

***Red Star Over China* and the British Left Book Club: A Historical Analysis**

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Abstract: *The publication of the Red Star Over China can be regarded as a significant event in the history of the Chinese revolution. It successfully broke through the Kuomintang's news blockade on the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Soviet Area, presenting the realities of the anti-Japanese revolutionary base to the world. This article reviews the history of the leftist reading clubs in the 1930s, an important stronghold for British leftist intellectuals, and analyzes the deep connections between the Red Star Over China and this club. It reveals the deeper reasons for the success of the Red Star Over China. For the first, affected by the Great Depression in the 1930s, the labor movement flourished. Secondly, the disappointment of intellectuals with the authorities due to Britain's appeasement policies, leads to a collective leftward shift. Thirdly, inspired by the Soviet model, British intellectuals gradually came to realize that only communism could replace capitalism. Finally, the article discusses the unjust treatment Snow received after World War II and his dismal circumstances, yet emphasizes that the Chinese people have never forgotten this media figure who made outstanding contributions to the Chinese revolution.*

Keywords: *Red Star Over China; Left Book Club; The 1930s; The Leftward Shift of British Intellectuals*

1. Introduction

There is deep connection between the *Red Star Over China* and British Left Book Club. In late October 1936, Edgar Snow completed his journalistic investigation in Yan'an and clandestinely returned to Peiping. Initially intending to await the Nationalist Government's censorship approval before publishing his materials, he was forced to be seen in public due to false rumors of his "execution" by the Red Army. Subsequently, he published an extensive interview with Mao Zedong in the Shanghai-based *China Weekly Review* in November, generating significant resonance among advocates of united resistance. In December, the London-based *Daily Herald*, consistently monitoring China's resistance movement, published this interview concurrent with news of the Xi'an Incident, attracting international attention. This interview essentially served as a precursor to *Red Star Over China*. From December 30, 1936, to March 1937, following the resolution of the Xi'an Incident, Snow systematically compiled his Yan'an materials into thirty serialized reports titled *The Truth About Red China* for the *Daily Herald*, accompanied by photographic documentation. By July 1937, he completed the manuscript and submitted it to London's Left Book Club. Victor Gollancz (1893-1967), the club's founder, lauded it as "the rare exemplary work that all publishers pray to encounter," designating it as the club's "Book of the Month." The October 1937 publication by the Left Book Club marked the first comprehensive presentation of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army to a global audience, effectively breaking through the Nationalist Government's information blockade. The work's subsequent translation into over 18 languages and multiple reprints by major publishing houses in Britain, America, and Russia established it as the definitive Western text on the Chinese Revolution[1].

The Left Book Club's publication of *Red Star Over China* was no coincidence. Snow's membership in the club and his appreciation for its publications, demonstrated by his honeymoon reading of Shaw's *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, aligned with the club's mission. The club's substantial membership and intellectual influence significantly facilitated the book's promotion and distribution. Victor Gollancz, the club's founder, established it in response to British governmental appeasement of fascism and economic crisis management. His innovative business model of free membership with subsidized monthly book selections rapidly expanded membership from 2,500 in May 1936 to 20,000 by year's end. The club organized reading discussion groups nationwide, ranging from small gatherings to hundreds of participants, encompassing diverse professions from transit workers to professionals. These discussion groups, meeting in venues from cafes to private homes, became Britain's

largest anti-government coalition, with approximately 20% Communist Party membership. The Left Book Club epitomized 1930s British intellectual engagement with communism, reflecting an era when intellectuals actively supported leftist causes, including participation in the Spanish Civil War.

