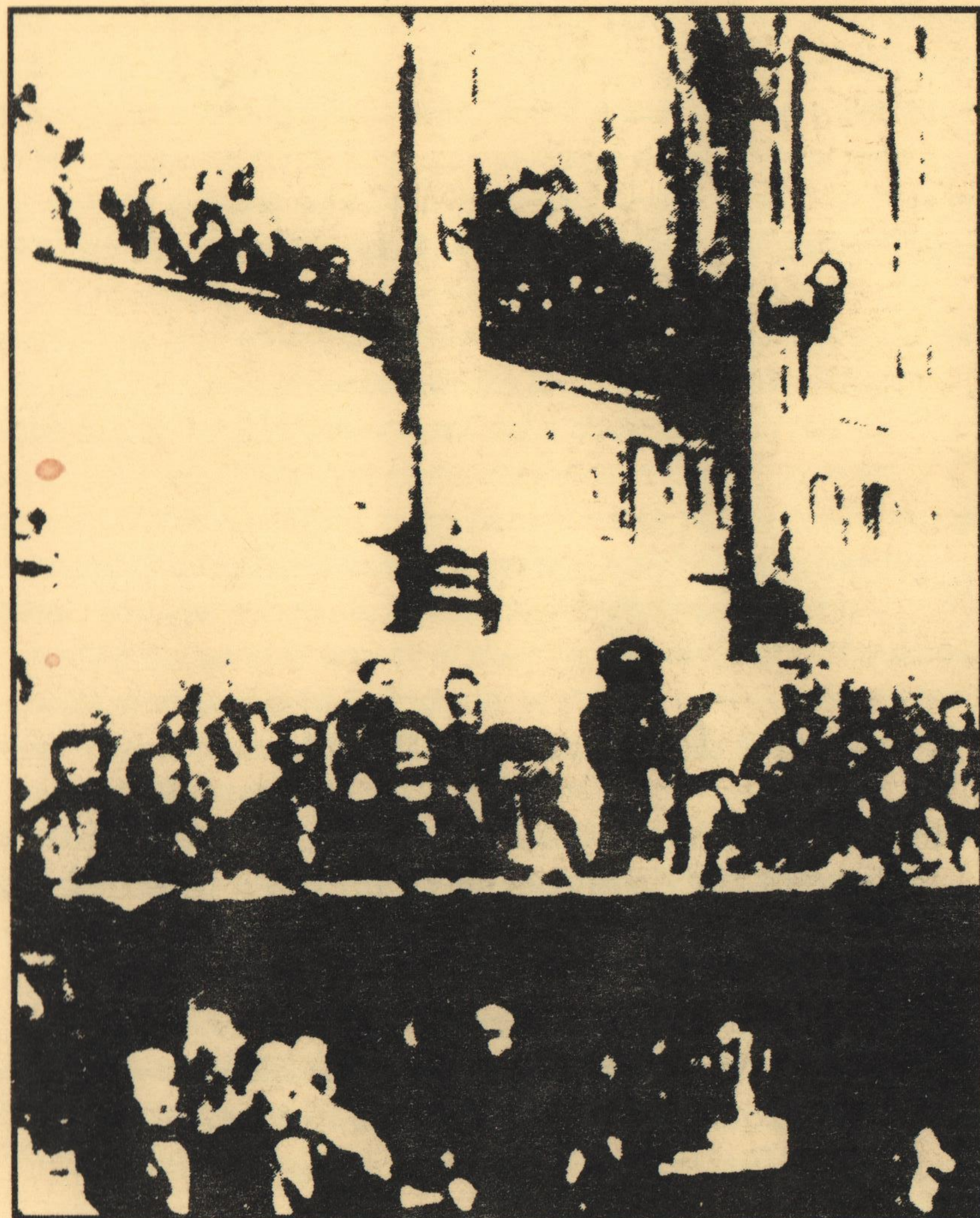


The Communist Club

The Communist Club, originally a political social club formed by German émigrés, played an important role in the radical politics of London and Europe during the mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It linked Chartism, utopian socialism, the First International, early anarchism, the first Marxist groups in Britain, and formed an important connection between the British and Continental European (German, Russian) socialist movements.

• *past tense* •



Keith Scholey

Front cover image:

OK, so we cheated. This is not a rendering of an image of the Communist Club. It's a blurred image of an engraving of the founding of the International Working Men's Association - the First International - at St. Martin's Hall, in 1864. We were unable to find any images of the Communist Club... But this is near enough, politically, historically and geographically.

introduction

This pamphlet gives a brief account of the organisation generally known as the 'Communist Club', or German Workers Educational Association. 19th Century Working Class London teemed with clubs: Workers Institutions; radical, secularist and republican clubs, and later socialist and anarchist clubs. Some had their own buildings, while many operated meeting rooms above pubs. They served many roles, holding evening classes for workers, many of who had never gone to school; providing space for the discussion of political ideas and for organising working class political activity, as well as social space run by club members themselves. Clublife was a crucial part of the building of mass movements like the Chartists, the Reform League of the 1860s, the anti-religious Secularists of the 1870s. Political refugees from repressive regimes in Europe formed, especially in the West End, a link between this homegrown radical club scene and Continental revolutionary activity. Many German political refugees especially were active both in supporting clandestine subversive activity in their homeland, and in the social and political movements in England. In the 80 years of its existence, the German Communist Club went through many incarnations, but for much its lifespan it brought together revolutionaries, socialists, underground publishers, trade unionists, including such luminaries as Marx and the leaders of the First International; it witnessed the first airing of the Communist Manifesto and the founding of the Social Democratic Federation and other leftwing parties, as well as hosting some of the splits between anarchists and Marxists...It was a significant space in the radical history of London and the world.

