



Elke Weesjes

# Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain

Childhood, Political Activism,  
and Identity Formation

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# Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain



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*Childhood, Political Activism, and Identity Formation*

*Elke Weesjes*

Amsterdam University Press



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*For  
Danny and Nino Sabella*

*And in memory of  
Andy Durr and Alun Howkins*



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*Elke Weesjes*



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# 1 Introduction

## Cradle Communists and Oral History

### Abstract

*Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain* offers a comparative analysis of the Dutch and British communist movements in the twentieth century and interrogates how far Moscow and/or indigenous social, political, economic and cultural factors influenced the experiences of communist parties and their members. Informed by oral history and memory studies, it draws on a series of interviews with 38 British and Dutch cradle communists, auto/biographies, archival materials, and existing historiography of both movements. Chapter One discusses the oral history project this book is based on, examines the variables that influence participants' experiences, discusses similarities between the two communist movements as well as national peculiarities, and briefly surveys the different trends that can be observed within communist historiography in both countries.

**Keywords:** Communist Party of Great Britain, Communist Party of the Netherlands, oral history, comparative research, cradle communists

I never felt as though I lived in two separate worlds. I even went to a Christian club – my mother felt doing so was important. We also had a Bible at home, one of those thick ones, with really thin pages. The Christian club was a children's club, which was part of the Maranatha Church in Overschie. We would first pray, then we would read from the Bible, and sing. Afterwards we would do fun things. We would make mittens, play games, that kind of stuff. The children from my school went there, so I wanted to go too. My father said, 'Can't you think of anything else?' But my mother said, 'You should go, you'll learn a thing or two'. But I didn't get along with the woman who ran the club, because she said that communists were really bad people. I was always fighting with that woman,

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but I kept on going to the club nonetheless because all my girlfriends were going and we would have a good time together. There was also a Christmas celebration. And at Christmas we would get an orange. That was such a treat. Because we didn't have much money at home (Mieke b. 1948, Rotterdam).

Mieke grew up in Overschie, a neighbourhood in Rotterdam. Her mother was raised in a socialist working-class family and became involved in the communist resistance during the Second World War. Her father, a carpenter, joined the *Communistische Partij van Nederland* (CPN; 'Communist Party of the Netherlands') in the 1950s and whilst active and always ready to organise a strike, he was never quite as passionate about communism as Mieke's mother. Despite her political dedication, Mieke's mother nonetheless wanted her daughter to have a 'normal' life and do what other children did, even if this meant attending a Christian club. Mieke, who looked up to her mother as an inspiration, recalled that her parents never forced her to join any communist organisations, but she did anyway and eventually became very active in her local CPN. Her brother – who was, according to Mieke, somewhat embarrassed about his parents' political views – did not join the party, and his decision was respected by the family. Mieke remained a member until the end. When the party was disbanded in 1991, a large photograph of her and her mother, both crying, was published in the newspaper.

Mieke is one of 38 cradle communists I interviewed for a comparative oral history project conducted between 2001 and 2019 about rank-and-file communist family life in Britain and the Netherlands during the Cold War. This book interprets these accounts within a larger framework in order to construct a collective past and, as such, it is inspired by both oral history and memory studies.

In their book *Oral History and Public Memories*, editors Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes discuss oral history and the construction of social and cultural memory. They note that there are many examples where the latter does not engage with the former. Hamilton and Shopes explain this phenomenon by pointing out that oral history emerged as a widespread practice in relation to the democratising of history in the 1960s and was fuelled by decolonisation and social movements. In contrast, the 'memory turn' in scholarship was prompted by the Jewish Holocaust memory 'industry' and twentieth century wars, as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union, and was therefore usually associated with trauma. Consequently, memory studies, they argue, moves away from the local focus of oral history, to a national



stage, much larger than can be encompassed by the memories of individuals. Additionally, Hamilton and Shopes explain that historians who work within memory studies interrogate the broader social and cultural processes at work in remembrance and are equally concerned with other (auto) biographical sources, whereas 'oral historians privilege the individual respondent and focus necessarily on his/her agency in the world', an approach which often 'fetishizes the interview process and fails to understand the interview as but one form of memory-making'.<sup>1</sup> Agreeing with the latter, I have integrated oral history methods into the wider context of memory studies. Participants' testimonies in combination with archival research and (auto) biographical sources were used to portray collective experiences, without losing sight of the uniqueness of each and every story.