The publication of the *Red Star Over China* significantly contributed to the development of the Left Book Club, with Gollancz calling the book “the best membership recruitment advertisement in the club's history[2].” In the year of its release, club membership reached 39,400, peaking at 57,000. The club served as a crucial channel for promoting literature, with every book published becoming a bestseller, and *Red Star Over China* was no exception — within the month of its release in the UK, it was reprinted three times, rapidly reaching sales of 100,000 copies[3]. The timing of *Red Star Over China* coincided with the Battle of Shanghai, and that month's issue of *Left News* featured a special edition on China's war of resistance, providing British readers with detailed accounts of the ongoing conflict, including the brutal aggression of the Japanese army and the heroic resistance of the Chinese people. Gollancz drew parallels between the suffering in the Chinese war and the Spanish Civil War, aiming to evoke sympathy among the British populace for China. In the following months, the Left Book Club organized hundreds of meetings and demonstrations to support China's resistance. Pamela Johnson's novel *Monument* captures the atmosphere of the time, depicting young men and women parading in the streets with lanterns and banners, vocally expressing their outrage at the atrocities and invasions committed by the Japanese forces[2]. Gollancz viewed the Chinese struggle against Japanese aggression as an integral part of the global anti-fascist movement, dedicating himself tirelessly to this cause. He organized a nationwide speaking tour to share firsthand information about China with reading groups in 15 towns, and he established the Committee for Supporting China's War of Resistance, which aimed to strengthen the united front between the Chinese Nationalist and Communist parties. In recognition of these efforts, he received an award from the Nationalist government. Snow also praised Gollancz for his contributions, referring to him as an outstanding publisher with significant impact. Both Mao Zedong and Soong Meiling expressed their gratitude and appreciation for the Left Book Club's substantial support for the Chinese revolutionary cause in letters that Snow forwarded. Gollancz cherished this friendship and publicly acknowledged it during the club's second national congress.

The publication of *Red Star Over China* received widespread acclaim from the British mainstream media. On October 11, 1937, shortly after its release, the *Daily Herald* praised the book as an “epic tale, narrated with remarkable flair[1].” On November 6, *The New Statesman and Nation* featured an article by British journalist Freda Utley, who regarded Snow as the first foreigner to deeply explore the Soviet areas and conduct comprehensive research on various aspects of Soviet China. Utley noted that the extraordinary courage and indomitable fighting spirit of the Red Army depicted by Snow surpassed that of any military in human history, even those portrayed in novels, citing the daring seizure of the Luding Bridge as a prime example[4]. She even suggested that conservative appeasers in the UK should read the book to gain a clearer understanding of the situation in China, thus abandoning the notion that international mediation could bring peace to China[5].

2. The Deep Reasons for the Success of the *Red Star Over China*

Prior to the book's release, both Snow and his publisher were apprehensive about its sales due to the ongoing Great Depression and the general disinterest among Western audiences in Chinese realities. What, then, sparked such keen interest in the Soviet regime in China and its resistance against Japanese aggression? This fascination likely stemmed from the specific economic, political, social, and intellectual climate in Britain and the broader Western world at the time. Snow and *Red Star Over China* fortuitously resonated with the sentiments of their era.

Following the success of *Red Star Over China*, Snow published numerous works related to China, but none achieved the same level of acclaim. After World War II, he faced political persecution in the United States as a target of McCarthyism, branded as a communist by the FBI, Congress, media, and anti-communist coalitions. He felt like a “castaway in a foreign land[3], ”experiencing a life that had flourished in its earlier years but found little outlet later on.

In truth, Snow had not changed, nor had his depiction of China, yet British perceptions of his work were filtered through subjective desires. The public's hopes influenced what publishers sought to promote. During the 1930s, British intellectuals were concerned about being drawn into an imminent world war, expressed dissatisfaction with their government's appeasement policies, and held high expectations for Soviet communism. They were eager to see an anti-fascist alliance forming in Asia, particularly in China, and welcomed Snow's accounts of the Chinese Communists' resolve and their collaboration with the

Nationalist Party to fight Japanese fascism. This context contributed to the popularity of *Red Star Over China*. Additionally, the Left Book Club, as a platform for leftist intellectuals to engage in scholarly creation and ideological advocacy, published works centered around three major themes: the threat of war, fascism, and poverty and unemployment, reflecting the prevailing public sentiment of the time.