Nat Love

Past Tense Publications, October 2006

Author's dedication: For Adam Buick, Socialist Writer and Speaker

The Communist Club

The Communist Club was essentially a political social club, primarily for German émigrés, which, under a variety of names, operated out of various central London premises during the mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most Left personages of the era had some association with the Club, but the most important was Karl Marx. The Club formed an important institutional link between Chartism, utopian socialism, the First International, early anarchism, the Social-Democratic Federation (the first socialist group in Britain) and the new wave of 'pure' Marxist socialism of Edwardian times (the Socialist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Labour Party). The Club also formed an important connection between the British and Continental European (German, Russian) socialist movements.

Origins and early history (1840-47)

The early years of the Communist Club are known in exceptional detail due to the involvement of Marx and Engels and also because of the splendid article by Alexander Brandenburg (see sources at end).

Formation

The Communist Club started life as the **Deutsche Demokratische Gesellschaft** (German Democratic Society) founded on 7th February 1840 by seven members of the *Bund der Gerechten* (League of the Just) including Karl Schapper, Joseph Moll and Heinrich Bauer.

The League of the Just itself had been formed in Paris in 1836 as a split consisting of the "*most extreme, chiefly proletarian, elements of the secret democratic-republican Outlaws' League, which was founded by German refugees in Paris in 1834*" (Engels). Originally democratic-nationalist in ideology, under the influence of Wilhelm Weitling the League of the Just soon became utopian socialist.

Schapper and Bauer had been exiled to London after having been arrested following an insurrectionary action in Paris on 12th May 1839. Karl Schapper from Weilburg, had a history of such things, being involved in Burschenschaft (student radical) conspiracies in Frankfurt (participating in

the storming of the police station on 3rd April 1833) and had taken part in Mazzini's march on Savoy in February 1834. Not long after this he became a communist. Originally a forestry student, he was later a compositor but in London found work as a teacher of languages, where he married an Englishwoman. Engels describes him as "*of gigantic stature, resolute and energetic*". Engels also knew Joseph Moll, a "*watchmaker from Cologne, a medium-sized Hercules*" and Heinrich Bauer, originally from Frankow, "*a shoemaker; a lively, alert, witty little fellow, whose little body, however, also contained much shrewdness and determination*".

The reason for setting up the Club was given by Schapper in 1847: "*...the founders of this society decided to make education the foundation of their movement and not to let themselves be guided by leaders...*" This was a reaction to the defeats of the workers' movement in the 1830s, which were blamed on the lack of political education of the working class. This ignorance had left it open to opportunistic leaders. Notably this 'education' policy was followed by Marx and Engels. Less altruistically the Club was what we would now call a front for the secret League of the Just, serving as a recruiting ground and propaganda vehicle.

Name

The original title did not stick and in these early years (indeed until the early 1880s) the Society was known by a variety of names, including:

Deutscher Wissenschaftlicher Arbeiterverein (German Scientific Workers Association),

Bildungs-und-Gegenseitige Unterstützungs-Gesellschaft für Arbeiter in London (Education and Mutual Support Society for Workers in London),

Bildungs-Gesellschaft für Arbeiter (Educational Society for Workers),



Karl Schapper

Deutscher Bildungs- und Unterstützungs-Verein (German Education and Support Association),
Deutscher Demokratischer Arbeiterbildungsverein (German Democratic Workers Educational Association),
Deutsche Bildungs-Gesellschaft für Arbeiter (German Education Society for Workers),
Bildungsverein für Handwerker (Educational Association for Artisans),
Bildungsverein Deutscher Arbeiter (Educational Association of German Workers).

However, the most fitting and commonly used name was the **Deutsche Arbeiter Bildungs Verein (German Workers Educational Association).**

