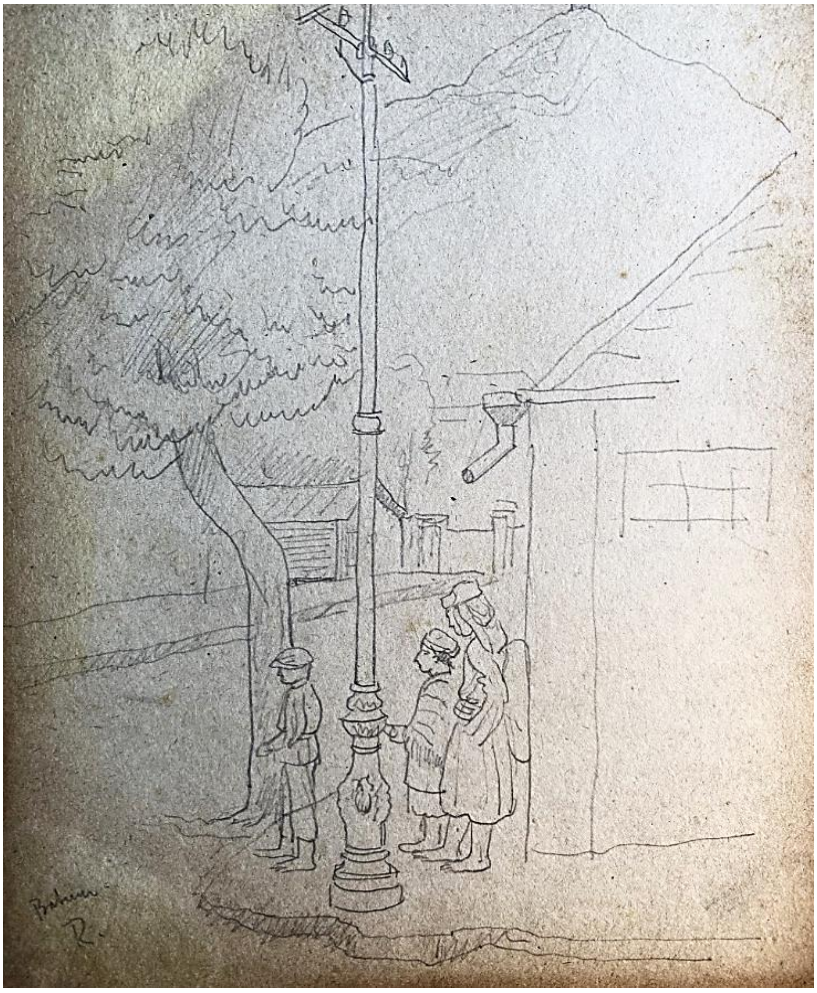


Figure 37: Cliff Rowe. *Street corner, Batumi,* 1933. Pencil on paper.

In both these sketches there are individuals in traditional Georgian dress, and it seems that Rowe was aware of the ethnic differences and tensions between Russians, Georgians and Muslims in the region. He learns from the warden of a hostel in Batumi that the Muslims 'hate the Russians because they are Christians', and the Russians are resented by the Georgians because 'they run the show on the coast'.[232] He and Anna are warned by an expatriate American not to venture into the villages up in the mountains because of the hostility of 'the Turks' towards Russians and Georgians. They ignore the warning and one evening make their way up to a Turkish village where they come across 'a delightful scene' of families celebrating a Muslim festival, a scene Rowe sketches (Figure 38). They joined in the celebrations and no harm befell them.

[232] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*

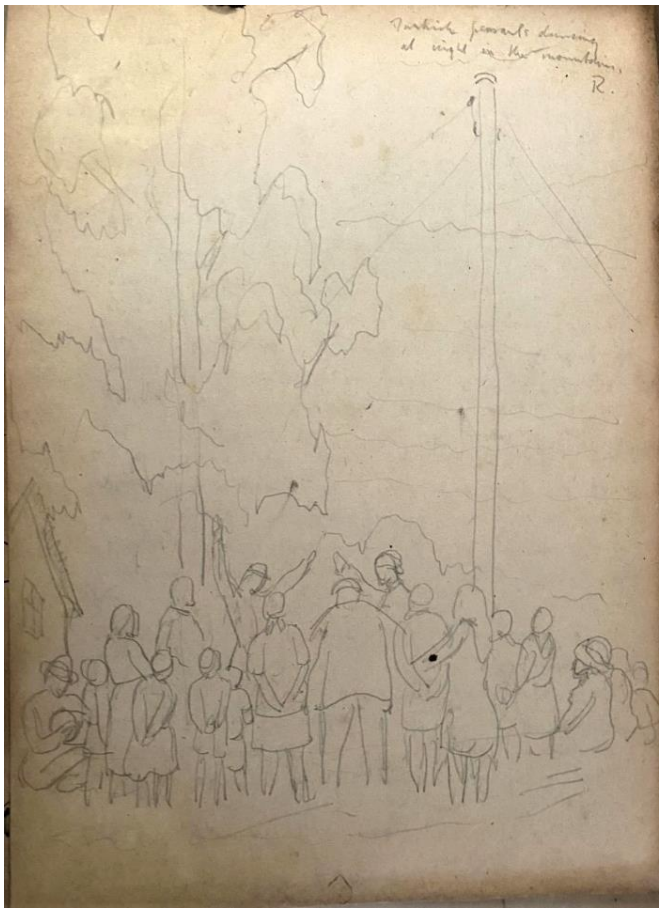


Figure 38: Cliff Rowe. *Turkish peasants dancing at night in the mountains*, 1933. Pencil on paper.

At every stage of their journey Rowe and Anna had to deal with the GPU. Some of the officers they encounter are charming and helpful (one in Tiflis arranged cinema tickets for the couple), some curious and talkative, some hostile and distinctly unhelpful. He is warned by one commandant that 'white opposition and propaganda' was still present in factories and collective farms and he should be wary of false information, that many of the foreign specialists support the Party but that some were working against it. Rowe noted that the GPU headquarters in Batumi could only be approached directly from the front, always from the pavement and never from the road, an indication of nervousness about possible attack.[233] Rowe chafed at the restrictions placed on him, and on one occasion when the relevant officer was unavailable, he went to paint at an oil terminal in Tuapse without a GPU permit. He was arrested, taken to the regional GPU headquarters, and accused of espionage. His interrogator kept pointing to his sketches and shouting 'Baden Powell!', which Rowe later learned was a reference to Robert Baden-Powell's activities in the Austro-Hungarian empire as

[233] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*

a spy masquerading as an artist. After several hours he was saved by the intervention of a more senior GPU officer whom Rowe recognised as the lover of a friend in Moscow, Nina Mukhortova.[234]

> At last the Commandant, a tall fiery eyed young man, comes in. He is exactly like the photo which Nina has on her wall and I ask him if he knows her. He glares but makes no reply. I am shown to his room. He makes one or two queries and I ask him again about Nina but he smiles and says no. He sends for my passport then lets me go.[235]

In his journal and in later conversations Rowe made light of this incident but there could have been serious consequences for both him and Anna.[236] It seems remarkable that Rowe's remote connection to this GPU officer through his friend Nina should result in him being allowed to go on his way. Another explanation is that a phone call to Moscow was sufficient to establish Rowe's standing.

Shortly after this incident the couple departed for Novorossisk, where Rowe made sure that he obtained the necessary permits to make drawings of the giant cement factory there. He was warned, however, not to make any sketches of the harbour or ships. The couple was pleasantly surprised by the wide range of international publications they could get in Novorossisk, including up to date copies of the British and US *Daily Worker* and, to their surprise, 'mimeographed I.R.A. leaflets from Copenhagen'.[237] This marked the end of their Georgia excursion and from there they returned by train to Moscow. Feeling that they had 'roughed it' enough, they treated themselves to 'soft travel' tickets for the train, with Rowe noting that 'Most of the carriage was occupied with G.P.U. and army men as usual'.[238]

Origins of an international for artists

Cliff Rowe is best known for his part in establishing the Artists' International in Britain in 1933. He has stated that the idea of forming this came to him in discussions with other foreign artists during their preparations for the Red Army 15th anniversary exhibition. He was struck by the artists' collaborative spirit, setting aside individualism for collective ideas expressed individually. He was especially moved by Chinese and Japanese artists—despite their countries being at war—working

[234] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.1.*
[235] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*
[236] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.* Rowe told me this story in 1980 and did not indicate that he had felt in danger at any time.
[237] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*
[238] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.2.*

together for peace. This, he wrote later, inspired him to return to London to establish an international artists' organisation promoting unity and anti-war ideals. [239]

He wrote to his friend Misha Black in London to enlist his help in setting up this organisation, suggesting that there should be similar organisations of artists in all countries.[240] However, the genesis of the Artists' International was rather more complex than Rowe's somewhat idealistic account would suggest. Before being commissioned for the Red Army exhibition both he and Misha Black were already in correspondence about the possibility of setting up a revolutionary artists' group in London to engage directly in the class struggle, along the lines of the IZOGIZ *isobrigade* model. In mid- December 1932 Rowe wrote to Black:

> I was talking to an English comrade who gives us political classes now and again and he mentioned our joint 'works' for the Invergordon leaflet and the ILD, without knowing we did them. He was very pleased with the idea of us forming an artist revolutionary union in London and he knows Pollitt and the other leaders very well so I think we could get them to send us on the spot to help with banners, street newspapers, caricatures, posters etc.[241]

The 'English comrade' is likely to have been Bram Freiberg, who gave Rowe lessons in 'Marxist Leninism' at the publishing house. The reference to (Harry) Pollitt, general secretary of the CPGB, suggests that from the outset Rowe and Black envisaged that their 'artist revolutionary union' would operate under the Party's direction. That this group could be part of an *international* organisation was an idea that came later. The key relationship that Rowe developed as a result of that meeting of Red Army exhibition contributors was not with those Chinese and Japanese artists but with another foreign artist, the Hungarian Bela Uitz.

In November 1930 Bela Uitz attended in Kharkov the Second International Conference of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Writers, *Mezhdunarodnoe byuro pisatelei-revoliutsionerov* (MBRP), known in the Anglophone countries as the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW) and under the control of the Comintern.[242] Taking inspiration from the work of MBRP, Uitz proposed the establishment of a similar organisation for artists to oppose war and fascism and promote Soviet revolutionary culture throughout the world. It was to be called the *Mezhdunarodnoe byuro revoliutsionnykh khudozhnikov* (MBRKh) but became better known in the

[239] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[240] Morris and Radford, *AIA,* p. 8.
[241] 'Len Wincott', TNA KV 2/509.
[242] Michael David-Fox, *Great Experiment*, p. 290.

West by its English title, the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists (IBRA), which also under the direction of the Comintern. [243]

There had been two British representatives at the 1930 Kharkov conference, the writers Bob Ellis and Harold Heslop. Although both were politically left-wing, they were not CPGB members. They undertook to establish a section of the IURW in Britain but subsequently appeared to have done little to make this a reality.[244] Indeed, the Party leadership considered them to be 'quite inept',[245] and later they were accused of 'going over to Trotskyism', suggesting that the issue was probably more to do with political differences than competence.[246] A more concerted attempt was made in October 1932 to set up a British IURW branch, this time through a literary journal called 'Storm', edited by a young CPGB member, George Douglass Jeffries. In a letter to Tom Wintringham, chair of Utopia Press, the publisher of the *Daily Worker*, he described 'Storm' as new revolutionary periodical which aimed to 'inspire and unite class struggle fighters' by creating Britain's first truly Socialist literature through fiction, verse, and 'skilled propagandist writing' tied to everyday struggles. [247]

Shortly after, Wintringham was appointed as the CPGB representative on the journal's editorial board. Jeffries' activities soon came to the attention of MI5 which opened a file on him in November 1932. A senior MI5 officer later described 'Storm' as 'one of those United Front organisations, Bolshevism with a human face, which have lately been making their appearance.' [248] The fact that the officer in question was Vernon Kell, head of MI5, and the remark was in a memo about 'Storm' sent to Valentine Vivian, head of the counter-espionage section of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), indicates the significance the security services attached to the new publication.[249]

Jeffries wrote a series of letters (intercepted and copied by MI5) to Sergey Dinamov, chairman of the Anglo-American Committee of the IURW and editor of its journal *International Literature*, discussing how 'Storm', its writers and its distribution organisation might form the nucleus of the British section of the IURW. Dinamov was anxious to help. The IURW was concerned that Britain, foremost of the imperialist countries, lacked an organised focus for revolutionary literature, unlike France and the US. He advised Jeffries to ignore the efforts of Ellis and Heslop (who had set up a group they called

[243] Angelina Lucento 'Painting against Empire: Bela Uitz and the Birth and Fate of International Socialist Realism, *The Russian Review*, Volume 79, Issue 4, pp. 578-579.
[244] Nikiforova, *Advertising as Art,* p. 196.
[245] 'Christopher Murray Grieve', TNA KV 2/2010.
[246] 'George Douglass Jeffries', TNA KV 2/2806.
[247] TNA KV 2/2806.
[248] TNA KV 2/2806.
[249] Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm. The Authorized History of MI5*, (London: Allen Lane, 2009), p. 135.

the Revolutionary Writers League) and concentrate on building up 'Storm'.[250] The correspondence reveals that Jeffries was also in touch with Cliff Rowe, and had enlisted his help in designing 'Storm':

> I am writing to Cde. Rowe about layout. We seem to have some differences, but his criticism has been very helpful and any progress in No. 3 over No. 2 is largely due to him.[251]

Jeffries also seems to have explored with Rowe the potential for using 'Storm' as a basis for establishing a British section of Bela Uitz's IBRA through uniting with other radical arts organisations. He wrote to Dinamov on 12 June explaining that:

> We are laying the basis, furthermore, for closer collaboration with the Workers' Theatre Movement and the Workers' Camera Clubs fusing their organisations with ours and, in some three months, holding an exhibition with them. We hope to organise (for our part) a poster and art show by workers and 'lefts' of Britain, France, Holland and the USSR. I am writing to Rowe, Bela Uitz, and Gurov about this.[252]

The Workers' Theatre Movement had been founded in 1926 as a joint initiative by members of the Independent Labour Party and the CPGB but by 1931 it was firmly under the control of the latter.[253] The Worker's Camera Clubs was a reference to the Workers' Film and Photo League, also controlled by the CPGB.[254] The 'Gurov' mentioned in the letter was probably Sergey Gurov, a film maker specialising in newsreels and director of the Moscow-based *Soyuzkinokhronika* news film trust. He had also served as a senior officer in the GPU.[255] It is likely that Jefferies was seeking his assistance in obtaining Soviet newsreels for the Camera Clubs in England.

It is clear that Rowe was now closely involved in the planning for a British section of the IBRA. He had been pressing 'Storm's case in Moscow, as is shown in 'Storm Bulletin No.1', 22 June 1933, which featured a statement issued by the 'Anglo-American section of the IBRA' on the formation of a British branch. The statement was the result of a report delivered by 'Comrade C. H. Rowe', which strongly suggests that Rowe was himself a member of the Anglo-American section:

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[250] TNA KV 2/2806.
[251] TNA KV 2/2806.
[252] TNA KV 2/2806.
[253] Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class*, (London and New York: I B Tauris, 2017), pp. 204-208.
[254] Worley, *Class Against Class*, p.216.
[255] 'Sergey Gurov', *Russian Central Studio for Documentary and Educational Films (CSDF) Museum,* https://csdfmuseum.ru/names/ . Accessed March 2023.

International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists

Resolutions for Britain

The Anglo-American section of the IBRA at a meeting held recently discussed a report on 'Storm' made by Comrade C. H. Rowe and passed the following resolutions:

1. Should develop close relations with the 'Daily Worker' and 'Storm'
2. Should raise the question with 'Storm' organisation to assist in forming an English Revolutionary Artists' Organisation
3. To link up this organisation, when formed, with the Workers Theatre Movement and other cultural movements
4. To get into touch with and link up with all colonial cultural organisations
5. To get more work from English artists to send to Moscow for an exhibition of English work
6. To get in touch with VOKS to find out the names of all artists who sympathise with the U.S.S.R. and who had connections with exhibitions of Soviet posters in England. To get in touch with these artists.
7. To find out all information concerning Fascist, Social Democratic and reactionary artists in England and the colonies, and to commence to try to win over those who incline to the workers' movement and control the influence of those who are definitely antagonistic.
8. That the Revolutionary Artists Movement as an organised body is very necessary in England and has now begun.[256]

In August 1933 Rowe visited VOKS in Moscow at the request of 'Storm' seeking Soviet artworks and photos for the proposed London art exhibition.[257] He also sought information on artists in 'the colonies' sympathetic to the workers' movement. Jefferies had earlier asked Dinamov for contacts in Canada and Australia for *'Storm'*. Notes made by Rowe inside his Ukraine sketchbook record details from this discussion, listing nine Australian radical artists linked to Workers' Art Clubs in Sydney and Melbourne, and a Canadian contact via the New York John Reed Club. [258]

[256] TNA KV 2/2806.
[257] GARF, 'VOKS daybook', F. 5283. Op. 8. D. 177. L. 114., August 2/12, 1933.
[258] Rowe, *Russian Sketchbook No.1*.

Shortly after this meeting events took an unfortunate turn for 'Storm'. Its next issue – No.5 – was its last. Although growing in popularity, at the relatively cheap price of four pence a copy 'Storm' needed a circulation of over 10,000 in order to be viable, and this it could not achieve.[259] This collapse left the embryo 'Revolutionary Artists Movement' as the only organised presence of the 'cultural Comintern' in Britain.

Rowe's situation in Moscow had also taken a turn for the worst. After his return from Georgia he lost his job with the *Tovarishchestvo* because he had unwisely drawn cartoons lampooning the management and internal Party organisation for the 'wall newspaper' of a Moscow factory that had been adopted by the publishing house. He had crossed the boundary of what was acceptable criticism and was dismissed as a result. The key piece of evidence that told against him was the fact that his aunt owned a shop in Wimbledon, thus making him a petit-bourgeois class enemy.[260] Whether it was this episode that prompted his return to England, or the conclusion that he had done as much as he could in Russia, is unknown. His public position has always been that he left only because he realised that he was not needed in Russia and his place was now back in England where 'the class struggle was really going'.[261] However, it was clear that with the collapse of the 'Storm' project, the promotion of a revolutionary artists' grouping was an alternative way in which the Comintern could establish an organisational cultural presence in Britain, and Rowe would be key in making it happen. Thus it was that towards the end of October 1933 Cliff Rowe, with a very reluctant Anna, made his way back to London.

Cliff Rowe's Russian sojourn was at once inspiring and unsettling, a crucible in which his artistic vision and political convictions were tested. Attracted to Constructivism yet pressured by Socialist Realism, he encountered both comradeship and repression, innovation and deprivation. His sketches and journals reveal a duality - admiration for Soviet achievements but also an awareness of their human cost. What also emerges from his observations is a love for Russia and its people that at times went beyond the purely ideological. It may indeed partly explain why he remained loyal to the ideal, as opposed to the reality, of the USSR to the end of his life. Returning to Britain, he carried with him the lessons, tensions, and ideals of this formative Soviet experience.

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[259] James Smith, 'The Radical Literary Magazine of the 1930s and British Government Surveillance: The Case of *Storm* Magazine,' *Literature and History* 19, no. 2 (2010), pp. 69–86.

[260] Personal communication from Don Milligan, 26 July 2016, relating to a conversation with Cliff Rowe c.1970. The information about Rowe's aunt would have been gleaned from biographical details held by the Comintern on all its employees.

[261] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 8.

CHAPTER 3: AN INTERNATIONAL FOR ARTISTS

Introduction

This chapter explores the emergence and evolution of the Artists' International (AI), the first openly Marxist art organisation in Britain, founded by Cliff Rowe after his return from the Soviet Union in 1933. Rowe envisioned a disciplined collective of 'worker artists' producing agitational art for the working-class struggle. The AI developed within the 'Class against Class' phase of Communist policy, aligning with the Comintern's International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists (IBRA). Its early work centred on posters, banners, and visual propaganda supporting strikes and demonstrations, aiming to be both a national and international revolutionary cultural force.

In 1935 the Comintern's strategy shifted focus from class war to the broad-based anti-fascist resistance of the Popular Front. Now renamed the Artists' International Association (AIA), the group sought wider appeal, attracting established artists but also generating ideological disputes. The chapter charts the AI/AIA's trajectory through these ideological shifts, highlighting how Rowe's personal journey, from committed Socialist Realist to cautious sceptic, reflected the broader dilemmas faced by radical artists seeking to balance politics, creativity, and public engagement.

The Artists' International – the beginnings

Fired with enthusiasm for the USSR, Rowe's first action on arriving at the Port of London in October 1933 was to go straight to the CPGB headquarters in King Street and join the Party.[262] As was seen in the final section of the previous chapter, Rowe had begun planning to establish a British section of Bela Uitz's 'International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists' (IBRA) to unite artists into an anti-fascist and anti-war alliance. His friend Misha Black, with whom he had corresponded about setting up an artists' section of the CPGB, had already set the wheels in motion, seeking out possible recruits for the new group.[263]

An inaugural meeting was held at Black's studio in Seven Dials, attended by about twenty people. The artist James Boswell later recalled that among those attending was James Fitton, who taught lithography at the Central School of Art, Pearl Binder, who had just returned from a visit to Russia (she had met Rowe on the boat returning to London), James Holland, James Lucas, Peggy Angus, Edward Ardizzone, Cliff Rowe and his wife Anna (Meblin). Rowe's enthusiasm for life in the USSR, particularly the status of artists, won them over to the idea of 'the need for painters to organise

[262] Cliff Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[263] Robert Radford, *Art for a Purpose*, pp. 20-21.

internationally in support of the working-class movement'.[264] The suggested name for this new grouping was 'The International Organisation of Artists for Proletarian Art', likely to have been proposed by Rowe himself, echoing as it did the titles of some of the artists' groups he had encountered in Russia. However, after discussions with 'more experienced Party members' it was agreed that the name should be simplified to 'Artists' International', or AI.[265] They agreed an organisational structure similar to that of the CPGB, with a ruling Central Committee elected annually by a national meeting of members. The Central Committee would in turn elect the principal officers – Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Secretary. The first of these were, respectively, Misha Black, Cliff Rowe, and Anna Meblin.

The first iteration of the AI's statement of aims was published in 1934 in *International Literature*, the English language organ of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW), which described the AI as 'the first organisation of revolutionary artists in England':

> The International Unity of Artists against Imperialist war on the Soviet Union, Fascism and colonial oppression. It is intended to further these ends by the following practical measures:
>
> 1. The uniting of all artists in Britain sympathetic to these aims, into working units, ready to execute posters, illustrations, cartoons, book jackets, banners, tableaux, stage decorations etc.
> 2. The spreading of propaganda by means of exhibitions, the Press, lectures and meetings.
> 3. The maintaining of contact with similar groups in 16 other countries.[266]

In keeping with its international perspective, the organisation and activism of the AI was modelled on the John Reed Clubs, the American section of the IBRA, suggesting that there was close contact with at least one other foreign group. Indeed, the AI's key aim bears a marked similarity to the first two points of the *Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Club*:

1. Fight against imperialist war, defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression;
2. Fight against fascism, whether open or concealed, like social-fascism; [267]

Many of the AI founding members were commercial artists and designers and described themselves as 'worker artists'. They saw their role as one of not just commenting on the class struggle through

[264] Lynda Morris and Robert Radford, *The Story of the AIA,* p. 10.
[265] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 10. The use of the initials 'AI' in this thesis refers to the Artists' International, not 'Artificial Intelligence'.
[266] 'Revolutionary Artists Organise', *International Literature* 1934 1 (7), p. 151.
[267] 'Draft Manifesto of John Reed Clubs'*, New Masses*, No. 12, June 1932, p. 4.

their art but actively participating in the struggle as auxiliaries for the organised working class. Rowe believed that the deepening crisis of capitalism would force even those 'fine artists' who had benefitted from an expanding art market to choose sides (a point also made in the Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Club). Writing in *Viewpoint* (the forerunner of *Left Review)* in his review of a modern art exhibition at the Mayor Gallery, Rowe appealed to those artists to fight 'the octopus' of capitalist culture:

> If any organisation of artists is to go forward it must change from the defensive to the offensive. It must take its place in the social struggle, with all other workers of hand and brain, with the deliberate intention of dealing the octopus the hardest blows where it is weakest, until it is destroyed. It must link up with all other organisations intent on the same purpose. It must not only attack at its root the poison growth of bourgeoise 'culture' but join in the struggle for the new revolutionary culture. The pure observer is a cipher. Everyone is involved and it is only by active participation in the class struggle can we gain the experience and understanding necessary to forging a new literature, architecture, or art which will be worthwhile.[268]

Class against Class

The reference to 'social fascism' in the John Reed Club manifesto came directly from the 'New Line' policy promulgated at the 6th Comintern Congress in 1928 in Moscow. It declared that international capitalism, having survived the 'first period' of turmoil following the Great War, and having enjoyed a 'second period' of relative stability and expansion, had now entered a 'third period' of revolutionary upheaval. Fascism was presented as the desperate attempt of a dying system to maintain itself. In this period of 'Class against Class' (as it was designated) the historical role of the non-communist reformist organisations - advancing the interests of the working-class through political reform - had turned into its opposite. The role of these organisations was now to hold back the working-class from taking a revolutionary path and that consequently they were to be viewed as enemies of the proletariat.[269] They were designated 'social fascists' (a term first used by the German Communist Party about the Social Democrats) and portrayed as being of greater danger to the working class than the avowedly fascist parties themselves. Communists were to organise

[268] C.H. Rowe, 'Unit 1', *Viewpoint: A Critical Review*, July-September 1934, No.2, p. 45.
[269] 'Comintern's New Line' in John Callaghan and Ben Harker, eds. *British Communism: A Documentary History,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 108-109; Duncan Hallas*, The Comintern*, (London: Bookmarks, 1985), pp. 126-127.

independently of existing trade unions and social democratic parties, and 'lead the masses to a frontal assault on the bourgeois State'.[270]

The 'New Line' was resisted by most of the CPGB leadership, who saw it as inappropriate for British conditions, but under pressure from the Comintern they eventually fell in line.[271] The implementation of this policy in Britain would inevitably lead to the isolation of the CPGB from the wider working-class movement. As Party founder-member J. R. Campbell remarked to the Central Committee meeting where the 'New Line' was discussed:

> We might get a larger membership amongst proletarian intellectuals desirous of making the CP a socialist monastery, but we would lose our influence in the working class immediately.[272]

The CPGB carried the policy through to the 1929 and 1931 General Elections, where it failed to make any headway with the electorate.[273] Campbell's fears had been realised but, in line with Comintern's directive, the Party persisted with the 'Class against Class' policy for the next four years, despite a decline in membership and influence.

Events in Germany forced a major change in the Comintern line. The ease with which the Nazis assumed power in February 1933 in the face of an opposition divided into Communist and Social Democrat camps, and the consequent destruction of the German Communist Party, showed the disastrous consequences of 'Class against Class'. In March the Comintern, while still not abandoning its 'Third Period' analysis, softened its 'social fascist' position and called for unity with socialist parties and organisations against the dangers posed by the real fascists. This came as a considerable relief to the CPGB where internal opposition to the Comintern line had been the cause of a major rift.[274]

Despite the difficulties on the political front, there were developments in the cultural realm during the 'Class against Class' period which helped the CPGB maintain a foothold in the working class, particularly amongst the unemployed. The rejection of reformism and all things bourgeois accelerated the development of a distinct communist culture associated with the Party. Many of the communist cultural institutions, such as the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM), came as a direct

[270] Callaghan and Harker, *British Communism*, p. 110.
[271] Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy, *Under the Red Flag*, (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), p. 59.
[272] Quoted in Laybourn and Murphy, *Red Flag*, p. 58.
[273] Laybourn & Murphy, *Red Flag*, pp. 59-60.
[274] Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp. 48-51.

result of the 'Class against Class' policy. The WTM sought to challenge the established theatre of the bourgeoisie with a new, vigorous approach to dramatic representation that reached directly to the working class and promoted the ideals of Communism.[275] As well as the Workers' Theatre Movement, there was the Workers' Music Association, the British Workers' Sports Federation, the Federation of Workers' Film Societies, the Workers' Film and Photo League, and even a West London Workers' Esperanto Club.[276] The Ramblers' Rights Movement, founded in Manchester by Young Communist League member Benny Rothman, achieved national publicity with the Kinder Scout mass trespass in 1932, an event that paved the way for the legal 'right to roam' in 1948.[277]

Rowe conceived the AI as being a part of this wider cultural movement which:

> …involved writers, architects, musicians… actors already organised in Unity Theatre. We were able to establish relations with them very easily. That's how it grew.[278]

The Artists' International was a key participant in this Communist counter-culture, and through it a major factor in attracting artists to membership of the CPGB. Rowe, Boswell, Fitton, Turner, Binder and Lucas all joined the Party at this time. Misha Black, an Azerbaijani immigrant and not yet a British citizen, was ineligible for membership though he remained close to the Party for the next decade.

The Artists' International in action

Political activism was the hallmark of the newly formed Artists' International. The journal *International Literature* described some of its activities – supporting strikes and demonstrations by producing leaflets, posters and cartoons, making contact with revolutionary artists abroad, working with Workers' Film group in producing animated cartoons, working closely with the Marx Memorial Library and Workers' School to promote fortnightly discussions on art and politics, decorating halls used for revolutionary meetings and so on.[279] Rowe was directly involved from the outset, one of his first designs being the publicity poster for the Cambridge University travelling exhibition of anti-war

[275] 'The Red Stage: Organ of the Workers' Theatre Movement', 1, 1 (November 1931), in Callaghan and Harker, *British Communism*, p. 121.
[276] Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class*, (London and New York: I B Tauris, 2017), pp. 194-217.
[277] Worley, *Class Against Class*, pp. 211, 213.
[278] Cliff Rowe, interviewed in 1982 and quoted in Morris and Radford, AIA, p. 9. Regarding the actors, Rowe probably had in mind the Workers Theatre Movement, as Unity Theatre was not founded until 1936 by members of the WTM.
[279] *International Literature*, p. 151.

posters and drawings in 1934 (Figure 39). The photograph of one of the exhibition's stands showing the gas-masked soldier motif suggests he also contributed to the exhibition itself (Figure 40).

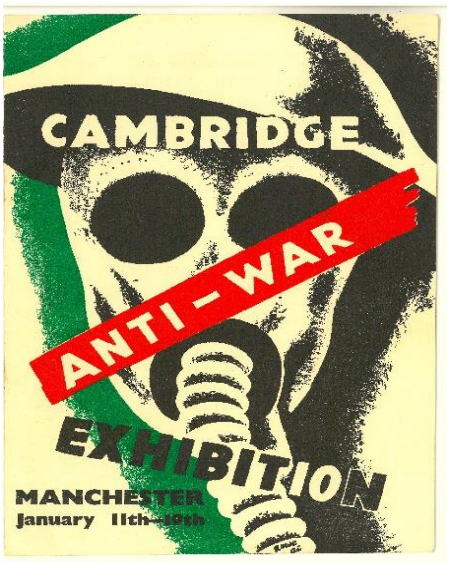

Figure 39: Cliff Rowe. Poster design for Cambridge Anti-War Exhibition, 1934.

Figure 40: Posters in the Cambridge Anti-War Exhibition, 1934.

Edith Simon, a young German artist living in London who joined the Artists' International at its foundation, later recalled those heady activist days:

> We painted banners, often through the night, made monumental heads of Marx and Lenin for demos, in which we also marched. We designed and printed posters, made scenery for Unity Theatre, and made murals. We drew portraits for one shilling, and caricatures for sixpence, at *Daily Worker* bazaars, in relays of an hour…. You don't think one got paid. We were lucky most of the time to get the cost of the materials out of the organisations … The jibe often levelled at such bodies that they were subsidised by Moscow gold drew wistful smiles.[280]

[280] Edith Simon, 'Eye Witness', in Inge Goodwin, Giles Sutherland, Antonia Reeve, *Moderation be Damned!* (Edinburgh: Antonia Reeve, 2005). Np.

In truth, neither the IBRW (writers) nor its off-shoot for artists, IBRA, was in any position to provide 'Moscow gold' for the Artists' International. The Comintern was not resourced to provide much financial support for its cultural organisations.[281] Its priorities lay in supporting individual Communist parties and their newspapers, and without such support the CPGB probably would not have survived during the 'Class against Class' period.[282] The activities of the Artists' International were largely financed by its members and sympathisers.

Figure 41: Edith Tudor-Hart. *Communist Demonstration in London,* 1934. Photograph. National Galleries of Scotland.

Another early example of the kind of agitational art produced by the Artists' International can be seen in the photograph by AI member Edith Tudor-Hart of two placards carried in the 1934 May Day march in London (Figure 41).[283] The images of Ernest Thalmann, the German Communist leader imprisoned by the Nazis, and Georgi Dimitrov, later to become the Comintern leader, are likely to have been made by Cliff Rowe in the photo-realist iconography of the Moscow parades he had helped produce while working for IZOGIZ.

The Artists' International's first major publication was in February 1934, a booklet entitled *18 cartoons: Why we are marching!* This was one of the 'mimeographed newspapers' mentioned in the organisation's statement of aims. It was produced to coincide with the culmination in London of a national series of hunger marches organised by the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) led by Wal Hannington, a CPGB member.[284] A similar march in 1932 had been the subject of Rowe's painting for the Red Army exhibition in Moscow. The NUWM was the most successful attempt by the CPGB to build a grass roots movement of the unemployed in the face of the perceived indifference of the official trade unions and the Labour Party. Although Communist-led, its support came from beyond the ranks of Party members, and it was far from being simply the Communist front organisation depicted by some Labour Party leaders.[285] In 1934 its main focus was

[281] Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-40*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), pp. 75-77.
[282] Laybourn & Murphy, *Red Flag*, p. 58.
[283] Edith Tudor-Hart *Communist Demonstration in London 1934*, in Duncan Forbes, ed. *Edith Tudor-Hart: In the Shadow of Tyranny*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013).
[284] Wal Hannington, *Unemployed Struggles 1919-1936*: *My Life and Struggles Amongst the Unemployed, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1936),* pp. 233-234.
[285] Ralph Hayburn, 'The National Unemployed Workers' Movement: A Re-Appraisal', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1983), p. 290.

opposing the Unemployment Insurance Bill, Ramsay McDonald's National Government's proposal to limit unemployment benefit and to set up work camps for the young unemployed.

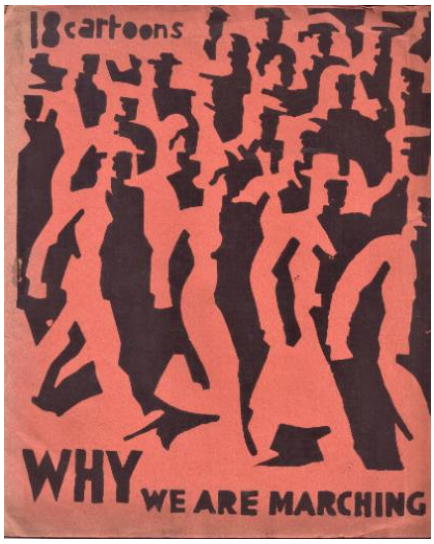

Figure 42: Cliff Rowe. *18 Cartoons. Why We Are Marching,* 1934. Cover design.

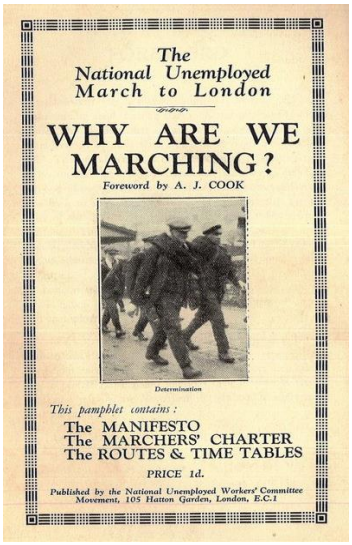

Figure 43: NUWM. *Why Are We Marching?* 1934. Marx Memorial Library.

The Artists' International publication mirrored the title of the NUWM's own pamphlet *Why are we marching?* and was a commentary on the iniquities of the Bill. Rowe designed the striking silk-screened cover (Figure 42), transforming the marchers on the cover of the NUWM pamphlet (Figure 43) into semi-abstract shapes and incorporating the text into the overall design.[286] This showed the strong Constructivist influence on Rowe's art and is a stark contrast to the photo-realism of his Thalmann and Dimitrov images. Rowe also contributed three cartoons. In two of them (Figure 44), a somewhat ponderous allegory on how to deal with the Unemployment Insurance Bill, Ramsay McDonald sports a swastika (a not-so-subtle reference to his 'social fascist' designation), the TUC bureaucrats are privileged onlookers, the Labour Party in the form of George Lansbury absents itself from the struggle, but concerted action from a United Front knocks the Bill out of the ring.