As illustrated through participants' accounts, *Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain* showcases communists' struggles to establish community and define their identities within the specific cultural, social, and political framework of their countries during the Cold War and beyond. By analysing the political and non-political aspects of participants' lives, the book examines how much these experiences were the product of their indigenous social, political, and economic circumstances. In terms of the latter, comparing two very different countries was necessary, as doing so exposed how communists, their parties, and associated organisations adapted to their national circumstances. Scholars in the field of British communism, such as Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, Andrew Flinn, Norman LaPorte, and Matthew Worley have urged the international community of communist historians to engage in comparative research. Despite many challenges associated with a comparative approach, including language, geography, and the availability of comparable sources, they firmly believe that the possibilities and limitations of communism can only be truly understood if compared across different national boundaries. These scholars, who have shaped contemporary communist historiography, have published a number of important volumes and organised international conferences, bringing together samples of the work produced in the fields of communist biography and prosopography.<sup>2</sup> By doing so, they mean to encourage a

1 Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, 'Introduction', in *Oral History and Public Memories*, ed. by Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2008), pp. x-xi.

2 For example, *Agents of the Revolution. New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. by Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005). The academic peer reviewed journal, *Twentieth Century Communism – A Journal of International History*, first published in 2009 is also worth mentioning. Founded by, among others, Matthew Worley and Kevin Morgan, and published

cross-fertilisation between the historians of communist parties in different countries and challenge the myth of monolithic communist dictatorship by emphasising national differences within the international movement. Yet studies that actually compare two or more national movements remain sparse.

Aside from its comparative approach, *Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain* is also distinct in that it uses a child's perspective – or rather the adult memory of childhood experience filtered through time. Children were born into a life rather than choosing it and, as expected, I found them to be less defensive in their responses than their parents. Even those who were initially somewhat defensive let their guards down during follow-up interviews and shared very intimate details about their upbringing. Due to the sensitive nature of the information they provided, and the fact that the communist community has always been rather small in both countries, some requested I use a pseudonym to protect their identities. For the sake of parity, I therefore decided to use pseudonyms for all my participants.

*Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain* adds nuance to the picture painted by the sociologist Jolande Withuis for the Dutch context, and historians Thomas Linehan, and to a lesser extent, Raphael Samuel for the British context.<sup>3</sup> Examining communist family life and communist mentality 'from below', all three authors have described communists as inflexible, emotionally distant and unavailable, overbearing, and physically unaffectionate. All three build up a picture of a group with rigid moral codes and values whose members deliberately isolated themselves, politically and socially. In my own sample, only three Dutch and two British participants

by Lawrence and Wishart in London, this interdisciplinary journal publishes internationally themed issues to encourage readers to draw connections and comparisons between different periods and different communist movements.

3 Raphael Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism', *New Left Review* no. 154, November/December 1985, Raphael Samuel, 'Staying Power: The Lost World of British Communism, Part Two', *New Left Review* no. 156, March/April 1986, Raphael Samuel, 'Class Politics: The Lost World of British Communism, Part Three', *New Left Review*, no. 165, September/October 1987, Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920-39: From the Cradle to the Grave* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), Jolande Withuis, *Opoffering en heroïek: de mentale wereld van een communistische vrouwenorganisatie in naoorlogs Nederland 1946-1976* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1990), Jolande Withuis, *De jurk van de kosmonaute. Over politiek, cultuur en psyche* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1995), Jolande Withuis, *Erkenning. Van oorlogstrauma naar klaagcultuur* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2002), Jolande Withuis, *Na het kamp, vriendschap en politieke strijd* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2005), and Jolande Withuis, *Raadselvader. Kind in de Koude Oorlog* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2018).



shared experiences that somewhat matched these authors' observations and findings. Over the years, many Dutch participants with positive recollections of their childhood have voiced discontent with the way communist family life has been portrayed in existing literature.