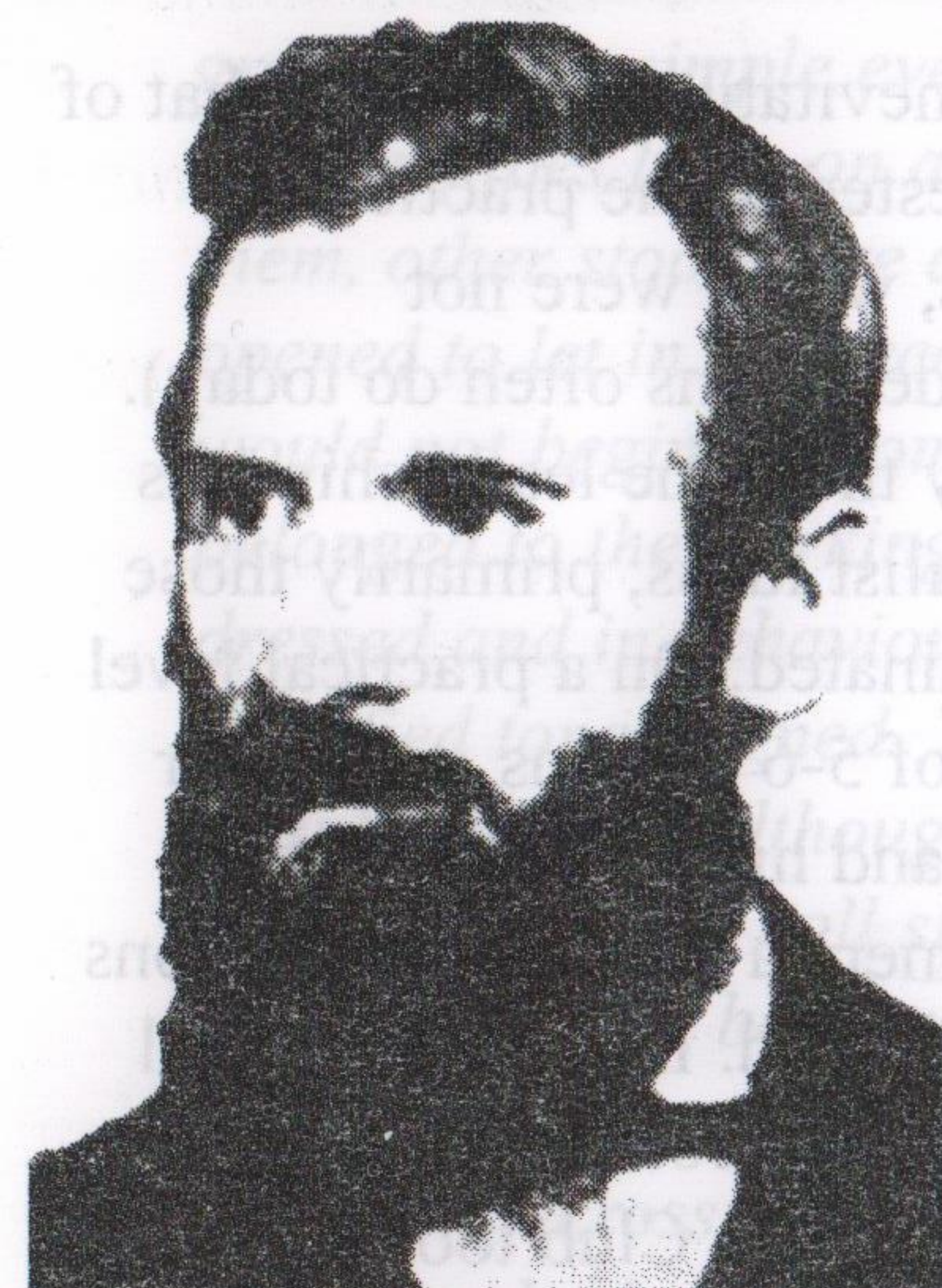
Size

The DABV rapidly became the main organisation of the German workers in London. Despite being near to dissolution in 1841 its numbers rapidly grew from not more than 30 members before 1844 to 130 in the summer of 1845, 250 the following July (when intensive propaganda work properly commenced), and around 500 by February 1847. 169 of the latter total were in the East London branch, based in Whitechapel and formed in June 1846.

Activities

As the name would imply the Association acted as an educational and social club for German workers, of which there were then many in the capital. In 1845-46 business meetings were held on a Sunday, political discussions (e.g. reading and commenting on contemporary political and philosophical literature) on a Tuesday night, with Saturdays reserved for cultural activities - such as song and dance - and classes in elementary education (e.g. English lessons). Lessner,* speaking of the following year, adds: "*The club had also evenings devoted to elocution. Everybody who was trained in reciting would recite poems of a serious or gay turn. My first recital consisted in the reading of a poem humorously describing an adventure that happened in Berlin in 1846.*" In these years the Club had a thirty strong choir. This latter became very important in later years. The

* Friedrich Lessner, a German tailor, involved in the communist movement for over 60 years; in the 1880s/90s he was a member of the Social Democratic Federation, the first British Marxist organisation.



Friedrich Lessner

club owned a variety of maps, a globe, other basic scientific materials and musical instruments to assist these activities. There was also a library. A list for this survives from late 1845 and was analysed by Brandenburg. Of 229 volumes all but 45 were in German (20 were in English and 25 French). Exiled authors were heavily represented. Approximately 100 items were literary in nature - poetry, songs and novels. Authors noted were Shakespeare, Goldsmith, Eugene Sue, Goethe and Schiller. 60 were political or social in nature - authors here included Cabet, the early works of Marx and Engels, Weitling, Feuerbach, Ruge, Blanc, Proudhon, Voltaire, Rousseau and Paine.

Another 40 were general historical works. Very few were science related. Members could borrow books on a 14 day loan period. 2d was charged per week for overdue books. 10 newspapers were kept in the reading room. These included *Vorwärts* and *Gesellschaftsspiegel* from Paris, and probably the *New Moral World* and the *Northern Star*. Literature, mainly socialist and communist, from Switzerland, France and Belgium, was also sold at the club. In the autumn of 1846 the Club acquired a press for printing announcements of meetings and the like, and the following year had the intention to produce a journal provisionally entitled *Proletarier*.

Organisation

A rule book survives from 1845-46, bearing the Association's motto "*Alle Menschen sind Bruder*" (All People are Brothers) on its title page, and giving details of internal organisation but it appears that this varied. Generally a President, Vice President, Secretary (minute taking), Treasurer and Librarian were elected every three months. These were all voluntary unpaid posts. At this time membership was open to anyone subject to the sponsorship of two existing members and approval of a majority at a business meeting. Members paid into a compulsory health insurance fund, as well as a general subscription towards running costs.