[286] Artists' International, *18 Cartoons: Why We Are Marching*! (London: Artists' International, 1934).

Figure 44: Cliff Rowe. *18 Cartoons. Why We Are Marching,* 1934. Cartoons.

Another Rowe cartoon (Figure 45) is a sharper comment on capitalism and the British Establishment, showing (left to right) Montagu Norman (Governor of the Bank of England), Neville Chamberlain (Chancellor of the Exchequer), Cosmo Lang (Archbishop of Canterbury), and Ramsay MacDonald (Prime Minister), all of them worshipping at the altar of Capitalism. An unsigned cartoon from another contributor urges workers to join not only their union but also the CPGB.[287] Another cartoon contrasts 'fascist Germany's' and 'democratic England's' use of labour camps with the full employment to be found in the Soviet Union where the working class is in charge, coupled with the exhortation to 'Build a Soviet Britain'.[288] The text accompanying *18 Cartoons* called for the formation of a United Front against the Government, a key CPGB demand:

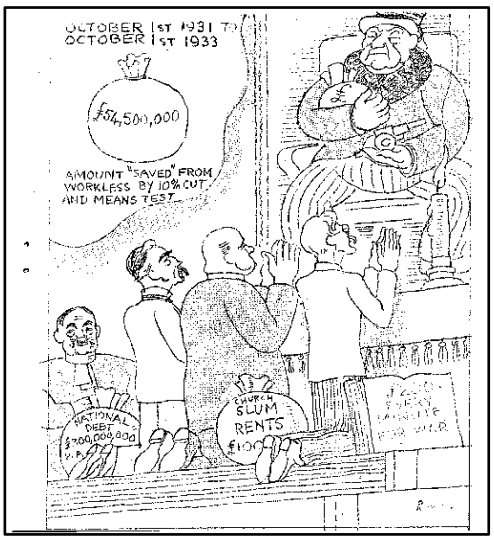

Figure 45: Cliff Rowe. *18 Cartoons. Why We Are Marching,* 1934. Cartoon.

> But only organisation and struggle and unity on the part of the working class can lead to victory against our enemies. The Bill is a direct attack on the employed as well as the unemployed workers and they must work together to strengthen the National Unemployed Workers Movement and build a mighty United Front of the workers… and sweeping out of existence this Government of hunger, fascism and war.[289]

[287] Artists' International, *18 Cartoons.*
[288] Artists' International, *18 Cartoons.*
[289] Artists' International, *18 cartoons.*

The text of *18 Cartoons* was largely a summary of a 1934 CPGB pamphlet, *Slavery or Socialism* by Robert Page Arnott, a Party Central Committee member and British representative at the Comintern.[290] The pamphlet described the Unemployment Insurance Bill as '… a class measure: an attack of the whole capitalist class upon the whole working class'. It savaged the Labour Party, called for a 'United Front to fight against Hunger, Fascism and War', and concluded with a call for a Soviet Britain'. [291] Rowe's cover design for *Slavery or Socialism* (Figure 46) is again reminiscent of his Constructivist-influenced designs for the Co-operative Publishing House in Moscow. It encapsulates all the key messages of the pamphlet, with depictions of fascism, capitalism, exploitation and militarism contrasted with the solidarity of workers in struggle and the achievements of socialist Russia. Lenin is depicted in Soviet heroic style, alongside images of the modern technology underpinning Russian industrialisation based on Rowe's drawings from his Georgia excursion in 1933. In contrast, Ramsay McDonald is explicitly linked with the Nazi Hermann Goering, along with a top-hatted caricature capitalist, cocktail in hand and flapper on knee. Rowe proclaimed his membership of the Artists' International by adding to his signature the lower-case letters 'ai'.

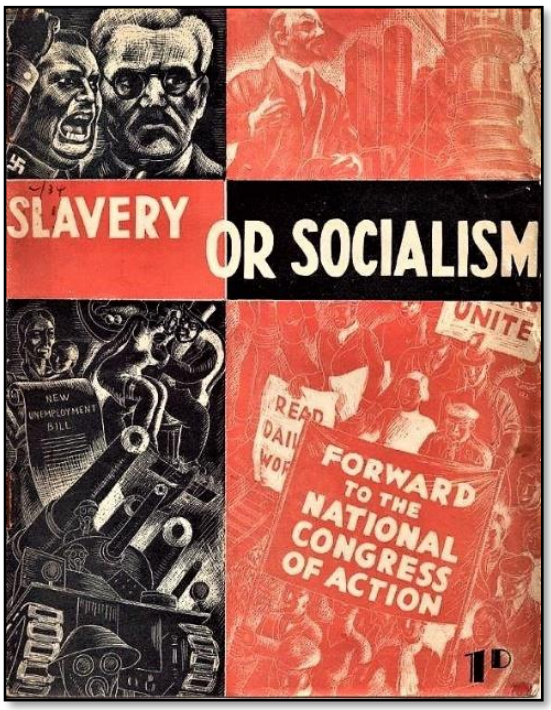

Figure 46: Cliff Rowe. *Slavery or Socialism,* 1934. Cover design.

18 Cartoons ended with a rousing statement urging all artists and designers to join in the class struggle on the side of the workers:

> The Artists' International stands for the international unity of artists against Fascism, against Imperialist war, and against war on the Soviet Union, and for the United Front of artists with the working class against all capitalist oppression.
>
> We invite all professional, commercial, and worker artists to join our organisation.

[290] R. Page Arnot. *Slavery or Socialism*, (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1934), p. 5.
[291] Page-Arnot, *Slavery or Socialism,* pp. 5-16.

The address given for 'The Secretary' (Anna Meblin, Rowe's wife) is 65 Marchmont Street, W.C.1, their home address.[292]

The Social Scene and after

The first major AI public exhibition was *The Social Scene,* held in London in September 1934 in a large shop in Charlotte Street. It sought to portray the 'Social Conditions and Struggles of Today' through art and social commentary. It was modelled on *The Social Viewpoint in Art, Sculpture, Painting, Drawing,* an exhibition mounted by the New York John Reed Club in January 1933.[293] In a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* in July 1934, AI Secretary Anna Meblin explained the political thinking behind the exhibition and spoke of a 'new art' which will be brought about through artists' participation in the class struggle:

> The members of the Artists' International are convinced that artists, if they are to become economically secure and are to perform their proper function in society, must organise themselves to fight for an ordered socialist system. They are convinced that the art which ignores social conditions, and the needs of the people, is now an expression of reaction, and they believe in a new art which experience in the struggle will help to create.
>
> This exhibition to which all artists are invited to contribute will contain the first conscious attempts to make this art a reality.[294]

There was no mention of 'Socialist Realism' as the form of this 'new art' in Anna Meblin's letter, but this term was soon to have an impact on the Artists' International. Six weeks after her letter was published, the First Congress of Soviet Writers held in Moscow in September 1934 proclaimed Socialist Realism as the required ideological underpinning of all Soviet art and literature. In his address to the Congress, Andrei Zhdanov described writers as 'engineers of the soul' (a phrase attributed to Stalin)[295] and urged them to:

> Create works of high attainment, of high ideological and artistic content.
>
> Actively help to remould the mentality of people in the spirit of socialism.

[292] Artists' International, *18 Cartoons.*
[293] Eric Homberger, 'Proletarian Literature and the John Reed Clubs 1929-1935', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Aug. 1979), p. 234.
[294] *Manchester Guardian*, 8 July 1934.
[295] Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin*, p. 90.

> Be in the front ranks of those who are fighting for a classless socialist society.[296]

The Soviet Writers' Congress had an immediate impact on the Artists' International and triggered a debate about how Socialist Realism could be adapted for British art.[297] During his time in Moscow, Rowe had come to accept what he termed 'the logic' of Socialist Realism – that it served to give art mass appeal to a population that was still largely uneducated. However, he believed that Socialist Realism as a method was a reversion to the Victorian naturalism which he had so criticised when a student. He was now prepared to embrace it, not for aesthetic reasons, but because it was the official art of the Soviet Union which he felt duty-bound to support. Despite his misgivings he became an enthusiastic advocate of Socialist Realism among the artists in the Party, something he was later to regret:

> My main personal interest [at this time] was in the problems of socialist realism, and here I must confess that I did everything I could to spread the doctrine of this viewpoint, and I have since regretted whatever influence I may have had on others during this proselytising period, and have often wondered if I had done them harm, as well as doing harm to myself … But the more I argued for its principles, the more my secret doubts began to nag at me.[298]

His 'secret doubts' lay not just with the *method* of Socialist Realism but with the uniformity of thought resulting from its imposition on Soviet art and literature and its implications for the individual artist:

> In one aspect did it seem to me to be inadequate, and that was the relation of individual talent, conviction, conscience, and aesthetic understanding to the collective will, understanding and conviction.[299]

The unresolved conflict between the 'collective will' and the subjective aesthetic of the individual artist was to remain a constant for Rowe throughout his life. Nevertheless, his political commitment to Communism meant he felt bound to accept the 'overwhelming logic' that the 'individual will must be subordinate to the majority will'.[300] That the 'majority will' was interpreted and mediated by the Communist Party was not something he openly questioned at this time, whatever his private doubts.

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[296] Andrei A. Zhdanov, Soviet Literature - The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature,' in H. G. Scott, ed. *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress*, (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), pp. 15-48.

[297] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 14.
[298] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 32.
[299] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[300] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.

Those doubts remained secret, their expression only coming later – through his art and his writing. In the meantime, he had limited opportunity to produce works of art, Socialist Realist or not. In addition to his leading role in organising the AI, there was his 'Party work' (he was still expected to sell his share of the *Daily Worker*) and the necessity of earning a living through his freelance commercial art.[301] The latter in particular frustrated him. Although his work included commissions from newspapers, publishing, the film industry and the big oil companies, it was not enough to sustain even a modest standard of living and offered little in the way of aesthetic reward. It all seemed irrelevant when compared with the demands of the class struggle:

> … but really it was the work. It was unreal to me. Everything I did became unreal to me. A task without meaning. There was only one thing to do, the gigantic task of changing society. I did not see that I had to change myself too.[302]

The Social Scene exhibition programme reflected the political line of the Soviet Writers' Congress and made explicit the Marxist basis of the Artists' International. In addition to the art works on display, supplementary lectures on 'Revolutionary Proletarian Art' and 'Marxist Art History' were offered, with the exhibition manifesto declaring:

> We must say plainly that the AI supports the Marxist position that the character of all art is the outcome of the character of the mode of material production of the period. Today, when the Capitalist system and Socialists are fighting for world survival, we feel that the place of the artist is at the side of the working class. In this class struggle we use our abilities as an expression and as a weapon, making our first steps towards a new socialist art.[303]

Rowe was later to question the assertion that 'all art' was the outcome of 'the mode of material production' though at the time he was willing to proclaim it. Despite this, the AI avoided the cultural exclusivity displayed by other CPGB-dominated groups. Entry to the exhibition was open to all artists and a wide variety of styles and subjects, political and non-political, was displayed. Although there was sympathy from art critics for the aims of the exhibition, the general consensus was that the art itself was poor. Rowe, who had submitted a number of paintings, later acknowledged this, stating that much of the 'political art' was 'naïve, untrained, badly drawn, academic'.[304] Leading CPGB member Tom Wintringham's review for *Left Review* was particularly critical of those artists who proclaimed themselves as left-wing, accusing them of being more concerned with the political forms

[301] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[302] Rowe, draft letter to Connard.
[303] Quoted in Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 13.
[304] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 13.

of working-class struggle than with workers themselves. Clearly, it was the AI members and supporters that he had in mind:

> These artists have come fairly recently to realise that politics are of dominating importance to them in their work. Fairly recently they have decided to put their ability at the service of the working-class movement. Their work, therefore, naturally shows more real acquaintance with, more real feeling for, the working-class political movement than for the working class itself. Because of this there are several paintings and drawings of meetings, marches, banners, that are unsuccessful.[305]

Herbert Read, the anarchist and surrealist painter who later joined the AI, made similar criticisms writing that *The Social Scene* was a failure, a 'feeble interpretation' of what constituted revolutionary art:

> Revolutionary art should be revolutionary. That surely is a simple statement from which we can begin the discussion. We can at once dismiss the feeble interpretation of such a statement as an injunction to paint pictures of red flags, hammers and sickles, factories and machines, or revolutionary subjects in general … But such a feeble interpretation does actually persist among Communists and was in fact responsible for the failure of the first exhibition organised by the Artists' International.[306]

One of Rowe's submissions to *The Social Scene*, *The Pit Rescue Gang* (Figure 47), was painted by him using the method of Socialist Realism. However, for Wintringham it was not Socialist Realist enough. While naming and praising the work of fellow-Communists James Boswell, Edith Tudor-Hart and James Lucas, Wintringham devoted a large section of his review to a detailed criticism of Rowe's painting:

> C H Rowe's large canvas 'The Pit Rescue Gang', of two men carrying a stretcher, has a robust, almost monumental solidity with its main figures but makes the secondary figures, women and men at the pithead watching for the dead, seem rather insignificant … The artist has not perhaps felt entirely the continual unquiet and undertone of anxiety and waiting that dominates a pit village everyday while the men are below ground, the waiting that is

[305] T.H. Wintringham, 'Artists' International', *Left Review*, November 1934, p. 40.
[306] Herbert Read, 'What is Revolutionary Art?', in *5 on Revolutionary Art*, (London: Artists' International, 1935), p. 12.

> gathered not into a tension that is of despair and mourning, but of racking hope. This tension is not in Rowe's painting; therefore it gives a feeling of being a static pose and not alive.[307]

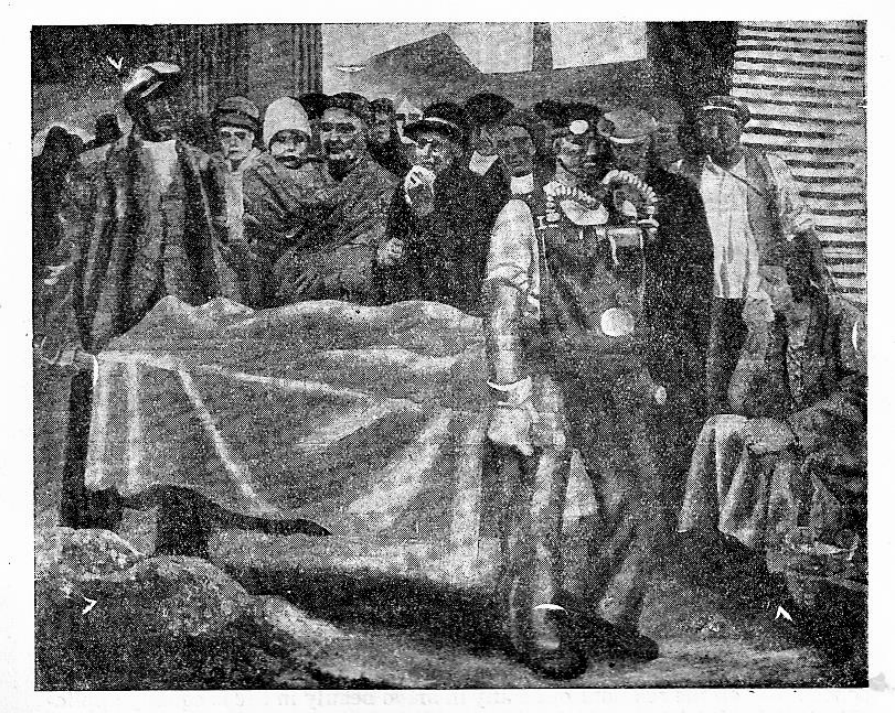

Figure 47: Cliff Rowe: *The Pit Rescue Gang,* 1934. Monotone image. The British Library.

Not only that, according to Wintringham Rowe also failed to take account of the industrial context in which the miners worked – the pithead trestles, the range of machinery, the buildings and so on – 'the vast machine' that entombs the miners. All of this would have been depicted in a genuinely Socialist Realist work of art. Echoing Zhdanov's strictures on how the socialist writer should portray the proletariat in fiction, Wintringham wrote:

> Yet how can the industrial worker, maker and product of the machine and the factory, be represented in full relief if the factory and the machine are left out of account?[308]

How Rowe reacted to this criticism from a senior member of the Party can only be imagined. Like so much of this period in his life, he has written little. However, given his past experience with gallery owners and their attempts to channel his art into particular directions, he would not have taken it well, not least because Wintringham had no background or expertise in art. As for Wintringham himself, it is possible that his criticism of Rowe was as much motivated by resentment that the Artists' International was generally seen as the most successful manifestation of the 'cultural

[307] Wintringham, 'Artists' International', p. 41.
[308] Wintringham, 'Artists' International,' p. 41.

Comintern' in Britain, as by comradely concern for the artist's failings. Indeed, Wintringham's attempts to make *Left Review* the nucleus of a British section of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers never succeeded and the Artists' International remained the main body for advancing revolutionary ideas in the British cultural sphere. Rowe's attitude to *Left Review* (and Wintringham) may be indicated by the fact that though AI members Binder, Boswell, Fitton and Lucas regularly contributed drawings and cartoons, not a single article or picture came from Rowe throughout the journal's four-year existence.

In the meantime Rowe's marriage to Anna was foundering. She had been reluctant to leave Moscow where she had a career in education and now found it difficult to adjust to their impoverished life in London:

> Although I was attracted and deeply in love, I still had a rankling doubt about the whole affair. We were irritable, quarrelled a lot, had difficulty in communicating though he was very verbal. I felt inadequate and insecure. Still I sort of drifted along to London where la vie boheme in crowded one room apartments on very little money proceeded to lose its romance.[309]

They thought that having a child might bring them closer together, and in June 1934 their son Jasper (Jack) was born. Although they had both wanted their child, the pressures on the marriage became too great and in February 1935 they parted, with Anna taking baby Jack to New York.[310]

Towards the end of 1934 the Artists' International received an invitation from the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists to provide paintings, drawings and sculptures for an exhibition of Western revolutionary art which was to tour the major cities in the USSR.[311] Rowe's submissions included two Socialist Realist paintings, 'The Pit Rescue Gang' and 'Demonstration' renamed 'Catastrophe in the Mine' and 'Struggle with Strikebreakers' (Figure 48) for the Soviet exhibition. The two paintings received a mixed reception in Moscow when they were shown at the Museum of New Western Art in July 1935. A review by the critic A. Tilman in *Sovietskoe Iskusstvo* (Soviet Art) unlike

[309] Letter, Anna Rowe to Jack Rowe, 1980. I am grateful to Jack Rowe for sharing this letter with me.
[310] Anna Rowe to Jack Rowe, 1980. After returning to the US, Anna worked for many years as a teacher in Puerto Rico. On moving to San Francisco in 1963 she continued her involvement in radical politics, working for the Civil Rights movement and later with the Vietnam war protest movement. She maintained her married name and still kept in touch with Cliff Rowe. Her work in helping build the Artists' International has been largely unacknowledged.
[311] A.L. Meblin, Secretary, Artists' International, 'Special Notice', 1934. TGA 771/1/3, Tate Gallery Archives, London.

Wintringham's, praised Rowe for his realism but criticized the works on the more conventional ground of artistic technique:

> Less interesting are the works of English artists in the field of oil painting. Clifford Rowe stands out as a master of realistic composition. His paintings 'Struggle with Strikebreakers' and 'Catastrophe in the Mine' are thematically significant. But they are weak in a picturesque sense. Rowe must learn to master colour better.[312]

Wintringham's criticism of the way Rowe depicted emotion in *The Pit Rescue Gang* could also be made of *Struggle with Strikebreakers*. The faces of those caught in this picket-line confrontation are near expressionless, their positioning almost posed. There is none of the dynamism, the exuberance, the optimism, the humour of Rowe's painting for the 1933 Red Army exhibition, *The Struggle*

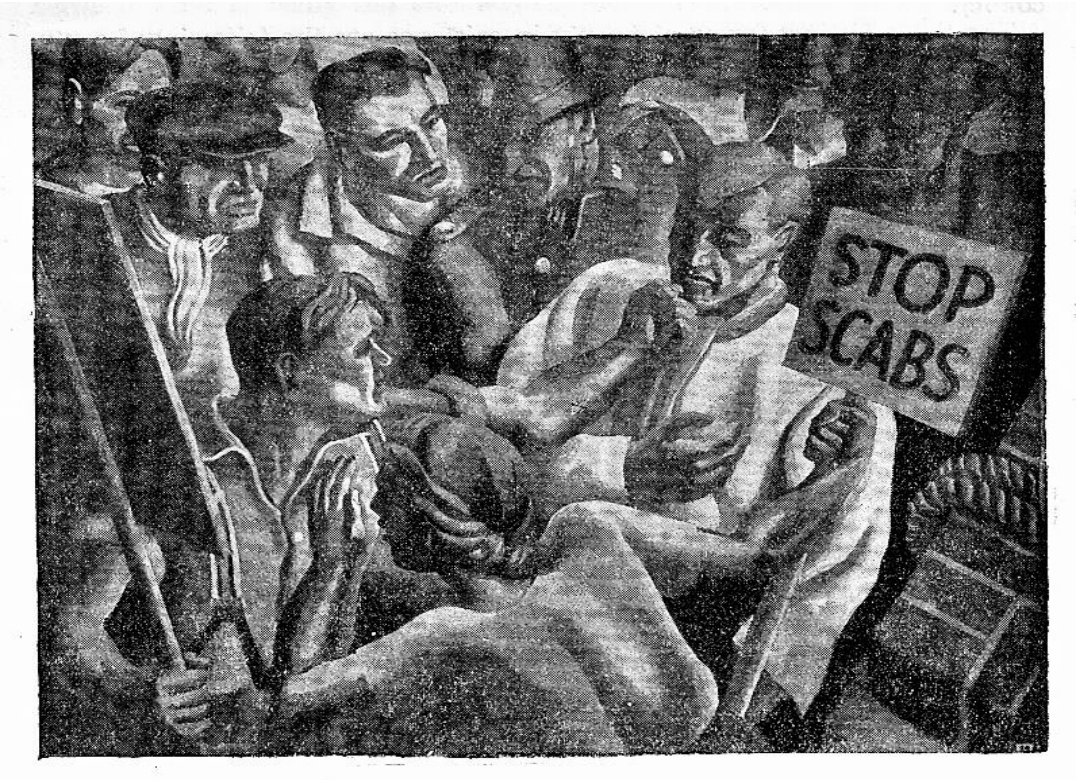

Figure 48: Cliff Rowe. *Struggle with Strikebreakers,* 1934. Monochrome image. The British Library.

between the Unemployed and the Police, though Rowe has again included his 'Joe' figure as a key character. Monochrome reproductions of both paintings were printed in *International Literature,* and currently these are the only known images.[313]

[312] GARF, E. Tilman, 'Vystavka angliiskikh khudozhnikov' (Exhibition of English Artists), *Sovietskoe Iskusstvo,* 1935, No.33, p. 2.
[313] 'Two English Paintings by C. H. Rowe', *International Literature* (8) 1935, p. 41.

Rowe tried to retrieve the paintings and his other works through his contacts with *International Literature* but with no success, as a letter to him from Walt Carman, one of the journal's editors, indicates:

> I have practically given up hopes of getting a hold of the paintings and drawings which you sent to the MBRX (sic). They use their things for exhibit purposes and it is damn hard chasing them.[314]

The likelihood is that they stayed in Russia, and it is possible that they still exist, though so far efforts to locate them have been unsuccessful.

Another of Rowe's works shown in the Moscow exhibition is worthy of note. It was an anti-monarchist poster designed by him as part of a campaign against the celebration of George V's Silver Jubilee in 1935 (Figure 49). It is a particularly savage image which clearly demonstrates the Constructivist influences on Rowe's art and is far removed from Socialist Realism. It was produced under the auspices of Artists International and caused a considerable stir in London where it was widely distributed.

Figure 49: Cliff Rowe. *Jubilee,* 1935. Poster design.

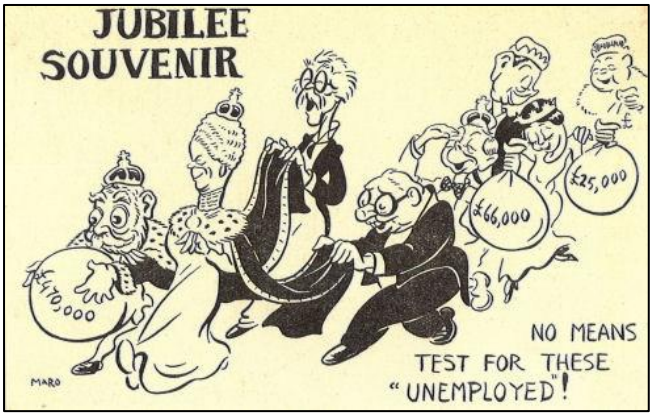

Figure 50: Maro*, Daily Worker* cartoonist. *Jubilee Souvenir,* 1935.

[314] RGALI (*Rossiĭskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva*) Russian State Archive of Literature and Art. Letters from *Internatsional`naya literatura* (International Literature) to C.H. Rowe, F.1397. Op. 1. D. 908.L.1. Box 650.

Rowe's poster was part of a wider national campaign against the monarchy mounted by the CPGB. Party instructions to local branches outlined ways in which Jubilee celebrations could be legally disrupted,[315] and suggested that inspiration could be found in an article in *Left Review* on how James Connolly and Irish socialists campaigned against Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in Dublin in 1897.[316] Indeed, the Party's anti-monarchism had provided a large boost to the sales of the *Daily Worker*, whose Maro cartoons lampooning the Royal Family were popular among working-class readers (Figure 50).[317] However, the Party's uncompromising anti-monarchist stance was coming under pressure from an unexpected quarter - the Comintern. In March 1935, to the dismay of the Party leadership, orders came from Moscow to ease back on attacks on the monarchy.[318] This instruction seems to have been resisted, as the anti-Jubilee activities went ahead as planned, but it was an indicator that a major change of Comintern policy was underway.

From an International to an Association

At the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in July/August 1935 the Comintern's move away from 'Third Period' Communism was completed with the adoption of the Popular Front policy – a broad alliance of parties and organisations opposed to fascism, whatever their political affiliations. It had become clear that Germany's rearmament and belligerent nationalism now posed a grave threat to the Soviet Union. The international workers' revolution – previously seen as being the only way to defeat fascism - had to take second place to the defence of the socialist homeland, an essential requirement in line with Stalin's 'Socialism in One Country' policy. A new version of the United Front was now to include not only socialist parties, trade unions, and organisations, but all those opposed to fascism, including capitalist and nationalist parties, as well as religious and cultural organisations. Stalin's greatest fear was that Germany would forge an alliance with Britain and France against Soviet Russia, an alliance that would be even more likely if the USSR were seen fomenting revolution in the capitalist countries and their colonies.[319]

This was not an abrupt change, having been signaled by the creation of the 'Front Populaire' of Communists and Socialists in France in 1934. Indeed, the Congress had been delayed for several months as international events unfolded (including the Soviet Union's admission to the League of

[315] 'Communist party and the war', TNA KV 3/390, The National Archives.
[316] Ajax, 'Connolly and Another Jubilee', *Left Review*, April 1935, 7, pp. 241-246.
[317] 'Maro' was William Desmond Rowney, a CPGB and AI member, killed in 1937 fighting in Spain with the International Brigade.
[318] Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: the authorised history of MI5*, (London: Allen Lane, 2009), pp. 178-179.
[319] Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern*, p. 137.

Nations), and to enable discussions to take place within the international Communist movement.[320] The new policy was warmly endorsed by the CPGB leadership, riven as it had been by the internal dissensions over the 'Class against Class' policy. Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary, had contributed to the Seventh Congress discussion by pointing out how a change in policy was needed to meet the conditions of operating in Britain.[321]

Alongside these developments, the Artists' International changed its political stance. However, it is not the case that this came about simply as a direct response to the new line emerging from the Seventh Congress. The AI for some time had been aware of the need to broaden the base of its support among British artists. As AI Secretary Betty Rea observed, in its first year 'it had not thought of artists qua artists – but only in connection with the needs of the working classes' but now the political landscape was changing. [322] As early as March 1935 discussions had taken place within the AI as to how it could widen its appeal so that the more established artists could be attracted to supporting a major art exhibition planned for the autumn. It was agreed that this was best done through emphasising the cultural dangers posed by fascism as well as its political threats, and to write to twenty leading artists with this message to enlist their support.[323]

The response was encouraging. A letter from AI secretary Betty Rea *to International Literature* named established artists Laura Knight, Duncan Grant and Ethelbert White among those 'expressing solidarity' with the AI. There were others who, though sympathetic, were not convinced of the necessity of engaging in political action. 'Nevertheless', wrote Rea, 'It was clear that a carefully formulated manifesto, protest or broad action would gain open support of several of these artists'. She concluded:

> Altogether it is clear that there is a leftward movement growing among progressive artists of all sections. The need of the moment is for the correct leadership and the creation of channels of activity and organisation which will enable these artists and students to unite in action against the attacks of the capitalist class on progress in culture and the approach of fascism and war.[324]

[320] Kermit E McKenzie, 'The Soviet Union, the Comintern and World Revolution: 1935.' *Political Science Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (1950): p. 218.
[321] Branson, *CPGB History 1927-41*, p. 128.
[322] Artists International Association, 'The First Five Years', quoted in Radford, *Art for a Purpose*, p. 42.
[323] Betty Rea, 'British Artists go Left', *International Literature*, Number 4, 1935, pp. 100-103.
[324] Rea, 'British Artists'.

It is reasonable to assume that Rea (by now a Party member) was echoing a policy then being discussed within the CPGB artists' group, and that Rowe would have played a significant role in the debate. The discussion would have been informed by the direct experiences of German Jewish artists and teachers forced from their livelihoods by the Nazis and now living as refugees in Britain. Among those arriving in London during 1933/34 were the artists Erna Auerbach, Martin Bloch, Georg Ehrlich, Hans Feibusch, Fritz Kraemer, and the art historian and philosopher Frederick Antal, all of whom came to be supported by the Artists' International.[325]

The 'correct leadership' proposed in Rea's letter soon bore fruit. The call for artists to contribute to the exhibition *Artists against Fascism and War* issued in April by 'Artists' International (British Section)', was signed by 'progressive artists' Eric Gill, Duncan Grant, Augustus John, Laura Knight, Henry Moore, and Paul Nash.[326] When the July/August *Artists International Bulletin* was issued shortly after the Comintern Congress, its masthead had been changed from 'The International Unity of Artists against Imperialist war on the Soviet Union, Fascism and colonial oppression' to 'The unity of artists against Fascism and War and the Suppression of Culture'.[327]

By the time *Artists against Fascism and War* opened in November 1935 the alignment with the politics of the Popular Front was well underway. The name of the organisation itself had been changed from 'Artists International' (with its Comintern connotations), to the softer 'Artists' International Association' (AIA). There was no formal public announcement of the title change. It was displayed for the first time on the cover of the exhibition catalogue along with the slogan 'For Cultural Progress and Expansion, Freedom of Work, Speech and Expression'.[328] However, a leaflet inserted into the programme titled *We Believe* rather confusingly described the organisation as 'the British Section of the Artists International Association', suggesting that the break with the earlier identity was neither complete nor a single event but an ongoing process:

> The British Section of the Artists International Association is part of this movement of intellectuals, cooperates with the branches abroad, and with the writers', architects' and actors' organisations in that country. We carry on propaganda by means of exhibitions, publications and meetings, and by direct art work for all anti-war and anti-fascist organisations.[329]

[325] Morris and Radford, *AIA,* p. 52.
[326] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 29.
[327] *Artists International Bulletin*, July/August 1935, HUNOT/2/4, Bishopsgate Institute, London.
[328] Artists' International Association, *1935 Exhibition Artists Against Fascism and War*, November 1935, TGA 4/9/327.
[329] AIA, *Artists Against Fascism and War.*

It is not clear if there had been any opposition within the AI to the change of title, but a later remark by Edith Simon, describing the name change as 'the revolutionist noun turned into an innocuous adjective' suggests that not all the activist members were happy with the change. She also noted that Cliff Rowe, in 'a sacrifice to the Popular Front', was ordered by the Party to shave off his goatee beard, because it was considered to be too Bohemian an image. [330] The AIA retained its CPGB-inspired organisational structure, though now with an additional body to enhance its broader appeal to the British art world. This was the Advisory Council, to be composed of invited established artists and other leading cultural figures. Its constitutional role, as the title suggests, was to advise the Central Committee on matters of art and culture but its wider political role was to provide reassurance to the art establishment that the AIA had now abandoned the revolutionary aims of its founders. In this it was successful, but the Advisory Council was to provide a locus of internal dissension and opposition to the Communist influence in the AIA as the harmony of the Popular Front faded in the months leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

It is a tribute to the organising ability of Rowe and his comrades on the AIA Central Committee that the exhibition *Against Fascism and War* was planned, arranged and mounted in just over seven months. It opened on 13 November at 28 Soho Square, London, a townhouse transformed into an art gallery by AIA members. It brought together works from 179 artists representing a broad range of artistic styles, from abstract to Socialist Realist, and included some of the more celebrated names of the time. There was also an international section, with works from French, Dutch, Polish and Soviet artists.[331] During the two weeks in which it was held it was visited by over 6000 people and was judged by *Left Review* to have had a public impact not seen since Wyndham Lewis' Vorticist exhibition of 1915.[332] Among the exhibits was an oil painting by Cliff Rowe, *Canvassing with the Daily Worker*. Reviewing the exhibition for *Left Review* in January 1936, the writer Montagu Slater (a CPGB member) was critical of Rowe's contribution:

> Others…like C.H. Rowe in 'Canvassing with the Daily Worker'… attempt to absorb vitality from a vital subject matter and do not succeed because they have turned from the thing expressed to its own expressions in other forms. It is as difficult to write a poem about a poem or paint a picture of a picture as to paint or carve a demonstration. Demonstrations and meetings are art forms in themselves. [333]

[330] Edith Simon, 'Eye Witness', *Moderation be Damned.*
[331] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 29.
[332] Montagu Slater, 'Artists' International Exhibition 1935', *Left Review,* January 1936, p. 161.
[333] Slater, 'Artists' International Exhibition', p. 164.

This observation brings to mind Winteringham's critique of *The Social Scene*, that 'leftist' artists were more concerned with the forms of working-class struggle than with workers themselves. Rowe was not the only Communist artist to be criticised by Slater. James Fitton, James Boswell and the Hungarian sculptor Peter Lazlo Peri were condemned for 'failing to provide answers' to the questions their works raised. Slater deplored the lack of 'warmth, colour and vitality' and called for more positive messages, quoting from Nikolai Bukharin's address to the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress that 'the new man that is being born and the whole world of his emotions… are the province of socialist art'.[334] Rowe, who had read all he could about Socialist Realism and would have been well aware of Bukharin's address, would also have known that in the same speech Bukharin stated that:

> Socialist realism is distinguished from other realism by the fact that it inevitably focuses attention on the portrayal of the building of socialism, the struggle of the proletariat, of the new man, and all the manifold complexities of 'connections and settings' of the great historical process of our day.[335]

If, as stated by Slater, socialist artists should not try to 'absorb vitality' from the *forms* of working-class struggle, then how were they to portray 'the struggle of the proletariat', which, according to Bukharin, was what distinguished Socialist Realism? This illustrates the reality that at this time there was no clear consensus as to what constituted Socialist Realism even in the Soviet Union, much less in the West. The different Russian art groupings which had been brought together in 1932 into an all-embracing union of artists continued their bitter feuding with their own conceptions of Socialist Realism, so that meaningful definitions were contingent on which faction was in the ascendency within the bureaucracy of the Soviet art world.[336] It was not even clear if Socialist Realism should be considered a 'method' (i.e. a technique, a view held by Rowe), or a 'style', suggesting the existence of a coherent philosophy behind the artwork. An attempt to explain Socialist Realism to a Western audience by the Soviet writer A. Y. Arosev, published in a special edition of *The Studio* in 1935, only added to the confusion on this crucial point:

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[334] Slater, 'Artists' International Exhibition' p. 164.

[335] Marxists Internet Archive, Nikolai Bukharin: Poetry, Poetics and the Problems of Poetry in the U.S.S.R. - 1. Poetry. Accessed October 2024.

[336] Susan E. Reid, 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The Industry of Socialism Art Exhibition, 1935-41', *The Russian Review* , April 2001, Vol. 60, No 2, p. 154.

> Soviet art began to master the creative method which determined the whole of its development, *vis*. the method of Socialist Realism. Naturally, the creation of a style of Socialist Realism presupposes a wide competition among the various art tendencies.[337]

The prevailing view of Soviet art within the AIA at this time is perhaps best summed up by Jack Lindsay (Viscount Hastings) in his address to the 'Congress of Peace and Friendship with the USSR' held in London in December 1935. While extolling the material progress of the Soviet Union, he acknowledged its art had not developed to the same degree:

> It is perhaps also true that no great movement in art or literature has as yet developed. The struggle has been too intense, the time too short.[338]

Rowe wrote later that 1936 was the year that he finally abandoned his efforts to produce Socialist Realist art. It is possible that *Canvassing the Daily Worker* was his last attempt, and that it was the issues raised in Slater's review that convinced him of the futility of his efforts.

