



1956 and all that

Keith Flett

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Through the Smoke of Budapest 50 Years On The February 2006 Conference of the London Socialist Historians Group was held at the Institute of Historical Research in central London, one of a series of such conferences over the previous ten years. Assembled were a modest group of academics and activists come to mark the 50th anniversary of the events of 1956, and to do so in a particular way. Firstly by presenting new historical research on the questions under review rather than trotting out tired orthodoxies. Secondly by linking historical inquiry to political activism. It was queried why such a conference was held in February 2006 rather than in the autumn, and the answer was a simple one. To intervene historically in the debates of the year by setting a socialist historical agenda for doing so. The opening plenary heard from Sami Ramidani, an Iraqi exile now lecturing at a British University, from Stan Newens, who had been present at the protests in 1956 and from Nigel Wilmott, the letters editor of the Guardian but here speaking about Hungary. The flavour was one both of historical recall of the events of 1956 and of contemporary political parallels. Indeed during this session news came through via text message that the left-wing MP George Galloway had been detained in a Cairo jail overnight and an emergency protest called at the Egyptian Embassy for later in the day. The next two sessions focused on the key moments of autumn 1956, Hungary and Suez but again with new research examining their wider significance. Mike Haynes looks at the origins of the Hungarian revolt, in terms of workplace politics while Anne Alexander reviews the impact that Suez had on Nasser's reputation within the Arab world and Arab nationalist politics. In the afternoon there was a widening of the focus. One session examined the impact of the events of 1956 on left-wing organisation and in particular the orthodox Communist or Stalinist tradition. Terry Brotherton took a fresh look at the impact of 1956 on the Communist Party of GB, while Toby Abse focused on how the events of that year worked their way through in the largest of the Western European CPs, the Italian. Alan Woodward examined how the crisis of Stalinist politics opened new possibilities for libertarian left-wing ideas. The other focused on the rise of a new left as a result of the crisis of 1956. Paul Blackledge examined the development of the theory of socialist humanism by E.P Thompson and others as an alternative to Stalinism. Neil Davidson examined the ideas of a forgotten left-wing thinker from this period Alisdair Macintyre, while Christian Hogsberg reviewed the influence of an existing Trotskyist theorist, CLR James around the events of 1956 Of course the conference could not hope to cover the huge range of possible historical issues arising from the 50th anniversary of 1956. The beginnings of the consumer society and the age of affluence; the birth of youth culture and rock n roll; British nuclear tests and the origins of CND and campaigns against the bomb; the new theatre marked by look back in anger . In an introduction, the editor Keith Flett reviews some of these wider trends However the research agenda proposed by the conference was and remains an important one.

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