Ideology

The ideology of the leadership of the club was inevitably different to that of the membership, who were probably more interested in the practical benefits. The Club provided a platform for ideas, which were not necessarily fully believed in by members (as trade unions often do today). Because the League and the Club had practically the same leadership it is difficult to tell them apart. Initially utopian socialist ideas, primarily those of Etienne Cabet and Wilhelm Weitling, predominated. On a practical level the Club was connected with a small commune of 5-6 persons, set up for self-help purposes. In the early 1840s Schapper and his friends rejected Cabet's plan for a grand utopian commune in America for practical reasons - that is as an untimely experiment unlikely to succeed. In a more general fashion Cabet was criticised for his favouring of class collaboration (a typical utopian socialist stance). In September 1844 the Club took part in a meeting held to greet Wilhelm Weitling. Weitling was a member while in London but the Association largely rejected his ideas by 1846. By December of that year the Club was pressing atheism, opposing nationalism and had generally grown far more radical than at its birth.

International connections

From early on, the Club was in contact with Marx's *Kommunistischen Korrespondenzkomitee*, and in September 1845 took part in the formation of the Fraternal Democrats, an early working class international organisation driven by Julian Harney, who joined the Association in early 1846. Collections were made during the uprisings in Silesia (1844), Poland (1846), and Switzerland (1847).

Venues

The Association met in the *Red Lion* pub in Great Windmill Street from 1840 to 1846. Around the end of 1845 Bruno Hildebrand, a Marburg professor, paid a visit to the *Red Lion*:

On the ground floor was an ordinary grog shop in which porter and other fine beer could be bought, but I could not perceive a special place in which guests could settle down.

We went through and up a flight of stairs into a hall-like room, which could hold around 200 people on tables and

benches distributed around the room. Some twenty sat in groups, ate a simple evening meal, or smoked out of one of the honour pipes lying on all the tables, their jug of grog before them, other stood here and there, and every moment the door opened to let in a newcomer, so it was clear it that the meeting would not begin for some time. Most faces that one saw belonged to the working classes, although all were decently dressed and in behaviour were very easy, but throughout a dignified tone reigned. The language of conversation was mainly German although one also heard English and French. At one end of the hall stood a grand piano, which in unmusical London was the best proof to us that we had found the right room. We knew none of those present, so we sat down a little obviously across from the door at a bar and bought a glass of porter and a here obligatory penny packet of tobacco, in order to wait our acquaintance Schapper, who had invited us. He invited us to sit with him at the end of the hall and showed me a piece of paper stuck up on the wall, on which the statutes of the association were written.

*I looked at the Association's library and bought some communist tracts, one of which (by August Becker of Switzerland) contained much the worst defence of communism of all existing pamphlets. The meeting dispersed very agreeably, so that the prevailing familiar 'Du' * seemed to be rooted not merely in the rules of the Association, but also in the hearts of the members.*

In the summer of 1846 the club moved to a hall in the *White Hart*, 191 Drury Lane. The move was primarily due to the rapid expansion of the club but the new premises also offered cheap board and lodging for members. The hall, originally capable of holding 300 but soon altered by members to hold 4000, is described in an 1847 report from the *Northern Star*, the main Chartist paper:

* "Du" - In German, there are two ways of saying 'you': 'du' for friends and equals, 'Sie' for politeness, but also for authority figures, people supposed to be superior to you. Using 'du' for 19th century communists was a statement of egalitarianism.

A large and splendid room... having a raised roof, decorated with beautiful arabesque ornaments, composed of graceful scrolls, figures and flowers, associated with medallion portraits of Shakespeare, Schiller, Mozart and Albert Durer. On the centre of one of the walls immediately above the chairman's seat is an extensive view of Hampstead Heath, taken during the last May Day festival of the Association (painted by Messrs. Holm, Pfaender, Clausen and Ens). On one side of this view is a statue of Liberty, and on the other side as statue of Justice. The other sides of the room are decorated with large and beautiful maps, with which, on this occasion, were interwoven wreaths and festoons of laurel and other evergreens. The room was brilliantly illuminated by gas, and extra quantity of which was supplied for the purpose of giving effect to a large and beautiful transparency gratuitously painted by an English member, Charles Keen. The painting represented a full length female figure, combining the attributes of liberty and equality, trampling under her feet the hydra of corruption, and holding aloft le bonnet rouge, the rallying sign of awakening nations. In the background war and tyranny are represented as fading away beneath the influence of the rising sun of liberty, which lights up the happy homes of the emancipated millions. The whole is surrounded by a golden wreath (on crimson ground) of oak leaves and acorns, with which is entwined a riband, bearing the society's motto: *ALL MEN ARE BRETHREN* in twelve different language: German, English, French, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, Italian, Greek, Spanish, Polish, Hungarian and Russian.