If the success of the *Artists Against Fascism and War* exhibition provided a boost to the AIA because of its inclusive approach, there was another aspect of it which posed a serious challenge for the Communist members. The AIA had achieved a major coup in persuading the writer Aldous Huxley to write the introduction to the exhibition catalogue. In doing so it exposed some of the perils inherent in Popular Front politics. Huxley began his contribution thus:

> The work in this exhibition is being shown as a protest against Fascism and War. Personally, I should have preferred to 'Fascism' the more general term 'dictatorship', for I am convinced that, however admirable the ends proposed by the dictators, any form of dictatorship is intrinsically bad. Good ends never justify bad means for the simple reason that, in the process of being used, the bad means change the good ends, so that what in fact is reached is not the goal originally proposed, but some other and worse goal.[339]

He went on to describe how the 'good artist', like the 'good citizen', is 'self-controlled, scrupulous, conscientious', qualities that are scorned by 'warlords and dictators' who only require 'a passive obedience, which they are able to extort because they have previously imposed on them a mechanical discipline from without'. It was clear that Huxley had Stalin in mind when he wrote of 'good ends' being used to justify 'bad means', and whom he numbered among the 'warlords and

[337] Quoted in Reid, 'Socialist Realism', p. 155.
[338] *Britain and the Soviets. The Congress of Peace and Friendship with the USSR,* (London: M. Lawrence, 1936), p. 78.
[339] Aldous Huxley, 'Foreword', AIA, *Artists Against Fascism and War.*

dictators'. The implications were also clear to the Comintern. A week after the exhibition closed, Pearl Binder was in Moscow to report to M.S. Veleskayan of the Anglo-American Commission of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Writers (IBRW) on progress in the arts and literature in Britain, an indication that the AIA was still seen by the Comintern as the key contact in the British cultural sphere. Binder sought, somewhat clumsily, to downplay the significance of Huxley's introduction. A summary by Veleskayan of their conversation included the following:

> Aldous Huxley has written an introduction to the programme for an antifascist exhibition. At my request to show it, she answered that it was unimportant as it was only for the name, but she needs to send this material to another organisation, but she promised to reprint it in a couple of days. His first sentence is something like this: 'The exhibition is called anti-fascist and against wars. The words 'Anti-Fascist' I would like replaced with the general word 'Dictatorship''! *(Exclamation as in the original)* [340]

As well as being a cause of embarrassment for Binder, the issues raised by Huxley's introduction also exposed where the AIA was most vulnerable in its mission to create a broad alliance of artists against fascism – the fact that many of its members openly embraced a regime that had shown itself to be just as capable of suppressing artistic freedom as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Possibly under the prompting of the IBRW but more likely because the CP members recognised the danger of Huxley's statements, the AIA responded swiftly and decided to meet the challenge head-on. Just two weeks after Binder's meeting with Veleskayan, the AIA announced the formation of an open discussion group to debate the question of arts in a dictatorship:

> The Artists' International Association, Architects' and Technicians' Organisation and the Left Review have arranged a joint Discussion Circle.
>
> The subject will be the position of Painting, Literature and Architecture in Soviet Russia on the one side, and in other European countries, especially Germany and Italy, on the other. One of the chief aims of the discussion will be to answer the current view that the position of under 'dictators', whether they are from the Left or the Right, is identical. [341]

A series of weekly meetings, open to the public, was advertised, with speakers including architects Wells Coates and Berthold Lubetkin, the poet Alec Brown, and the writers Montagu Slater and Alick West (all of whom were known to be sympathetic to the Communist Party). The first meeting was

[340] RGASPI *(Rossiĭskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii*) Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History. 'Conversation of the English artist Pearl Binder with M.S Veleskayan', F. 541. Op. 1. D. 50.
[341] Artists' International Association, Bulletin No.2, December 1935, HUNOT/2/4, 1935-1937.

scheduled for 4 January 1936 and was reported in the following *AIA Bulletin*. Alick West made the introductory speech in which he did not challenge the designation of Soviet Russia as a dictatorship, but sought to draw a distinction with the Fascist states by addressing the class basis of the different dictatorships:

> His main point was that to make a proper study of Art produced in the countries under dictatorships, we must be clear first, as to what kind of dictatorship they represent. He traced the historical development in Germany, the USSR, and in Italy from the War to the present time, and dealt with the question of which class is imposing the dictatorship in those countries, and what is the meaning of 'Freedom' in relationship to the society in which we live.[342]

The same theme was continued over the following sessions as speakers from the world of literature, architecture and engineering contrasted the approaches of the two kinds of dictatorship in their respective fields.[343] One of the speakers on art was Cliff Rowe, who drew on his own experiences of working in Russia to describe the life of the artist in the Soviet Union. His main point was that Soviet art should be considered as part of the centrally-planned Soviet economy:

> The difference between culture in the USSR and other countries is primarily the question of planning. Art production, like every other social activity, is organised in the same way as industrial, agricultural and educational production. Consequently, the artist and the student are regarded as necessary and valuable workers in society. Their education, development, and production is, as far as is consistent with individual freedom, organised, protected and expanded.[344]

He went on to explain how promising students and amateur artists identified in schools, factories and collective farms were given sponsorship to develop their talents at art and design schools. There was plenty of work available for both graphic and fine artists through a wide variety of commissioning bodies, all overseen by the all-powerful Artists' Union of the USSR which had complete control of the assignment of artists' contracts. He concluded:

[342] Artists' International Association, Bulletin No.3, January 1936, HUNOT/2/4, 1935-1937.
[343] Artists' International Association, Bulletin No.4, February 1936, HUNOT/2/4, 1935-1937.
[344] AIA Bulletin No.4.

> Art in the USSR has changed from a product and activity for the few, to a matter in which the whole people is concerned and interested, bringing forward tremendous reserves of talent which would in other conditions be stifled.[345]

What he did not mention was that his experience in Russia, even in those early days when Socialist Realism had not yet taken hold, showed how the system also acted to stifle originality and creativity. The need to obtain sponsorship and commissions required artists to negotiate their way through the various committees and interests to get the support they needed, and this was more easily done by conforming to the prevailing orthodoxy, whatever that might be.[346] His hopeful assertion that the Soviet system developed and supported artists 'as far as is consistent with individual freedom' suggests either a naive faith in the USSR or, more likely, he felt obliged to mask the reality that individual artistic freedom was tightly restricted. Other AIA artists would also have been aware of the dire state of Soviet art. Betty Rea, who had visited the USSR in 1934 to photograph contemporary Russian painting, later wrote that:

> I found the rot already setting in. False, blown-up 'commercials' – reminding one of Ovaltine posters – were being boosted and I had a memorable evening in difficult argument with a group of painters over this (to them) New Trend. Deineka, the only painter who rose to stature in the earlier period of 'War Communism', was being denigrated by them.[347]

This was reported by Rea in 1957, but it is highly likely she would have shared this with her fellow-Communists at the time

The threat of a possible division in the AIA over the question of arts in a dictatorship was averted by events abroad. In July 1936 the Army under General Franco attempted to overthrow Spain's newly-elected Popular Front government and the Spanish Civil War began. The impact of this event on the AIA was profound, bringing home to its members the reality of fascism spreading through Europe. Writing in 1957, AIA member Julian Trevelyan remembered:

> …until the Spanish War started in 1936, there was an air of gentle frivolity about our life in London. True, the Hitler terror had begun , and refugees were pouring into England. Moreover, it was clear from Abyssinia and Japan that war and violence were to be the order

[345] AIA Bulletin No.4.
[346] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[347] Betty Rea, letter to *Realism,* 8 February 1957. CP-CENT-CULT- 07, Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) Archive**.** Labour History Archive and Study Centre, People's History Museum, Manchester.

> of the day… but for the next three years our thoughts and conscience were turned to Spain.[348]

During those three years AIA, by now over 600 strong and representing a broad range of artists and artistic styles, ran a nation-wide campaign to raise funds for the Spanish Republican cause and to heighten awareness of the dangers of fascism. Some of them gave their lives. The first Briton to die in the conflict was an AIA artist, Felicia Browne. She was a London Communist, killed in August 1936 fighting with a workers' militia group outside Barcelona. Her death inspired other young artists to make the political commitment to fight against fascism at home and abroad. Another early casualty was William Rowney, the *Daily Worker* cartoonist Maro, killed at the battle of Jarama. Others joined the International Brigade, including Clive Branson and Hugh Slater.[349] Cliff Rowe played a major part in the AIA activities to support the Spanish Republic, including helping raise funds to buy and equip an ambulance for the International Brigade (Figure 51).

Figure 51: Photograph of the AIA ambulance taken outside the House of Commons, 1937. Cliff Rowe is on the left of the line-up, giving the clenched fist Communist salute. The photograph illustrates the significant number of women artists active in the AIA. Getty Images.

[348] Quoted in Simon Martin, *Conscience and Conflict: British Artists and the Spanish Civil War,* (Chichester: Pallant House Gallery, 2014), p. 35.
[349] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, pp. 31-32.

Figure 52: Cliff Rowe (?). *Help Spain,* 1937. Poster.

Figure 53: Cliff Rowe (?). *Help Spain* detail.

He also produced in 1937 one of the most striking British posters portraying the suffering of the Spanish people (Figure 52). Rowe has never been credited as the designer of this poster, which in exhibitions and publications is described as the work of an 'unknown artist' despite being clearly in his style.[350] A likely explanation is that the top of his signature 'R.' was obscured (Figure 53), rendering it as 'K.', a mysterious artist who has never been identified. Whether this was a fault in the printing process, or a deliberate act by Rowe before production, is not known. He may have been dissatisfied with the finished product on aesthetic grounds and did not wish to be associated with it. Alternatively, it may have been because of a personal or political quarrel, as with his withdrawal of his work from the Goupil Gallery exhibition. For reasons best known to himself, he never claimed ownership, although he had opportunity to do so.

[350] See, for instance, Martin, *Conscience and Conflict* p. 6; Morris and Radford, 'AIA', p. 32.

Stalin's fish supper: the enigma of Cliff Rowe's *The Fried Fish Shop*

It was during 1936, while the public debates about art and dictatorship were underway, that Rowe produced an enigmatic painting which marked his abandonment of Socialist Realism - *The Fried Fish Shop* (Figure 54). What follows is a detailed exploration of the painting and Rowe's intentions in making it. As with any appraisal of a work of art, it is subjective and is underpinned by a degree of speculation, yet the evidence suggests a radical re-interpretation of this painting is required. It was first shown at an exhibition of contemporary art at Leicester Art Gallery in May 1936, after which it was bought by the Gallery for the sum of eight guineas and still forms part of its collection.[351] It is Rowe's most exhibited work and has featured in exhibitions in the UK and in France, where it has been presented as an example of British 'social realist' art of the 1930s.[352]

Figure 54: Cliff Rowe. *The Fried Fish Shop,* 1936. Oil on panel, 59.5 x 112.8 cm.

The scene depicted is the interior of a fried fish shop (Figure 54). This is no greasy, steamy fish and chip shop, a setting often used to illustrate working-class life. It is a rather more sedate scene, respectable even. The shop appears to be clean, well-lit and efficiently operated, with separate areas for counter service, food preparation, and tea making. The marble-topped wrought iron tables are comfortably separated, the chairs sturdy but tasteful. There is additional dining space upstairs, indicated by the sign 'Supper Room' over a staircase. Two scripted signs advertise 'fresh fish daily' and 'Harry's for Quality'.

[351] Communication from Simon Lake, New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester, to Sandra Thornberry, 22 August 2017.
[352] Patrick Elliott and Sascha Llewellyn, *True to Life. British Realist Painting in the 1920s & 1930s*, (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2017).

There are twelve figures, three staff and nine customers. Three of the customers, two men and a small girl, stand at the counter. A dark-coated woman ascends the staircase to the 'Supper Room'. Two of the tables are occupied by couples, while at a third table there is a man eating alone. The staff are dressed in crisp white, engaged in their tasks with that quiet concentration which is a feature of Rowe's depictions of people at work. The man being served is shabbily dressed, his flat cap and rolled up newspaper in his pocket suggesting that he is working class. The small girl clutching a shopping bag seems to be with the man. The third customer, dressed in overcoat and trilby hat, has a faint air of seediness, and seems to be taking a close interest in the man and the girl.

One of the seated couples appear to be middle-class, the woman wearing a fur-trimmed coat and hat, her male companion dressed in a suit and hat. The social class of the other couple is more difficult to determine. The woman wears a striking white coat and perky green hat, and the man sitting opposite her sports a red scarf, crossed around his neck in the manner of a working-class muffler. The final figure is seated alone. Occupying the centre of the painting, he dominates the whole scene both by his positioning and his appearance. He is wearing what appears to be a dark blue uniform coat and has distinctly 'foreign' features. A faint smile plays around his lips.

Figure 55: The Fried Fish Shop detail.

Figure 56: Edith Tudor-Hart, *'Sedition?',* 1934. The British Library

The first clue as to Rowe's intentions in this painting can be found in the figure in the bottom left of the painting, the man in the trench coat. This individual brings to mind the photograph by Edith Tudor-Hart which featured in the *Social Scene* exhibition held in 1934. Titled *Sedition?* it showed three plainclothes policemen at an outdoor political meeting, one of them apparently taking notes of what was being said. Tom Wintringham's review of the exhibition in *Left Review* remarked on the power of the image:

> But one of Edith Tudor-Hart's photographs … is called "Sedition?" and shows three detectives taking notes at a meeting. The expression on the face of one of these "gentlemen" is indescribable in print.[353]

Rowe's rendition of this figure strongly suggests that he is one of Tudor-Hart's policeman, a reference that would have been recognisable to many of Rowe's contemporaries (Figures 55 and 56)

Figure 57: Percy Horton. *Unemployed Man,* c.1929. Oil on panel, 44.5 x 36.2 cm.

Figure 58: Percy Horton. *Kay,* c.1930. Unknown medium and dimensions.

The working-class figure suggests a work by another artist and AIA member, Percy Horton, whose work Rowe greatly admired. His *Unemployed Man*, painted around 1929, is a portrait of a working-class man wearing a flat cap, muffler and overcoat. As with the policeman, Rowe has turned the figure around to show a back view of the same man. The young girl is likely to be Horton's daughter Kay, a favourite subject of the artist (Figures 57 and 58).

Figure 59: The Fried Fish Shop detail.

Figure 60: Harry Pollitt, *Daily Worker* photograph,1936.

[353] T.H. Wintringham, 'Artists' International', *Left Review*, November 1934, p. 2.

The eponymous 'Harry' figure serving behind the counter is most likely to be Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary of the CPGB, and the woman in the corner at the fish-fryer could be Kay Beauchamp, a senior Party administrator and *Daily Worker* executive who worked closely with Pollitt (Figures 59, 60, 61, 62).

Figure 61: The Fried Fish Shop detail.

Figure 62: Kay Beauchamp, *Daily Worker photograph,* 1939.

Figure 63: The Fried Fish Shop detail.

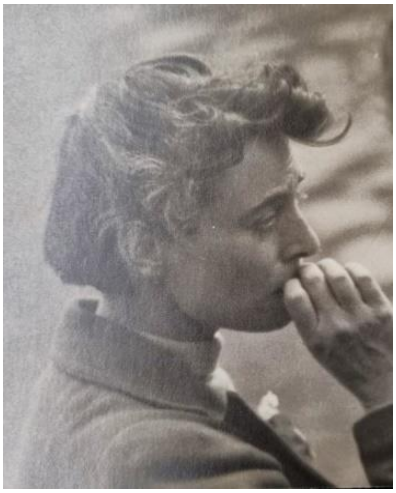

Figure 64: Elizabeth Watson in 1937. Marx Memorial Library.

The woman serving behind the tea counter may be Elizabeth Watson, a Party member who succeeded Betty Rea as AIA Secretary in 1936. Above her is a shelf containing a radio, a tall cylindrical pot, and a smaller jar, images that could be interpreted as a rebus spelling out the letters 'AIA' (Figures 63 and 64).

Figure 65: The Fried Fish Shop detail

Figure 66: Clive and Noreen Branson c.1942. Marx Memorial Library.

The well-dressed couple is likely to be Clive and Noreen Branson, both well-known to Rowe. They came from wealthy upper-class families but renounced their privileged backgrounds and devoted themselves to the Communist cause, choosing to live in Battersea, a working-class area of London. Noreen's allegiance is playfully indicated by the red flag draped over the back of her chair, a contrast to her expensive coat and hat. She was a writer who later produced two volumes of the official history of the Party. Clive was a painter who in 1931 had given up his art to work full-time for the CPGB, though later he took up his painting again.[354] Both were occasional participants in AIA meetings (Figures 65 and 66).[355]

The identity of the figure of the woman climbing the staircase to the 'Supper Room' is not clear. There is no obvious link to the Party, the AIA or to another artwork. The fact that Rowe has chosen to include her in this setting indicates that she has some significance for him. To her left is a draped white cloth suggesting a shroud, an image that is symbolic of death and mourning (Figure 67). Could she be Rowe's mother, who died when he was eight years old after a long and painful illness in the upper room above her shop in Wimbledon?

Figure 67: The Fried Fish Shop detail.

The other couple on the right of the painting is Rowe himself (now shorn of his goatee beard as instructed by the Party), and his wife Anna. She is identifiable by the pillbox hat, also seen in a drawing of her by Rowe in Moscow in 1933 (Figures 68, 69, 70). In 1935 Anna had left Rowe to return to the US, her absence indicated by her being presented with her back to the viewer. In the

[354] Christine Lindey, *Art for All: British Socially Committed Art from the 1930s to the Cold War*, (London: Artery Publications, 2018), pp. 17, 46.
[355] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 28.

painting, Rowe is clearly distracted from conversing with Anna, an acknowledgement, perhaps, of the state of their relationship as seen by his wife.

Figure 68: The Fried Fish Shop detail.

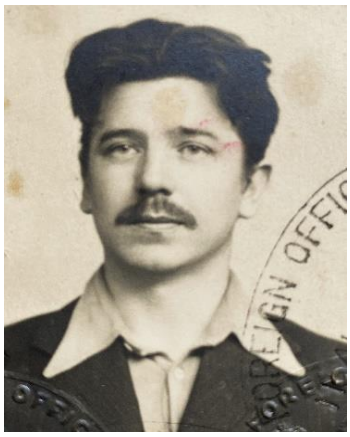

Figure 69: Cliff Rowe passport photograph, 1935.

Figure 70: Cliff Rowe. Untitled drawing of Anna Meblin, 1933. Pencil on paper.

In the painting 'Rowe' appears to be gazing intently at the man seated alone in the centre of room, who seems to be unnoticed by all the other characters. This figure is intended to be a representation of Stalin, a younger, slimmer version, but recognisable nevertheless with his Georgian features and military greatcoat. To emphasise the connection, Rowe paints the fish supper on his plate in the form of a hammer and sickle (Figures 71 and 72).

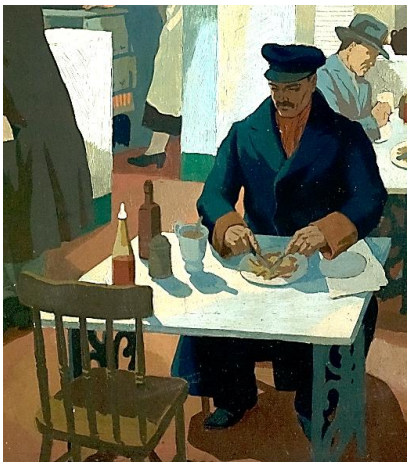

Figure 71: The Fried Fish Shop detail.

Figure 72: Stalin in 1936. Getty Images.

Why is the young Stalin being shown in a London fried fish shop in 1936? An answer may be found in another painting with a similar title - *Fried Fish Shop*, painted by the Polish-born artist Stanislawa de

Karlowska in 1907 (Figure 73). This shows an exterior view of a fried fish shop, with a woman in Edwardian dress gazing in at the bustling, gas-lit interior. Rowe's painting can be seen as his imagining of that interior scene, transposed to 1936. After a number of showings before the Great War, Karlowska's picture stayed in her own collection and was shown as part of a solo exhibition of her work at the Ward Gallery in London in 1935, reviewed by Rowe's supporter at *The Times* during his Emotionist days, the art critic Philip Marriott. It is likely to have been seen by Rowe, who always took a close interest in new exhibitions.[356]

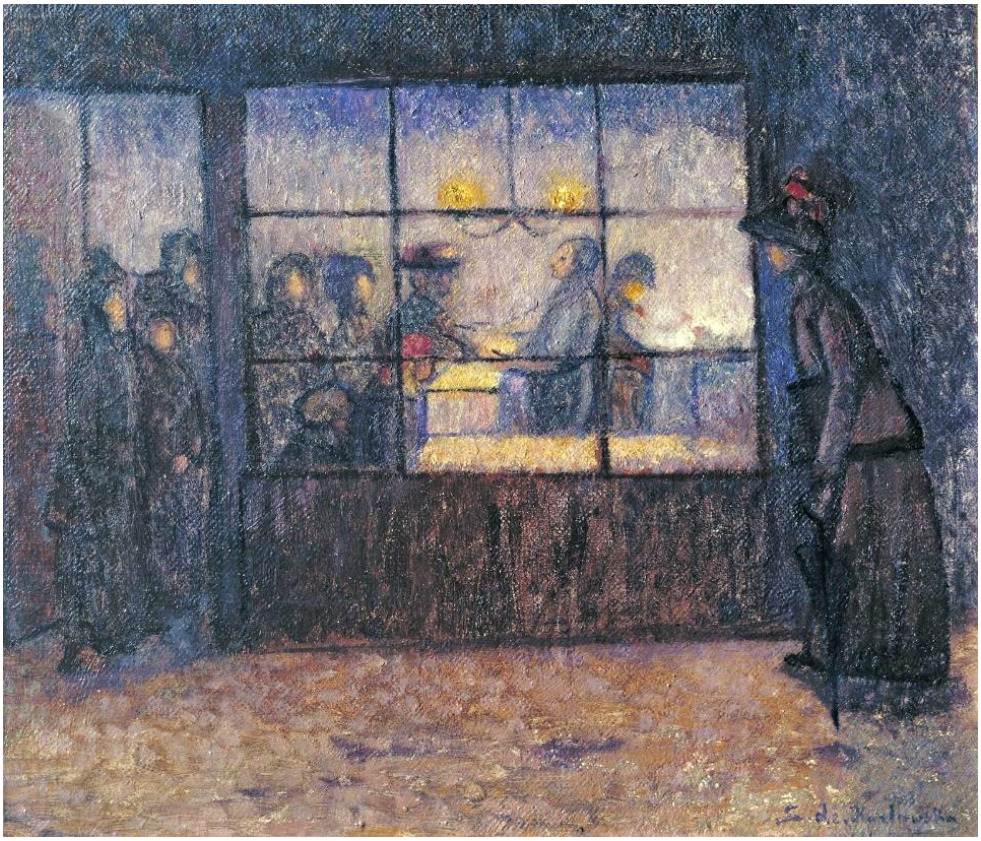

Figure 73: Stanislawa de Karlowska*, Fried Fish Shop,* 1907. Oil on canvas, 33.7 x 39.4 cm.

However, the real significance of the painting is not only the similarities in title and subject but the date when it was made - 1907. In May of that year the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) held its 5th Congress in Whitechapel, in London's East End. Among the delegates was the 28-year-old Stalin, who appears to have had only a minor role in the proceedings.[357] Despite this, his brief time in London became part of British Communist folklore and, with the 30th anniversary of the 5th Congress looming, would have been well known within Party circles at the time Rowe painted *The Fried Fish Shop* in 1936.

[356] *The Times*, 12 October 1935.
[357] Robert Service, *Stalin, A Biography*, (London: Macmillan, 2004), pp. 65-66.

However, there is more to this painting than a playful reference to London's part in Communist history. There are two signifiers that strongly hint at a more critical statement by Rowe. The first is his rendering of Stalin's 'fish supper' in the form of a hammer-and-sickle. Was this a coded reference to Trotsky's contention that Stalinism was consuming the Russian Revolution, that the USSR had become a 'degenerated workers' state'? [358] The second is the positioning of an empty chair at Stalin's table, slightly set back and at an angle, suggesting that someone had just left. The London Congress was a major event in the history of the Bolshevik/Menshevik split in the RSDLP, with all the factions represented as well as allied political organisations from outside Russia. Among those delegates were the significant figures who helped shape the Russian Revolution – Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Tomsky – with Stalin appearing under the pseudonym 'Ivanov'.[359] By 1936, of these figures Lenin was dead, Trotsky was in exile, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Tomsky were in disgrace and soon to be tried and executed. Who, then, did Rowe envisage had occupied the empty chair? Any or all of them, perhaps. The political point was an obvious one. Stalin alone now dominated the world Communist movement, and the Rowe figure – the artist within the painting - appears to be the only character who seems aware of this.

Rowe has carefully assembled a group of characters – friends, family, comrades, fellow artists – all of whom had a meaning for him in 1936. This was the year when he finally abandoned his attempts to embrace Socialist Realism, one of the few examples of Rowe providing a specific date in his writings about himself.[360] The creation of allusions, metaphors and hidden meanings was the opposite of what was required in Socialist Realist art, where clear unambiguous messaging must be central to the work. *The Fried Fish Shop* fits more easily in the genre of 'magic realism', with its incorporation of the fantastical and its distortion of time, giving the work an overall dreamlike quality.

Many of those friends and comrades would have recognised the allusions, yet there is no mention of *The Fried Fish Shop* in any of the AIA publications nor is it referenced in any of Rowe's writings. Was this painting intended as a warning about the malign influence of Stalinism? If so, why did Rowe not take this further in his art and his writings? A likely explanation is that he was painting it for himself. By freeing himself from the constraints of Socialist Realism, he was expressing his feelings about the people and the issues most on his mind at the time, showing he was capable of wit and irony in his art as well as political commitment. What can be interpreted as a political critique can also be seen as a catharsis, a way of letting go of ideas in which he no longer believed. However, it does not

[358] See Leon Trotsky, *The Workers' State, Thermidor and Bonapartism*, February 1935, www.marxists.org Accessed February 2025.
[359] Alan Woods, *Bolshevism*: *The Road to Revolution*, (London: Wellred Books, 2017), p. 379.
[360] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.

represent a disillusionment with communism on Rowe's part, nor did it lead to a break with Stalinism. That it did not can be explained by his loyalty to the Party, his deep and continuing emotional attachment to Russia, and his consciousness of the need for unity in the face of the fascist threat. However, although he continued to pay lip service to Socialist Realism, he was now mentally free to pursue the art he wanted to create.

To conclude, the early history of the Artists' International, and its transformation into the Artists' International Association, reveals the complex interplay between political commitment, artistic practice and international developments in the turbulent years of the 1930s. Conceived in the fervour of revolutionary optimism, the AI embodied a belief in the power of art to serve the interests of the working class. Yet as the political landscape shifted with the abandonment of 'Class against Class' and the adoption of the Popular Front, the organisation was forced to adapt, broadening its appeal to mainstream artists while attempting to retain its political edge. For Rowe, the impact of this transition was significant. His brief embrace of Socialist Realism ended not in a reaffirmation of its principles but in their quiet rejection, most notably signalled in his painting *The Fried Fish Shop.* Rowe's remaining in the Party, despite his private doubts, speaks to the profound tensions and pressures experienced by many politically engaged artists of the period - tensions between belief and compromise, between loyalty and conscience, and between the collective will and the individual imagination. For Rowe and his artist comrades who remained Party loyalists, these pressures were to reach the point of explosion twenty years later, when the CPGB in was confronted with its existential crisis of 1956.

CHAPTER 4 CLIFF ROWE'S WAR

Introduction

This chapter examines Rowe's complex engagement with the Second World War - as Communist, artist, and citizen - and the turbulent course he navigated as the shifting policies of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) collided with the moral and political urgencies of the time.

It begins with the internal tensions within the Artists' International Association (AIA), which Rowe had helped to build. In the lead-up to war, he helped steer the AIA through fraught debates over conscription, national defence, and the political stance artists should adopt in the face of fascist aggression. As a committed Communist, he defended the CPGB's opposition to military service, a stance swiftly reversed by the Party under Comintern pressure. This volte-face, followed by the shock of the German–Soviet Pact in August 1939, left Rowe and his comrades struggling to reconcile loyalty to the Soviet Union with their anti-fascist convictions.

The early months of the war brought further ideological contortions. The CPGB's sudden declaration that the conflict was an imperialist war and should be opposed, strained relations within the AIA, alienating members across the political spectrum. As debates intensified - especially after the Soviet invasion of Finland - Rowe emerged not only as a Party loyalist but also as a pragmatic leader attempting to hold the AIA together amidst multiplying contradictions.

Too old for active service, he joined the St Pancras Air Raid Precautions (ARP) rescue unit, confronting the brutal realities of the Blitz at close quarters. The emotional and physical demands of this work deepened his awareness of civilian suffering and inspired some of his most affecting wartime images. His experience alongside rescue workers indifferent to politics also showed him the limits of ideological certainties, foreshadowing the more reflective stance he would adopt in later years. Yet he remained creatively and politically active - producing pamphlet designs, cartoons, and posters for the Party, and developing his own vision of a socialist art.

Alongside these commitments, Rowe continued to record the Camden streets he knew intimately, producing wartime images that blend documentary precision with an awareness of social change but without the overt political messaging of Socialist Realism. His visits to locomotive sheds at St. Pancras to draw women cleaning engines steered him towards exploring new forms of realism while also underlining the role played by women in the war effort. By tracing Rowe's artistic production, political involvement, and personal reflections during these pivotal years, this chapter charts the trajectory of a committed artist grappling with war, and explores the broader tensions faced by politically conscious artists in a time of global crisis. In Cliff Rowe, torn between Party discipline,

anti-fascist conviction, artistic integrity, and lived experience, we find a mirror of the dilemmas that characterised the British left at war.

The AIA, the Party, and the War

The AIA's Central Committee Minutes between October 1938 and June 1940, covering the period from Munich to the fall of France, provide a fascinating insight into the complexity of issues confronting the organisation. They show Cliff Rowe as one of the AIA's most active and influential leaders, combining organisational skill with political commitment.[361] Serving as Vice-Chairman and later with two spells as Chairman, he helped steer the Association through a period of intense internal division over conscription, national defence, and the organisation's stance following the Nazi–Soviet Pact. He chaired and reported from the Production Committee, oversaw the planning of major exhibitions, and played a central role in the AIA's innovative print schemes. Rowe also liaised with external bodies, drafted public statements, and advocated policies to defend cultural life and safeguard artists' employment in wartime. His ability to balance practical initiatives with ideological debate made him a pivotal figure in maintaining the AIA's coherence during these turbulent months

With Franco's victory in Spain in early 1939 and developing events elsewhere in Europe, it was becoming clear that war with Germany was inevitable. Discussion in the AIA Central Committee was now dominated by the need to arrive at an agreed position regarding the AIA's attitude towards the national war preparations. The Government's announcement of partial national conscription in April 1939 posed a particular problem. Rowe, Black and the other Communists wished to promote the Party's policy of opposition to conscription (that this was capitalism preparing to sacrifice the working class in another war) while others in the AIA saw this as essential for the long-awaited confrontation with Fascism. Rowe was now acting chairman of the Committee as Misha Black was on an extended visit to the US. He proposed to the AIA Central Committee that civilian service, such as ARP (Air Raid Precautions), which retained its 'democratic principles,' should be supported but military service involving the taking of an oath of allegiance was unacceptable – all in line with the Party's position.[362] A statement of this policy was drawn up and members of the AIA Advisory Council were asked to endorse it. The response was mixed. Eric Gill gave his support willingly; Sir Muirhead Bone gave partial agreement but 'queried some of the context.' David Low, the *Evening*

[361] Artists' International Association Central Committee Minutes, 18 October 1938 – 20 June 1940, TGA 20143, Tate Gallery Archive, London. I am grateful to Andy Friend for pointing me towards this highly informative archive of the uncatalogued papers of Maurice Kestelman, artist, teacher and friend of Rowe.
[362] AIA CC Minutes, 18 April 1939.

Standard cartoonist, disagreed completely, demanding to know why the Advisory Council had not been consulted in the first instance.[363]

It was while views from other Advisory Committee members were being canvassed that the situation was complicated by an unexpected development. In the first of a series of policy contortions the CPGB abruptly changed its line. While the Party was gearing itself up for a major campaign against conscription, in May 1939 instructions came from the Comintern for all opposition to conscription to be abandoned. Stalin at the time was attempting to form an alliance with Britain and France to contain Nazi Germany and, as always with the Comintern, the foreign policy interests of the Soviet Union came first.[364] The difficulties now facing Rowe, Black and the other Communists and sympathisers in coming to a coherent position on conscription were considerable. Over the following months of meetings, consultations, policy drafting and re-drafting (mostly involving Rowe and Black), it was only by August that a statement that could be put to the membership was agreed. However, by then all such discussions had been overtaken by events in Europe and yet more contortions by the CPGB.

The German-Soviet non-aggression pact, announced on 23 August, stunned the world. The CPGB, however, was quick to justify it. The same day the front page of the *Daily Worker* declared it a 'master-stroke of Soviet peace policy' and 'a demonstration before the world of the decisive power of the Soviet Union and of the results which can be achieved by a genuine stand against aggression'.[365] A Party statement published in the same issue described it as 'a victory for peace and Socialism against the war plans of Fascism and the pro-Fascist policy of Chamberlain.' It stressed the necessity for an immediate Anglo-Soviet pact and the removal of the Chamberlain government – 'the men of Munich'. Any unfortunate consequences for Poland resulting from the German-Soviet pact were the responsibility of Chamberlain and his appeasement policy.[366] This was followed by a more detailed statement on 2 September where the Party called for 'a war on two fronts':

[363] AIA CC Minutes, 9 May 1939.
[364] Kevin Morgan, 'Militarism and Anti-Militarism: Socialists, Communists and Conscription in France and Britain 1900-1940', *Past & Present*, Vol. 202, Issue 1, February 2009, pp. 207-208. For an examination on how fear of Communism was a crucial factor influencing Western policy towards the USSR see Jonathan Haslam, *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 258-326
[365] *Daily Worker*, 23 August 1939.
[366] *Daily Worker*, 23 August 1939.

> …the essence of the present situation is that the people have now to wage a struggle on two fronts. First, to secure the military victory over Fascism; and second, in order to achieve this, the political victory over Chamberlain and the enemies of democracy in this country.[367]

At the same time, the statement also made clear the Party's unequivocal support for the war and the consequences of a German victory for the British working-class:

> Now that the nightmare of war is upon us, we Communists cannot stand aside.
>
> Our brothers and comrades are in the armed forces. Our homes, like those of all the working population, will be bombed and destroyed.
>
> Our rights and liberties as a democratic people are in danger if Fascism is allowed to conquer.[368]

The following day, 3 September 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany. A *Daily Worker* editorial under the heading 'How to win the War' declared:

> The war is here. It is a war that CAN and MUST be won. And the people of Britain can win it.[369]

Rowe and Black had earlier drafted a policy statement which was accepted by the Central Committee and sent out to AIA members on 31 August. It largely followed the line laid down by the Party, blaming the Chamberlain government for its failure to pursue serious negotiations with the Soviet Union. This had confirmed Soviet fears that Britain and France were planning another Munich-type sellout of Poland and that their negotiations with Stalin were a sop to public opinion. The Soviet agreement with Germany was an attempt to force the issue and to bring about an effective military alliance with Britain and France. The AIA statement, however, made one significant departure from the CPGB line in that it acknowledged that the effect of the non-aggression pact would be to:

> …strengthen the self-confidence of the Nazis in pursuing their demands on Poland and to cause confusion in England and France. In that sense, therefore, it was a factor contributing to the possible outbreak of war by strengthening the self-confidence of Hitler and weakening that of the democracies.

The statement concluded by emphasising that:

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[367] *Daily Worker*, 2 September 1939.
[368] *Daily Worker*, 2 September 1939.
[369] *Daily Worker*, 4 September 1939.

> … in the present situation it is evident that we in in Britain must on no account retreat from our pledge to Poland.[370]

The statement of 31 August caused an even bigger furore among AIA members than the position taken on conscription. Again, it was David Low who was prominent in opposition. He wrote to the Central Committee asserting that it was 'by no means proven' that the Soviet Union had any intention of signing a pact with Britain. His *Evening Standard* cartoon, published a few days after he wrote the letter, reflected the view of many in the country (and in the AIA) that the German-Soviet Pact was a cynical exercise by two dictators to divide Poland between them (Figure 74).

Figure 74: David Low. *Rendezvous. Cartoon. Evening Standard,* 20 September 1939.