2.1 The Great Depression and the Flourishing of the Labor Movement

The bestseller status of *Red Star Over China* was closely tied to the profound social crisis brought on by the Great Depression in Britain, which shifted the overall political climate to the left. Intellectuals expressed deep disillusionment with the future of capitalism. Before World War I, Britain had gradually lost its status as the world's factory due to lagging industrial sectors compared to the United States. After the war, Britain not only lost its maritime supremacy but also ceased to be the world's financial center, facing significant struggles. The global economic crisis of 1929 further devastated British agriculture, with agricultural prices plummeting by 34% between 1930 and 1932, turning Britain into a market for surplus grain from other countries. This situation exacerbated the already existing unemployment crisis, which statistics showing a rate of 16.8% in 1930, escalating to 25.5% by 1932—meaning that one-quarter of the workforce was unable to find employment[6]. The widespread economic downturn and unemployment were vividly reflected in contemporary literature. Leftist writer B. L. Coombes' *These Poor Hands* depicted the hardships of coal miners in South Wales during the Great Depression, and was regarded as one of the most significant works of the proletariat at the time[7]. In 1930, George Orwell was commissioned by the Left Book Club to investigate living conditions in the northern industrial areas of Britain. The poverty and unemployment he witnessed profoundly shocked him, as he came from a middle-class background, leading him to question and ultimately resent the rigid class barriers that divided British society[2].

In stark contrast to the inaction of both the Conservative and Labour governments, the British Communist Party made notable strides in addressing unemployment and poverty. The Communist Party helped organize the "National Unemployed Workers Movement," staging demonstrations such as the "Great Hunger March" and advocating for "Work or Full Benefits." In 1931, they launched the significant "Charter Movement," calling for unity among the working class around a six-point program to combat unemployment[8]. As a result, the party's image among the British populace rose sharply.

2.2 Appeasement Policy and the Intellectuals' Collective Leftward Shift

The international political landscape was also bleak. In Asia, Japanese militarism was on the rise, exemplified by the "Mukden Incident" of 1931, which led to the occupation of Northeast China and the establishment of a puppet state. In Europe, Hitler's ascent to power in 1933 marked a resurgence of fascist forces, while Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1936. That same year, Spain established a democratic coalition government, only to face a rebellion led by Franco with support from fascist Germany and Italy. Throughout these globally significant events, the British government consistently adopted a policy of appeasement.

The primary reason for this policy of appeasement was Britain's diminished stature in an increasingly changing world. Once a formidable power, Britain shifted its focus to preserving its existing interests. After all, at the Versailles Conference, Britain had secured a substantial share of the spoils of World War I, and it sought to avoid any conflict with Germany and Italy to maintain those interests. In a letter to the Permanent Undersecretary of the Treasury in 1934, Chartfield remarked, "We are in an unparalleled position that does not require us to dispute with anyone, as we have secured most, if not all, of the world's best parts; we only need to safeguard what we have and prevent others from taking it away[9]."

Furthermore, the British conservative establishment harbored strong anti-Soviet sentiments, fearing communism even more than fascism. There was a pervasive anxiety that a conflict between Britain and Germany would lead to mutual destruction, allowing the Soviet Union to gain dominance in Europe and Asia, which would severely undermine British interests. This led to a covert strategy of "diverting the flood eastward." As then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain stated in 1936, "We hate fascism, but we equally hate Bolshevism. If fascism and Bolshevism were to kill each other in some country, it would be a great benefit for humanity[10]."

The media also played a significant role in promoting the policy of appeasement. Geoffrey Dawson, editor of *The Times*, wrote in 1937, "I have worked day and night to avoid reporting anything that might hurt their feelings (the German government)[11]." On September 30, 1938, when *The Munich Agreement* was signed, the *Daily Express* predicted that there would be no war for the next two years, attempting to

pacify public sentiment.