These feelings weren't shared by British participants as the new generation of historians mentioned above have expanded on Samuel's line of inquiry. These historians, including Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, have applied a prosopographical approach and, based on an impressive collection of 3,000 autobiographical questionnaires and more than 100 recorded interviews with former Communist Party members, they explore who joined the Communist Party and why, and what this commitment meant in their lives. The first book that arose from this project, *Party People, Communist Lives. Explorations in Biography*, was published in 2001, and a second book, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991*, was published in 2007. In the latter, which is regarded as one of the fullest accounts of the British Communist Party, Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn integrate the private and the political, depicting the lives of 'ordinary' members of the CPGB.<sup>4</sup> The authors and those historians who have been working in the same field, such as Matthew Worley, Geoff Andrews, and Evan Smith, have added nuance to and expanded the picture painted by Samuel. They have underlined the many variations of local communisms and explored the changing nature of communists' interpretations of the ideology and their relationship with Moscow.

*Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain* is firmly placed within the latter trend and particularly hopes to expand on Withuis' ground-breaking research. Rather than contradict, this book sets out to compliment prior studies into communist mentality and identity. After all, there were those among communist parents who were slavishly obedient to their parties, isolated themselves socially, and followed Soviet pedagogical practices to the letter.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in my sample, they were a very small minority.

4 Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991. People of a Special Mould* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007).

5 It is of note that this rigid culture was absent in some Dutch communist organisations, such as the *Organisatie voor Progressief Studerende Jeugd* (OPJS; 'Organisation for Progressive Studying Youth'), but dominated in others, such as the Dutch communist women's organisation, the *Nederlandse Vrouwenbond* (NVB; 'Dutch Women's League') which is the focus of Withuis' first work, *Opoffering en heroiek*. Almost all of my Dutch participants recalled that their mothers were members of the NVB on paper but weren't particularly active as they didn't feel at home in this organisation. This could explain the discrepancy between my findings and those of Withuis.



Aside from interpreting 26 Dutch and twelve British participants' oral testimonies, I also analysed ten interviews from Phil Cohen's illuminating record of the experiences of children of Communist Party members brought up in 1950s Britain, *Children of the Revolution*.<sup>6</sup> The majority of my participants and those interviewed by Cohen grew up in cities with relatively large concentrations of communists: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, London, Liverpool, and Manchester. They were born between 1932 and 1956 and their parents were part-time communist activists or organisers. Their parents, who generally belonged to the working or lower middle classes, considered themselves to be representatives of the working class despite the fact they were often much more culturally and politically educated than most members of that class.<sup>7</sup> As observed by Raphael Samuel, class was 'a moral rather than a social signifier' [...] 'measured not by occupation or income but by allegiance'.<sup>8</sup>

6 I have analysed the following interviews conducted by Phil Cohen: Jude Bloomfield (b. 1953, London), Ann Kane (b. 1942, Yorkshire), Martin Kettle (b. 1949, Liverpool), Mike Power (b. 1944, London), Michael Rosen (b. 1946, London), Alexei Sayle (b. 1952, Liverpool), Nina Temple (b. 1956, London). See: Phil Cohen, *Children of the Revolution. Communist Childhood in Cold War Britain* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997).

7 In 2001, I assisted Margreet Schrevel, who was a research officer at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, with her project about communist family life in Cold War Holland. The project was inspired by two works on the lives of communist children: Phil Cohen's *Children of the Revolution. Communist Childhood in Cold War Britain*, and Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro's book about the American communist movement, *Red Diapers. Growing up in the Communist Left* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998). Together, Schrevel and I interviewed 22 men and women who grew up in communist families in Cold War Holland. Schrevel published an article based on our findings. See: Margreet Schrevel, 'Rode luiers, hollands fabrikkat. Communistische gezinnen in de jaren vijftig', *Holland Historisch Tijdschrift* Vol. 36, No. 4 (2004), pp. 327-352. Since then, I have continued and expanded this research and used the findings for my PhD work (*Children of the Red Flag – Growing up in a Communist Family during the Cold War* – University of Sussex, 2012). Wherever possible, I did follow-up interviews in recent years to investigate if participants' attitudes had changed as time went by and their circumstances changed. The initial and follow-up interviews lasted approximately two to three hours. Contacts were made through the International Institute of Social History and the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex. Snowball sampling techniques were used to identify further participants that fit my criteria. As mentioned in the Introduction, the majority of Dutch participants grew up in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague. Amsterdam and, to a lesser extent, Rotterdam and The Hague were traditional communist bulwarks. Based on industry and the composition of the workforce, the British equivalent of these Dutch cities are London, Manchester, and Liverpool. Most of the participants' parents and the parents of those interviewed by Cohen grew up in these cities. They were born between 1932 and 1956 and were raised in a communist family, without excluding parents who joined or lapsed whilst the children were growing up. I included families where only one parent had a Communist Party membership, but in those few cases, the other parent was a sympathiser.