For the first time the Communist influence in the AIA Central Committee was now openly challenged. The Surrealist painter Stella Snead wondered 'when is the Committee going to admit that its support of Stalin and the present Communist Party was a mistake, and a very trying one for its members?'. Presenting the pacifist viewpoint, strong among the membership, Leonard Greaves did not believe that the AIA should support war in any form, for 'war-like means will not bring about peaceable ends'.[371] Eric Gill and McKnight Kauffer had to be persuaded not to resign from the Advisory Council, with the latter stating that the AIA had become 'too political' and Gill declaring that it should confine itself to 'putting the artists' house in order'.[372] The episode exposed the serious rifts now developing in the organisation and was a stark demonstration of the difficulties faced by Rowe and Black in maintaining 'the unity of artists against Fascism and War', the bedrock of

[370] AIA *Emergency Bulletin No.1,* 'Artists International Association, Statement – August 31st 1939', TGA 20143.
[371] Artists International Association *Emergency Bulletin No.3*, October 1939. TGA 20143.
[372] AIA CC Minutes, 19 September 1939.

the AIA, in the face of the coming conflict. The Central Committee response, drafted by Rowe, Misha Black, Ewan Philips and Percy Horton tried to be conciliatory, while still defending its support for the Soviet position:

> Our statement of August 31st was not intended to be an argument supporting the Soviet Union, but an attempt to collect together the information then available and place it before the members, so that they could individually form their own opinions. The A.I.A. has no political party affiliations, but holds that peace and freedom are essential if the artist is to be able to work and if civilisation and culture are to develop…We have supported the foreign policy of the Soviet Union because it was a genuine peace policy aiming to bring a stable peace to Europe and to the rest of the world…

The statement acknowledged that the speed of events made it difficult for the Central Committee to analyse developments and communicate with the membership. Nevertheless:

> ….we can, however, restate our general position. We are willing to support this war only so long as it remains a genuine war to defeat Nazism, free Europe from the constant threat of aggression, and bring a greater degree of democracy and freedom to the world.[373]

Within days this statement was undermined by yet another about-turn by the CPGB. Under pressure from the Comintern, the Party's line changed from support for the war to outright opposition on the grounds that, far from being a war to defeat Fascism, it was an imperialist war. The Comintern directive had led to furious debate within the CPGB Central Committee. Harry Pollitt had held out against this abrupt reversal but was overruled and compelled to resign as Party General Secretary.[374] The new line published in the *Daily Worker* on 7 October was in many ways a re-statement of Lenin's position of 'revolutionary defeatism' during the Great War, which called for the defeat of one's own national ruling-class as a necessary prelude to revolution. The key difference this time, however, was not the intention to bring about revolution but to serve the interests of the Soviet Union:

> The continuance of this war is not in the interests of the people of Britain, France or Germany.
>
> End this war before it has brought death and destruction upon millions and millions of people, before the flower of our youth is slaughtered.

[373] 'The Wider Issues,' Artists International Association Emergency Bulletin No.3, October 1939. TGA 20143.
[374] Monty Johnstone, 'The CPGB, the Comintern and the War, 1939-1941: Filling in the Blank Spot', *Science & Society*, Spring, 1997, Vol. 61, No. 1, pp. 29-30.

> The truth about this war must be told. This war is not a war for democracy against fascism. It is not a war for the liberties of small nations. It is not a war for the defence of peace against aggression.
>
> This war is a fight between imperialist powers over profits, colonies and world domination.
>
> We call for a united movement of the people to compel the immediate ending of the war.[375]

But what of the declaration that had been made by the Party just four weeks earlier, pledging that 'we Communists cannot stand aside' from the coming conflict and that hard-won liberties would be lost should Fascism triumph? This was explained away in an abject statement which implied that the Central Committee (i.e. Pollitt) had been over-hasty in arriving at its conclusions, and as a result of further analysis:

> …the Central Committee decided that the declaration issued in September was incorrect, since it failed to take into account the basic changes in the international situation arising from the rejection of the Peace Front by Britain and France.[376]

This left Rowe and Black defending an AIA policy that had now been repudiated by the Party they supported, opposed both by pacifists against war whatever the circumstances, and by the militant anti-Fascists in the AIA who believed that its support for the war did not go far enough. Further fuel was added to the debate when, in November 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Finland. British government support for the Finns reinforced the CPGB belief that what the Chamberlain government now wanted was a war against the Soviet Union. For Communists in the AIA, it was an understandable move by Russia to secure its Northern flank against a possible German attack. For others, it was an act of naked aggression, no different from that launched by the Germans against Poland. Stephen Bone, son of Sir Muirhead Bone, an established artist and also a member of the AIA Advisory Council, wrote to the Central Committee proposing that an AIA travelling exhibition should not be sent to Russia as a protest against the Soviet action. The Central Committee was unable to agree a response to this and proposed that Bone be asked to write a letter to the AIA Bulletin setting out his objections, with a letter giving an opposing view to be printed alongside, a device that was to be used on a number of occasions when a controversy arose.[377]

Bone's letter, printed in the January 1940 AIA Bulletin, was a sarcastic summary of the various justifications for the Russian invasion, with mock-praise of Stalin for his determination to 'free

[375] *Daily Worker*, 7 October 1939, p. 2.
[376] *Daily Worker*, 7 October 1939, p .1.
[377] AIA CC Minutes, 2 January 1940.

Europe from the shadow of Finnish aggression which hangs over it'. He concluded with a question for the Central Committee:

> … but what I want to know, boys, is this: the A.I.A. protested about wops in Abyssinia and Japs in China and Hitler almost everywhere, because that was aggression; but the A.I.A. won't protest about Russians in Finland because that's not aggression, it's something else. Have I got this correct? Is this the way all you chaps feels about it? Because, if so, I'm not sure that I go much further on this bus.[378]

Printed alongside was the opposing view of Douglass Glass, a photographer and Party member. It gave a brief summary of Finland's history since the October Revolution and how General Mannerheim's White Guards had supplanted the legitimate revolutionary government. The imperialist powers had always seen Finland as the shortest route for an invasion of Russia and were now ready to do just that. Justifying the Soviet invasion, he referred to the wishes of a somewhat abstract entity he called the 'Finnish People's Government':

> The Finnish Peoples Government aims to give to the people of Finland the same rights as the government we supported in Spain aimed to give to the Spanish people. Therefore it is consistent that we should support that government and its ally, the Soviet Union, and should oppose the sending of assistance to the Finnish White Guards.[379]

Reactions to the two letters were divided between those supporting and those opposing the Soviet actions, with those against in the majority. Rowe was one of three Committee members who wrote in support of the Soviet position.[380] Anonymised extracts from the responses were published in the March 1940 Bulletin.[381] Those criticising Bone stressed the good intentions of the Soviet Union and the sinister motives of those who backed the Finns:

> All the oppressed peoples of the Tsarist Empire were liberated by the Soviets. Only the Soviet Union has materially assisted victims of aggression … are we asked to believe that the Soviet Union seeks to oppress the Finnish people?

And:

[378] 'Two Letters on Finland,' Artists International Association Bulletin No.59, January 1940. TGA 7043/20/4.
[379] 'Two Letters on Finland,' AIA Bulletin No.59
[380] AIA CC Minutes, 23 February 1940.
[381] 'The Correspondence on Finland,' Artists International Association Bulletin No.60, March 1940. TGA 7043/20/5.

> The A.I.A. stands for Peace and Democracy. If it takes the course Mr. Bone would like, it would, let us make no mistake, join forces with Franco, Mussolini, Chamberlain... It would thus be joining and strengthening those forces which have never ceased attacking the very things the A.I.A. stands for.

In a further indication of the growing anti-Communist feeling in the AIA, those supporting Bone focused on what they perceived as the undue influence of the CPGB and the hypocrisy of its members. One correspondent noted that when Hitler seized Austria and Czechoslovakia and invaded Poland, Communists rightly denounced this as aggression, but:

> When Stalin employs an identical technique against Finland, the boneless wonders of the Communist Party, and their supporters, throw double somersaults backwards in an endeavour to show that it is not aggression at all.

Even members supporting the view that the AIA should take a political stance were nevertheless critical of the hold that CPGB supporters had on its politics:

> The A.I.A. is, of course, and must be a 'political' organisation in the broad sense…It cannot in the nature of things be anything but this. But to allow it to become a medium for a particular brand or party of politics, will, I fear, endanger the Association as a whole.

Faced with this clear division of opinion, the AIA Central Committee announced that it would not be able to make any statement about Finland on behalf of the Association. At the same time, it managed to resolve the issue that had first prompted Stephen Bone's intervention – the planned showing of an AIA prints exhibition in Moscow – by cancelling all the international bookings for the show so that:

> …the sending or the refusal to send the exhibitions to any particular country cannot be interpreted as a political demonstration.[382]

The controversy over Finland had formed part of the background to the AIA Annual General Meeting of members which took place in January 1940. Misha Black opened the meeting with a statement which he made clear was personal and not on behalf of the Central Committee. He believed the Central Committee had made a 'grave error' in making those statements at the outbreak of war without first consulting the membership. Given the variety of opinion, it was important not to split the membership on political issues:

[382] AIA Bulletin No.60.

> Some of us favour an immediate armistice without any prior conditions being laid down, some think that the Nazi consent to an independent Czechoslovakia and Poland are essential conditions to be agreed *before* an armistice. Some are against artists taking part in this war on the grounds that, in their opinion, it is a purely imperialist war – others oppose artists helping because of their pacifist convictions, while on the other hand some of our members can see no alternative but to go forward with the war until certain conditions are fulfilled.

Black was admitting that as political consensus was impossible, the AIA, if it was to survive as a united body, needed to refrain from taking a political position on whatever may arise in the future. Instead, he proposed that the focus of the AIA should be on campaigning for the economic security of artists and on ensuring that cultural activity was maintained:

> Our job, as I see it, is to try and ensure that artists are not allowed to starve, and that culture is not annihilated during the progress of this war.[383]

The 'no political discussion' policy adopted at the General Meeting seems to have been all-embracing in its application. An early example was the rejection of a request from the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) for the AIA to send a delegate to its general meeting.[384] The policy met its first major challenge in the AIA's response to the actions of the French government against citizens opposed to the war. The French Communist Party had already been banned and many of its leading members imprisoned because of its adherence to the Comintern line on the war. This was followed in February 1940 by a set of decrees which, among other repressive measures, introduced the death penalty for those spreading Communist and 'defeatist' views similar to those being expressed in Britain by the CPGB. When the issue was raised in the AIA Central Committee Rowe, who had been chafing against the restrictions on political discussion, pointed out that 'as the present policy of the AIA was a retreat on the political position, it made it difficult to pronounce on this matter'. Misha Black did not support this view, a rare instance of recorded disagreement between the two.[385]

It was not until April that the Central Committee came to an agreement on the issue. It was decided that the AIA Bulletin should reprint a letter drawn up by the NCCL and signed by a wide range of literary luminaries including George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, E.M. Forster and J.B. Priestley. The letter had already been published in the national press. Cliff Rowe, James Holland and Priscilla Thornycroft (all Party members) were tasked with drafting a supporting statement reflecting 'a

[383] 'Future Policy: The A.I.A. and the War,' Artists International Bulletin No.59, January 1940.
[384] AIA CC Minutes, 2 February 1940.
[385] AIA CC Minutes, 15 March 1940.

progressive professional attitude'.[386] The NCCL letter, carried in the May 1940 AIA Bulletin, was a strongly worded condemnation of the French government, comparing its actions to those of Hitler:

> We are convinced that the world cannot be saved from Nazism and the barbarous repression which that term implies by imitating the standards and the methods of that abhorred regime.

It urged the French government to recognise 'the profound distress that has been caused amongst the British public' by these decrees and demanded that the British government should press for their withdrawal. The planned AIA statement drafted by Rowe and his comrades had been discussed in the Central Committee but because of 'some uncertainty about the article' it was decided not to print it. The accompanying statement finally agreed by the Central Committee was both brief and bland:

> The A.I.A. Central Committee associates itself with the statement made in this letter and has written to the French Ambassador in London expressing its support for this statement.[387]

Why this decision was made is not known, but the anodyne nature of the statement suggests a waning influence of the Communists in the AIA Central Committee. Despite this, Rowe continued to argue that the AIA needed to re-engage in political activity, especially in relation to the war. He recognised, however, that this posed a dilemma for the organisation, which needed to be cautious in its approach. A pro-war position, which would be supported by many members, should be avoided but a clear anti-war stance demanded by the pacifists (and also in line with the Party's position) was difficult because of Defence Regulations.[388] At the Central Committee meeting the following week the war artist Lowes Luard proposed that the Association should support Churchill's newly-formed coalition government in its prosecution of the war. After much discussion the proposal was defeated and the 'no political discussion' position adopted at the January General Meeting was maintained.[389]

These internal discussions took place against fast-moving events in France. In the week between the two Central Committee meetings the Dunkirk evacuation took place, and it was clear that France would soon capitulate. A German invasion seemed likely, and the question arose, posed by Elizabeth Watson, as to what should be done with the AIA records in that event. It was agreed that all unnecessary correspondence and addresses would be destroyed, and other records be distributed

[386] AIA CC Minutes, 6 May 1940.
[387] AIA Bulletin No. 61, May 1940. TGA 7043/20/6.
[388] AIA CC Minutes, 26 May 1940.
[389] AIA CC Minutes, 3 June 1940.

among Central Committee members for safe keeping.[390] Misha Black had earlier indicated that as he was 'technically an alien' and possibly subject to internment, he may need to be replaced as Central Committee chairman.[391] In addition, because of conscription and commitment to war work, other Central Committee members had also stepped down, all this necessitating a major change in the composition of the Central Committee. Cliff Rowe was elected as the new Chairman, Elizabeth Watson as Vice-Chairman, and five members co-opted on to the Central Committee.[392] Rowe remained in the chair until the next AIA General Meeting in January 1941 when Misha Black, the threat of internment having passed, resumed his post as Chairman.[393]

Thus, during those momentous months between July and December 1940, with the threat of imminent invasion, the Battle of Britain raging, the beginning of the London Blitz, Cliff Rowe, with a largely new and inexperienced Central Committee, was effectively in charge of the AIA. It is a tribute to his leadership and organisational skills that the work of the AIA continued – meetings, lectures, travelling exhibitions, support for foreign anti-fascist artists interned under Defence Regulations, and, not least, the mounting of the AIA annual exhibition at the Royal Academy. The opening of that exhibition in September was delayed because the upper gallery had been damaged by incendiary bombs but despite continuous air raids which affected attendance, it went ahead with 280 works, all submitted by AIA members.[394] The *Sunday Times* correspondent wrote of the exhibition:

> The ideals of the Artists' International Association are 'Peace based on Progressive Democracy and Cultural Development'. It seems a long time since any of these desirable commodities played a noticeable part in our daily lives. But cultural development is possible even within the framework of war and the A.I.A. is certainly making a brave attempt to keep it going by holding its yearly exhibition of painting and culture.[395]

A significant departure from the 'no political discussion' line came under Rowe's stewardship when the ban on association with the NCCL was reversed (without consulting the membership!) and the AIA sent two delegates to the NCCL Annual Conference in August 1940.[396]

Just as Misha Black resumed his Chairman's role in January 1941 a further political challenge to the unity of the AIA came when the question arose about supporting a proposed 'People's Convention'.

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[390] AIA CC Minutes, 10 June 1940.
[391] AIA CC Minutes, 14 May 1940.
[392] AIA CC Minutes, 17 June 1940.
[393] AIA Bulletin N0. 64, January 1941. TGA 7043/20/9.
[394] AIA Bulletin No 63, November 1940. TGA 7043/20/8.
[395] Quoted in AIA Bulletin No 63, November 1940.
[396] AIA Bulletin No 63, November 1940.

This was a CPGB-inspired initiative that followed a series of regional meetings opposing Churchill's coalition government and calling for a 'People's Government.' It was a broad-based movement involving trade unions, co-operatives, tenants' associations and some Labour Party branches.[397] The proposed manifesto for the People's Convention made six demands, the first four being concerned with living standards, democratic rights, better air raid precautions and 'friendship with the Soviet Union.' It was the final two demands that caused the most controversy – the call for a new government 'truly representative of the whole people', and a 'people's peace that gets rid of the causes of war'.[398]

In keeping with its policy on political non-involvement, the AIA Central Committee concluded that it could not come to a decision on supporting the Convention without first obtaining the views of the membership. It did this by consulting the Advisory Council rather than making a direct approach to the members, with four of the responses subsequently printed in the February 1941 AIA Bulletin.[399] David Low's advice was succinct: 'Leave it alone.' Given the current situation, he wrote, the Government had to make every effort to maximise resources, so calls for defending trade union rights were misplaced. Lucien Pissarro, though sympathetic to some of the demands, was also opposed. James Bateman believed that all efforts should be directed towards beating Hitler, for 'if he won, the A.I.A. would be one of the first casualties of the 'Peace.'

The most trenchant criticism, surprisingly, came from Misha Black (also a member of the Advisory Council). While supporting the first four points, he felt that the last two points – the key political purposes of the People's Convention, were 'so ambiguous as to be almost meaningless.' What was meant by a 'People's Government'? If this required a general election, then it should be stated. And what, precisely, was a 'people's peace' – 'by making peace with Hitler now or after his defeat – or what?' Statements such as these about the People's Government smacked of 'intellectual dishonesty.' Black's proposal was to withhold support from the Convention and instead send an observer who would report back to the AIA.[400] Such public criticism of a key CPGB policy must have come as a shock to Rowe and the other Party members in the AIA. It suggests that Black had been moving away from the CPGB since his 'personal statement' of January 1940 and that this was may have been his final break with the Party. It may also explain the double-edged nature of a valedictory

[397] Branson, *CPGB History 1927-41,* p. 291.
[398] *Labour Monthly* (November 1940), quoted in Callaghan and Harker, *British Communism*, p. 156.
[399] AIA Bulletin No. 64, February 1941. TGA 7043/20/9.
[400] AIA Bulletin No. 64, February 1941.

written by Rowe when Black finally stood down as AIA Chairman in 1944. After praising Black's talents, his contributions to design and his ten years of leadership of the AIA, Rowe concluded:

> I do not mention the weaknesses which Misha, thank goodness, like the rest of us possesses. They are irrelevant. Now that I have said so much, I must plead again that I know him too well. It would have been better to say 'Well, you know Misha'. Everyone does, so much better than I.[401]

The report from the (unnamed) AIA observer at the first national meeting of the People's Convention, factual though in tone sympathetic, was most likely written by a Party member, possibly by Rowe himself. Two new demands had been added to the original six – independence for India and the ending of the partition of Ireland. The AIA annual general meeting in March 1941 debated the issue of affiliation but no conclusions were reached. Further views were invited from members and extracts from their letters were printed in the AIA Bulletin, with those against in a slight majority. On this basis the newly elected Central Committee, which still included Black and Rowe as Chairman and Vice-Chairman, took the view that no clear decision could be made, and so the matter was left in abeyance.[402]

Not for the first time, however, events overtook the internal deliberations of the AIA. 'Operation Barbarossa' - the German invasion of Russia in June 1941 - removed many of the dilemmas that had perplexed both the CPGB and members of the AIA over the previous two years. It prompted an immediate response from the AIA Central Committee, this time made without any prior consultation with the members:

> The German attack on the U.S.S.R. has made every member of the A.I.A. Central Committee still more certain that his (sic) own political theory has proved valid. Rather than initiate a bitter political controversy as to which attitude to the war has, in fact, been proved correct by the new military and political events, the Central Committee think we should now take as an association, a more positive attitude to the war on the result of which the whole future of European civilisation and culture may depend.[403]

What this 'positive attitude' entailed was a commitment to waging the war by all means – military, economic and political - until the Fascist regimes were defeated and overthrown. The role of the AIA was to work as an artists' organisation to take a more direct part in 'the fight for democracy against

[401] AIA Bulletin No. 83, May/June 1944. TGA 7043/20/32.
[402] AIA Bulletin No. 65, May 1941. TGA 7043/20/10.
[403] AIA Bulletin No 66, July 1941. TGA 7043/20/11.

Fascism and oppression.' Stating the Central Committee's view that this represented the wishes of the great majority of members, it challenged those who disagreed to collect the 30 signatures required to call an Extraordinary General Meeting to discuss the matter. It acknowledged that though this statement would not be acceptable to pacifists, the AIA would support those individuals who were prepared to follow the dictates of their conscience.

In the light of these developments the 'People's Convention' became an irrelevancy. The CPGB dropped the demand for a 'People's Government,' pledged its support to Churchill's coalition, and re-instated Harry Pollitt as General Secretary.[404] Thus was a damaging split in the AIA avoided, and as a united organisation it could now concentrate on twin aims – supporting artists in making a living and supporting the waging of the war until victory. It was, however, a temporary respite from internal dissension which only lasted for the duration of the war. In the post-1945 period the same splits between Communists and their opponents were to re-emerge, this time with fatal results for the unity of the AIA. The months following Barbarossa also saw the gradual disengagement of Rowe from the leadership of the AIA. In October 1941 the AIA Bulletin announced that 'C.H. Rowe has resigned from vice-chairmanship of the Central Committee due to pressure of other work' but would stay on as a member of the Central Committee.[405] In March 1942 the Bulletin reported that Rowe did not stand for membership of the 1942/43 Central Committee, though he continued his involvement in various sub-committees. This marked the end of Rowe's participation in the leadership of the organisation he had inspired and helped found, and from which he was to resign in disillusionment ten years later.[406] There is also an indication that Rowe was stepping back from his work for the CPGB at this time. A security service telephone intercept of a call to the Party HQ in King Street seeking an artist to help with the London Womens' Parliament Exhibition yielded the information that Cliff Rowe, an obvious choice, 'has not been seen lately'.[407] Rowe's withdrawal seems to have been shaped both by his weariness of the complexities and divisions of the previous few years as well as changes in his personal life and a desire to focus more on his art. It was not a renunciation of communism—his commitment to it endured—but it did signal a clear turning point in the direction of his life.

[404] Branson, *CPGB History 1927-41,* pp. 331-333.
[405] AIA Bulletin No 67, October 1941. TGA 7043/20/12.
[406] AIA Bulletin No 70, March 1942. TGA 7043/20/18.
[407] 'Paul Hogarth', KV 2/4059.

The ARP and Camden Studios

When war finally came Rowe, even at the age of 36, was still liable for conscription. He was convinced that if he was called up for active service he would not survive.[408] He decided, however, that he needed to make a direct contribution to the war effort through joining one of those 'democratic' services approved by the Party. He first tried the Auxiliary Fire Service but, although he passed all the physical tests, the recruiter decided that as an artist he would be undisciplined, would require 'looking after', and was therefore unsuited for the role.[409] He then applied to the ARP rescue service, was accepted into the St. Pancras unit, in which he served for the duration of the war, along with fellow artist Peter Lazlo Peri. The unit was divided into two sections – Heavy Rescue and Light Rescue. The role of Heavy Rescue was to shore up bomb-damaged buildings so that rescue of the inhabitants could proceed. Rowe's 1941 lithograph *The Call Out* depicts a Heavy Rescue section scrambling to attend an ominous red-blaze in the distance. He shows the basic nature of their equipment – rubber boots and steel helmets for protection; timber beams, trestles and wicker baskets to make safe the building (Figure 75).

Figure 75: Cliff Rowe. *The Call Out*, 1941. Lithograph.

Rowe served in Light Rescue, which dealt with rescue from buildings that had been badly damaged or totally destroyed. 'Rescue' in this context was often a matter of recovering dead bodies and giving

[408] Cliff Rowe interviewed by unknown interviewer c.1980. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[409] Rowe interview c.1980.

what help they could to the often badly injured survivors. Rowe in a later interview expressed his feelings of helplessness and of his own inadequacy in dealing with these situations:

> I wasn't much good…There's not much you can do in these things. You spend hours and hours digging and trying to get people out and once you get them out there's not much you can do… bind them up a bit if its normal bleeding and not internal bleeding… and get them to hospital as fast as you can.[410]

Rowe demonstrates this in another lithograph, *Stretcher Party*, shocking in its portrayal of the effect of bombing on civilians (Figure 76). It shows the apparently lifeless body of a woman being retrieved from the ruin of a bombed-out building by a Light Rescue squad. Rowe includes himself among the rescuers in the guise of his alter-ego 'Joe', recognisable by his hair side parting and moustache. The other ARP man helping with the rescue bears a close resemblance to Peri, who produced a series of drawings, etchings and sculptures based on his rescue unit experiences.[411]

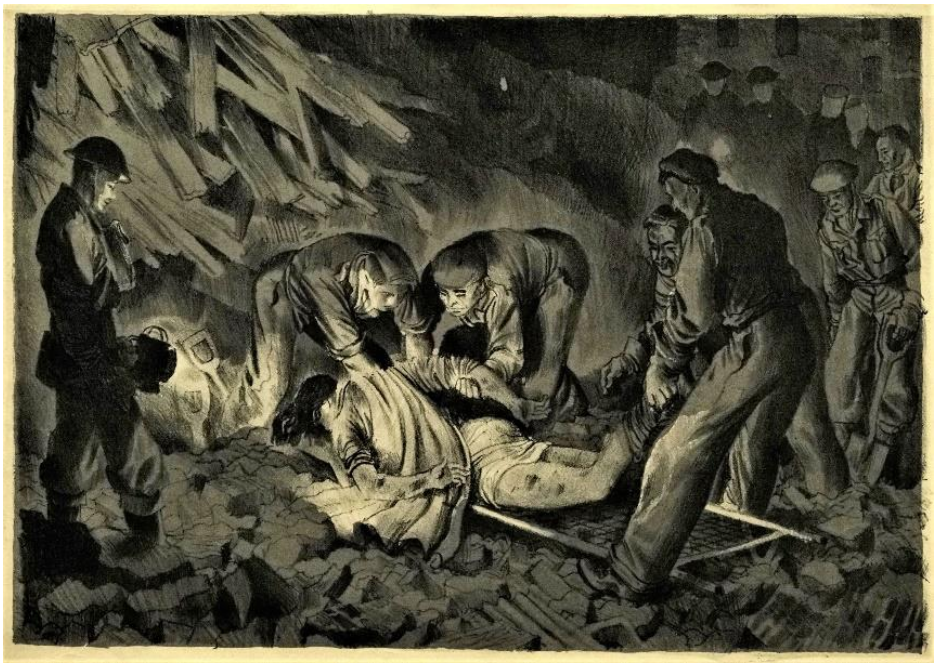

Figure 76: Cliff Rowe. *Stretcher Party, 1941.* Lithograph.

This image was used in *Russia: Britain's Ally 1812-1942* by Francis Klingender, a book of historical and contemporary British and Russian graphic art published to celebrate the two countries' alliance.

[410] Rowe Interview c.1980.
[411] Peter Laszlo Peri, 'Biography', www.peterlaszoperi.org.uk. Accessed July 2025.

It was sponsored by the Ministry of Information with a written introduction by the Soviet ambassador, Ivan Maisky.[412]

Those who experienced the Blitz often reported the strange fascination of observing the bombing from a distance. Rowe's friend and fellow artist Priscilla Thornycroft, witnessing the East End docks ablaze from the safety of Hampstead Heath, described the scene as 'surrealistic', and 'strangely beautiful'.[413] Rowe captured this strange beauty in the painting *Parachute Flares*, showing the ARP trucks speeding to a rescue through a blasted cityscape, while above, in vivid colours against a sumptuously blue night sky, the Luftwaffe drops flares to illuminate the target below (Figure 77).

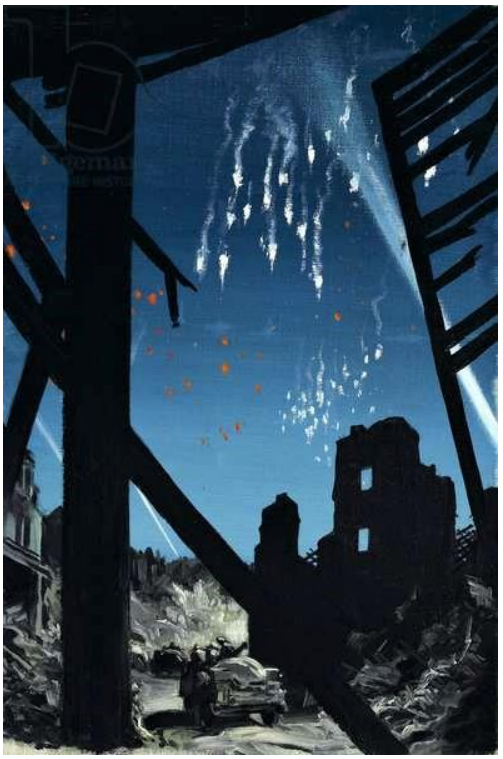

Figure 77: Cliff Rowe. *Parachute Flares,* 1942. Lithograph.

Apart from the call-outs, Rowe reported later, 'the work was as dull and boring as could be' and his experience of the ARP 'five years of dismal waste'. Most of the men in his depot were ex-building workers, 'with no interest in politics or anything else that I could discover, except gambling and money'. He appreciated that they couldn't live on the meagre allowances they received for their ARP work and were focussed on their part-time jobs, but he could not understand why they did not fight to improve their condition. He tried to interest them in joining a union but 'all had absurd reasons for opting out'. This was probably Rowe's first experience of working regularly alongside working-class people and he found their attitude puzzling. It was not how they were portrayed in the *Daily Worker* or how his working-class Party comrades behaved. He concluded that their lack of interest was down to the fact that 'nearly all of them had been so corrupted by the system they lived under that nothing but immediate cash was capable of arousing any interest'. He later reflected on how he – an articulate artist - might have been perceived by them, acknowledging that 'they were kind and tolerant of me, which was more than I deserved'[414]. One of the ways in which they showed their tolerance was in their willingness to be subjects for Rowe the artist. He drew a series of sketches, some of which he developed into

[412] F.D. Klingender, *Russia - Britain's Ally 1812-1942*, (London: George G. Harrap & Co.), 1942.
[413] Priscilla Thornycroft, interview by Ulrike Smalley, 25 March 2009, catalogue no. 31966, Imperial War Museum, London, Oral History Collection.
[414] Rowe, 'Autobiography', 1984, p. 7.

lithographic prints, of different individuals in his squad. One of them, of an unnamed black colleague, indicates the contribution of black Londoners during the Blitz (Figure 78).

Working in the ARP did provide another benefit. For the first time in many years, he had a regular source of income, however scant, which, alongside his freelance design work, enabled him 'at least to live in poverty, but this was not unusual for me'.[415] This degree of low-level economic security meant he would be able to devote more attention to developing his art. Another factor enabling this was that from 1939 he had his own studio at Camden Studios, just off Camden High Street. This was part of a somewhat ramshackle building containing six studios surrounding a small garden. Along with Rowe, at various times during the war the studios were used by Peter Peri, Priscilla Thornycroft, Carel Weight, Alex Koolman, Edith Simon, and Elizabeth Shaw.[416]

Figure 78: Cliff Rowe. *Black ARP Man,* 1942. Print.

All these artists were politically active AIA members and provided for Rowe a critical audience for his still developing ideas about realist art. As well as political affiliation, this group of artists was united by the camaraderie engendered by having to face physical danger. At the outset of the war Peri, who had some idea of what they were likely to face, had insisted that they acquire an Anderson air raid shelter which was duly installed in the garden. Into this the artists crammed when the air raid sirens gave warning but soon, like many other Londoners, they became somewhat blasé about the dangers from above, despite their closeness to the Kings Cross rail complex, a key Luftwaffe target. Their perilous location was demonstrated when the Studios were hit by hail of incendiary bombs which luckily did not cause serious damage. This was in no part due to the bravery of Edith Simon who single-handedly disposed of six incendiaries using nothing more than buckets of sand.[417]

In her autobiography, Elizabeth Shaw described her experiences of Camden Studios as among the happiest of her life. She had particularly fond memories of Rowe:

[415] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 7.
[416] Edith Simon, 'Moderation be Damned'.
[417] Thornycroft interview, 2009.

> In those days I lived in one of the studios in Camden, which I had taken over from an artist who had been called up. There were six studios that were opposite each other, with a small garden with bushes between. Opposite me lived Cliff Rowe, a communist artist and one of the founders of the International Artists union of the 1930s. He remained a dear good friend, honest, incorruptible, endowed with humour and warmth.[418]

Shaw at the time was making a name for herself as a political cartoonist and her work was a regular feature in the left-wing literary journal *Our Time*, to which Rowe also contributed.

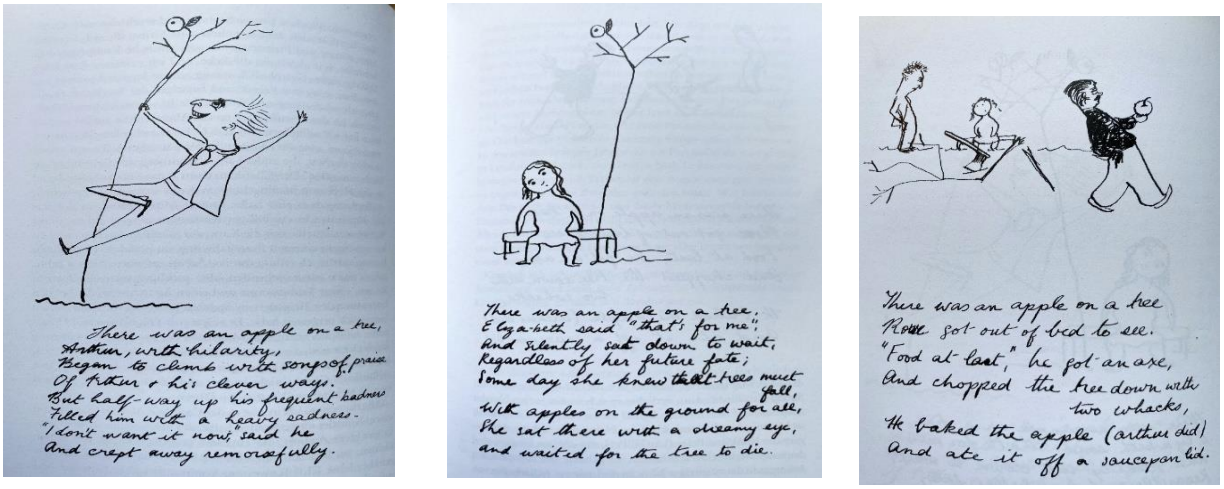

Figure 79: Elizabeth Shaw. *There was an Apple, Camden Studios*, 1942. Cartoons.

In 1942 she drew a set of satirical cartoons – *There was an Apple* – an allegory involving herself, Rowe, and Arthur Koestler (Figure 79). Koestler In 1942 was an occasional visitor to the Camden Studios where Edith Simon, the translator of his novel *The Gladiators,* had a studio. Koestler by this time had departed from his earlier Communist beliefs, resigning from the German Communist Party in 1938 because of the purges in the Soviet Union and the counter-revolutionary activities of the Stalinist secret police in Spain.[419] This was viewed by Communists as a betrayal of the ideals of the October Revolution which he had once held dear, and his novel, *Darkness at Noon,* based on the trial and execution of Nikolai Bukharin, published in English in 1941, was seen as confirmation of his treachery. This is indicated in Shaw's cartoon as Koestler, filled with conceit at his own cleverness, throws himself into the struggle to achieve Socialism – 'the Apple'. - but, overcome with guilt at his disloyalty, gives up.

[418] Elizabeth Shaw, *Wie ich nach Berlin: Eine Irin in der geteilten Stadt,* [Like me in Berlin: An Irish woman in the divided city], (Berlin: *Verlag Berlin Brandenburg,* 2013), p. 71.
[419] Koestler, 'Invisible Writing', p. 435.

Shaw self-mockingly presents herself as being passive, and content to wait until, in time, Socialism comes to pass without any effort on her part. In a sharp insight into Rowe's character, Shaw shows his impatience and tendency to opt for simple though drastic solutions to complex issues. Anything positive that may result would likely be exploited by apostates like Koestler. This facet of his character was wryly acknowledged by Rowe some forty years later, though he was far from apologetic about it:

> I am a person of complicated and overlapping motives and consequentially one who perennially believes that all problems have a simple and direct solution, which only the obstinacy of events and my fellow creatures renders difficult or obscure! In practice, of course, I find that in any real problem both my reactions and the facts are saturated with exasperating conflicts and entanglements. But I never seem to learn, though there are times when I realise that this is the inherent fascination of life, without which I would be bored to extinction.[420]

Rowe's wartime political artwork

Figure 80: Cliff Rowe. *We Are Many!* 1940. Cover design.