Marx and the Communist Club (1847-60)

In March and April of 1847 the DABV took part in discussions with the Société démocratique Française, and the Réunion des réfugiés politiques, two French refugee groups, which led to the latter's merger. The Association (and the League) was becoming much more cosmopolitan; Engels remembered the clientele including "Scandinavians, Dutch,

Hungarians, Czechs, Southern Slavs, and also Russians and Alsatians" as well as "a British grenadier of the Guards in uniform". Until 1847 Marx and Engels had been in contact with the League of the Just but were not members. In that year however the League began to come across to their way of thinking (emphasising the working class and political action). The two entered the League, which in the summer of 1847 was reorganised as a democratic propaganda society and renamed the Communist League. It was for this organisation that the famous Communist Manifesto was issued. The reading and adoption of this probably happened in the upstairs room of the Association premises in Drury Lane (rather than the Red Lion as indicated by Liebknecht and others). Correspondingly the open social club was renamed the **Communistische Arbeiter Bildungs Verein (Communist Workers Educational Association)**, de-emphasising the Germanic element. Engels noted that its "membership cards bore the inscription *"all men are brothers"* in at least twenty languages, even if not without mistakes here and there". Germans, however, remained the largest section of the Association.

After the 1848 revolution in France the exiles returned to Germany where the League played a significant part in the struggles of that year. The events severely affected the Club, the East London branch closing down in the summer of 1848. Moll was



The cover of the original edition of Marx & Engels' 1848 "Manifesto of the Communist Party"

killed during an action against the Prussian Army in 1849 but the rest gradually drifted back to London. The League was organised afresh in London in autumn 1849 but retained contacts in Germany.

It was at this point that Marx was again a member of the Association and lectured on political economics (November 1849 to September 1850). He did this somewhat reluctantly but this *"was a rare treat to all those who had the good fortune to take part in it"* according to Wilhelm Liebknecht.

The course was apparently on the lines of *Capital* and was presented in the crowded room in Great Windmill Street (where the Club had returned to).

"Marx proceeded methodically. He stated a proposition - the shorter the better - and then demonstrated it in a lengthier explanation, endeavouring with utmost care to avoid all expressions incomprehensible to the labourers. Then he requested his audience to question him. If this was not done he commenced to examine them and he did this with such pedagogic skill that no flaw, no misunderstanding escaped him... He also made use of a blackboard, on which he wrote the formulas - among them those familiar to all of us from the beginning of 'Capital'". Other lecturers at this time included the Chartist Ernest Jones, who spoke very good German.

The Association held outings to the country at this time and it was on one of these, in the summer of 1850, that Wilhelm Liebknecht, founder of the German Social-Democratic party, met Marx. The latter commented to him that membership of the League depended on a thorough examination by the group's phrenologist (bump reader) Karl Pfaender. Pfaender was a painter by profession and an early member of the League of the Just, Engels called him *"a man of peculiarly fine intelligence, witty, ironical and dialectical"* (letter to Marx, 20 September 1852). Marx probably acquired his interest in the now discredited 'science' of phrenology from Pfaender.*

Marx and Engels and their coterie (including Bauer and Wolff) withdrew from the Association and the League on 17th September 1850, essentially as the result of a reassertion of utopianism. Both groups were effectively destroyed by the Cologne Communist trials (4th October to 12th November 1852) and dissolved soon after.

The League was dead but the Association lived on. In the 1850s and 1860s, presumably after the demise of the Communist League, the Association

* Phrenology - the popular 19th Century 'science' of reading people's personality, character and prospects from the shape of the bumps on their heads. Often used to define people with funny shaped heads as criminals. Since widely discredited. Can't think why.

seems to have commonly known as the **Londoner Deutsche Arbeiter Bildungs-Verein (DABV: London German Workers Educational Association)**. Clearly the Communist element was being downplayed and the German element revived. At the end of the 1850s Marx was once again involved in the Association, holding free lectures on political economy, and was invited to its twentieth anniversary celebration held on 6th February 1860.

The Communist Club and the First International (1860s)

The German Workers Educational Association is believed to have supplied the choir which sung at the foundation meeting of the International Working Men's Association (the famous First International) on 28th September 1864 at St Martins Hall, Long Acre. It certainly did so at the London Conference social the following year. However it did not formally affiliate until 10 January 1865. At this time the DABV was meeting at 2 Nassau Street, Soho (now Gerrard Place off Shaftesbury Avenue), the tavern of Heinrich Bolleter. President was then one P. Van Hofen. There were



Leaders of the First International.

two "kindred societies" (branches) known as Eintracht (in Whitechapel) and Teutonia (in South London). Wilhelm Vogt (of Marx's dire *Herr Vogt*) was in the former. Members of the Association who were on the General Council of the First International included Schapper, Bolleter, JG Eccarius and Friedrich Lessner (the latter two tailors associated with Marx). Although clearly the German element was dominant, internationalism was not dead; the DABV taking an active part in commemorations held for the 24th June 1848 massacres in Paris. During this era the DABV seems to have had annual meetings celebrating its own birth: at the 27th in February 1867 Lessner and Marx were the speakers; whilst at the 28th the following year Eccarius followed Lessner's introduction. Marx was again a member in the mid-1860s but resigned on the 23rd November 1868 because the Association was dabbling with the Lassalleans* in Germany. On 15th December 1868 the General Council of the IWMA reported that the membership of the DABV was now 1,800.