This situation left leftist intellectuals profoundly disappointed. In his 1940 work *Socialism and the English Genius*, George Orwell criticized the decaying British government for allowing the Great Depression and unemployment to fester, while exhibiting cowardice and incompetence in foreign policy[12]. Similarly, Mike Foot, Frank Owen, and Peter Howard, in their 1940 book *Guilty Men*, captured public dissatisfaction with Chamberlain and others following the Dunkirk evacuation, blaming the government's failures in rearmament and appeasement for dragging Britain down[13]. The book was quickly blacklisted by publishers but still sold over 200,000 copies and sparked strong public reaction, with calls for Chamberlain to be ousted from the wartime cabinet[14]. Chamberlain consistently pursued a policy of coordination with fascism rather than with socialism, prompting the British Communist Party to launch a significant national campaign demanding, "Chamberlain must go, and a peace alliance with the Soviet Union must be formed." Additionally, the Communist Party actively organized anti-fascist efforts. During the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the British Communist Party formed an International Brigade with 1,500 members, over half of whom were party members. During the two-and-a-half-year conflict, the British contingent suffered 526 casualties, half of whom were communists. The Communist Party's report hailed this noble struggle as "writing the proudest page in history[9]." When the Japanese army launched a full-scale invasion of China in 1937, the British Communist Party organized an embargo against Japan. In 1938, a Japanese ship carrying pig iron was turned away by dock workers in Middlesbrough, and when it approached London, the local Communist Party branch held a public meeting to resist its unloading. The Communist Party had long been attentive to the Chinese struggle for national liberation; during the National Revolution, they launched the "Non-Intervention in China" campaign and supported the May Thirtieth Movement, urging organized British workers to support China's quest for freedom and demanding that the British government recognize the Nationalist government led by Sun Yat-sen, withdrawing all British armed forces.

During this period, the Left Book Club became a crucial platform for the Communist Party to establish a united front. The club published numerous influential books on Marxism, such as Pat Sloan's *Soviet Democracy* and Emil Burns's *Handbook of Marxism*, both selected as "monthly selections." The club also invited communists like Politt, Stretch, and Hannington to speak at large rallies promoting communism. Many club members joined the Communist Party, and from 1935 to 1938, the party experienced significant growth, doubling its membership. This period also marked rapid expansion for the Left Book Club, with the Communist Party's social prestige soaring alongside the club's increasing influence.

2.3 The Power of the Soviet Model

British intellectuals and Left Book Club members gradually came to realize that only communism could replace capitalism and address unemployment, poverty, and economic crises. They identified the root of fascism not as nationalism or militarism, but as capitalism itself. Capitalism's belief in the sole solution to economic crises being the expansion of economic living space allowed the Nazi Party to exploit this theory for dictatorship and warfare. The only hope for containing fascism and preventing the impending war was the Soviet Union. Only socialist Russia could lead and unite the forces of democracy and peace in Europe to form a people's united front against Nazism. The Soviet Union was seen as the sole hope for democracy and peace.

From 1936 to 1939, the Left Book Club published a total of 15 books related to the Soviet Union, and *Left News* featured a column introducing the Soviet Union, even inviting Soviet Ambassador Maisky to contribute an article. The club also operated a Russian language school and regularly screened Soviet films. Another significant activity was organizing visits to the Soviet Union for prominent figures in society; Gollancz himself visited the USSR in 1937. This initiative continued until late 1938, when the Soviet Union canceled visa applications due to escalating international tensions[2].

At the time, the term "Stalinism" had not yet emerged, and there was minimal coverage of the Great Purge in the media; the Soviet Union had not yet fallen from the altar. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was perceived as an enemy by the Nazis and was the only government to provide significant support to the Spanish Republican government, earning the admiration and even support of leftist intellectuals in Britain. Compared to the democratic nations of England and France, which occupied a position of moral superiority, the Soviet Union garnered appreciation from British intellectuals, both leftist and liberal ones.

In contrast to other Western nations, which were mired in the Great Depression, the Soviet economy

and society were flourishing. During the economic crisis of 1929, while the capitalist world was engulfed in turmoil, the Soviet Union, long subjected to economic blockade by capitalist powers, unexpectedly benefited from the situation. Rather than being adversely affected, it seized a tremendous opportunity for industrial development. The USSR capitalized on the West's urgent need to export technology to escape the crisis, importing substantial advanced technology, personnel and capital. Consequently, it established a number of backbone enterprises in key industrial sectors, enabling the rapid realization of its industrialization goals and transforming from a backward agrarian nation into an industrial powerhouse, marking a historic leap. For the first time, the largest immigrant nation, the United States, witnessed a significant wave of technical immigration, with approximately 100,000 scientists, engineers, and skilled workers applying to migrate to the Soviet Union. The Soviet government made unprecedented investments in science and offered exceptional privileges to intellectuals, which were topics of great interest among British scholars. This admiration and longing even escalated to a fervent belief that the Soviet model represented the best form of democracy to date and that Soviet society was the future of humanity.