Rowe's design work for the CPGB during this period faithfully reflected the changing priorities and concerns of the Party. Among his many cover designs during the war was a pamphlet by Ted Bramley, CPGB London District Secretary, *We are Many*! (Figure 7). The title echoed Shelley's call following the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 'to the men of England' to rise up against tyranny for 'Ye are many...they are few!' Written when the Party was in its 'revolutionary defeatism' phase, the pamphlet was an appeal to workers to join the Communist Party and build a new leadership of the Labour movement. Rowe's cover design shows the continuing Constructivist influence on his graphic art, with its mixture of photomontage representing the mass of the workers, and cartoon figures showing the Fascist sympathies of the tiny ruling class.

[420] Cliff Rowe, 'Camden Confession', c.1980. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.

Another Rowe design from this period is a 1940 lithograph, *Unemployment Assessment Board,* which, though not commissioned by the Party, conveys its opposition to service in the armed forces. It contrasts the warm welcome received at an army recruitment centre with – in the basement downstairs – the shabby treatment given to the unemployed (Figure 81).

Figure 81: Cliff Rowe: *Unemployment Assessment Board,* 1940. Lithograph.

After the Soviet Union entered the war in June 1941 the emphasis of the CPGB was as much on supporting the Soviet war effort as on the British. Within months the Party was calling for Britain to open a Second Front in Europe to relieve the pressure on the hard-pressed Red Army, a demand it pursued for the next three years.

Figure 82: Cliff Rowe (?). *A Second Front in Europe,* c.1943. Poster design.,

Rowe's contribution was a poster - *A Second Front in Europe*- showing a British soldier splashing ashore with, in the background, a tank, landing craft and aircraft. On the land is a ragged figure, presumably a member of the local Resistance, giving a V for Victory salute over the body of a German soldier. The poster is unsigned but is undoubtedly in Rowe's style. The slogan urging an attack 'while Hitler is being hammered in Europe' suggests that this was produced after Stalingrad, so suggesting a date of c.1943 (Figure 82).

Soviet Millionaires by Reg Bishop, another prominent London Communist, extolled the virtues of the USSR where it was possible for a collective farm manager to become a (rouble) millionaire. On this cover, Rowe re-cycled one of his earlier designs from his Moscow pamphlets showing the head and shoulders of a chisel-faced worker against a background of agricultural machinery, heavy industry and a wad of roubles (Figure 83).

Figure 83: Cliff Rowe. *Soviet Millionaires,* 1943. Cover design.

Rowe's most publicly visible art work for the Party during the war years was a regular cartoon strip in the *Daily Worker* from 1940 to 1943. 'The Front Line' was drawn in collaboration with Fred Manner, a graphic artist and Party member, under the name 'Hob Nob'. It mostly centred on the lives of a working-class couple struggling to cope with the daily challenges of rationing, food prices, the black market and dealing with government bureaucracy, drawn with a distinct Marxist class analysis slant.

The cartoon from October 1942 (Figure 84) is a typical example, showing how the capitalist system always ensures that the upper classes are given preferential treatment. 'The Front Line' also dealt with current political issues as reported in the *Daily Worker*. Its first appearance in 1940 (Figure 85) was a direct reference to the CPGB campaign for the provision of deep underground shelters, a major issue in the early years of the war.[421] It showed the inadequacy of Anderson shelters and other surface refuges, out of which Hob Nob's working-class couple is rescued by benign policemen, but when they demand deep shelters, they are run in by those same policemen. Another strip from 1942 highlighted the issue of the US military authorities enforcement of racial segregation in the use of British social facilities. It showed a group of black G.I.s being refused entry to a 'whites only' pub.

[421] Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, (London: Pimlico, 1992), pp. 83-84.

A friendly British squaddie takes them to another tavern where there is no colour bar, only to find that here they are all discriminated against on class grounds, a neat Marxist twist (Figure 86).

Figure 84: 'Hon-Nob' (Cliff Rowe and Fred Manner). *Daily Worker* cartoon, 1942.

Figure 85 : 'Hon-Nob' (Cliff Rowe and Fred Manner). *Daily Worker* cartoon, 1940.

Figure 13: 'Hon-Nob' (Cliff Rowe and Fred Manner). *Daily Worker* cartoon, 1942.

In addition to his work for the Party, Rowe also performed the role of a war artist, albeit an unofficial one. In October 1939 the AIA Central Committee was alarmed by a survey it had conducted which indicated that 73% of artists had lost their jobs or commissions as a direct result of the outbreak of war. It was feared that schools would have to close, commercial advertising would cease, patronage would dry up. In the event this was a misplaced fear, but it had the effect of galvanising the AIA into campaigning to ensure that artists could make a living in the period to come. In this they were helped by the establishment of the government-funded War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC) as

a branch of the Ministry of Information.[422] Under the chairmanship of Sir Kenneth Clark, Director of the National Gallery, it was given the task of ensuring that an artistic record of Britain at war would be made and, in Clark's own words, 'to keep artists at work on any pretext, and, as far as possible, prevent them from being killed'.[423] A number of artists were given contracts to record the military and the civilian war effort, with others given specific commissions. However, because of the CPGB's position on the war, known Communists were excluded, and this ban continued even after the USSR entered the war in June 1941. One such was Cliff Rowe, who unsuccessfully applied three times during the war for a WAAC contract in April 1941, October 1943 and April 1944,[424] yet he produced one of the first reminders of what the conflict would mean for the British people.

Figure 87: Cliff Rowe. *Morning News,* 1939. Oil on board, 60.9 x 90.2 cm.

[422] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 56.
[423] Quoted in Brian Foss, '"The Colour and Peculiar Feeling of Events": The War Artists Advisory Committee, 1939-1945', in *WW2. War Pictures by British Artists,* (London: Sacha Llewellyn & Paul Liss, 2016), np.
[424] Brian Frederick Foss, 'British Artists and the Second World War, with particular reference to the War Artists' Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Information', PhD Thesis, University College London, 1991, p. 454.

It was during the stormy debates within the AIA and the Party in the lead up to war that Rowe painted this charming scene of two children playing at being adults outside a shabby urban dwelling. A small girl plays at being 'mother', sitting on the doorstep nursing a doll, an empty pram close by. A boy adopts a stern fatherly pose, standing erect and closely reading a newspaper. The scene gently parodies middle-class domesticity in a working-class setting, yet the title and date - *Morning News* 1939 (Figure 87) - transform it into a commentary on innocence under threat. In 1939, the 'morning news' was filled with warnings of imminent war, a reality destined to shatter the children's play.[425] The picture is both personal and political. *Morning News* sits directly within the charged atmosphere of the AIA Central Committee's stormy discussions about war, conscription, and the role of artists in the face of an approaching global conflict. It shows Rowe's awareness that these debates were not remote ideological exercises but matters that would soon shape the lives of ordinary people — including the children in his scene. Notes on the painting when it was prepared for an exhibition in 1978 indicate that the house was number 53 Hartland Road, Camden Town, London.[426] The *1939 England and Wales Register* shows that the O'Callaghan family lived in the house and that the boy may be Desmond O'Callaghan, recorded as being 'at school'.[427] There is no record of the girl, who may have lived in a neighbouring house.

Figure 88: Cliff Rowe. *Factory Gate Meeting,* 1943. A study for *Freedom of Speech*. Ink wash on paper.

Figure 89: Cliff Rowe: *Freedom of Speech,* 1943. Monochrome image. *Our Time*.

[425] This painting is now in the Tate Britain collection, though incorrectly catalogued as *Kentish Town Scene*, c.1931. Art UK, a national digital record of British art, uses the correct title and date in its description.
[426] Notes and photographs relating to a planned exhibition of Rowe's work at Camden Arts Centre, 1985. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[427] *1939 England and Wales Register*. London, St. Pancras Metropolitan Borough, enumeration district B, TNA RG 101.

Rowe's best-known contribution to wartime public art was his submission to the 'For Liberty' exhibition, held in the basement of the bombed-out John Lewis store in Oxford Street London in March 1943. Sponsored by the *News Chronicle*, this was an event organised by the AIA to bring together works by artists in support of the Government's propaganda effort to emphasise the ideals for which the nation was fighting. It received official support from the Ministry of Information, with the minister Brendan Bracken speaking at the opening ceremony and the Soviet Ambassador Maisky lending his support.[428] Over 150 artworks were exhibited, among them a painting by Rowe titled *Freedom of Speech*. This was one of a group of twelve paintings in a section dedicated to illustrating the '4 Freedoms' of the 1941 Atlantic Charter – 'Freedom of speech. Freedom to worship, Freedom from want, and Freedom from fear'.[429] Rowe's painting, *Freedom of Speech*, showed a young woman addressing a factory-gate meeting, in itself a conventional image for illustrating the theme. What gives this painting subversive power is the prominent slogan painted on the wall – 'Lift the ban on the Daily Worker', a reference to the banning of the Party's newspaper by Home Secretary Herbert Morrison between January 1941 and August 1942 on the grounds that it was 'fomenting opposition to the war' (Figures 88 and 89).[430]

The juxtaposition of this image with the lofty theme of the '4 Freedoms' was a reminder that even democratic Britain was not immune from dictatorial practices. Rowe's model for the painting was a young woman named Doris Collins, a Party member and a shop steward at the Carreras tobacco factory in Mornington Crescent, known for her fiery speeches in support of her fellow-workers.[431] She had been one of the organisers in 1940 of a successful picket to force the Carreras factory to open its basement air raid shelter to the local populace.[432] She and Rowe formed a relationship that in time developed into a life-long partnership.

Towards a socialist art

The structure of Rowe's ARP duties – 24 hours on and 24 hours off - gave him, for the first time in many years, 'time to think out and practice my theories and aims' and to explore new directions for his art.[433] The free time he had from his ARP duties gave him the opportunity to explore the area in which he lived – Camden Town. He obtained a map of Camden to identify every working-class street

[428] Morris and Radford, *AIA,* p. 66.
[429] Harriet Atkinson, 'Exhibitions as political 'demonstrations': Artists' International Association's For Liberty exhibition, London 1943', University of Brighton https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/publications/exhibitions-as-political-demonstrations-artists-international-ass. Accessed December 2024.
[430] Branson, *History of CPGB 1927-41*, pp. 310-13.
[431] Oral evidence of Sandra Thornberry, Doris Rowe's daughter, 2023.
[432] Branson, *History of CPGB 1927-41*, p. 304.
[433] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 8.

in the district in order to make a visual record of the buildings and the people he encountered - 'drawings and paintings of everything that interested me from the aesthetic point of view':

> Every time I sallied forth, I came across satisfying surprises, often bordering on the fantastic. The very fact that these areas were unplanned had led to every kind of individualistic solutions to the maverick problems that past developers had thrown into each other's way in their search for profit. Indeed, I learned quite a bit about planning from the sheer irresponsibility of such lack of it.[434]

The people he met were mainly women and children, because the men were mostly at work or in the armed forces. He noted that they lived most of their social lives on the street, in order to gain relief from the boredom of living in small rooms without gardens, so pavement conversations were the accepted means of communication (Figures 90 and 91). He was impressed by the ingenuity of the children in turning these pavements into exciting play areas, reminding him of his own childhood playing on the Wimbledon streets:

> Often the pavements were the play areas for the children, who converted railings into swings with a little old rope, and concrete steps into all kinds of ingenious games involving old cans, milk bottles and sundry street findings.[435]

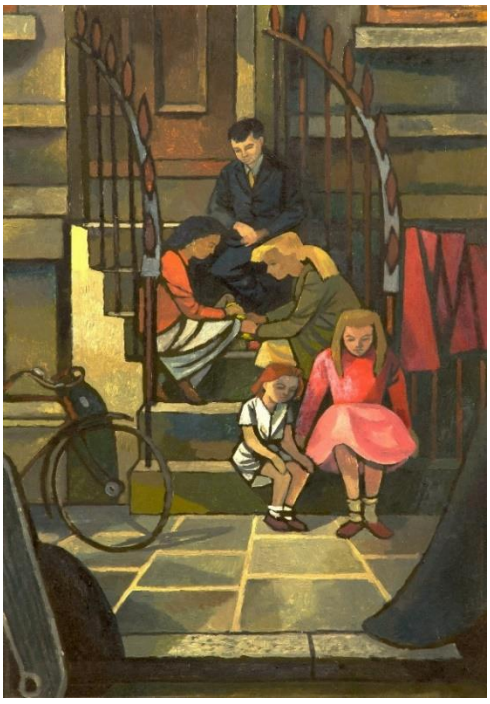

Figure 90: Cliff Rowe. *The Steps,* c.1943. *O*il on board, 91 x 61 cm.

Figure 91: Cliff Rowe: *Camden Street Scene*, c.1943. Oil on board, 91 x 61 cm.

[434] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 8.
[435] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 9.

He was also struck by the curiosity he generated whenever he set up his easel, and the welcome he received from the local people:

> One could stop and chat almost anywhere, and find oneself a welcome addition to the fold, as though entire streets were really one large family. It was the community spirit and life which a common level of income and environment always produces, and in which I felt completely at home.[436]

He did not attempt to paint these urban scenes in a socialist realist style. Instead, he adopted what he described as 'naturalist realism' as his method, one that he felt happiest in using as it accorded with his own aesthetic. He continued to paint and draw these scenes over the next 20 years. Some of his works were lost when his flat was damaged during an air raid while he was on ARP duty, but many have survived. Unusually for a Communist artist, he did not seek to make overtly political points, believing that the aesthetic spoke for itself. As in *Morning News*, the children he depicts are clean and well-dressed despite the poverty of their surroundings, and not the shoeless urchins often used as a cliché to show the deprivation of urban working-class life:

> Recently a well-known middle-class critic suggested I had painted these children and their surroundings to make a political point of contrasting them with what one might see in a West End restaurant. The political bias was in his own mind, not mine. I had painted them entirely from love of the subject, and its almost limitless aesthetic value to anyone with eyes to see.[437]

While drawing great satisfaction from his Camden street scenes, Rowe also felt the need to address what he saw as the failings of Socialist Realism to develop a genuinely socialist representation of reality, to create what he called 'a new socialist visual language'.[438] The opportunity to begin this task came during his wanderings around Camden when he came across a huge locomotive cleaning shed in the midst of the complex of railway lines leading to the St. Pancras - Kings Cross terminals. He obtained permission from the Ministry of Information to make drawings of the interior and what he saw when he first entered astonished and delighted him:

> The whole vast interior was plunged into a blue grey haze, lit from high up by a central glass dome. The effect was like that of a cathedral lit by shafts of gleaming light.[439]

[436] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 9.
[437] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 9.
[438] Cliff Rowe, 'A New Socialist Visual Language'. Unpublished essay, 1984. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[439] Rowe, 'Socialist Visual language', p. 51.

In the centre of the room was a huge turntable onto which a locomotive had been driven, awaiting cleaning. The cleaners were all women 'dressed in masculine blue overalls with their hair wrapped in close-fitting scarves and wearing eye goggles'. The tools they used for cleaning were long tubes which emitted jets of scalding steam under pressure. The work was dangerous and dirty, but it also held a fascinating, indeed, an erotic beauty for Rowe. He perceived in the actions of these women a reversal of traditional sex roles:

> These women, mostly young and slight in build, thrusting their tubes into the dark bowels of the huge iron engines and creating spurts of steam had a strong sexual symbolism as though the women were usurping the male role, as indeed they were, for this kind of work would certainly have been done by men but for the war.[440]

Rowe saw in this grimy but beautiful and compelling setting the inspiration for a new way of looking at reality, one that went beyond the 'naturalist realism' of his Camden street scenes:

> The silent movements of the great engines as they loomed into or out of the lighted areas, the rhythmic movements of the women like a kind of dance ritual, so that one had to remind oneself of the filth and danger to their lungs of breathing in the sulphurous fumes, to see that there was an underlying realism that engendered the whole extraordinary performance.[441]

Over the next 25 years Rowe worked on developing his initial drawings into a variety of different ways of portraying these women at work, each iteration moving further away from three-dimensional naturalism to more abstract two-dimensional forms. He found it more difficult than he had realised to achieve this 'flattened' form of presentation as it was contrary to his whole training and experience, as well as being way beyond what would be acceptable as Socialist Realism (Figures 92, 93, 94, 95).[442] Nevertheless, he continued to experiment in this direction while at the same time continuing with his Camden street scenes with which, he admitted, he felt more comfortable.

[440] Rowe, 'Socialist Visual Language', p. 52.
[441] Rowe, 'Socialist Visual Language', pp. 52-53.
[442] Rowe, 'Socialist Visual Language', p. 67.

Figure 92. Cliff Rowe. *Locomotive shed,* 1943. Ink on paper.

Figure 93: Cliff Rowe. *Woman Cleaning locomotive,* 1943. *O*il on board*, 93 x 61 cm.*

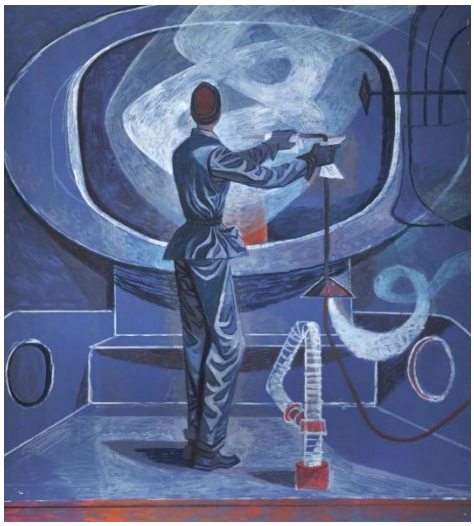

Figure 94: Cliff Rowe. *Woman Cleaning Locomotive,* 1945. Oil on board, 61.1 x 91.7 cm.

Figure 95; Cliff Rowe. *Woman Cleaning Locomotive,* 1960. Oil on board, 61.2 x 79.3 cm..

The experience of the locomotive shed inspired in Rowe the beginnings of a new way to depict reality. Having stepped back from his leadership role in the AIA and reducing his Party work, he now devoted his energies to his art and to developing this new realism. He outlined his views in an article

for the left-wing literary journal *Our Time* published in July 1944.[443] He described how the war had 'uprooted from their studios' many of the war artists and had transformed how they represented the world in the light of their new experiences. He mentioned Eric Bawden, Stanley Spencer and Eric Ravilious as examples of those finding new means of expression (he was particularly appreciative of the work of Spencer). However, even they had not been able to depict the social and political forces which, in Rowe's view, underlay the reality they sought to portray. He proposed that only the application of Marxist theory to art could achieve this understanding because it provided:

> …the only thoroughly scientific analysis of these forces, and dialectical materialism the only philosophical synthesis, which would give them that realistic and living approach to phenomena and experience which is necessary as a guide to action.

To illustrate his point, he imagined how different artists from past and present might represent what they would see in a modern factory. Rembrandt, Michaelangelo, Cezanne and Picasso would interpret this reality in their own way as defined by their own aesthetic but would still be unable to capture the essential truth of the social relation of the worker to the means of production. Only the artist with a Marxist understanding of class forces had the capability of achieving this. But for Rowe, this artist does not simply paint what is in front of them. In the process of identifying and revealing these social relations, this artist may choose to select some forms, reject others, 'make an emphasis here, an exaggeration there', so that by such alterations

> ...he (sic) conveys a greater sense of the real relations and character of these forms than the actual forms he sees.

This process of close observation, analysis and synthesis brings about a conflict within the artist which, as with the class struggle, brings about a revolutionary change within themself, creating a new experience. For Rowe, it is not what is *seen* but what is *experienced* that should determine what the artist produces pictorially. This understanding is crucial to appreciating what lies at the heart of socialist realism:

> To my mind, socialist realism is not naturalism, but a realism of approach to a given relation or 'subject'. The resulting work is not simply a copy of actuality, but a selection and transformation of a given relation or subject, into a pictorial design which makes it more 'real' to the spectator. In other words, it invites the spectator not only into what the artist *sees*, but also into what he *experiences*.

[443] C.H. Rowe, 'A Painter on His Method', *Our Time*, July 1944, pp. 19-20.

This was Rowe's contribution to an ongoing debate on the Left as to how socialist realism was to be interpreted and applied within a British context. In an earlier article in *Our Time*, Rowe had welcomed this debate and the opportunity it brought for artists to explore and experiment with their own practice:

> It is doubtful if anyone knows what is 'proletarian art' or 'Socialist Realism' or 'Marxist art' but, thank goodness, there are many strongly held opinions on these questions. For it is out of such multiplicity of opinions, but more effectively, out of the many attempts to create works that express our time … its content, and its expression, that we hope to find answers and results which can be commonly agreed upon as the real thing.[444]

What is notable about this article, as opposed to other contributions to the debate, is the absence of any mention of contemporary Soviet art and its 'leading role', or any referencing of Lenin and Stalin to support the argument. However, by emphasising the supremacy of the artist's *experience* of reality, Rowe introduces an element of subjectivity which was somewhat at odds with contemporary interpretations of Socialist Realism, despite his claim to be guided by strict Marxist method. If this is a matter of his own aesthetic, informed though it is by the application of the dialectic, then how does it fundamentally differ from the personal aesthetics of the artists he references? What makes *this* 'the real thing', and not the others? Is it not, shorn of its Marxist rhetoric, essentially a re-statement of the principles of Emotionism, with 'experience' replacing 'feeling'? Rowe was all too aware of this conflict and sought to resolve it, only towards the end of his life coming to a real understanding of what he had been seeking. Before then, there were to be many trials – personal, artistic and political – he would have to undergo.

By the war's end, Cliff Rowe had established himself as both a steadfast organiser and a committed realist painter whose work bridged political purpose and close observation. His depictions of Blitz-damaged streets, Camden life, and women at work in locomotive sheds demonstrated his belief that art should serve social ends without losing touch with the everyday realities it claimed to defend. The tensions and compromises of wartime politics never erased that conviction but instead sharpened his commitment to an art rooted in lived experience. He ended the war convinced that the most enduring political art was not forged in slogans, but in the observed lives of the people whose struggles it sought to represent.

[444] C.H. Rowe, 'Auto-Lithography', *Our Time*, July 1944, Dec. 1943, pp. 19-20.

CHAPTER 5: COLD WAR, CULTURE, AND CONFUSION

Introduction

The years following the ending of the Second World War produced a new range of challenges for Rowe and his comrades in the CPGB Artists' Group – political, ideological and aesthetic. This chapter explores the nature of these challenges, set against the background of the Cold War, 'Zhdanovism', and the 'Battle of Ideas' between the USSR and a capitalist West dominated by the USA. They forced artists and other cultural professionals to choose sides and led to an irrevocable split in the Artists' International Association. What had been a broad-based anti-fascist alliance fractured under the weight of Cold War politics. Attempts to suspend the AIA's 'political clause' were symptomatic of the growing rift between communists and non-communist progressives within its ranks. At the heart of this chapter is the dilemma facing British left-wing artists after the defeat of fascism in 1945: how to remain committed to socialism while responding honestly to the realities of Soviet repression and artistic orthodoxy.

The chapter also explores the increasing influence of the CPGB's National Cultural Committee, a body tasked with directing the cultural work of Party members. Its top-down enforcement of Socialist Realist principles stifled artistic experimentation and alienated many who had been among the most loyal cultural workers. Cliff Rowe, who had once found hope and inspiration in the Soviet cultural experiment, now found himself in a profoundly uncomfortable position. He did not openly abandon the principles of Socialist Realism, but since at least 1936 he had increasingly questioned both its aesthetic limitations and its capacity to reflect truthfully the lived experience of ordinary people.

As the grip of Zhdanovism loosened following Stalin's death, Rowe glimpsed the possibility of renewal. His visit to East Germany in 1956 revealed artists tentatively reaching toward a new freedom, keen to reconnect with the broader European cultural tradition. This thaw brought a brief period of hope that, freed from the need to promote Socialist Realism as the only acceptable art, Communist artists would be free to develop new forms of socialist art. It was a hope that did not last long. Finally, this chapter follows Rowe's continuing commitment to producing socialist art as he wrestled with the realities of political control and artistic constraint. His efforts to find a more humane, honest form of realism, one that could speak to the lives of working people without resorting to cliché or dogma, reflect not only his own artistic journey, but the wider crisis facing left cultural politics in the Cold War years.

The Cold War, the 'Battle of Ideas' and the AIA

The onset of the Cold War after 1945 was marked by the emergence in the USSR of what became known as the 'Zhdanov Doctrine' or *Zhdanovshchina.* Named after A. A. Zhdanov, Stalin's propaganda chief and heir apparent, it sought to mobilise culture as a weapon in the global struggle between the Soviet Union and the capitalist West, now dominated by the United States. *Zhdanovschchina* provided a proscriptive restatement of Socialist Realism in the arts. It stressed the importance of the Russian academic tradition, the dangers of foreign 'bourgeois' influences and the primacy of political purpose (i.e. what was required by the Party). It triggered a new wave of repression against artists, writers, musicians and performers deemed to be 'formalist', a term used in the 1930s against artists accused of placing aesthetics - 'form' - above politics, and now a catch-all for those who did not to conform to the orthodoxy of Socialist Realism.[445] Foreign Communist parties were also expected to follow this new doctrine, the vehicle for ensuring this being the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau), established in 1947 under the auspices of Zhdanov as a cultural successor to the Comintern.[446] At the same time, in the USA and Western Europe, modernist abstraction was elevated as the art of freedom and individualism, a cultural expression of capitalist democracy.[447] Thus came about a new multidimensional global culture war that became known as 'the Battle of Ideas'.[448]

Caught between these polar opposites were Cliff Rowe and a few like-minded comrades in the Party's Artists' Group, still paying lip service to Socialist Realism but at the same time not totally rejecting the insights of abstraction. For them, the most serious casualty in the Battle of Ideas was the unity of the AIA. The first targets of Zhdanov's campaign in the USSR had been the composers and musicians, many of world renown including Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Khachaturian, who were denounced for formalism. This campaign against the 'Soviet composers' was picked up by the British press in 1948 and led to the beginnings of what was to become the fatal split in the AIA. Following this press criticism, which included a wider denunciation of the Soviet attitude to artistic freedom, the Communist members of the AIA took up the challenge through the columns of the *AIA Newsletter*. The tone of the debate was considerably more partisan than the pre-war discussions on

[445] Bown, *Art under Stalin*, pp. 204 -206.
[446] Bill Bland, 'The Cominform Fights Revisionism', 1998, Marxists Internet Archive, www.marxists.org. Accessed September 2024
[447] Christine Lindey*, Art in the Cold War*, (London: The Herbert Press, 1990), p. 85.
[448] For an exploration of how the CIA covertly shaped Cold War culture by channelling funds to journals, orchestras and films sympathetic to the West's ideological aims, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, (London: Granta Books, 1999).

'art in a dictatorship'. Jack Chen dismissed the British press commentary as yet another example of anti-Soviet propaganda which misrepresented the role of the Soviet Communist Party in promoting the arts in the USSR. Paul Hogarth, the *Newsletter* editor, stated that in Britain dictatorship in the arts existed through capitalist control of the press, the film industry, the BBC, and the dismissive attitude of the galleries to works with a political content.[449]

This in turn drew the ire of Frederic Laws, art critic of the *News Chronicle*, who responded in the *Newsletter* that the events in Russia represented 'the latest heresy hunt'.[450] The debate became even more heated following the Communists' coming to power in Czechoslovakia that same year, in many ways echoing the furore in the AIA over the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1940. To some AIA members this constituted an illegal coup – to others (principally the CPGB members) it was a legitimate parliamentary manoeuvre reflecting the wishes of the Czechoslovak people.[451] Matters came to a head at an AIA Extraordinary General Meeting in October 1948 held to discuss the issue. At the heart of the discussion was a proposal from Stephen Bone, who had played a prominent role in the Finland controversy and was now the art correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*. He proposed that because of the acrimonious division among the members, Clause 2f of the AIA constitution - the 'political clause' - should be suspended for two years. Clause 2f stated that one of its objectives of the Association was:

> To take part in political activity, to organise or collaborate in any meeting or demonstration in sympathy with the aims of the Association where action seems desirable or justifiable.[452]

The proposal was defeated but the vote was later declared to be invalid. The number of votes counted did not appear to tally with the number cast, including postal votes. However, no further votes were taken and there the matter rested, but the damage to the unity of the Association had been done. A number of prominent members, including Sir Edward Marsh, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant, resigned from the AIA's Advisory Group.[453] Cliff Rowe, who had stepped back from his prominent role in the AIA and had not attended the meeting, found himself being drawn back into the same controversies that had exhausted him five years earlier. Outraged by the move to suspend the political clause, he drafted a letter to the *AIA Newsletter* (misnaming it as its old title of *AIA*

[449] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 79.
[450] Morris and Radford, *AIA,* p. 79.
[451] Morris and Radford, *AIA,* p. 79.
[452] Artists' International Association, 'Legal Charter of the Artists' International Association', Künste im Exil, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, https://kuenste-im-exil.de/KIE/Content/EN/Objects/artists-international-association-satzung-en.html. Accessed March 2025.
[453] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 82.

Bulletin) where he gave vent to his frustrations. Writing as 'one of the three people who were responsible for calling the first meeting at which the AIA was founded with 7 members, its first secretary and a Committee member for 10 years', he stated that it was the political clause that gave the AIA its essential meaning for existing. The AIA had consistently upheld that artists, writers, and musicians had both the right and the responsibility to address society and politics collectively through their own organisations, since their work was inseparably shaped by political and economic conditions.[454]

He accused Stephen Bone and others who supported his proposal of hypocrisy, pointing out that they were happy to accept the political clause when they actively engaged in the anti-fascist, anti-Franco campaigns in the 1930s, where that same clause had enabled their activities, not merely as individuals, but as part of an organisation. It should have come as no surprise that there were now disagreements among members on political matters, as there had been in the past, but the way to deal with them was through debate and engagement, not by closing down discussion.[455]

Rowe also took aim at the *Evening Standard* cartoonist David Low, who had been one of the principal protagonists in the Finland debate and now supported Bone's proposal. Low's claim that the political clause would divide the association was unfounded, since it had long existed without causing splits. Low's real objection, wrote Rowe, stemmed from his suspicion of the Communist Party, which he was not honest enough to debate openly. This was inconsistent given his own career:

> Mr Low has, for more years than I can tell, taken part in the most direct way an artist can, in political ideas, discussion, comment and action. He is a *political* cartoonist who has probably more political influence than most professional politicians.[456]

He was scathing that the AIA Committee had allowed the use of a postal ballot in the vote on Bone's proposal, accusing it of 'weakness' and arguing that this put the Association 'at the mercy of a vote unsupported by thorough discussion, reflection and demonstration of facts'. This was an angry and bitter letter, unusual for Rowe who was usually civil in his public utterances. His concluding call for 'a Committee that does not mistake the difference between generosity and sentimentality' would have been particularly hurtful for old friends still serving on the Committee. The letter did not appear in the following edition of the *AIA Newsletter* or in any subsequent issues. It is possible that he may

[454] Cliff Rowe, draft letter to *AIA Bulletin*, 19 November 1948, Cliff Rowe Personal Papers. The first secretary of the AI was, in fact, Rowe's wife Anna Meblin.
[455] Rowe, draft letter *AIA Bulletin*.
[456] Rowe, draft letter *AIA Bulletin*.

have had second thoughts about sending it, but it is more likely that the AIA Committee, anxious to keep the Association together, recognised its inflammatory nature and declined to publish it. A further attempt to remove the political clause was made at a General Meeting in April 1949 but there was no clear outcome, with the vote split at 50/50, and there the matter rested though the internal tensions deepened.[457] It was not until December 1953, with the Cold War well underway, that the political clause was replaced with a new aim:

> To work for the co-operation of artists for intellectual freedom, economic security and the promotion of peace and international understanding; to organise, or collaborate in, any action for the above aims.[458]

The AIA from then on was to function primarily as an exhibiting body, finally ceasing operation in 1973. Communist artists, including Rowe, still provided artworks but all the CPGB Artist Group members resigned from the AIA following the dropping of the political clause, with a consequent impact on membership, which declined from a post-war high of nearly 1000 to 375.[459] However, by 1953 Rowe and the few like-minded comrades in the Artists' Group had another fight on their hands, this time with the Party's National Cultural Committee and its attempt to impose Zhdanovism on its cultural workers.

The National Cultural Committee

The main effect of the 'Battle of Ideas' for the CPGB was the establishment in February 1947 of a National Cultural Committee. Chaired by Emile Burns, who had been responsible on the Central Committee for cultural matters,[460] it reported directly to the Party Executive Committee. This was a significant organisational development as it moved culture from a peripheral concern into a key component of Party policy. While this development was warmly welcomed by members, it meant that the Party's artists, writers, performers and other cultural workers were to come under much greater scrutiny by the leadership than in pre-war days. Its remit, as described in 1952 by its full-time secretary Sam Aaronovitch, was:

> …to give leadership to Marxist work in the arts and sciences, to enable the Communist Party to fight reactionary and anti-human ideas more effectively, and put forward progressive,

[457] Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 82.
[458] Morris and Radford, *AIA,* p. 82.
[459] Radford, *Art for a Purpose*, p. 166.
[460] Andy Croft, 'The Boys Round the Corner', in Andy Croft, ed. *A Weapon in the Class Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain*, (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 146.

> humanist ideas in their place. It has the task of using all aspects of cultural activity as a weapon in the fight of the Party for peace, independence and Socialism[461]

Aaronovitch was a *Zhdanovschchina* zealot, so much so that a member of the Party's Historians Group described Zhdanov himself as 'the Soviet Sam Aaronovitch'.[462] The various Party 'professional workers' groups, many of which had their origins in the Communist counter-culture of 'Class against Class' era, were now to be mobilised as the Party's cultural shock-troops in the 'Battle of Ideas'. The variety of cultural interests represented by these groups is evident from a Special Branch report of a 1949 Cultural Committee national conference, chaired by Emile Burns, 'called to discuss the organisation of Party work in art and science and the "Battle of Ideas"':

> It was attended by 124 delegates representing different Cultural Groups such as the Science Group, the Historians' Group, the Writers' Group, the Anthropologists' Group, the Architects' Group and the Unity Theatre Group. Also present were the University Staffs' Committee, the Education Advisory Committee, the National Economic Committee, the Teachers' Advisory Committee, the Engels Society, the Young Communist League…[463]

An unnamed delegate from the Artists' Group reported that, though 'small and struggling', its members:

> …no longer spent their time in rooms discussing the specialised problems of artists alone. They were now entering more fully into political life and were busy supplying posters and banners for demonstrations, illustrations for Party literature. They had begun to hold week-end schools.[464]

This suggests that the Artists' Group had turned inward on itself and was only now returning to the 'agitprop' of the early years of the Artists' International. Indeed, some months previously they had written to Jack Chen, an artist with considerable standing in the Party, seeking his advice on how best they should be directing their activities in order to cope with the political demands now being placed on them.[465]

An early casualty of the National Cultural Committee's scrutiny was *Our Time*, a successor to *Left Review*, founded in 1941 by a group of Party members that included Cliff Rowe, James Boswell and

[461] Sam Aaronovitch, 'Culture and the people', W*orld News and Views* 2 February 1952, p. 55.
[462] Andy Croft, *The Years of Anger, The Life of Randall Swingler*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2020), p. 254 n. 2.
[463] 'Samuel Aaronovitch', TNA KV 2/4269.
[464] TNA KV 2/4269.
[465] 'Communist activities among musicians and actors', TNA KV 3/379.