The SDF, the anarchists and the Communist Club (1877-81)

The next that is heard of the club, once more known as the **Communistische Arbeiter Bildungs Verein**, is in the late 1870s, when it seems to have been part of what was known as the **Social Democratic Club**. This ultimately consisted of five sections of various nationalities. The English section, originally known as the English Revolutionary Society, had been formed on the initiative of Frank Kitz during the summer of 1877. Charles Murray, an O'Brienite, and Johann Neve were also present. Neve, who later died in a German prison, had urged the formation of the group on Kitz. By November the group was known as the Social Democratic Club and was meeting at the Grafton Arms in Fitzroy Square. It had now acquired 'international' sections, the German section apparently being the CABV. The emphasis appears to have again been on the Communism rather than the Germanity of the group. Probably in 1878 the Social Democratic Club took premises in 6 Rose Street, Soho (now Manette Street). The Club did not occupy the whole of no. 6, which was packed to the brim with poor working class people. One of the residents

* Lassalleans - German socialist group, denounced by Marx for their reformist positions.

was Charles Ruster, recorded in the 1881 Census as the club's steward. The building was demolished for the 1929 extension of Foyle's bookshop. Important practical work of the CABV at that time included involvement in a masons' strike, raising money for the strikers and ensuring that imported German masons understood the situation and left the country. Kitz also recalled that the Rose Street premises was used to house fugitives from the German Anti-Socialist Laws: "*The club was crowded with refugees; our hall at times resembled as railway station, with groups of men, women, and children sitting disconsolately amidst piles of luggage*". The CABV had extensive contacts with the English socialist movement at this time. These include Joseph Lane's Homerton Socialist Society which was then affiliated to the CABV. This later became part of the Labour Emancipation League, later an affiliate of the (Social-) Democratic Federation and later still merged into the Socialist League. Rose Street holds a particular place in the history of British Marxism, as it was here that the first meeting which was to lead to the formation of the Democratic Federation (later the Social Democratic Federation, the first Marxist organisation in Britain) took place. On 2nd March 1881, Henry Myers Hyndman and HAM Butler, a Conservative MP, called a meeting of Radical MPs and workingmen opposed to coercion in Ireland. This proposed a federation of Radical clubs based on a Chartist-like program of reforms and a committee was formed to make further arrangements, which



Johann Most

ultimately led to the formation of the Democratic Federation. As well as the social democrats the CABV was extensively involved in the anarchist movement at this time, being involved in the 'Revolutionary Congress' of 14-19 July 1881; the organising committee of this included Sebastian Trunk representing the CABV. Although designed to unite anarchists and socialists, it essentially became an anarchist affair. More importantly the CABV subsidised Johann Most's *Freiheit*, a German language paper issued from 1879 to

1882. Designed to be smuggled into Germany, this publication was originally democratic-republican with Proudhonian anarchist undertones, but later became more radical. After the assassination of the Tsar in early 1881, Most printed an article approving assassination as a political weapon. He was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. The English section briefly issued an English language *Freiheit* in 1881, largely with the aim of defending him. This resulted in a split in the club. The anarchist section associated with Most stayed in Rose Street, while the Social-Democrats moved to 49 Tottenham Street as the Second Section of the **Communistische Arbeiter Bildungs Verein**. The Second Section prefix was soon dropped, afterwards there being no more name changes (although the short English version - the Communist Club - became used in common parlance.) The anarchists later moved to Stephen's Mews, Rathbone Place as the International or German Club. The premises here were the scene of a police riot on 9 May 1885.

The Communist Club after 1881

In its final phase the Communist Club was less of a political body and more of a social club. Kitz disparaged it as a mere West End dining room, but it remained an important focus of Left wing life in the capital. Several aged radicals lived close by, including Lessner at no. 12 Fitzroy Street around 1888, and William Townshend, veteran O'Brienite, who from Max Beer's 1895 description (quoted in Shipley) actually lived at the Club's premises at no. 49 Tottenham Street. The Club band was particularly noted and performed at many left wing events.

The Club retained its importance as a venue for lectures and events. Friedrich Engels, George Bernard Shaw, Keir Hardie and William Morris all spoke at no. 49. One of the most notable was the Sixth and final Annual Conference of the Socialist League, (William Morris's semi-anarchist split from the SDF) held at the Club on 25th May 1890. This Conference saw the ousting of William Morris and marked the beginning of the transformation of the League into an anarchist group. 49 Tottenham Street is a surviving building.

In 1902 the Communist Club moved to 107 Charlotte Street. Shortly thereafter Stalin and Lenin visited. This was probably in connection with

the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. This took place at a variety of locations. The first London sitting (14th overall) took place on 29th July 1903 at the "English Club" in Charlotte Street. This may well be another term for the Communist Club - possibly a ruse to avoid spies or simply an error. The main question dealt with at this meeting was Lenin's report on Party rules. The Congress overall marked the emergence of the Bolshevik faction within the RSDLP. Earlier sittings had been held in a flour warehouse in Brussels. 57 delegates from all over Russia attended the Congress, which subsequently continued at unknown locations in London.

After 1900 the SDF renewed its acquaintance with the Communist Club. In 1903 the delegates to the Annual Conference were formally welcomed as guests to the club. This was made a festive occasion with songs and speeches - in effect the Conference's 'social'. The Conference had been marred by the expulsion of several leading impossibilists (anti-reformists) and shortly after the Socialist Labour Party was formed.

In April or May 1903 the newly formed Socialist Labour Party held its first meeting in London at the Club. Present was Frank Budgen (Felix in the following):

At the entrance to the Club Felix paused to read a notice painted white on black: DER KOMMUNISTISCHEN¹ ARBEITER BILDUNGS VEREIN. He was teaching himself German and the genitive case was a constant stumbling block. Impatient in his new-found dedication to a cause, Rex tugged at his coat sleeve.