3. Discussion

A confluence of factors contributed to the commercial success of *Red Star Over China* and the rise of Edgar Snow as an authority on Far Eastern affairs, to the extent that President Roosevelt sought his opinions on Asian matters. His writings influenced a generation, being regarded by many Western intellectuals as unparalleled reportage on China. Following the advice of his Harvard mentor, John King Fairbank, journalist William Hinton came to China, much like Snow, to serve as a war correspondent, and after visiting Yan'an, he authored the impactful book *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* influenced by *Red Star Over China*. David Crook arrived in China in 1938 and eventually settled there with his wife, Elizabeth, contributing to the establishment of the precursor to Beijing Foreign Studies University, nurturing generations of foreign affairs talents. Even the American comic series *Terry and the Pirates* vividly reflected the revolutionary realities described by Snow.

Ironically, the only severe criticism directed at *Red Star Over China* came from the Comintern. They instructed the American Communist Party to prohibit the book from being stocked in their bookstores, disallowing party publications from advertising it, and labeling Snow as a Trotskyist. This was due to Snow's assertion that "the Chinese revolution and the Chinese Red Army grew under the leadership of the Chinese people themselves, and the Comintern might bear some responsibility for the setbacks suffered by CPC[3]." Such statements challenged Moscow's position as the center of Marxist revolutionary thought and the orthodoxies of the Soviet state.

After World War II, with the common enemy of fascism defeated, the Cold War ensued, and hostility towards and suspicion of communism became paramount political themes. Snow, known for his pro-Communist sentiments, naturally faced discrimination and persecution. The FBI monitored him, even unearthing his records from the late 1920s when he was involved with the Nationalist government in Shanghai. They suspected him of being a communist and a Chinese spy, entangling him in multiple cases against leftist figures. Ultimately, these investigations yielded insufficient evidence, but his reputation and literary career suffered significantly. Influenced by the political climate of McCarthyism in the 1950s, he was forced to resign from his high-paying position as associate editor of the conservative publication *Saturday Evening Post*, subsisting on sporadic article contributions. His works were removed from all libraries funded by the U.S. government in Europe. Attempts to transition to public speaking and novel writing proved unsuccessful. Political persecution extended to his wife, who faced local council recommendations against her candidacy for the Rockland District Education Committee, resulting in her narrow defeat. Snow's outrage was palpable, yet he felt powerless. His siblings failed to understand him, believing he brought shame upon the family. Ultimately, he was compelled to leave the United States and settle in Switzerland. After being diagnosed with cancer in 1971, he hoped to return to the U.S. for treatment, but Nixon denied his entry, leading to his death in exile.

4. Conclusion

Snow's fate parallels that of the Left Book Club and the British Communist Party. Founded in 1948 with close ties to the Soviet Communist Party, the Left Book Club ultimately disbanded under the direction of its founder, Gollancz. The 1939 non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany, intended as a strategy to prevent "trouble from the East," resulted in the collapse of faith among Western leftists in the Soviet model as an anti-fascist exemplar. The British Communist Party, which had closely

aligned itself with the Soviet Union, suffered a significant decline in reputation due to the Soviet Union's erratic foreign policy, leading to its long-term stagnation. Despite his dismal later years, Snow found solace in the fact that China remained open to him, and as a distinguished guest of CPC and Chairman Mao, he visited China multiple times after the establishment of the new China. Snow passed away on February 15, 1972. Within 62 hours of his death, Nixon's plane took off from Andrews Air Force Base bound for Beijing, marking a historic moment in U.S.-China relations.

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