Montagu Slater, with *Daily Worker* literary editor Randall Swingler as editor.[466] After 1945 its circulation fell and by 1947 it was in financial difficulty. It was felt by its editors that the only way it could survive was to appeal to a broader readership and should publish articles from non-Communist progressives. Emile Burns attacked this proposal and demanded that it should instead be a combative literary journal putting forward the CPGB political line in the 'Battle of Ideas', a position that harked back to the 'Class against Class' days.[467] Evidence suggests that Cliff Rowe attempted to moderate in the dispute. A phone call from the artist Paul Hogarth to Sam Aaronovich in December 1947, intercepted by MI5, indicates that the Artists' Group had concerns about this the new direction and that 'Cliff Roe' (sic) had 'raised some very good points' and should be present at a future meeting to discuss *Our Time.*[468] However, Burns - later described by Hogarth as 'King Street's cultural commissar' - had his way, insisting on vetting every issue, with a new editorial board replacing the single editorship of Randall Swingler.[469] Subsequent editions took a distinct anti-American tone while downplaying the cultural repression in the USSR. At the same time, and in the face of constant interference from Burns, *Our Time* continued to include at least some material with wider appeal. Hogarth wrote later:

> *Our Time* could only reach its readers through a national network of Party-controlled bookshops and sales outlets. Publication, therefore, was often delayed because King Street disapproved of any editorial reluctance to endorse Zhdanov's various campaigns against 'decadent' bourgeois culture or Lysenko's half-baked theories.[470]

Rowe played his own part in trying to maintain some degree of inclusivity. His cover design for the May Day 1948 edition of *Our Time* was far from the strident imagery of other Communist publications. Instead, it promoted the joyfulness of the occasion with his drawing of a wagonload of

[466] Croft, 'The Boys Round the Corner', p. 143.
[467] Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain,1941- 1951*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1997), p. 171.
[468] 'Paul Hogarth', TNA KV 2/4059.
[469] Andy Croft, 'The Boys Round the Corner', p. 153.
[470] Paul Hogarth, 'Afterword', in Croft (ed.), *Weapon in the Class Struggle*, p. 207.

happy children, with not a Soviet flag or anti-American slogan in sight (Figure 96). The following edition of *Our Time* for June contained a lively and well-argued debate between Rowe and his old mentor Ronald Dunlop on the topic of a trade union for artists. Dunlop defended the view of the artist as a free individual 'whose unique vision makes his creative work stand alone'. It followed that there could not be a trade union for artists 'because art is not a trade and to unite is not the tendency of the artist'. Rowe responded that the history of the 20th century had shown that 'the notion of complete independence and total freedom is hopeless sentimentality….we are all dependent on each other, and our freedom is limited accordingly'. Artists, like everyone else, were subject to the vagaries of the capitalist system and needed to organise to promote their interests.[471] There remained, however, a deep mutual respect for each other as artists. An editorial introduction to the piece concluded:

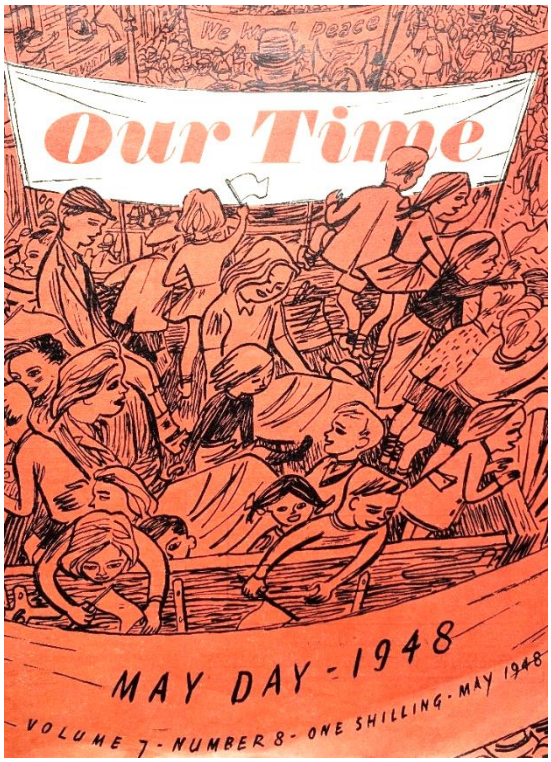

Figure 96: Cliff Rowe. *Our Time* 1948. Cover design.

> If they have expressed a devilish dislike of each other's ideas, we have to report that when it comes to an actual job of work in painting, they have frequently found themselves in agreement.[472]

In spite of (or perhaps because of) the new regime, the circulation of *Our Time* continued to decline and in July 1949 publication ceased.[473]

In the meantime, the Party's efforts to control the outputs of its various cultural and scientific groups continued. A key element of this was the exhortation to emulate the 'achievements' of the Soviet Union in these areas:

> In this fight we are fortunate in the guidance of the Soviet Union. The great controversies on literature, music, biology, philosophy, medicine and linguistics, to mention a few of them,

[471] 'A Trade Union for Artists? A discussion between R.O. Dunlop A.R.A. and Clifford Rowe', *Our Time*, June 1948.
[472] 'Trade Union for Artists?', *Our Time.* In his *Understanding Pictures. From Primitive Art to Surrealism*, published in London in 1948, Dunlop referred to Rowe as 'a good friend'. p. 43.
[473] Croft, *Years of Anger,* p. 220.

have resulted not only to Soviet development *but to the battle of ideas on a world scale.*[474] (Emphasis as in the original).

A resolution of the CPGB Executive Committee in January 1952 approved the work of the National Cultural Committee and called for more public activity in 'exposing the false ideas that serve the ruling class'. It demanded of its cultural workers 'continuous study and popularisation of Soviet achievements' and 'new efforts by our writers, artists and musicians to produce work relating to the British working-class struggle and based on the standpoint of Socialist Realism'.[475] For the artists and writers in particular, the Party was now going further than it had ever done in seeking to impose the same uniformity prevalent in the Soviet Union. Discussion within the various cultural groups was muted, with any criticism of the Soviet Union or Party policy in danger of being denounced as 'deviationism' by the Party leadership.[476] The 'walking on eggshells' approach was later satirised by the writer Doris Lessing, then a Party member, in her semi-autobiographical book *The Golden Notebook*. She describes a meeting of members of the CPGB Writers Group earnestly discussing a recently-issued pamphlet by Stalin on linguistics, each recognising that it was nonsense but not prepared to say so openly, either pretending ignorance of the subject or concluding that it was 'a bad translation'.[477] The impact on the CP scientist members – the Engels Group – was more serious. The pressure to support Lysenko's 'half-baked ideas' on biology caused the group to fragment, with several members resigning and one of its most eminent members, J.B.S. Haldane, withdrawing from Party activity before finally resigning in 1956.[478]

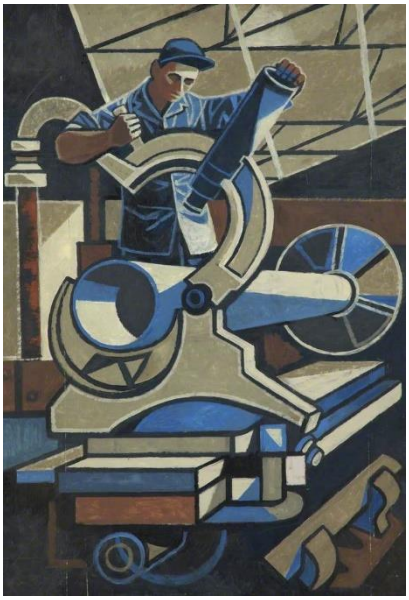

Figure 97: Cliff Rowe. *Pipecutter*, c. 1950 Acrylic on board, 122 x 93 cm.

The Esher murals

The drive for Socialist Realism in the 'Battle of Ideas' had a profound effect on Rowe's thinking about the direction of his own art. Following from his wartime drawings and paintings of Camden streets and women workers in the Kings Cross locomotive sheds, he had been experimenting with new forms of 'realism', for example, his *Pipecutter*, painted around 1950

[474] Aaronovitch, W*orld News.*
[475] Aaronovitch, W*orld News.*
[476] Callaghan, *Cold War and Crisis*, p. 94.
[477] Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook,* (London: Fourth Estate, 1972), pp. 270-277.
[478] Callaghan, *Cold War and Crisis*, p. 94.

(Figure 97). He now had to come to terms with the demands laid down by Aaronovich and the Cultural Committee:

> The Battle of Ideas which had started in the Thirties had not stopped. On the contrary, it had burst into a complicated flare up of segmented theories and I found myself spending valuable time in trying to work out my own solutions to the complicated problems the twentieth century had thrust upon all of us.[479]

In 1953 he was offered a commission by the Electrical Trade Union (ETU) to paint a number of large artworks for their new union training centre in Esher, Surrey. By this time the CPGB exerted close to full control of the ETU with the three key leadership positions occupied by Party members – President (Walter Stevens), General Secretary (Frank Haxell), Assistant General Secretary (Frank Foulkes) and nine other positions on the fourteen-member Executive Committee.[480] This put Rowe in a quandary. He had little time for the supposedly 'socialist' content of the Socialist Realism that was now being demanded of all artists in the Party:

> I had long lost interest in the usual 'class struggle' painting which generally consisted in physical conflict between the police and strikers or the miseries of the working class under capitalist exploitation. These paintings were invariably clichés more or less well done but the whole approach seemed to me to be negative, a continual moaning against oppression, too often expressed in sentimental terms and images.[481]

Unfortunately for Rowe, this was exactly what the ETU leadership, dominated by the political requirements of the CPGB, now demanded. In line with the Party's strictures on Socialist Realism in art, they wanted the works to be large-scale, after the style of the Mexican muralists, and painted using a method that would make them '... understandable to their members and that meant an emphasis upon naturalistic verisimilitude'.[482] Their preferred subjects were the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the 1926 General Strike (Figures 98 and 99), and three incidents from the union's militant history. Rowe tried to discuss alternative approaches with the ETU leaders, who took a close interest in the whole project, as did the Cultural Committee, which saw the commission as an important development in promoting art in the working-class movement. One of Rowe's ideas for the General Strike painting was to depict a group of striking dockers laughing at the ineffectual attempts of

[479] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[480] Graham Stevenson, 'The ETU and the Communist Party', http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index Accessed March 2021
[481] Cliff Rowe, 'A New Visual Socialist Language', 1980, p. 40. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[482] Rowe, 'Visual Socialist Language', p. 40.

middle-class students from the strike-breaking 'Organisation for the Maintenance of Supply' to unload a ship in the London docks.[483] His patrons were happy to discuss his suggestions but were adamant in what they wanted: '… they put no obstacles in the way of discussion. They were simply convinced of their own views'.[484]

Figure 98: Cliff Rowe. *The Tolpuddle Martyrs,* 1953-54. Oil on board, 122 x 363 cm.

Figure 99: Cliff Rowe. *The 1926 General Strike,* 1953-54. Oil on board, 100 x 300 cm.

This to Rowe was a reminder of his Red Army commission in Moscow in 1933, when his own proposal to illustrate the British class-struggle (a clash between a mounted policeman and a hunger marcher) was rejected in favour of the Red Army officers' own preference (a massive confrontation between the police and the marchers in Trafalgar Square).[485] The outcome had been the same – he had given his patrons what they wanted, treating it as he would any commission from a commercial

[483] Communication from Don Milligan concerning conversations with Cliff Rowe c.1970, 3 August 2016.
[484] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 50.
[485] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 50.

client. As with his Moscow painting, he later wondered whether he should have done more to defend his own ideas:

> I was uneasy and worried as to whether I should have boldly attempted at least a step towards a different conception of the union struggle, demanding a different method of expression. I think if I had come to any clear idea of what this approach might be and of the method of expression it would indicate, I would have tried to convince the union leaders of - its authenticity.[486]

The reality was that Rowe was still not confident enough in the approaches to realism on which he had been working. Moreover, the schedule for completion of the two large murals and the other works was too demanding to allow him time for experimentation. They had to be ready for the grand opening of the Esher training centre later the following year. The only real alternative he had was to refuse the commission, and this he didn't want to do. It was not simply a question of turning down badly-needed money, though clearly this was a factor. This was the first time a British trade union had commissioned any significant artwork, a practice which Rowe had first observed when in Moscow and which was one of the positive experiences of 'socialism in action' which had convinced him that the future lay in Communism. This commission had the potential to be a model for furthering socialist art within the trade union movement. Not only that, a refusal would be a slap in the face not only to the ETU but to the Party itself, to which he was still deeply loyal.

He carried out the commission 'to the best of my then ability', though the technical requirements for such large paintings constituted a major challenge.[487] Working night and day in his Camden studio, he part-painted his scenes in sections, using oil paint on marine plywood panels which he then transferred to Esher Place for assembly and the completion of the painting.[488] It was a time-consuming and physically demanding process which took its toll on him. Despite this, the commission was completed in time for the training centre opening in June 1954, the final result being warmly welcomed by the ETU and the Party leadership.[489] Rowe, however, was profoundly dissatisfied with what he had produced. He felt that this had been a real opportunity to make the breakthrough towards that new form realism for which he had been striving but which he had been unable to realise because of his lack confidence in his own experiments, and his unwillingness to confront openly his Party's zealous adherence to Socialist Realism:

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[486] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 50.
[487] Rowe, 'Visual Socialist Language', p. 40.
[488] John Gorman, *Images of Labour*, (London, Scorpion Publishing, 1985), p. 130.
[489] Rowe, 'Visual Socialist Language', p. 40.

> The result pleased the Union and has pleased many others since, but I always wondered what would have happened had I taken every risk and gone ahead with something that might have pleased me, but which might have deeply disappointed the Union… I felt that I had been unable to do anything towards creating a new and socialist work of art but had expressed socialist views in a bourgeois technique.[490]

Figure 100: Cliff Rowe. *ETU Strike, Fulham, 1953-54.* Oil on board, 110 x 58 cm.

In a later interview he was more brutal, saying that they had not been up to standard, were too rushed, and that he would willingly 'burn the bloody lot!'[491] However, within one of the paintings he was able to make a muted protest against what he had been required to do. The scene in the painting *ETU Strike, Fulham* (Figure 100), is of a picket-line in militant confrontation with the police. The pickets are determined, joyful even, revelling in the opportunity to fight their cause – all save one. At the bottom of the picture is a figure with an expression of sad resignation and, unlike the other pickets, facing away from the action. This figure is clearly meant to be 'Joe', Rowe's alter-ego, which he used in a number of works since he first appeared in Rowe's painting for the Red Army exhibition in 1933. The expression on his face provides a vivid insight into the conflicting emotions of the artist.

Shortly after the murals were completed Rowe asked the critic John Berger to view them and give his opinion. Berger declared that they were 'the best I have seen of that kind of work', a response that was both dispiriting and unhelpful. Rowe had been only too well aware of the inadequacy of the Socialist Realist approach he had reluctantly used but had been expecting some constructive help from Berger – a trenchant critic of the Soviet version of Socialist Realism - on the direction he should be taking. He didn't get that help, and writing about the incident thirty years later his bitterness was still evident:

> I did not know whether to curse or smirk, it was so close to my own opinion. But while I agreed with his summary, I did not accept the basis upon which he made it. If I was divided, he seemed to me to be equally so, and for similar reasons.[492]

[490] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 51.
[491] Gorman, *Images of Labour*, p. 133.
[492] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 51.

In a survey of the work produced by British 'progressive artists' including Paul Hogarth, Pat Carpenter and Cliff Rowe published in an unnamed Soviet art journal a year later, Berger commented on the Esher murals:

> Clifford Rowe, having chosen as the sphere of his activity a wall painting, is less intimate than Carpenter and more directly dramatic than Hogarth. He sees historical events in the light of a Marxist world outlook and at the same time gives them a romantic colouring.[493]

This juxtaposition of 'a Marxist outlook' with 'a romantic colouring' hints at Rowe's (and Berger's) dilemma regarding Socialist Realism and is deserving of at least some explanation, which unfortunately Berger does not provide. Instead, there is what could be interpreted as a sly dig at Rowe's standing with the ETU following the completion of the commission. In contrast to Rowe's belief that both murals were well received, Berger wrote, referring to *The Tolpuddle Martyrs*:

> Critical voices were heard in the electricians' union about this fresco (sic): it seemed to many somewhat static. There was greater popularity among union members enjoyed by another of Rowe's pictures, devoted to the general strike of 1926, more dynamic and full of vivid dramatic effect.[494]

Significantly, the illustration chosen to accompany the article was of *The Tolpuddle Martyrs*, not *The 1926 General Strike*. The positive comment about the latter went someway to soften the preceding statement, though not totally. Insofar as Rowe has had public recognition as an artist, it is for these two paintings. For nearly 30 years they hung on the walls in Esher Place, inspiring, no doubt, generations of trade union activists. Because of their size and dimensions full colour reproduction of their images was expensive and until recently were rare, but two examples have been found. *The 1926 General Strike* was printed on the cover and over two pages of issue Number 44 of *Purnell's History of the 20th Century*, 1969, and *The Tolpuddle Martyrs* was the subject of a Christmas card produced by the TASS section of the AUEW in 1975. The original paintings are currently in storage in Esher Place, awaiting a decision on their future.

The quest for a British Socialist Realism

The basics of Socialist Realism first laid down in 1934 were further refined in the years of the *Zhdanovschchina.* To the slogan 'realist in form, socialist in content' was added 'national in form,

[493] John Berger, 'We Are Going Forward' c. 1955. Translated from Russian by Sandra Thornberry. This article is a photocopied extract from an unnamed and undated Soviet art journal found in Rowe's papers. Attached to it was a handwritten note: "Greetings from John B".
[494] Berger, 'Going Forward'.

socialist in content'. In other words, foreign Communist artists were now expected to develop their own forms of Socialist Realist art, supposedly based on their own countries' cultural traditions. In practice, however, this meant emulating the current art of the Soviet Union. During a weekend school on Socialist Realism for Party members held in 1953, Sam Aaronovitch reiterated what was required of British artists in a set of five 'features'. First, art must be national in form but socialist in content, blending cultural tradition with ideological purpose. Second, it should offer a truthful, historically grounded portrayal of reality. Third, it must depict reality in motion, emphasising social change through struggle. Fourth, it must have an educational role, aiming to guide audiences in the advancement of socialism and the transition to communism. Finally, it should present 'the typical' — that which most clearly expresses the essence of the relevant social forces. Together, these principles defined art as a tool for ideological clarity, social engagement, and collective transformation.[495] He concluded that it was not enough for Communist artists to portray the evils of British capitalism, they also had to point towards the solution, which was, of course, the implementation of Party policy. Perhaps the most revealing of Aaronovitch features was the focus on *the typical* — the demand that artists distil and represent not just individuals, but archetypes that exemplify the values and struggles of the working class. This left little room for ambiguity, subjectivity, or psychological nuance. Rowe could not accept such a restrictive and, to him, philistine vision of art. Although he always considered himself as a Marxist, he had:

> …never fully believed the Marxist analysis which claims that culture is the superstructure arising from the economic and political foundations of society. I could accept that this must logically be so, but it appeared to me that once culture had appeared it developed a life of its own which reacted back on economics and politics and could change them just as much as they changed culture.[496]

Rowe's belief that culture possessed an autonomous power to shape economics and politics seems to echo Antonio Gramsci's reflections on the reciprocal relation between base and superstructure, although Gramsci's writings were not available in Britain until the first English edition appeared in 1957. Gramsci wrote in 1927:

[495] Sam Aaronovitch, 'Capitalist Reaction against Socialist Realism', in *Essays on Socialist Realism and the British Cultural Tradition,* (London: Arena Publication, 1953), pp. 50-56.
[496] Rowe, 'Visual Socialist Language', p. 52.

> Both economic changes and cultural changes are expressions of a basic historical process, and it is difficult to say which sphere has primacy over the other.[497]

Aaronovitch's prescriptions, far from clarifying what Socialist Realism meant for British artists, only succeeded in confusing them further. Some attempts had been already made to produce what was required, the most notable being Derek Chittock's *The Arrest of the Dockers* (1952), depicting the arrest in 1951 of members of the London Dockers' Committee for subversion. In true Soviet style one of the figures had to be erased later when it was discovered that he had been a police spy. Another was Lucian Amaral's *The Raising of Lazarus* (1953) showing the emergence of Welsh miners from a successful sit-in strike.[498] Amaral wrote later of his painting that it was intended to be:

> … an assertion of the validity of Socialist Realism as against all manner of revisionist (sic) that were, and still are, current amongst 'Marxist' theorists.[499]

One of the 'revisionists' that Amaral had in mind might well have been Cliff Rowe. Already familiar with the degeneration of Soviet art since the imposition of Socialist Realism in 1934, Rowe did not believe that British socialist artists had anything to learn from what was being promoted as the most advanced form of art in the world. In meetings of the Artists' Group he railed against what he saw as painting that purported to be socialist but at the same time using 19th century bourgeois art forms:

> Soviet painting was not genuinely realistic at all. Workers were continually shown as tow-headed heroes and heroines of labour, joyfully fulfilling their five-year plan quotas, waving red flags, perfectly built if rather heavily muscled, entirely sexless, generally in bright sunshine under blue skies, always smiling and laughing, making the work seem effortless.[500]

He was particularly critical of the complete absence of the erotic in contemporary Soviet art, symptomatic of the general sexual repression of the Stalinist period:

> Sex was looked upon by the Communist leaders as some kind of sin against the productive effort, so any sign of human passion was eliminated as if by putting bleach in the artists' paint. Emotional love of a particularly sentimental and sickening kind, always shown with the obligatory smiles of pure innocence was approved, but never anything approaching a straight or questionable sexual desire.[501]

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[497] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings (1921–1926),* Quintin Hoare, ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), p. 210.
[498] Radford, *Art for a Purpose* pp. 178-179.
[499] Quoted in Lindey, *Art for All*, pp. 186-187.
[500] Rowe, 'Visual Socialist Language', p. 53.
[501] Rowe, 'Visual Socialist Language', p. 53.

He went further, comparing Soviet art with Nazi art. He described a famous painting from the 1930s of Stalin, 'showing him in a pose of stern nobility', addressing a group of young Russian soldiers seated 'in attitudes of humble adoration'. A little later, he came across a painting of Hitler in a similar noble pose, addressing a group of young Nazis with similar adoring expressions and poses.

> One only had to change the faces of the two leaders to make either picture valid for either country, at that time. The upshot of this extraordinary conflict of opposites, and yet identity of opposites, was the frightful sacrifice of the Russian and German working class that followed.[502]

This was a dangerous heresy and one, if stated openly, would probably have warranted expulsion from the Party. He did not at first share all his opinions with his comrades in the Artists' Group but ultimately felt compelled to confront their dogmatic adherence to Socialist Realism:

> This was not the kind of thinking that would endear me to my fellow artists… So at first I refrained from pressing the matter, but in the end I felt it necessary to challenge the view that Socialist Realism was sacrosanct and argued in the CP Artists' Group against its principle and practice, claiming that it was not, as was practised in Socialist countries, either socialist in content, or realistic in form. A few of the group endorsed the argument. Most were hostile.[503]

Rowe's recollections are borne out by Paul Hogarth, who had distanced himself from the Party since the demise of *Our Time* though still remaining a member. He recalled the unwillingness of the Artists' Group to discuss any form of art other than the sort of Socialist Realism demanded by the Party leadership:

> From time to time I would attend meetings of the Party's Artists Group. I found them totally unreal. There was no effort made to examine past traditions of social and political art…. Through its stooges King Street peddled Socialist Realism based on nineteenth century Russian academic naturalism.[504]

Rowe later recounted a Group meeting attended by an unnamed member of the Cultural Committee who was also on the CPGB Executive Committee, most likely to have been Emile Burns. Rowe, despite his experiences over the *Our Time* controversies, had admired Burns for his 'clarity of mind

[502] Rowe, 'Visual Socialist Language'. p. 53.
[503] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 56.
[504] Croft, *Weapon in the Class Struggle*, p. 208.

and his democratic approach to all problems'. He now faced, instead of 'clarity', the rigidity of the closed mind when he shared his views on Soviet art:

> He remarked in a friendly but regretful way: 'You know, comrade, this is really a hidden form of anti-Soviet propaganda'. It was blackmail, of course, but his loyalty did not allow him to realise it, so I let it pass.[505]

Rowe believed that this was an implicit threat to what he called 'his career in the Party'. However, he later acknowledged that, though he did not in any way moderate his views, the Party did not place any obstacles in his way.[506] Indeed, it is a measure of the esteem in which he was held as an artist that he was offered the ETU commission in 1953.

Rowe and his like-minded comrades found support in the art critic John Berger. Berger had trained as an artist at the Chelsea Art College and was a member of the AIA, exhibiting paintings at the AIA's 1950 Summer Exhibition, but it was as a writer and art critic for the *New Statesman* that he really came to prominence.[507] He was an advocate for realism as an art form for 'committed' artists though he was never enthusiastic for the Soviet version. Although not a member of the CPGB he worked closely with Artists' Group and joined it in opposing the moves to drop the AIA political clause. In 1953 he visited the Soviet Union and wrote a series of articles for the *New Statesman* on his experiences. Like Jack Lindsay in 1935, he gave due praise to Soviet achievements in industry and agriculture but was highly critical of the kind of Socialist Realist art being produced there, declaring:

> …the majority of Russian painting is bad (and) the new developments are embryonic.[508]

Here was the nub of the problem for Rowe and others in the Artists' Group. How could it be that a country whose social relations purported to be the most advanced in the world produce such 'bad' art which, even within its own terms, was a poor emulation of the great masters of 19th century Russian realist painting? Rowe expressed their dilemma thus:

> In view of the historical fact that art always changed with changes in social development, it seemed logical to believe that this would inevitably be the same with a socialist society, yet although socialism had been on trial for half a century, there was no change in the art, indeed there was a regression.[509]

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[505] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 57.
[506] Rowe, 'Approach to Realism', p. 57.
[507] Joshua Spurling, *A Writer of our Time*: *The Life and Work of John Berger*, (London: Verso, 2018), pp. 22-25.
[508] James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War, 1945–1960* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 67.
[509] Rowe, 'Visual Socialist Language', p. 57.

Although 'half a century' was a slight exaggeration, the implications of this issue posed a serious problem for Marxists like Rowe. They tried to find ways to embrace Socialist Realism, to find in its concepts real insights that could be applied in a British context, to apply Aaronovitch's exhortation to produce art that was 'national in form, socialist in content':

> In fact, we were not against the words. We were not interested in their slogan value, but in their possible real meaning. Could there be, for instance, a genuine Socialist art unique to socialism, or even unique to Socialist countries? Was it possible to develop a genuine Socialist art in capitalist countries? [510]

These questions inevitably led them led them to contemplate the unthinkable, that what was practised in the Soviet Union and the 'Socialist Democracies' of Eastern Europe was not actually Socialism:

> We were compelled to the conclusion that either socialist art was a myth, or that there was something out of gear in the Socialism practised in Socialist countries, or in the minds of the artists.[511]

With the 'Battle of Ideas' raging these were difficult ideas for any Communist to hold, and none of them could be expressed publicly at the time. However, change was on the way. After the death of Stalin in 1953 the repression in the Soviet Union began to ease. Zhdanov had died in 1948, and with Stalin no longer at the helm the twin forces behind the Battle of Ideas had gone. Soviet artists and writers were now freer to express themselves, though still within strict limits. This easing affected the role of the CPGB's Cultural Committee, whose importance for the Party began to diminish, so that by 1955 it was no longer deemed necessary to maintain a full-time party worker as Secretary, and Sam Aaronovitch was deployed to other tasks. Responsibility for some professional groups – musicians, actors, scientists, architects among others – was transferred to other Party committees, while a much reduced Cultural Committee retained responsibility for artists and writers.[512] The Cultural Committee's enthusiasm for Socialist Realism had waned to such a degree that it allowed the Artists' Group to publish its own journal, *Realism*, where these issues could now be openly debated.

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[510] Cliff Rowe, 'Personal reasons for drawing and painting industrial subjects: particularly workers at machines', c.1985, p. 19. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[511] Rowe, 'Personal Reasons', p. 19.
[512] *Minutes and papers of the National Cultural Committee 1950-1962,* CP-CENT-CULT-01, Communist Party of Great Britain Archive, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, People's History Museum, Manchester.

Rowe, in a letter to *Realism*, implied that its original title was to be *Socialist Realism,* but that this was dropped.[513] The first issue featured a report by Ray Watkinson, a supporter of Rowe's views, on a series of lectures organised by the Artists' Group. The first lecture, by John Berger in March 1955, addressed the issue of whether it was possible to produce a genuinely socialist art in a capitalist society. Berger was of the view that this was impossible under capitalism and that it could not be achieved until at least a generation living under 'real socialism' had passed. The best that progressive Western artists living in the capitalist system could produce was a form of realism whose essence was *critical* rather than *socialist*:

> He was inclined to the view that what realism has always achieved, and the task it must continue to perform, is one of criticism. It does not merely mirror: it selects, it comments; and critical realism is what we shall produce, what can be produced, under capitalism.[514]

The following lecture, delivered a month later by Cliff Rowe, focused on the actual production of art rather than on a theory of what art should be. Described by Watkinson as 'an accomplished artist, not a professional critic', Rowe used drawings from his current work, and examples from ancient art, to demonstrate the 'essentially selective and critical nature of realism'. Artists had always engaged in a process of abstraction, selecting and re-arranging their material in order to 'show clearly the nature of action, to express character, to develop the vital connections between one object and another, one movement and another'. This process had been obscured and overlaid since the Renaissance, creating problems of expression for modern European artists.[515]

Rowe took up Berger's argument in the following issue of *Realism*, writing on behalf of 'those of us who wish tacitly to drop the term Socialist Realism'.[516] Although sharing Berger's views on the soulless conformity of current Soviet art, he did not accept his conclusion that a form of art that was both realist and socialist was, for the current generation of British artists, unattainable. He took particular exception to the view that 'critical realism' was the best that he and other Communist artists could aspire to:

> …what is possible under Capitalism? 'Critical Realism' it is said. One does not want to start an arid discussion on the meaning of terms, but if this term means anything it refers to the exposure of the defects of Capitalism. If so, it is a good but negative policy, but at once poses the question of its logical opposite – 'Constructive Realism'. In short, 'Critical Realism'

[513] Cliff Rowe, letter to *Realism* No. 3, April 1956.
[514] Ray Watkinson, 'Three men in search of realism', *Realism,* No 1, June 1955.
[515] Watkinson, *Realism* No.1.
[516] Rowe, letter to *Realism* No.3.

> is necessarily an aspect of Socialist Realism. For how be critical, except in a Socialist manner, or realistic, without understanding Socialism? Are we not Socialists, because we do not live 30 years after the establishment of a British Socialist society? There is Socialism in Russia, but would those who sponsor 'Critical Realism' say that the arts in Russia are what they would define as Socialist Realism? But perhaps we are to wait until they have established full Communism. One asks, what will be the explanation if it does not appear then?[517]

He went on to describe how a literal interpretation of Socialist Realism had led British radical art into its current cul-de-sac and how, in his view, it could extricate itself. The key factor, for him, was to learn from the great artists of the past and recognise that artists such as Van Gogh and Cezanne, far from being simply the products of bourgeois society and therefore expressing its ideology, should be legitimately described as 'early socialist realists'. It was their social conscience, together with their assaults on the artistic orthodoxy of their time, that placed them in the socialist camp.:

> That they were not conscious Marxists is beside the point. They were as Socialist as any artist could have been at their time**...**These, and many other great artists, belong to us. The Capitalist camp has no valid claim on them, and I believe our own critics may begin openly to claim them, instead of allowing bourgeois critics to give us all a bad conscience.[518]

Communists should proudly reclaim this great artistic tradition, and by doing so would

> … win the enthusiasm of many progressive people, whose fears for culture under Communism at present hold them back. This viewpoint would also give us, instead of a vague polemical platform, a solid foundation in actual achievement and tradition, while at the same time taking their stolen planks from under the bourgeois phalanx.[519]

The clear message of this was that the individual artist living in contemporary capitalist society could effect a decisive change in art and how it was perceived, before society itself had changed. A letter from Patrick Carpenter (another supporter of Rowe) in the same issue of *Realism* stated that Communist artists should recognise that the 'actual creative work' in developing realist art in Britain had been done by artists outside the Party. He called on his comrades to acknowledge openly the 'mistakes' they had made in the recent past – over-praising Soviet art and the ideas of Stalin and

[517] Rowe, letter to *Realism* No.3.
[518] Rowe, letter to *Realism* No.3.
[519] Rowe, letter to *Realism* No.3.

Zhdanov, accepting uncritically the crude slogan 'Grasp the weapon of Culture!', and condemning the work of artists of the previous 60 years as 'formalist'. He concluded:

> I think the result of these ideas and false standards of criticism has been to make many of our artists feel one thing and think something else – and that kind of splitting of the artistic personality is fatal to the production of works of art. I would suggest that by means of discussion in *Realism* and elsewhere we should now begin to overhaul our whole theoretical approach to our work.[520]

A letter printed in the following edition from the artist Charles Bernard, not a Party member but one who had been active in the AIA, supported Carpenter's views but said he needed to go further. As well as an 'overhaul of our whole theoretical approach', there needed to be 'a new morality', one that was prepared to protest against the iniquities of the Soviet Union as well as those of the West. He concluded with the exhortation:

> Communist artists – in the recent past Stalin, Dutt and Aaronovitch have stifled the truth that spoke within you. From now on let your conscience equal your pamphlets as your guide.[521]

Other supporters of Rowe's views in the Artists' Group went further in their attacks on those in the Party who still clung to the tenets of Socialist Realism. Gerald Marks, in a review of an exhibition of the Italian Communist artist Renato Guttuso at Leicester Art Gallery which had drawn criticism from some Party members, wrote:

> Small wonder that those drab Lefts, who misunderstood the very nature of painting, who for years have either painted or defended 'academic' Socialist Realism, disliked it [the Guttuso exhibition]. We, who have become sick of Socialist Realism in subject matter, carefully smeared in a naturalistic sentimental manner, a so-called pictorial art lacking in formal excitement and organisation, illustrative and passionless, can only cheer this Italian artist.[522]

By 1956 the Artists' Group felt confident enough to put forward 'various notes and propositions to the Party to the effect that the solution to the problem of socialist realism probably was not possible

[520] Patrick Carpenter, letter to *Realism* No. 3, April 1956.
[521] Charles Bernard, letter to *Realism* No.4, June 1956. Bernard's mention of 'Dutt' was a reference to Rajani Palme Dutt, one of the most ardent Stalinists in the CPGB leadership.
[522] Gerald Marks, 'Renato Guttuso at the Leicester Galleries', *Realism* No.4.

in this country ... we didn't really quite know what was meant by socialist realism'.[523] Among these 'propositions' was a proposal to amend the Communist Party's manifesto *The British Road to Socialism*, adopted in 1952, to give greater emphasis to culture, and to the role of the artist in a Socialist Britain. In a proposed new section on 'Art and the Artist', the opening sentence emphasised the autonomy of the individual artist in deciding the form of their art. There was no mention of Socialist Realism, and the revised manifesto issued in 1958 stated:

> Socialism gives the artist a new horizon – a new environment for ideas which will call for widest experiment – the suppression of experiment is not our idea. Style is the expression of the individual and we expect to see as many styles as artists.[524]

Such a public statement would have been unthinkable just a few years previously. An indication of just how far the Party had moved its position is illustrated by a speech made by Arnold Kettle, a member of the Executive Committee, at the 24th Party Congress in March-April 1956. It was a public vindication of the position of Cliff Rowe and his comrades, for so long a minority view within the Artists' Group. In his speech, Kettle welcomed the discussions in the Artists' Group 'on the whole theoretical question of socialist realism' and how they had been 're-examining both their practice and their theory, in particular their concept of socialist realism':

> They have been asking whether some phrases we have often used (national in form, socialist in content) really always mean very much. And they have gone so far as to ask our musician comrades, for instance, just how you tell a socialist realist symphony from the other kind.[525]

But shortly after the CPGB's 24th Congress, Khrushchev 's denunciations of Stalin at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU became public knowledge, triggering a crisis for Communists throughout the world the ramifications of which are discussed in the next chapter.

A visit to the DDR

In May 1956 Cliff Rowe spent two weeks on a visit to the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR), sponsored by the *Gesselschaft fur Kulturelle Verbindungen mit dem Ausland* (Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) a sub-section of the East German Ministry of Culture. He wrote an

[523] Reg Turner, Artists' Group representative on the National Cultural Committee, quoted in S. Parsons, *Communism in the Professions: the Organisation of the British Communist Party Among Professional Workers, 1933-56*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1990, p. 360.
[524] The Communist Party, *The British Road to Socialism,* (London: Communist Party of Great Britain), 1958.
[525] Arnold Kettle, 'Points from the Discussion. Cultural and Ideological Work', *World News* No. 16, May 1956, p. 256.

account of his visit for the August-September edition of *Realism*.[526] He was accompanied by Benedict Nicolson, editor of the *Burlington Magazine,* and someone whom Rowe only identifies as 'Richards, the poster artist'. The aim was to assess the current state of East German art in the light of the thaw in East-West relations and the desire of the DDR Ministry of Culture for closer engagement with Western artists. The head of the section dealing with British artists was Ilse Lessing, who had lived in London in 1951-52. She had stayed at an address in Belsize Park, not far from where Rowe was living in Primrose Hill, so it is likely she was already known to him.

This was not the first visit from a member of the Artists' Group. In the summer of 1955 Ewan Phillips made a visit which he reported briefly in *Realism*. Regarding current art in the DDR, he noted that 'Realism' was the accepted key-word and that 'abstraction or expressionism' was abhorred.[527] Rowe and his companions, each coming from different perspectives, had the same overall impression of the state of East German art:

> We agreed that all the contemporary art, from painting to handicrafts, had been subjected to an oppressive insistence upon academic Victorian convention, that developments in art since the Impressionists had been ignored or completely underestimated, and that almost all experiment in contemporary techniques or aesthetic development, had been blanketed out of public expression.[528]

Most art they came across 'followed the Russian school of sentimental naturalism' and, despite Zhdanov's exhortation for art to be 'national in form, socialist in content', was 'almost entirely without genuine national characteristics'. This, Rowe believed, was not due merely to the East German artists' embrace of 'certain outworn conceptions of Socialist Realism' but also due to 'a distinct, though difficult to define, attitude on the part of officialdom'. The visitors also agreed that even within the terms of academic naturalism, 'the work lacked real conviction and failed to reach British standards in the same field'.[529] After discussions with a range of artists they concluded that some experimental work had been going on in their studios, but the public showing of such work had usually been either impossible or 'subjected to criticism on the grounds that it was 'formalist' or imitating 'decadent' Western art' . However, most this type of work that Rowe had seen was 'about as experimental and formalist as, say, William Morris or Eric Gill'.