To get to the hall they had to pass through a restaurant which smelt of sauerkraut, red cabbage, and garlic sausage and was decorated with portraits of Marx, Lassalle, Garibaldi, and other fighters for freedom. There were depressingly few people gathered together in the hall to hear the revolutionary message, thirty at most, and these were sprawling around on chairs at various angles smoking and chatting and waiting, but without visible enthusiasm, for the meeting to begin. Rex and

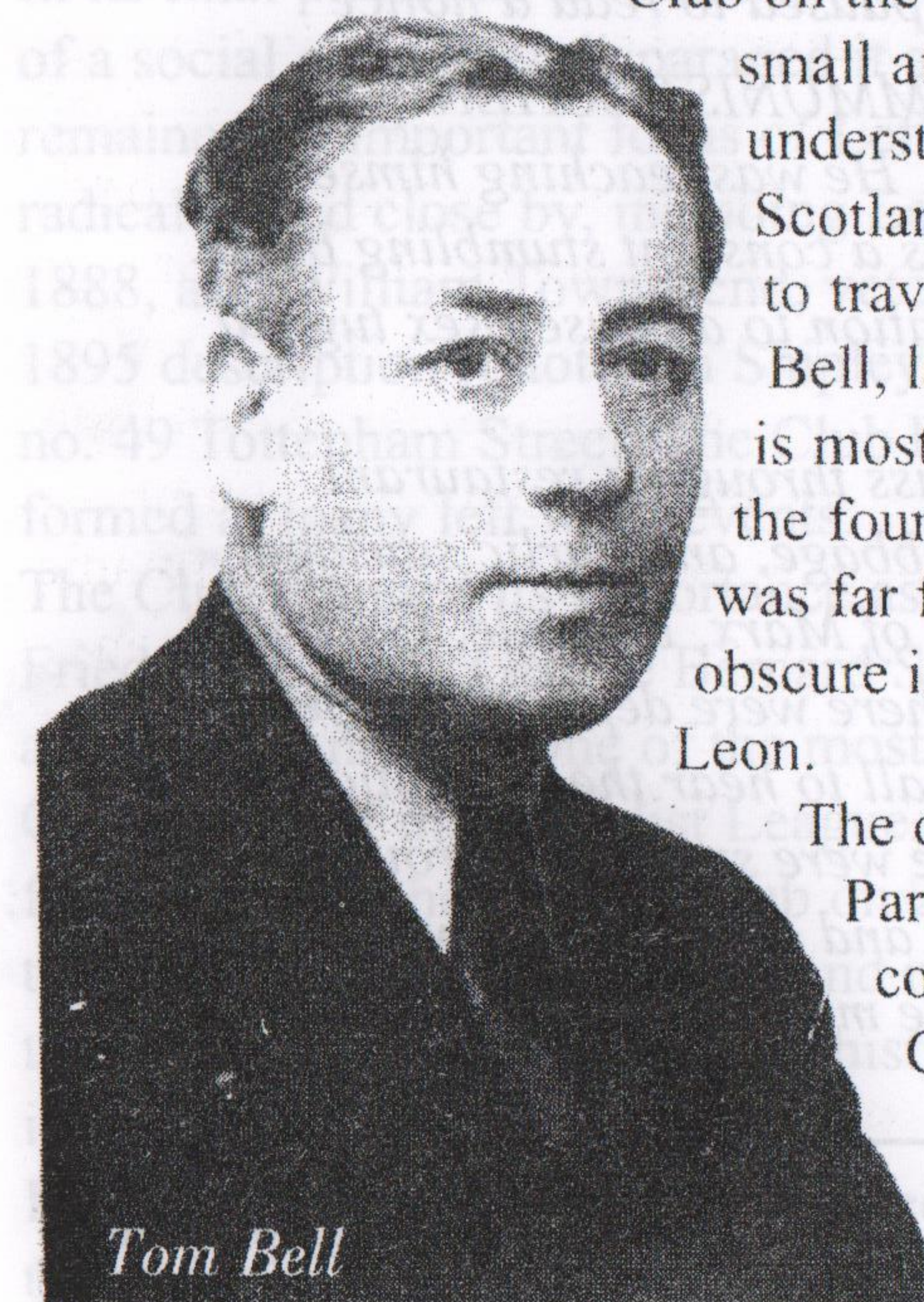
¹ Budgen is a smart arse. The correct ending is -e as the adjective is applying to the nominative plural Arbeiter. Consult your nearest German for a full and very boring explanation.

Felix took seats at the back of the hall.

Seeing that the numbers present were not likely to increase, the chairman, Comrade Groves, threw his cigarette on the floor, rapped on the table and called the meeting to order.

This is an historic occasion, he said, no less a one that the founding of a new revolutionary Socialist Party. Some of those present had been members of the Social Democratic Federation and had been witnesses to the gradual decay of that organisation under the leadership of Hyndman and Quelch into a capitalist reformist gang. Great efforts had been made to stop the rot, but at last the sound elements in the S.D.F. had realized that was a waste of time and they had left the party prepared to take up the task of forming a new organisation. Our Scottish comrades had given the lead. The Socialist Labour Party was in the course of formation. It was up to London and the South too. 'The job is there to be done and we can do it.'