[526] Clifford Rowe, 'Art in Eastern Germany', *Realism* Number Five, Aug-Sept 1956.
[527] Ewan Phillips, 'A Note on Art in East Germany', *Realism* Number 2, August-September 1955, p. 14.
[528] Rowe, *Realism* Number Five, p. 5.
[529] Rowe, *Realism* Number Five, p. 5.

Rowe was particularly interested in assessing how far the recent denunciations of Stalin by Khrushchev had affected the East German artistic community. He found grounds for optimism. Artists once condemned for formalism now sensed new possibilities for creative freedom. He saw this as a significant shift — a tentative but meaningful opening away from rigid dogma, offering hope for a more open and experimental approach to art within a socialist framework, 'the opening of a reformatory door in East Germany'. This was confirmed by some old friends from the AIA that Rowe visited while in the DDR. Elizabeth Shaw, whose satirical cartoons had enlivened *Our Time,* was now living in a State-supported artists' colony in Kleinmachnow, outside Berlin, and was a successful children's book illustrator. Her husband, the sculptor Rene Graetz, was one of the German Communist political refugees who had been supported by the AIA. (Figure 101)

After the war they had come to live in the then Russian zone of occupation to help in the building of the new German socialist state. Like other British-based German emigres who had returned, Graetz was treated with suspicion by those in the new regime who had spent the war in the Soviet Union and was one of those artists who had been denounced for 'formalism'.[530] Now, however, his work was in demand and when Rowe visited his studio, he found him working on his designs for 'a vast group of sculptured figures and bas reliefs for a monument to the victims of Buchenwald'.[531]

Figure 101: Cliff Rowe (left) with Rene Graetz, Kleinmachnow, 1956. Photograph. Private collection.

Rowe felt reassured by what he saw and heard. He concluded that this new sense of freedom was not a passing phase but represented a fundamental change in the DDR's approach to culture. He noted that many East German cultural workers were acutely aware of the limitations imposed by rigid interpretations of Socialist Realism. They were actively pushing back against ideological constraints and showed a strong interest in engaging with Western European ideas. He saw Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin as a catalyst not just for moral reckoning, but for a broader re-evaluation of cultural policy across the Soviet bloc.[532] Benedict Nicolson, writing of his visit to the

[530] Elizabeth Shaw, *Wie ich nach Berlin,* p. 123. See also Charmian Brinson, 'The 'Homecoming' of the Activists: How the Communist Refugees Returned from British Exile', *Oxford German Studies*, 52:3, 2003, pp. 297-306.
[531] Rowe, *Realism* Number Five, p. 5.
[532] Rowe, *Realism* Number Five, p. 6.

DDR in an editorial in *The Burlington Magazine,* confirmed many of Rowe's observations, particularly emphasising that East German artists, far from rejecting Western modern art, were eager to learn from it. Their discussions had largely centred on a question that paralleled the debate within the CP Artists' Group – how might a genuinely socialist art be created?

> … whether if art in East Germany is to flourish, it is necessary to catch up on fifty years of Western art, and assimilate it before a new art form can be fashioned out of it, or whether it is possible or advisable to by-pass this revolution, and to isolate the realist - expressionist aspects of it. It is refreshing to discover that among communist intellectuals there is no party line on this matter, that free discussion takes place in East German studios just as it might anywhere.[533]

The visit to the DDR culminated with a reception in Berlin hosted by the Artists' Union, attended by the Minister of Foreign Affairs (an indication of high-level official approval for the visit). It is safe to assume that also present was Ilse Lessing, head of the British section of the *Gesselschaft fur Kulturelle Verbindungen.* It was agreed that contacts with British artists needed to be strengthened, with Rowe concluding:

> I came away, and I think my companions did too, with the impression that we have as much to teach our German friends as they have us. This indicates that an exchange of delegations and work on a larger scale is a crying need.[534]

On his return to London Rowe immediately set about strengthening those links, writing, as an 'ex-RCA student', to Robin Darwin, Principal of the Royal College of Art. He explained that during his visits to art schools in East Germany, several principals expressed keen interest in exchanging ideas with British institutions, and he had promised to follow up by contacting the RCA and other London art colleges. He noted that the Berlin school operated much like the Royal College and its director was eager to correspond. He concluded:

> For a long time they have been out of touch with the West and we out of touch with them, and they are keen to open friendly relations with people and institutions with the same interests in art as themselves.

The letter, added to Rowe's RCA student file, was poorly received. A note pencilled by an official hand in the margin stated - 'Principal. A fellow traveller, I would think'. A typed note was added –

[533] Editorial, 'The Artistic Situation in East Germany', *The Burlington Magazine*, Aug. 1956, Vol. 98, No. 641, p. 258.
[534] Rowe, *Realism* Number Five, p. 6.

'File returned. The Principal doesn't intend to answer this letter'.[535] Rowe's efforts to facilitate greater cultural exchange with the DDR, however, were soon overtaken by events in Eastern Europe, and the 'reformatory door' he had believed was opening in the DDR was slammed shut. The next time he met Ilse Lessing it was under very different circumstances.

The years after 1945 saw Rowe and his comrades grappling with a far harsher political and cultural climate. The tightening grip of Cold War orthodoxy, whether from Moscow or King Street, left little space for the critical, humane socialism Rowe sought to express. His work for the ETU, his debates within the Artists' Group, and his visit to East Germany show someone determined to find a path forward, even as official doctrines narrowed around him. The death of Stalin and the early cultural thaw gave brief hope that British socialist art might move beyond slogans and stereotypes. For a moment, it seemed possible to recover a realism grounded in the British lived experience rather than Party dogma. But the hopes of 1956 were short-lived, as events in Poland and Hungary were to show. Rowe's efforts in these years stand as a testament both to his loyalty to the cause of socialist art and to the increasingly painful contradictions demanded by that loyalty.

[535] *Student File: Rowe, Clifford Hooper*, Royal College of Art Special Collection.

CHAPTER 6 1956 AND AFTER

Introduction

For British Communists of Cliff Rowe's generation, 1956 was the year everything changed. What had once seemed like iron certainties - about the Soviet Union, the nature of Socialist progress, and the Party's place in history - suddenly fractured, and for many, shattered beyond repair. The cause of that rupture was not capitalist propaganda, nor a crisis of confidence brought on by internal factionalism. It was something far more corrosive: the truth. Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech', delivered to a closed session of the CPSU's Twentieth Congress, stripped away the mythology surrounding Stalin and exposed the brutal machinery that had delivered decades of terror. It was a moment long delayed and, for many, long denied. When it finally arrived, filtered through press reports rather than through Party channels, it provoked shock, fury, disbelief, and, for some, a painful awakening.

Rowe was among those for whom the revelations landed with particular force, although in many ways without surprise. He had seen the Soviet Union up close in the early 1930s, a witness to both its genuine achievements and its alarming authoritarian drift. But now the scale of the repression, and the complicity of a generation of leaders, both Soviet and British, was undeniable. The Party leadership's explanation, blaming everything on Stalin's personal failings and a handful of his henchmen, seemed not only inadequate but deliberately evasive. The crisis demanded more than regret - it required fundamental reform of the CPGB. And so, for a brief moment, reform seemed possible. Intellectuals, artists, and rank-and-file members began to speak, tentatively at first, then with increasing clarity, about the need for democracy within the Party, for honest debate and a complete reckoning with the past. This chapter seeks to capture that moment: its hope, its suppression, and the consequences of the leadership's refusal to change. It focuses especially on Rowe's own response - his critical public statements and his undelivered speech to the CPGB's Twenty-Fifth (Special) Congress in 1957 - which stands as both a critique of Stalinism and a statement of belief in a very different kind of socialism. The Party would survive, but it would never again hold the same moral authority on the British political Left. Rowe chose to remain a member, not out of loyalty to leadership, but of fidelity to principle - and to the hope that British Communism could be rescued from its own self-inflicted wounds.

Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech'

On the final day of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1956, a closed session was held from which all but CPSU members were excluded. In a speech which was to convulse the international Communist movement, Nikita Khrushchev revealed

many (though not all) of the crimes perpetrated by Stalin, and the deleterious effect they had on the Party and the building of Socialism in in Russia.[536] Following Khrushchev's speech rumours of its contents began to filter through to the CPGB membership, provoking a flurry of letters to the *Daily Worker* demanding further information.[537] In March 1956 the leadership tried to close down the debate but in June the whole issue blew up with the publication in *The Observer* newspaper of Khrushchev's speech in full, with all its shocking detail of Stalin's crimes. Large parts of the membership were bewildered, and many outraged, that they had to learn of this from the capitalist press rather than from their own Party. There was also dismay with the Party leadership's unquestioning acceptance of Khrushchev's explanation that these monstrous crimes were all down to Stalin's 'cult of the personality' and the machinations of Lavrenti Beria and his cronies. There were resignations from disillusioned members who had believed that all those stories about the purges, the show trials, the tortures, the secret executions - many of good Communists - had all been the fabrications of the capitalist enemy. Rowe later wrote of these revelations 'shattering us all mentally, emotionally and morally':

> The effect was devastating. The Party lost half its membership and all its credibility within a few days. Throughout the cultural field all those who had been willing fellow travellers cut all links with the Party. Those of us who understood some of the reasons for this savage violation of all the human rights we thought the Soviet Union stood for received yet another blow, in some ways the worst. The Party leadership, instead of having the courage to condemn the Soviet Party and its leadership for the disaster, tried to put the whole ghastly business down to an historical aberration only to be expected in the struggle for socialism.[538]

While losing half the membership within a few days was an exaggeration, there is little doubt that by the end of 1956 many had left the Party, including most of its intellectuals, and many more were to follow.[539] However, there were also others who saw in this crisis the opportunity to press for a real reform of the CPGB into a more democratic organisation where free and open debate was encouraged. Doris Lessing, in *The Golden Notebook*, captures the heady and somewhat unrealistic optimism of the time, when comrades at last felt able to speak openly and imagine a very different future Communist Party:

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[536] *Special Report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union,* https://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/evans/HIS242/Documents/Speech.pdf. Accessed May 2025.
[537] John Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict*, p. 65.
[538] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[539] Callaghan, *Cold War*, p. 76.

> I again find myself among people filled with excitement and purpose – among them people who had left the Party years ago. The plan can be summarized thus: (a) The Party, shorn of its 'old hands' who are incapable of thinking straight after so many years of lying and double-cross should make a statement repudiating its past. This, first. (b) To break all ties with foreign Communist Parties, in the expectation that other Communist Parties will also be rejuvenating themselves and breaking with the past. (c) To call together the thousands and thousands of people who have left the Party in disgust, inviting them to join the revitalised party. (d) To …[540]

At another meeting she describes how an Austrian socialist guest makes a humorous but compelling contribution, gently criticising these reformers who, despite acknowledging that the Party leadership is corrupt, manipulative, and entrenched in Stalinist methods, refuse to take meaningful action. Instead of confronting the systemic nature of the problem, they retreat into wishful thinking, imagining the leadership might voluntarily step aside for the greater good. It was, he said, like appealing to a professional burglar to retire because his efficiency was giving his profession a bad name.[541]

Others, though, took more concerted action to provide a platform for those who were intent on radical change in the Party. In July 1956 two members of the Party's Historians Group – John Saville and Edward Thompson – published the first of three editions of *The Reasoner, A Journal of Discussion*. An editorial explained that *The Reasoner* was intended to be a discussion journal, written by and for members of the Communist Party, with the aim of providing a new forum to challenge the Party's restrictions on debate:

> We believe that the self-imposed restrictions upon controversy, the 'guiding' of discussions along approved lines, the actual suppression of sharp criticism – all these have led to a gradual blurring of theoretical clarity, and to the encouragement among some Communists of attitudes akin to intellectual cynicism, when it has been easier to allow this or that false proposition to go by than to embark upon the tedious and frustrating business of engaging with bureaucratic editorial habits and general theoretical inertia.[542]

Printed with a quotation from Marx on its title page – 'To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality' – the publication of *The Reasoner* was a serious breach of Party discipline as

[540] Lessing, *Golden Notebook*, pp. 393-394.
[541] Lessing, *Golden Notebook*, pp. 394-395.
[542] *The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion*, First Number, July 1956, p. 1.

it was done without the Party's permission. It was not a document for internal discussion but a public one which openly proclaimed that 'nothing in these pages should be taken as the expression of official Communist positions'.[543] Its publication led to the suspension, and ultimate expulsion, of Saville and Thompson from the Party. Over its three editions *The Reasoner* served as a rallying point for those within and outside the Party determined on fundamental reform. Doris Lessing was one of the correspondents. She applauded the journal's intentions but was critical of the notion that a change of leadership or the adoption of a new set of rules would fundamentally alter the Party, tainted as it was by years of Stalinist deference. What was required was for CPGB members to take individual responsibility for decisions and not to delegate it to 'a central body – whether it is the communist party, or the government of the country we live in, be it a communist or a capitalist government'.[544]

The reformers, though, were very much a minority within the Party. The position of the majority at the time – that Khrushchev's revelations described an aberration that should not be a diversion from the task of building socialism - is perhaps best summed up by *Daily Worker* journalist Peter Fryer:

> After the Twentieth Congress we allowed ourselves to speak of 'errors', 'abuses', 'violations of Socialist legality' and sometimes, greatly daring, 'crimes'. But we were still the victims of our own eagerness to see arising the bright new society that we so desperately wanted to see in our lifetime, and that our propaganda told us was being built.[545]

Rowe had a similar recall:

> It was as though now that Stalin was dead and his henchmen deposed, everything was all right again and all we had to do was forget and get on as before with the job of 'Building Socialism.[546]

However, the 'business as usual' line was soon to be undermined by the next crisis to hit the world Communist movement – the Soviet army's brutal suppression of the Hungarian uprising.

The CPGB Twenty-Fifth (Special) Congress 1957

The overthrow of the slavishly Stalinist Rakosi regime in Hungary in October 1956, inspired by the denunciation of Stalin, was followed by a brief period during which it was possible to see the emergence of a popular and democratic movement able to begin the task of creating a genuinely

[543] *The Reasoner*, First Number, July 1956, p. 2.
[544] *The Reasoner*, Second Number, September 1956, p. 8.
[545] Peter Fryer, *Hungarian Tragedy*, (London: Dennis Dobson), 1956, p. 9.
[546] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.

socialist society in an Eastern Europe state. Such was the belief of Peter Fryer, the *Daily Worker* foreign correspondent reporting from Budapest, who then witnessed the crushing of this brief flowering of people power by Russian tanks. Unfortunately for the CPGB leadership, his reports did not fit the official narrative of what was happening – that it was an American-backed fascist coup necessitating Soviet intervention to restore order. When his despatches were censored by the CPGB's headquarters in King Street, he took them to the *Daily Express* and *New Statesman*, and followed with a book written in just twelve weeks describing the events as a 'Hungarian tragedy':

> …a people's revolution – a mass uprising against tyranny and poverty that had become insupportable – being crushed by the army of the world's first Socialist State.[547]

For many who had hoped for a reformation of the CPGB, this was the final straw, and many of its leading intellectuals, including Doris Lessing, resigned from the Party. Those who remained pinned their hopes on the CPGB's Twenty-Fifth Congress (now billed as a 'Special Congress') to elect a new leadership and change the rules to allow free and open debate within the Party. Rowe was determined to be involved. The information that had trickled out regarding the 'rehabilitations' following Khrushchev's speech had touched on people he had known and admired. There was confirmation that the Bolshevik hero Mikhail Borodin, who had helped him stay in Moscow, had died in a labour camp. Len Wincott, who had so admired Rowe's artwork for his Invergordon pamphlet, had served in the Red Army during the war and taken part in the defence of Leningrad. In 1945 he had been arrested on what he said was 'a trumped-up charge' and sentenced to ten years in the Gulag.[548] Friends he had known at the publishing house, including Joe Feinberg, brother of his mentor Bram, had been swept up in the Great Purge.[549] Perhaps the most disturbing case was that of Edith Bone, a photographer and journalist whom Rowe knew from the AIA who had accompanied Felicia Browne to Barcelona in 1936. She had been arrested on a visit to Hungary in 1950 and, although an accredited *Daily Worker* correspondent and Party member, spent six years in solitary confinement until released from captivity by revolutionary students in 1956. It seemed that the Party leadership had done little to secure her release.[550]

Yet even before 1956 Rowe could not have been entirely unaware of the effects of the Stalinist terror in Eastern Europe. Early in 1953 he had received a first-hand account of the realities of life in the 'Socialist Democracies' when he was visited by his old friend and mentor, Pat Dooley. After the

[547] Fryer, *Hungarian Tragedy*, p. 7.
[548] Francis Beckett, *Stalin's British Victims*, (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), pp. 151-153.
[549] Helen Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia,* pp. 139-140.
[550] Callaghan, *Cold War*, p. 71.

Cominform was established in 1947 as the successor of the Comintern, Dooley had been appointed as the CPGB's representative at its headquarters in Bucharest, where he edited the English-language edition of a Cominform newspaper, later moving to Prague to continue his editorial work. Returning to London in 1953 due to ill-health, Dooley privately informed selected friends of his decision to leave the Party, avoiding a public break to deny opponents the satisfaction of finding another Party 'renegade'.

In a long conversation with Rowe, Dooley revealed that his time in Romania and Czechoslovakia had profoundly changed him, leaving him disillusioned and angry.[551] Within the Cominform, he had seen a rigid hierarchy dominated by the Soviet Party, with the CPGB marginalized. In Bucharest his editorial suggestions for improving the newspaper were met with hostility and suspicion. His experiences in Prague were even more disillusioning, details of which were made public by the British Trotskyist press in 1958. In the wake of the political show trials and executions of leading Czech communists, Dooley observed secret police operations, denunciations, and a pervasive climate of fear, even among loyal party members. He was shocked by antisemitism disguised as 'anti-Zionism' and blatant corruption among senior officials. His final break with the Party came over the leadership's response to his account when he had returned to London. Dooley realised they were fully aware of the repressive and corrupt practices he described yet offered him no support. Instead, General Secretary Harry Pollitt advised him to 'keep your mouth shut' and return to Prague. This convinced Dooley that the Party's leadership was itself corrupt and complicit in concealing the truth.[552]

Rowe believed his old friend but felt unable to offer him more than what Dooley himself had advised in 1932, when Rowe had expressed his own reservations about joining the Party:

> I tried to advise him not to leave the Party but take his own precept as his guide and fight the matter out from within. But he was older and far more experienced than I and with a much greater record of constructive activity. It seemed like an impudence to offer him advice. The blow to his passionate idealism and pride was too severe and I was unable to do anything to heal the wound.[553]

Rowe, with his own battles to fight in the Party, had no further contact with Dooley, something he later came to regret on hearing of Dooley's sudden death in 1958:

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[551] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[552] Obituary: 'We Mourn a Fighter and a Friend', *The Newsletter*, 22 February 1958, pp. 56-57; 'Pat Dooley's Letters', *Labour Review*, March-April 1958, pp. 59-60.
[553] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.

> A few years later, to my horror and regret, he suddenly died. I could only hope that his bitterness did not add to his illness and reproached myself that I had not gone to see him to relieve, at least to some small extent, the loneliness he must have felt when cut off from the source of what had been the main motivation of his life.[554]

Instead of following Dooley and so many others out of the Party, Rowe chose instead to follow his old friend's 'precept' to stay and fight from within. His chosen battleground was to be the Party's Twenty-Fifth Congress.

The four-day Twenty Fifth (Special) Congress of the CPGB opened at Hammersmith Town Hall on 19 April 1957. The main items on the agenda were approval of an updating of the *British Road,* and consideration of a report from the Commission on 'Inner Party Democracy', the latter a concession to the wave of criticism following the Khrushchev revelations. Members knew that this was to be the long-awaited battle over the future of the Party.[555] Rowe's own Party branch (Belsize) submitted a number of amendments to the main report. One criticised the current Soviet leadership for its failure to acknowledge the Soviet Party's shared responsibility for what had taken place under Stalin:

> They failed to indicate any responsibility on the part of Khrushchov (sic) and his colleagues for past events; they contained some manifestly absurd details; they contained no Marxist analysis of such events, and they were not given to our Party or to other Western Communist Parties (except by a leak to the press) nor to the Soviet people.

Another amendment, composited with those from three other branches, addressed the issue of Hungary, blaming both the Hungarian and the Soviet Parties for what had occurred:

> So rose the tragic situation of the Hungarian Party, maintained in power by the Soviet Army, fighting to preserve the gains of socialism against a mass uprising of the working people. That situation should never have arisen. And a large share of responsibility must rest upon the CPSU, which advised the Hungarian Communist Party, and the Soviet State, which neglected to treat the small nations of the socialist world on the basis of equality.[556]

[554] Rowe, Exercise Book 1.
[555] Callaghan, *Cold War,* p. 73.
[556] The (Special) Twenty-Fifth National Congress 1957, CP-CENT-CONG-11-06, Archive of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

A handwritten speech found in Rowe's papers shows that he intended to speak to these amendments and suggests that he was to be the Belsize branch delegate to the Congress.[557] Unfortunately, this was not to be. In true Stalinist style, as described by Doris Lessing's Austrian socialist, the Party leadership had ensured that the number of critical delegates was kept to a minimum, and Rowe was excluded.[558] Moreover, the membership had been subjected to a campaign in the Party press which painted the critics as unrepresentative 'middle-class intellectuals' who were out of touch with the working class.[559] Clearly, Cliff Rowe, with his working-class origins and his South London accent, would not have fitted this caricature. He certainly would not have endeared himself to the leadership with an earlier letter he had written to the Party journal *World News and Views*. In this, he openly attacked the leadership for relying on inadequate Soviet explanations for events in Poland and Hungary, rejecting the 'cult of personality' narrative in favour of a deeper, systemic critique. He argued that these revolts stemmed from long-term policy failures and called for a new direction, one based on independent, equal alliances between Socialist states, and genuine recognition of national and individual rights. He stressed that Socialist democracy must respect the autonomy of culture, law, press, and conscience. Capital punishment and secret trials must be ended. Political dissent should not be criminalised, and individual conscience must be respected, with clear distinctions drawn between personal belief and deliberate harmful action. Reiterating the position he had put forward in the Artists' Group rejecting the view of culture as being merely a part of the ideological superstructure of capitalist society, he called on the Party:

> To end the idea that art and culture are economic and mechanical superstructures to economic development, with a 'vague power of reaction'; to accept that in the long run, the creative power of the people is always superior to any form of material power.

His final challenge to Congress was stark: the Party must choose between a future of Socialist independence or a retreat into isolation and bureaucracy.[560]

Other contributors to *World News and Views* had also written critical letters but what probably damned Rowe was the fact that one particular phrase in his letter was cited approvingly by a leading British Trotskyist in a long critique of the CPGB published just before the Congress opened:

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[557] Cliff Rowe, untitled draft speech for the Twenty-Fifth (Special) Congress of the CPGB, 1957. Cliff Rowe Personal Papers.
[558] Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within. The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*, (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1995), p. 137.
[559] Beckett, *Enemy Within*, p. 137
[560] Cliff Rowe, 'Twelve proposals for Congress', *World News and Views*, 16 March 1957, p. 175.

> Thus the monstrous abominations of Stalinism which disgrace the very ideas of socialism, the deportation of entire peoples, the murder of tens of thousands of oppositional communists, the frame-up and ghastly forced confessions of innocent people, the systematic dissemination of anti-Semitism, the terror against the working class, are all dismissed as 'errors,' but as Cliff Rowe says (*World News*, 16th March, 1957), 'Marxism is not murder, hypocrisy and victimisation'.[561]

The Party leadership had been acutely aware of the political dangers posed by the Trotskyist groups who, though small, could now claim that they had been proved right about Stalin and were now offering their own alternatives to disaffected CPGB members. Peter Fryer, the former *Daily Worker* correspondent whose reports from Budapest had been censored by King Street, had joined one such group, as did a handful of others.[562] The apparent support for Rowe from a Trotskyist journal would have aroused the leadership's suspicion that he would do likewise. There is some evidence that Rowe had also tried to raise these points internally with Party leaders. A letter dated 5 March 1957 from James Klugman, National Cultural Committee chairman, to Arnold Kettle advising him of the agenda for the next Committee meeting, noted that there would be just two items – a discussion of the 'Report on Inner Party Democracy', and 'Point to be raised by Clifford Rowe'.[563] Unfortunately, no record of this discussion has been found in the CPGB archive.

The Special Congress went the way the Party leadership had planned. The line on Stalin's crimes and on Hungary was endorsed, the new Executive Committee handpicked by King Street was approved, and proposals to democratise the Party rejected.[564] The Belsize branch's proposed amendments were given scornful dismissal by one loyalist delegate:

> Branch B [Belsize] says that the action could have resulted in 'democratic government'. This is theorising and to theorise in Belsize Park (laughter). If comrades do not realise that while theoreticians of Belsize Park were dealing with this amendment, people were being strung up and burned to death by the Fascists.[565]

It is highly unlikely that Rowe's speech, had he been allowed to deliver it, would have made any difference to the final outcome, though it would certainly have had an impact. Even if he had

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[561] Eric Grey, 'The Crisis in British Communism', *Workers International Review,* vol. 1 no. 2 (April-May 1957), https://www.marxists.org/archive//grant/1957/04/communism.htm. Accessed October 2024. 'Eric Grey' was the pseudonym of Ted Grant, who later led the Trotskyist Militant Group within the Labour Party.
[562] Callaghan, *Cold War*, p. 74.
[563] 'James Klugman', TNA KV 2/3374. The letter had been intercepted and copied by MI5.
[564] Callaghan, *Cold War*, pp. 74-76.
[565] CP-CENT-CONG-10-06, CP Archive.

spoken, his speech, a greatly expanded version of his 'Twelve Proposals' letter, at over 7000 words would have exceeded the allotted speaker time. However, it would undoubtedly have created a political storm within the Party. Its significance for the purposes of this thesis is that it is a detailed exposition of Rowe's political position as it had evolved over twenty years of Communist Party membership and is therefore worthy of close examination. A detailed discussion of Rowe's views, making extensive use of his own words, can illuminate his strong views during this time.

In his planned opening remarks he states that the Twenty-Fifth Congress was the most unusual and vital that the Party had ever held. Furthermore, it had world significance in that the CPGB now had the opportunity to lead the World Communist movement towards 'a new creative policy'. If the Party did not take up this challenge, it was a failure in leadership. Khrushchev's revelations and the recent events in Poland and Hungary had raised fundamental questions for the CPGB and other Western Communist Parties, questions about:

> …the relations between the world's Communist parties and the International Labour Movement; relations between Government, Law, Press, Culture and Party in Socialist countries; internal organisation and rules of Communist Parties; and above all, how and why such a gigantic fracture in Socialist progress could have arisen.[566]

If the Party was to satisfy the British people that the 'high aims and fair promises' in the *British Road to Socialism* were anything but 'camouflage for eventual repression, dictatorship and loss of independence', there needed to be a 'thorough and manifestly demonstrable explanation' of the crisis that had engulfed the Communist world, and answers to the questions it had raised. The Party had to demonstrate that it knew not only the real causes but was actively applying the real remedies. For this to happen, he believed that 'we shall have to be very tough with ourselves and our friends abroad'.[567]

Rowe went on to demonstrate just how 'tough' he was prepared to be. In the most scathing terms, he rejected the explanation for Stalinism put forward by Khrushchev, and repeated by the CPGB leadership, that it was down to Stalin's 'cult of personality' and the pursuit of imaginary counter-revolutionary enemies within the CPSU. This, he stated, was an explanation that had nothing to do with Marxism and one that no Marxist could accept. The reality was that it was not a handful of individuals but 'the whole Soviet Party' who were involved, corrupted by 'the conditions obtaining at the time, and the false policies arising from them'. This explained the Soviet leaders' extreme

[566] Rowe, untitled draft speech.
[567] Rowe, untitled draft speech.

sensitivity to criticism from abroad and gave the only realistic clue as to the mysterious three-year time lag between Stalin's death and even the CPSU being given any information. Other Parties were given none at all but had the humiliation of being informed by the capitalist press, 'an ironic reward for blind loyalty'.[568] The CPGB leaders, in echoing and supporting Khrushchev's 'explanations', had 'provoked the indignation and general dissatisfaction of many members and were directly responsible for some of our membership losses, and loss of confidence among supporters in the working-class movement'. Furthermore, it also showed that this leadership was as tainted by Stalinism as its Soviet and East European counterparts:

> It must seriously be put to them that their repetition of obviously inadequate explanations, hypocritical censoring of outspoken critics on purely 'technical' grounds, 'witch hunting' of 'intellectuals' in order to find scapegoats for their own failures, is no less a continuation of the anti-Marxist bureaucracy of the Stalin regime … This lack of principle is the essence of 'Stalinism' and inevitably leads to State murder and worse.[569]

Turning to events in Poland and Hungary, Rowe argued that they had 'dynamited the Cult of Personality explanation'. They showed that Stalinism was 'a world phenomenon, in greater or less degree common to all Communist Parties'.[570] These Parties were not dominated by single dictators but by collective leaderships who acted in complete concord and on political principles they held in common:

> All the arrests (except those that were secret) all the purges, all the false trials and killings, were justified by the most thorough, ceaseless and commonly echoed speeches, publications and press campaigns, all produced with the most careful reasoning and 'Marxist' analysis, though usually finishing with those rabble-rousing cliches 'enemy of the people', 'counter-revolutionary scum' etc etc. It is undeniable that the anti-democratic persecution of the people and of intellectuals was carried out on the groundwork of political convictions saturating Parties everywhere, and in most cases, sincerely believed in by those in authority.

In Poland, at least, the CPSU had shown some flexibility by, however reluctantly, acknowledging the legitimacy of the Polish workers' demands and agreeing to the installation of a new reformist regime led by Wladyslaw Gomulka. Unfortunately, the same did not happen in Hungary. For Rowe, the real failure was not just the Soviet military intervention but the failure to intervene politically much

[568] Rowe, untitled draft speech.
[569] Rowe, untitled draft speech.
[570] Rowe, untitled draft speech.

earlier, when it was obvious that there was great unrest among the Hungarian workers and antipathy towards the Rakosi regime. The Soviet leadership wanted to pretend that the unrest was not genuine and was only stirred up by 'the ever-handy scapegoat, the intellectuals', ignoring the fact 'that the workers and 'intellectuals' arrived independently at exactly the same primary aims – the independence of Hungary and the removal of the Red Army':

> Had the discontent in Hungary been dealt with, as events in Poland had shown was necessary, honestly and directly, there need never have been either uprising or intervention. It is not a question of blaming the leaders of the CPSU but of facing the grim fact that once a wrong policy is formed and pursued with relentless, monolithic fanaticism by Communist Parties in monopoly control of Government, Law, Press and Culture, the end must be chaos and oppression, and if continued long enough must end in the very opposite of Communism, that is, to Fascism.[571]

Rowe's explanation of how this situation had come about lay in an analysis of the development of the CPSU since the October Revolution. Confronted by a formidable range of capitalist powers, it was the isolation of the Soviet Union that necessitated the adoption of harsh and arbitrary methods to maintain and strengthen the world's first workers' state. As well as the external pressures, there were the internal pressures of trying to build Socialism in a country where the population was still largely peasant and illiterate. The Soviet leadership faced the urgent dual task of building a strong socialist economy at home while simultaneously creating military power to deter hostile capitalist states. Both goals demanded rapid achievement, enforced by strict unity and discipline. Given the dangers, waiting for universal agreement was impossible; when persuasion and propaganda proved insufficient, compulsion became necessary to secure survival against internal and external threats.[572]

Rowe may well have been reflecting on his own experiences of life in Russia in 1932/33 when he wrote in his draft speech that peace time conditions in the Soviet Union were 'the equivalent of the strictest war time conditions in other countries', where everyone became divided into 'progressive' or 'reactionary', for 'there was no time or room for middle courses'. This policy and practice, born of naked necessity, hardened with the threat of Fascism, inevitably led to the Purges. By now, the building of Socialism had taken second place to building and maintaining military strength, making the defence of the Soviet Union the key priority. This required rapid decision-making which accelerated a process that saw the authority of the CPSU's Central Committee give way to the

[571] Rowe, untitled draft speech.
[572] Rowe, untitled draft speech.

Politburo, and thence to one man, Stalin. This process, which was likely to occur in any country at war, was accelerated by the very nature of the Soviet political system:

> It is already clear that the form of control used in the Party was transferred directly as the form to control the State and herein lies the means of all subsequent mistakes. The 'Dictatorship of the Working Class' was transformed into a 'Dictatorship of the Party' and the Party dictatorship into the 'Dictatorship of the Personality'. Had the process gone on much longer, the whole Socialist basis would have been converted from within into a Fascist State.[573]

Equating Stalinism with Fascism and posing the possibility of the Soviet Union ending up as a version of the Third Reich was a shockingly radical position for Rowe to take publicly and went further than most of the critics within the CPGB would have gone. Implicit also in this analysis was the question which has long bedevilled the Marxist Left – was Stalinism the inevitable outcome of Leninism? Did the application of Lenin's concept of 'Democratic Centralism' in Party organisation mean that sooner or later a dictator would arise? Here, one senses that Rowe knew he was on uncertain ground. Having argued that Stalin's dictatorship was caused by the isolation of post-Revolutionary Russia combined with the strict Party disciplinary structure, he now had to explain how the same would not occur in a British revolutionary context. His answer was two-fold. Firstly, that some form of Democratic Centralism was needed if democracy was to work, and the 'vertical' version implemented in the CPSU was not Lenin's invention but necessitated by the conditions of the time. The issue was deciding which form of Democratic Centralism suited current circumstances. As a flexible principle of organization, it can expand or contract in scope, provided it was guided by a correct Marxist assessment of prevailing conditions. Secondly, there was the British historical experience and the democratic traditions developed over time that were singularly absent in pre-Revolutionary Russia. He used the example of Oliver Cromwell to illustrate his point that England had in some ways experienced contradictions similar to those that arose in the Soviet Union:

> Cromwell was a progressive force when, through the creation of his army, operating under revolutionary discipline, he defeated the monarchy and placed a People's Parliament in paramount power in England. But after the Civil War the international forces of reaction continued the battle in other forms. Cromwell then applied his discipline, in even harsher forms, to civil life, and at last made himself Dictator, thus undermining the very Parliament he had helped to establish. There is a parallel, too, in the policies that drove him to the

[573] Rowe, untitled draft speech.

> massacres in Ireland. Cromwell could not see that the political and moral policies that gave him power could not work once that power was gained, without destroying the whole structure.[574]

Nevertheless, the class struggle went on and through it Britain became the pioneer of many democratic forms. It was still, in Rowe's opinion, 'the most democratic country, in practice, in the world today, including the Socialist democracies'. The importance of this radical heritage in building a Britain that was both Socialist and Democratic had been frequently misunderstood or underestimated by the British Party. He argued that calling Britain's democratic culture 'liberal bourgeois democracy' was anti-Marxist and insulting to the people's development, especially workers. The mistake was to assume true democracy only began with socialism. Instead, Britain's democratic forms could be seen as prototypes of socialist culture, embedded and expanded until they shaped instinctive daily life. Ideals such as fair play, honesty, truth, generosity, mercy, justice, and other civilised habits were derived from these traditions, even if hard to define in strict political terms. [575]

Rowe proposed that a clear recognition that culture was a material force in society was essential to a strategy to build Socialism in Britain. It was crucial that the CPGB demonstrated its independence as a national Party by ensuring that it did not work within 'forms and a culture inconsistent with the level of experience of the British people'. The Party had to 'reflect the People's culture', and, in a reference to his own criticism of the Party line on culture as merely an outcome of economic relations, 'accept that it is science and art which unites economics and culture'.

> We have, on the contrary, acted as a bourgeois party, denying culture and relating all to economics. That is what Stalin did, putting power before people, turning the CPSU into a Philistine party. In regarding culture as a professional matter, instead of the birthright of the people, as necessary as bread, we have reflected the capitalist money culture which denies all human endeavour unless it leads to gold.[576]

The Party had to recognise that 'economic and material power is not the only 'positive' issue, and that 'the Culture and Conscience of the people' were of equal importance. It had to 'end the philistinism that culture is a mere mechanical superstructure of economic relations' and accept that 'the creative power of the people' was always superior to any other form of power, and act accordingly. Antonio Gramsci had written along similar lines in the early 1930s that 'Ideology and the

[574] Rowe, untitled draft speech.
[575] Rowe, untitled draft speech.
[576] Rowe, untitled draft speech.

superstructure of civil society must be dealt with as objectively as economic considerations', though it is unlikely that Rowe would have had knowledge of Gramsci's ideas at this time.[577]

Finally, in his summing up he addressed the recent history of Eastern Europe and, by implication, the longer history of the Soviet Union, employing the same phrase he had used in his *World News* letter:

> The campaign against intellectuals, blaming them for the mistakes of the political leaders, must be stopped. All arrests and trials made on grounds of differences of political opinion must stop, since they deny the most elementary conceptions of democracy, and a clearer distinction made between opinions and calculated action. Capital punishment must be stopped immediately. All secret and military trials must be stopped. Marxism is not State murder, hypocrisy and victimisation.[578]

Rowe's undelivered speech to the 25th (Special) Congress shows that his commitment to Marxism was neither dogmatic nor nostalgic. It was rooted in a belief that the ideals of justice, equality and creative freedom were too important to abandon to either bureaucratic distortion or capitalist cynicism. His vision for the Party was bold, democratic and deeply humane. He saw culture not as a subservient appendage to economics, but as a vital, material force in its own right, shaping socialist consciousness. The fact that this critical voice was, like many others, excluded from the Congress speaks volumes about the state of the Party he tried to reform. Yet his call - insisting that socialism must be morally defensible, culturally expansive and rooted in individual conscience - remains a powerful reminder of what was at stake, and of what, even then, might have been possible.

The Aftermath

The events of 1956/57 had serious consequences for the Party. Over 2000 members had left after Khrushchev's speech became widely known, 5000 more departed following the brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolt, and a further 2000 left after the disappointment of the Twenty-Fifth Congress.[579] The circulation of the *Daily Worker* dropped by 20 per cent and the paper lost a third of its journalists.[580] The Party's 'professional worker' membership was hardest hit, with most of its leading writers and intellectuals resigning.[581] The impact of this loss is illustrated by what happened to an ambitious but short-lived initiative involving the Party's artists and writers. The November

[577] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.), (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 377.
[578] Rowe, untitled draft speech.
[579] Callaghan, *Cold War*, pp. 76-77.
[580] Beckett, *Enemy Within*, p. 135.
[581] Andy Croft, 'Authors Take Sides: Writers and the Communist Party 1920-56', in Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman, Kevin Morgan, eds. *Opening the Books*. Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party, (London: Pluto Press, 1995), pp. 99-100.

1956 issue of *Realism* had announced its intention to expand into 'a new and better magazine', with further information to be published in the *Daily Worker,* the *New Statesman* and *Tribune.*[582] According to an MI5 informant's report, discussions had been taking place with Lawrence and Wishart, the publishers close to the CPGB, for the launch of a new cultural journal on a commercial basis that would cover both art and literature.[583] The publishers had been enthusiastic about the project but the exodus of so many writers from the Party now made its achievement unlikely, as acknowledged by Lawrence and Wishart in a letter to the *Realism* editorial board. The prospects of starting a cultural journal 'as previously discussed' were now 'not at all favourable'. The advice of Emile Burns, who represented the Party on the board of Lawerence and Wishart, was for *Realism* to 'stick with art'.[584]

Unfortunately, the November 1956 issue of *Realism* was its last. As with the writers, the artists were so disgusted with how the Party had responded to Khrushchev's revelations that most of them left. Cliff Rowe estimated that 'out of the 100 or so artists and architects we had recruited from the AIA, 80 or so left the Party'. He tried in vain to persuade them to stay and carry on the fight within the Party:

> At a meeting of architect Party members called to discuss leaving the Party or not, I tried to persuade them that the Party belonged to all of us, not simply the leaders, and it was up to us to stay in and to change it. They decided to leave en masse, not really because of their disgust at the crimes of Stalin, but because our leaders were trying to make out that it was all just an inevitable mistake.[585]

As well as the architects, most of those artists who had been among the founders of the Artists International back in 1933, as well as the core group supporting *Realism*, left in disillusion. Among those who, like Rowe, decided to remain, 'there were no more of us than enough to count on the fingers of one hand' who 'were loyal to real socialism, and disloyal to the aberrations of socialism in communist countries'.[586] But without that close camaraderie that had sustained them throughout all those debates about Socialist Realism and the nature of revolutionary art, they became atomised, 'each compelled to work out his or her own destiny', not just as committed socialists, but as artists struggling to find new forms of art reflecting their convictions:

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[582] *Realism* Number 6.
[583] 'Raymond Watkinson', TNA KV 2/3087.
[584] Letter from Maurice Cornforth to James Lucas, 10 January 1957, CP-CENT-CULT-07, CPGB Archive.
[585] Rowe, 'Personal Reasons', p. 9.
[586] Rowe, 'Personal Reasons', p. 10.

> We could neither throw ourselves into the bourgeois modern movement or return to the bourgeois past, nor could we return to the path chosen by the communist countries, so there was no precedent, no established guidelines, no signposts. There was only emptiness and ourselves.[587]

Given that so many friends and comrades left the Party for reasons which Rowe well understood, the question arises as to why he did not join them. There is, however, an intriguing piece of evidence which suggests that in fact he may have left, albeit briefly. In December 1957 Ilse Lessing, whom Rowe had met the previous year when he had visited East Germany, came to London for a follow-up meeting as to promote further contacts with British artists and to arrange for an exhibition of East German art in London. She met with a group of artists and designers that included Rowe. Also present was an MI5 informant, 'a regular source', who reported the following:

> She then had a long talk with Cliff Rowe and others. Rowe is a Communist who has resigned from the Party in disgust with the present leadership. For about an hour-and-a- half he presented Lessing with such a volume of embarrassing home truths on impeccable Marxist functions that she was positively upset. When he told her that Paul Hogarth and Derek Kartun thought as he did and had resigned from the Party, she was even more upset.[588]

Derek Kartun had been the *Daily Worker*'s foreign editor and Hogarth had been a regular contributor to *Realism*. The 'impeccable Marxist functions' referred to in the report are presumably the lines of argument that Rowe had employed for his undelivered Twenty-Fifth Congress speech. This and other security service reports suggest that the informant was close to, and possibly a member of, the Artists' Group, so in all likelihood would have known if Rowe had actually left the Party. Alternatively, this may have been an assumption on their part given the apparent vehemence with which Rowe made his points. There is nothing in any of Rowe's later writings to indicate that he had resigned his membership, though he admits that he came close to it, noting that it was only his conviction that socialism would prevail that prevented him from following almost all his friends out of the Party.[589]

It was this belief in the ultimate, and necessary, triumph of socialism that sustained other critics who might have left the Party. The writer Alick West, for example, who began writing his autobiography in 1957, held that 'communism is necessary to the freedom of mankind', but also believed that

[587] Rowe, 'Personal Reasons', p.10.
[588] 'Ilse Lessing', TNA KV 2/3976.
[589] Rowe, 'Personal Reasons', p.9.

individuals who had served the CPGB for so long now had a moral duty to accept responsibility for their own acquiescence in its embrace of Stalinism and stay within the Party. He had 'failed through silence' as it was easier for him to see his doubts as his own individual failing 'because this required less intellectual and moral strength than to face my responsibility as a human being for the policy of the Party of which I remain a member'.[590] Rowe took a similar view, writing in 1967 that:

> Any criticism of the Party I accept as a criticism of myself, for if the leadership were wrong about the Stalin period, so were the rank and file. None of us were either vigilant or clear enough about what are now obvious signs.[591]

He would have been all too aware that his own doubts dated back to his time living in Russia and, though expressed in a coded form through his art, were still not openly expressed by him until 1956. For Rowe, there was no real alternative to the CPGB. Still firmly committed to the ideals of socialism, he could not abandon politics altogether as some disillusioned members had opted to do. Not having an academic background, he could not follow Savile, Thompson and others into the growing intellectual milieu that was to give rise to the New Left, though he shared many of their ideas. Neither would he, like Peter Fryer, join any of the Trotskyist groups that had buried themselves in the Labour Party and whom he regarded as an irrelevance. Writing in 1984, he justified his decision thus:

> I could not see that any Party not based on upon the principles and practices of Marxism could ever bring about world Socialism, and as there was no other Party anywhere that accepted or practised these principles, then we must continue to support the world's Communist Parties while transforming them into instruments independent of each other, yet interdependent upon each other.[592]

Staying within the Party, although 'in complete isolation, looked on with friendly suspicion', Rowe decided that the best he could do to serve the cause of socialism was to devote himself to his art and seek the answers to those questions that had so animated the Artists' Group. Despite all that had happened, he still supported the Party and continued to be active on its behalf. However, from now on he directed his energies to making art relevant to politics, to give it a real purpose, but not any more to meet the requirements of the CPGB:

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[590] Alick West, *One Man in His Time*, (George Allen & Unwin, London), 1969, p. 192.
[591] Letter from Cliff Rowe to William Wainwright, 22 January 1967, CP-IND-WAIN-3-11, CPGB Archive.
[592] Cliff Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 4.

> There were only two courses open to me, to regard painting as an anachronism, a kind of medieval activity outlasting its time and fading away, or commit myself to finding the solution to a genuine socialist method and content of painting that could reflect the real nature of our time, and would be real in that sense, not in any naturalistic, imitative or illusionist sense. I decided on the latter course.[593]

It was a quest that was to last for the next thirty years of his life.

The crises of 1956–57 left the CPGB diminished in numbers, morale, and cultural influence. Revelations of Stalin's crimes, compounded by the brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising, drove out thousands of members, including most of the Party's leading intellectuals and artists. For Cliff Rowe, these events confirmed long-held doubts but did not break his commitment to socialism. He rejected the leadership's evasive 'cult of personality' explanation of Stalin, calling instead for deep structural reform, genuine democratic practice, and recognition of culture as a vital, independent force within socialism. His undelivered speech to the Twenty-Fifth Congress was both a searing critique of Stalinism and a vision for a humane, culturally rich, and morally defensible socialism. Though many friends left, Rowe chose to remain, believing the Party could still be transformed from within and seeing no viable alternative. His decision reflected both political conviction and a refusal to abandon the socialist project to bureaucrats or cynics. Isolated but undeterred, he turned increasingly to his art as a means of political engagement, seeking a truly socialist form and content in painting. In this way, he carried forward his struggle for the ideals he believed the Party had betrayed but not destroyed.

Epilogue

There is no space here to consider in detail Rowe's later life and what follows is largely based on the personal recollections of Rowe's daughter Sandra Thornberry, and me, his son-in-law. Cliff Rowe's later life offers a compelling portrait of continuity and reinvention. We see a figure at once principled and pragmatic, deeply committed to an ideal of political art yet never static in his outlook. These final decades of Rowe's life, from the post-war years through to his death in 1989, reveal not only a sustained engagement with art and activism, but also an evolving understanding of what it meant to live as a socialist artist in changing times.

[593] Rowe, 'Personal Reasons', p. 10.

Sandra Rowe, born in 1944, was raised in a household where the values of socialism were woven into everyday life. The Rowe home in Primrose Hill was modest, book-lined, and slightly chaotic—a reflection of both economic constraint and intellectual ambition. It was in this world that Sandra came to know her father not simply as a painter or Communist Party member, but as someone who quietly practised his values. To Sandra, the Communist Party was unremarkable, its presence felt as natural as school or family. May Day marches, jumble sales for the Party, and a neighbourhood populated by like-minded individuals and their families, shaped her early experience. The CPGB was not, in her eyes, an institution to be revered or questioned—it was simply the way things were. And yet, Sandra is quick to note her parents' reticence. Unlike some of her friends' Communist parents, they did not impose ideology, nor did they offer Marxist instruction. For example, and much to her annoyance, she only discovered the existence of the Socialist Sunday School through her friends rather than her parents. Her father's political commitments were embedded in behaviour rather than rhetoric - a respect for working people, an instinctive suspicion of authority, a belief that art should do something in the world.[594]

I first met Cliff Rowe in 1972 when Sandra, whom I later married, took me to meet him and his wife Doris. They lived in a roomy Camden Council flat in Hampstead, the walls covered with his paintings, all of them framed by Rowe. By this time the ramshackle Camden Studios that he had shared with Peter Peri had been demolished (though Peri later persuaded Camden Council to rebuild them) and a large room in the flat now served as his studio. He always seemed to be working, either in his studio on his painting or on a commercial job. When not doing that, he was writing – letters, leaflets for his Party branch, but mostly about his thoughts on art and politics. Always frugal after a lifetime of having to make do with affordable materials, he wrote on whatever came to hand – scraps of paper, backs of bills, old diaries, even the blank pages in Sandra's old school exercise books – which he later typed up on an old typewriter. Most of this material survives in his papers, some of which I have used in writing this account of his life.

My own politics at the time tended towards anarchism and, not knowing anything of Rowe's own struggles, I regarded all Communist Party members as being irrevocably tainted with Stalinism. Despite that, over the next fifteen years we had many a lively discussion about current political issues, while avoiding entering too much into the past for the sake of family harmony. There was no shortage of topics: from the 1970s industrial struggles in Britain and the Third World liberation movements, to the rise of Thatcherism, the miners' strike, and the emergence of Gorbachev and

[594] Sandra Thornberry, interviewed by Adrienne Wallman, 15 May 2024.

glasnost in the 1980s. Cliff always engaged thoughtfully, never dogmatically, and I gradually came to appreciate the depth of his knowledge and his commitment, the considered way he balanced political loyalty with moral independence. During that time, until his health deteriorated, he was an active member of the Adelaide branch of the CPGB, taking part in all its various local activities. He was also a prolific writer of letters to the *Morning Star* (formerly the *Daily Worker*), often using them to press for internal reform, greater openness, and more nuanced international perspectives. He always defended the Soviet Union as being, at root, a workers' state, however badly deformed by the legacy of Stalinism. He was firmly of the view that the only way for the human race to survive was through the victory of Communism, the alternative being endless economic crises and wars, and the awful possibility of global nuclear destruction.

At the same time, he never proffered the Soviet Union or any of the Eastern European states as examples of socialism to be emulated. His consistent theme was the necessity of establishing real democracy in those countries, even if this necessitated political revolutions. He was particularly exercised by the treatment of dissidents in the Soviet Union, especially the regime's use of institutionalised psychiatry to silence and discredit them. He read the accounts of Vladimir Bukovsky and others with a mixture of outrage and sorrow, appalled that a state built in the name of human liberation could engage in such methods of repression. Nevertheless, he found hope in the cracks that were appearing. He was heartened by the emergence of Solidarnosc in Poland, which he saw not as an anti-socialist movement but as the authentic voice of workers demanding control over their lives. When Mikhail Gorbachev launched his reforms, Cliff saw in glasnost and perestroika the beginning of the political changes in world Communism he had long hoped for. He welcomed Gorbachev's commitment to openness and restructuring as belated but necessary steps toward the democratic renewal of the socialist project. Within the CPGB, the emergence of the 'Eurocommunist' trend with its emphasis on the importance of culture also gave him hope that the Party could at last be fashioned into a campaigning body truly in tune with the needs of the British people.

Cliff did not live to see the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which he had long regarded as symbolic of all that was wrong with the 'Socialist States' in Eastern Europe. But I have no doubt he would have celebrated it. For him, socialism had always been about people, about empowerment and dignity, not walls, wire fences or the stifling of dissent. If the events of 1989 discredited one model of socialism, he would have argued, they also created the conditions for another to emerge. However, he would not have foreseen that these developments would lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the promising trends in the CPGB would result in a fracturing leading to its final demise.

Conversations with Rowe about art were rare. This was an area in which I had neither the knowledge nor the vocabulary and I was reluctant to enter any discussion with someone with a lifetime of artistic practice. There was one occasion, though, when I ventured an opinion about Bolshevik support for art, I received in return a lecture about the iniquities of Socialist Realism that included his view, delivered in the South London accent he had never lost, that 'Lenin and Stalin knew fuck-all about art'. I had no inkling that he was engaged in his own deeply intellectual struggle to devise a form of art that was genuinely socialist while rooted in the British tradition of realist painting. He wrote at the time of his deep regret that he was alone in this pursuit and had no companion with whom he could test his ideas.[595]

It was in 1983 and the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Artists' International Association that Rowe's life and work became known to a wider audience. Curated by Lynda Morris and Robert Radford under the auspices of the Oxford Museum of Modern Art, a travelling exhibition illustrating the history of the AIA was organised. Showing in Oxford, Bradford, Nottingham Hull, Edinburgh and London, the exhibition featured 320 artworks from over 100 artists associated with the AIA, including Cliff Rowe. Rowe provided eight works, including *The Fried Fish Shop* and one of the panels from the ETU Esher House commission. The accompanying publication provided a detailed history of the AIA from its foundation in 1933 to the split in 1953, with interviews with many of the early members including Rowe, Misha Black, Pearl Binder and the 'Three Jameses' – Boswell, Fitton and Lucas.[596]

This brought Rowe further attention, with more interviews and requests for talks. He was disappointed that this attention was largely focussed on his time with the AIA. He told me, somewhat bitterly, that no one was interested in the art he was making now. In part this was because he was reluctant to exhibit his own work and shunned the commercial galleries that would have provided wider public recognition. This was due to his aversion to private galleries, born of his experiences in the 1930s, but also because he was not confident that he had yet achieved that breakthrough in providing a new form of realism that could be genuinely called socialist. There were, though, some public viewings of his work made in association with Camden Borough Council, the most notable being *Fighting Spirits* at the Camden Arts Centre in 1987. [597] This exhibition, which also included sculptures by Rowe's old friend Peter Peri, provided examples of the full range of Rowe's output – street scenes, heavy industrial processes, workers with machinery, but also scenes of

[595] Rowe, *Visual Socialist Language*, p. 60.
[596] 'List of Works', supplement to Lynn Morris and Robert Radford, *The Story of the AIA, 1933 – 1953,* (The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford), 1983.
[597] *Fighting Spirits: Peter Peri and Cliff Rowe*, (London: Journeyman Press, 1987).

domesticity and leisure, painted in what Rowe described as his 'naturalist style'. Whereas his industrial scenes reflected a continuing intellectual pursuit to find a new means of socialist image-making, his other 'naturalist' pictures were what gave him most pleasure.[598] Among his favourite subjects were children having fun (Figure 102), and scenes from his beloved Cornwall (Figure 103).[599]

Figure 102: Cliff Rowe. *Tree Walk Chrystal Palace,* 1978. Watercolour, 30 x 50 cm.

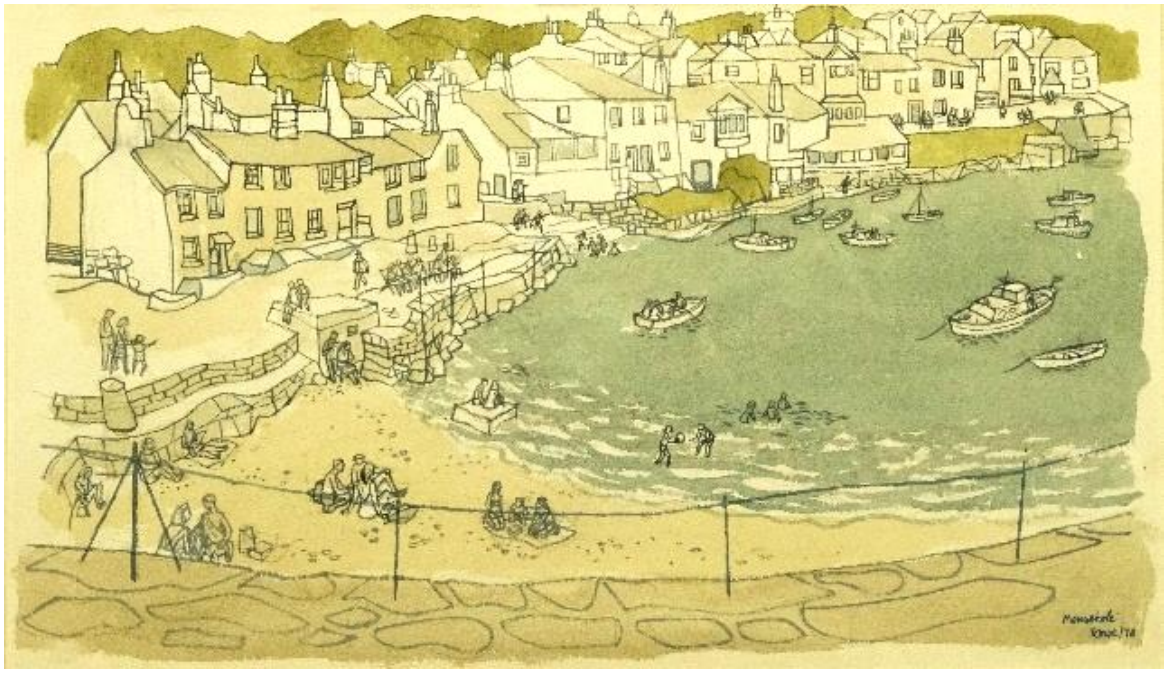

Figure 103: Cliff Rowe*, Mousehole,* 1978. Watercolour, 30 x 50 cm

[598] Rowe, *Visual Socialist Language*, p. 58.
[599] Sandra Thornberry interview by Wallman.

Before her death in 1985, Doris had urged Cliff to secure the future of his life's work. In 1985 he donated over 1,600 items to the National Museum of Labour History (NMLH). Soon after, the Museum lost its Limehouse home in London's East End following political shifts in Tower Hamlets local council and relocated to Manchester. The transition was turbulent—dogged by leadership disputes, financial instability, and poor storage conditions. Rowe grew deeply anxious about the collection's fate. Conflicting interpretations arose over whether the donation was a gift or a loan, while museum staff questioned the relevance of much of Rowe's work to the Museum's remit. Pressure from Rowe's daughter Sandra forced the institution to commit to preserving the collection in its entirety.[600] The collection has since been fully catalogued and conserved and now forms a major part of the PHM's offering.

In one of the most personal and revealing reflections left by Cliff Rowe, he recounts the final months of his wife Doris's life and, with it, an unexpected return to ideas that had shaped his earliest artistic identity.[601] As Doris battled terminal cancer, she remained active, determined to continue her job as a telephonist at the Hampstead Children's Clinic. When she was forced to rest, often lying on a couch in their flat, Rowe began to sketch her—at first quietly, then with her knowledge and cooperation. The resulting drawings and paintings, some of them made after her death, became more than portraits of illness or love: they represented, for Rowe, a culmination of artistic insight that had eluded him across five decades of commitment and ideological struggle (Figure 104).

Figure 104: Cliff Rowe: *Doris in her cosy corner,* 1985. Watercolour, 30 x 50 cm.

[600] Sandra Thornberry interview.
[601] Rowe, 'Autobiography', pp. 13-15.

These final sketches, he wrote, felt like a true breakthrough, an arrival at what he had long called 'Socialist Art'. But what made them so powerful was not their political content or industrial themes. Rather, it was the emotional truth they conveyed. This moment of realisation drew Rowe back, perhaps unconsciously, to his early days as a member of the Emotionist Group in the 1920s, where art was seen as the external expression of emotional inner life. Emotionism, with its emphasis on subjective intensity and psychological honesty, had offered a creativity grounded in feeling rather than form. Though Rowe moved away from Emotionism after the Group dissolved, these late drawings suggest a reactivation of those early convictions, filtered now through a lifetime of struggle, disappointment, and enduring love. What Rowe discovered in those moments with Doris was that the expressive power of art need not be rooted only in depictions of labour or class struggle, but could emerge from the everyday and the intimate, from what he called 'a love of both the subject and the means of expression'.[602] He had spent much of his artistic career fighting against the sentimentalism and leisure-centred narratives that dominated bourgeois art, insisting instead on a representation of the worker and the workplace. He remained sharply critical of art institutions that sanitised labour and omitted working-class life from view. But now, in Doris's repose, he found himself capturing not idleness, but quiet resistance - a form of love, discipline, and collaboration rooted in shared purpose. Her stillness, he suggests, was not leisure but resolve.

This encounter with vulnerability did not undermine his lifelong belief in the political role of art. Rather, it deepened it. Doris's activism - her union organising, Party work, but above all, her principled life - remained the touchstone by which Rowe understood her. But in drawing her, he confronted the limits of his earlier certainty. It was not only the depiction of industrial work that made art political. It was, just as crucially, the presence of feeling, mutuality, and social connection. In this way, the influence of Emotionism, long buried under the weight of ideology and activism, returned. In Doris's example - her quiet courage, her refusal to rest from her commitments, her willingness to become his subject - he found not only an artistic subject, but a co-creator. For the first time, he signed some drawings and paintings with both their names, acknowledging her role as a co-producer (Figure 105).

[602] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 14.

Figure 105: Doris & Cliff Rowe: *Doris Reclining,* 1985. Watercolour, 30 x 50 cm

This moment did not mark a retreat from political art, but a redefinition of its possibilities. It showed Rowe that human love, like political struggle, was a form of resistance, and that, perhaps, the two were never separate to begin with. In the final passage of his 'Autobiography', completed shortly after Doris died, he acknowledged the great debt he owed her:

> I had always been more critical of others, but her example showed me that to love was the stronger attitude and my lack of it the weaker and based upon my disappointment with my own performance. In consequence, her social influence was much greater than mine. I hope this conveys to the reader that if there is anything in my work that deserves to survive my death it is as much due to her as to me. We did it together, so I have signed a few of the best sketches of her, made when she was ill, with her name as well as mine, as a token of her part in all of them. I can only hope that while she lived, she sometimes felt that I had an equal part in what she did.[603]

Cliff Rowe died in 1989. While clearing out his studio, Sandra and I came across the last picture he had been working on. Incomplete and still taped to a board, it was a watercolour of a merry-go-round with delighted children enjoying the rides, parents and other children looking on (Figure 106). There is no hint of industrial process or class struggle but Rowe would have argued that this was a piece of socialist art. Close by in his desk was his Party card, showing he was a fully-paid up member paying reduced senior rates. This juxtaposition might be seen as a fitting summary of his life and

[603] Rowe, 'Autobiography', p. 15.

work, a commitment to joy, solidarity and humanity, inseparable from his enduring belief in the socialist cause.

Figure 106: Cliff Rowe. Untitled unfinished watercolour, c.1989. 30 x 50 cm

Chapter 7 Conclusion

In these chapters I have traced the life of Cliff Rowe across the landscapes of early twentieth-century Britain, the Soviet Union of the first Five-Year Plan, the turbulent years of anti-fascist struggle, the London Blitz, the ideological clashes of the Cold War, and the reckonings of the post-Stalinist British left. Each of these stages - Wimbledon childhood, Emotionist experimentation, Russian experiences, AIA activism, wartime engagement, Cold War disillusionment - reveals something not just about him as a man and artist, but also about the possibilities and limits of politically engaged art in the twentieth century.

At the outset of this study, I proposed a simple heuristic: to hold three forces in tension - Rowe with his aesthetic instincts, personal contradictions and emotional impulses, his commitment to the CPGB and support for the Soviet Union, and the major upheavals of the twentieth century. This triangle of forces has been the organising principle of the thesis, not a rigid structure but a means of appraising a life that was itself full of competing pressures. At its centre, I placed Rowe's artwork as the context where these tensions most vividly meet.

Throughout the chapters, this model has helped frame Rowe's life as more than a linear biography. It has allowed us to see how the personal and the political were never separable for him, and how the external pressures of history intersected with his inner convictions and doubts. The young Rowe's early experiences instilled in him both a stubborn individuality and a profound scepticism towards authority - religious, familial, and eventually political. They also generated his enduring hatred of hypocrisy and his identification with the vulnerable and oppressed. At the heart of Rowe's life and work was a refusal to separate artistic practice from political commitment. This is a thread that runs from his first exposure to Marxist ideas in the Covent Garden bookshop, through the pamphlets, banners and posters of the AIA, to his later paintings and letters. Yet, even before his political awakening, Rowe's brief but intense involvement with the Emotionist Group showed his willingness to challenge orthodoxies. He embraced modernist ideals of creativity, emotion and freedom, rejecting the Royal College of Art's conservative academicism in favour of a more expressive, avant-garde vocabulary. Although short-lived, his Emotionist phase marked his conviction that art could and should be more than a polite decorative exercise - it could embody the artist's inner urgency and speak to the wider world.

Friendship was also central to Rowe's life and work, and among his closest and most influential companions were R. O. Dunlop, Pat Dooley, and Misha Black - three charismatic figures who each influenced his outlook in distinct ways. Dunlop, with his ebullient personality and dedication to

painting as an emotional act, influenced Rowe's belief in the power of art to move and provoke, as seen during their shared involvement in the Emotionist Group. Pat Dooley, a gifted orator and skilled organiser, embodied for Rowe the kind of passionate, humane socialism he aspired to - pragmatic yet idealistic, rooted in solidarity with ordinary people. Misha Black, perhaps the most intellectually formidable of the three, offered Rowe a model of cultural leadership - articulate, politically astute, and skilled at forging networks that linked art, design, and politics. The later estrangement between Rowe and Black over the AIA's wartime policy shows how differences of principle could strain even his strongest friendships, yet it also indicates how profoundly these relationships mattered to him.

Rowe's time in Moscow in the early 1930s was a further turning point, politically and aesthetically. Working at the *Tovarishchestvo*, exposed to the vitality of Constructivism even as Socialist Realism was taking hold, Rowe saw the power of radical design to communicate ideas vividly. He was deeply impressed by the productive vigour unleashed by Soviet industrialisation. At the same time, he was troubled by the authoritarian realities of Soviet life - the repression of dissent, the narrowing of creative possibility, and, in Ukraine, the human cost of the Soviet experiment. His letters and later reflections reveal a man absorbing both the energy of a revolutionary cultural movement and the lessons of its decline into dogma.

On returning to London, he sought to adapt some of that revolutionary ethos through the founding of the Artists' International, later the AIA. In its early years, the AIA embodied the promise of collective action by artists in the service of social progress and against fascism. Rowe's vision of artists as active participants in the struggle for a just society was vindicated by the group's growing membership and influence. Yet, as this thesis documents, this commitment was constantly tested by the shifting strategies of the Communist Party, by the contradictory demands of maintaining artistic freedom while defending Soviet orthodoxy, and by the inevitable frictions among artists of differing temperaments and outlooks.

My heuristic device has also made it possible to read individual works anew. A painting such as *The Fried Fish Shop*, for example, becomes the place where Rowe's loyalty to socialist ideals collides with his unease at Stalinist dictatorship and his need to encode dissent into his art. It remains one of his most significant and revealing works, capturing both his loyalty to socialism and his refusal to ignore its betrayal by Stalin.

The Second World War posed perhaps the most acute test. Rowe's efforts to keep the AIA aligned with the Party while retaining its integrity exposed the fragility of its unity. The Soviet–German Pact and the subsequent reversals in the CPGB's line left him and his comrades scrambling to justify what

many saw as the unjustifiable. His attempts to reconcile principle with pragmatism, to defend the idea of an artist's duty to society while refusing to disavow the Soviet Union entirely, reveal the human difficulty of maintaining both loyalty and independence.

The post-war years deepened those contradictions. The Cold War forced British Communist artists to choose between defending rigid and censorious Soviet cultural policies and acknowledging the well-founded and growing critique of repression. Rowe's writings from this period show his discomfort with Zhdanovism, his frustration with the CPGB's cultural dogmatism, and his determination to keep the AIA politically engaged despite mounting pressure to abandon politics. The fissures that opened in the AIA mirrored the wider crisis of the British left: how to sustain socialist ideals in the face of Soviet abuses and Western hostility, and how to retain cultural independence without retreating into liberal individualism.

The climactic rupture of 1956 - Khrushchev's speech and the Hungarian Revolution - was a defining crisis. For Rowe, it was both confirmation and betrayal. He had suspected the extent of Stalinist repression but was nevertheless shocked by the scale of the crimes now admitted. His writings from this period reveal both his continued faith in socialism and his disillusionment with the Party's refusal to confront its own failures honestly. His undelivered speech to the CPGB Congress in 1957 remains a testament to his integrity - refusing to abandon the idea of communism while insisting on radical reform and internal democracy. Even when silenced, he chose not to walk away but to persist, to argue, and to salvage what he could.

The later decades of his life show a man who remained engaged. His support for Solidarnosc, his optimism about Gorbachev's reforms, and his continued contributions to debates within the CPGB, reveal a refusal to succumb to cynicism. Even in his disappointment, he maintained his belief that a democratic form of socialism could still offer a humane alternative to capitalist exploitation and war. It was only in the last years of his life, influenced by the stoicism of his dying wife Doris, that he came to understand the essential truth about art that he had been seeking: it was about the love of both the subject and the means of expression.

Throughout this study, I have tried to honour both Rowe's voice and the historical realities he inhabited. It is easy, from the vantage of hindsight, to judge his decisions harshly, to see in his loyalty to the CPGB a kind of stubbornness or naivety. But to do so ignores the profound moral and intellectual challenges he faced - how to remain true to his ideals in a world that so often betrayed them, how to keep faith with a movement that repeatedly disappointed, how to continue creating art that spoke to people's lives without succumbing to dogma or retreating into irrelevance. These

are not questions with easy answers, and Rowe's life reminds us that the role of socially engaged art is not to resolve these tensions but to work within them.

Writing Rowe's story has meant constantly negotiating between my closeness to him and the need for critical distance, between the gaps and contradictions in the evidence and the urge to construct a coherent narrative. This was a process that, like Rowe's own life, was full of tensions that could not always be resolved but had to be acknowledged and worked through. His journals, letters and paintings often seemed to me like a conversation - sometimes with himself, sometimes with history, sometimes with us. In these conversations, one hears the voice of a man grappling with what it means to live and work ethically in compromised times. His example reminds us that political and artistic choices are never made in a vacuum. They are shaped by family and friendships, by the demands of the moment and the weight of history, by the limits of what we know and the hopes of what we wish to be possible.

In the end, Rowe's significance lies not in any single achievement, nor in unblemished adherence to principle, but in his willingness to confront complexity. His life challenges the idea that commitment to justice and artistic integrity are mutually exclusive. He shows us that it is possible, though never easy, to make art that matters, to stand with the oppressed, to speak truth to power, and to continue believing in the possibility of a better world, even when the evidence suggests otherwise. It is his persistence in pursuing what he believed to be right, despite the obstacles, that mark him out as a kind of hero. But it is also worth remembering how he saw himself - a man of 'complicated and overlapping motives,' convinced that every problem had a simple solution, but constantly frustrated by reality and by others. He knew that both his reactions and the problems he faced were full of contradictions, yet he never abandoned his belief that clarity was possible. He came to see this tension, between simplicity and complexity, hope and frustration, as part of what made life interesting. The title of this thesis is drawn from that reflection, which seems to capture him perfectly: principled yet pragmatic, idealistic yet ironic, always alive to the contradictions that shaped him, and, in his own way, heroic.

Appendix 1: Cliff Rowe's Emotionist poetry

Emotionist Group*, Emotionism Number 1*, February 1928

THE PIT
by Hooper Rowe

MINING, tearing, cutting, hacking out the silver secrets of the earth, leaving the sore livid flesh to harden into death.

Bleak, dull green country, sudden hollows, all the ground a dead level with pits and hollows but no hills, all the hollows falling from the level but never rising into hills.

Uprising like a grey queer phallic tower, the tapering death-trunk of a stone grey chimney, stark single and gaunt to the sky and dull long heavy-lying clouds, horizontal. A grey square masonry of stone with a tomb-like open space arched in. A giant corpseless catacomb disgorged from the earth. Inside the structure a blank square of earth and rock and a dip scored deep.

At the rear without warning a sudden terrible pit yards across, invisible till the brink is stepped upon. Then an unending black drop into the night of the earth.

What crimes in the bowels of the earth were committed in the vertical iron stabbing wound? this gaping jaw locked forever in a final soundless death-cry, staring sightless into the hollow night.

Far down light glimmers whitely, flesh of the earth cut to the bone but no longer bleeding. Nature secretly riven and struck to death and exposed to the secret sky. Each worker a murderer with granite shoulders and bowed face.

Each man murdered by the thing murdered and the murdered murderers—slunk into the hidden places of night to die gradually, one by one, with a secret iron hole sunk deep by every blow of his tools into his own heart. Secretly hiding the dead heart—and secretly dying—and leaving bleak death a solitary tower on the only rise of the earth.

OVER THE PLAIN
by Hooper Rowe

Over the plain stretches her green dress of trees and grasses ornamented with grey beads of rocks and necklaces of leaden water.

Over the plain one strides a little unit gripped by the heart afraid secretly exhilarated by the beautiful implacable will of her intention and slow unfolding of her purpose.

Yet one seems the aggregation of her efforts, her final intention—her love-child and sometimes almost her tyrant whom she watches jealously lest any small step of freedom should be stolen from her inviolable laws.

So one is abject and subject yet bold and powerful.
The harmony is a subtle union vouchsafed to few, those who know how to conquer in their love without plundering, those whose love and hatred is not separate.

One who can keep his own laws and keeps them as inevitably and inviolably as she herself does.

Such a love she respects and returns for it is built upon an untiring to and fro of iconoclasm and an arising of stronger forms in unending power like giant arms tirelessly beating.

Power that is silent because too pregnantly there.

Power like hers that moves unseen under green garments and quiet voices and slow passive regard.

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