The third Annual Conference of the Socialist Labour Party was held at the Club on the 23rd and 24th April 1905. This was a



Tom Bell

small affair attended by only 16 delegates - understandably as most SLPers were in Scotland and few can have had enough money to travel down. One of the delegates was Tom Bell, later a well-known Communist. The SLP is most known because of its contribution to the foundation of the Communist Party. This was far from its roots, which lay in the rather obscure industrial unionist ideas of Daniel De Leon.

The other Impossibleist party, the Socialist Party of Great Britain, was also greatly connected to the Communist Club. The Club was the first headquarters of the SPGB (June 1904 to September 1905) and other meetings were also held here, including the Annual



Socialist Party of Great Britain members at the first party conference, 1905

Conferences (1905-9 and 1917-19), and Quarterly Delegate Meetings (1905-7, 1911-16 and 1918-19).

The Communist Club would have been severely affected by the First World War, when most German nationals returned to the Fatherland to fight or were interned. Its end came shortly after the war.

By this time it had grown notorious because of its name, which as has been outlined was largely a historical appendage rather than an expression of political sympathy with the new Bolshevik regime in Russia, and Germanic associations. For example the Club was portrayed as a centre for German spies and bloodthirsty reds in the repellent proto-fascist *The Red To-morrow*. In this scene the turncoat 'hero', Alec Wilson, is being pursued by the police:

Wilson turned into Tottenham Court Road and ran across the street, darting among the buses, taxis, and horses, and down Howland Street. So far he had had no plan of action save to give his pursuers the slip. Now, however, it occurred to him to

make for Charlotte Street and the Communist Club there. Although not a member himself, he knew some of its frequenters, and felt sure of sympathy and assistance. He therefore crossed the end of Whitfield Street, turned to the left into Charlotte Street, and crossing it, made of no. 107. He hurried up the five worn steps that led to the door, and, without knocking ran into the passage, flung open the door on the right and found himself in a long room with windows at each end. At a table in the middle sat several men in varnished Windsor chairs, smoking and talking or reading newspapers. "Comrades," he cried, "the cops are after me! Will you help?"

The Comrades do so, sending out "Calmasetto" (a dig at the famous Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta) in Wilson's coat to lead the 'cops' astray."

In most sources it is stated that the Club was closed down after police raids in 1918. However as indicated above the SPGB was still holding meetings here in late 1919 (which were recorded in the minutes as taking place in the Communist Club). Weller gives the date of closure as 1920. Secretary of the Communist Club during its last six months of existence was Harold Edwards. Born in 1900, this young anarchist, a friend of Errico Malatesta, dropped out of political activity in the 1920s to become an antiquarian bookseller. The premises continued to be used as a meeting place until at least 1922. The building was destroyed by bombing during the 1940-41 Blitz. Finally the existence of the International Socialist Club during the early 1920s should be noted. Based at 28 East Road, off City Road, this was promoted as the successor to the Communist Club and was the venue of a number of important meetings connected with the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain, including the second day of the Unity (Foundation) Congress.

Sources

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This is an excellent history of the Club in its early years (1840-47) but is in German.

Friedrich Engels, "On the history of the Communist League", in *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1973
This was written as the introduction to the 1885 German edition of Marx's "Revelations about the Cologne Communist Trial".

Karl Marx, *Herr Vogt*, New Park Publications, 1982
'Herr Vogt' was written in 1860 as a polemic against the spy Karl Vogt but contains much of interest about the life of Marx.

John Saville, *Ernest Jones: Chartist*, 1952
Description of White Hart rooms quoted on page 92

Frederick Lessner, *Sixty years in the Social-Democratic Movement*, Twentieth Century Press, 1907(reprinted by Carl Slienger)
Mostly Marx quotations although some interesting historical details.

Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Karl Marx: Biographical Memoirs*, Charles H Kerr & Co, 1901
Personal memories of Marx.

Frank Kitz, "Recollections and reflections" in *Freedom*, January to July 1912 (also issued as a pamphlet by Freedom Press which was reprinted by Carl Slienger in 1976)
A fairly cursory selection of memoirs.

Stan Shipley, *Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London*, History Workshop, 1971
An excellent source material dealing with English clubs but including several references to the Communist Club in passing.

HW Lee & E Archbold, *Social-Democracy in Britain*, Social-Democratic Federation, 1935
Lee and Archbold's book is not very accurate.

John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse*, Paladin, 1978
Useful mainly for details of the 1881 split.

H. Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London*, Croom Helm, 1983
This also includes details of the split.

L Muravyova & I Sivalap-Kaftanova, *Lenin in London*, Progress Publishers, Moscow,

1981

An essential guide to Lenin's visits to London, although not fully researched on locations.

Frank Budgen, *Myself when Young*, 1970

This book has an excellent description of the SLP meeting at the Club. The rest of it however is extremely dull. Under no circumstances should you purchase it. And neither should you spend good money requesting it from the library (as I did and immensely regretted).

Ken Weller, *'Don't be a Soldier!': The Radical Anti-war Movement in North London 1914-1918*, Journeyman Press and London History Workshop Centre, 1985

Detailed local history publication focussing on the North London Herald League. Includes brief details of Harold Edwards.

Emerson C. Hambrook, *The Red To-morrow*, The Proletarian Press, London, 1920

This is a sickeningly anti-Semitic piece of 'future' fiction. Although set in 1948, the Communist Club features as a centre of 'Red' agitation (along with 7 Featherstone Buildings - the 1920 headquarters of the abortive London Workers Committee - and the BSP headquarters at 21a Maiden Lane).



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