8 Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London/New York: Verso, 2006), p. 171.



I found that this attitude towards class complicated my research, as it turned out that those who truly belonged to the working class, especially those in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations, had different experiences and held different views from those who were in fact middle class. However, both groups did experience financial hardship – brought on by unstable employment due to communist activism, party-related financial responsibilities (either self-imposed or demanded by the party), or being employed by the party and paid a very low wage<sup>9</sup> – which somewhat justified middle-class communists' self-categorisation as working class. It should nonetheless be noted that, among the Dutch sample, there were more participants who truly belonged to the working class, which could explain some of the discrepancies between the British and Dutch experience. Furthermore, the British sample's average age is slightly lower, with more people born in the early to mid-1950s. In the context of the Cold War, even a few years age difference translated into wildly discrepant experiences. The latter became clear when interviewing siblings who were born four or five years apart. Generally, those born before 1950 and who remember the events of 1956 – i.e. Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin and the Soviet invasion of Hungary and associated anti-communist attitudes – had an altogether different experience from those participants who were born after 1950.

The slight unevenness of the samples and the bias introduced by using interviews collected and edited by a third party were taken into account when I interpreted and compared the data. Similarly, the specific challenges of oral history were carefully considered, including participants' tendency to be nostalgic and subjective, as well as the fallibility of memory. The follow-up interviews, in certain cases conducted eighteen years after the initial interview, show that memory is also subject to revision. Instead of becoming milder, participants had grown more critical of their parents' choices, which I relate to the fact that they felt more comfortable talking to me a second time around, but also to the fact that their parents had all passed away and they themselves were now elderly. Indeed, memories and our views on past experiences are refashioned by new information, suggestions from others, and by shifts in our emotional state of mind, ageing, and the passage of time.<sup>10</sup>

9 A handful of participants' parents were employed by the party as editors, journalists, administrative workers, and booksellers. These occupations were technically white-collar, but the party paid usually even less than minimum wage.

10 See: Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound. The Art of Oral History*, Second Edition (Chicago: Precedent, 1985), Robert Perks, Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2006), and Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*, Fourth Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Curiously, male and female participants spoke mostly about their fathers during the initial interview, even when their mothers had also been active in the communist movement. Mothers' political activities generally slowed down when they started families, which most likely explains participants' tendency to focus almost solely on their fathers when reflecting on a communist upbringing. I therefore asked participants to discuss their mothers during their follow-up interview. When prompted to do so, it became clear that their mothers were politically active, much more so than non-communist working-class mothers. Yet they often filled a supportive role, ensuring that their husbands could dedicate their time to politics. As illustrated by Mieke's account, some mothers were equally or more active than their husbands and, whenever this was the case, parents found it difficult to balance politics and family life. Nevertheless, only one participant felt that politics came first and the family came second.

Despite many variables that influence participants' experiences – including the aforementioned socio-economic circumstances and age, but also gender, and parents' party loyalty – the individuals' accounts are connected and there are numerous similarities, some subtle, other obvious. In addition, there are significant variations between the two countries, with British communists being more moderate in their outlook, more integrated into the wider labour movement, and more likely to stray ideologically. In the Netherlands during the late 1940s and 1950s, virulent anti-communism crowded out rational thinking. Cold War attitudes and associated hatred and fear led to an outburst of physical violence against Dutch communists after the Soviet invasion of Hungary. In Britain, on the other hand, a violent persecution of communists never occurred. Naturally, aside from causing victims to withdraw within their own communities, the shared experience of persecution defined Dutch communists' identities. Considering the forces that caused Dutch communists to withdraw, it would be fair to argue that, whereas communist parties and their organisations were largely responsible for political isolation during the Cold War, individual communists were generally not to blame for being socially isolated. On the contrary: communists and their families made many attempts to integrate into society.

Dutch communists' social isolation was further exacerbated by the political-denominational segregation of society, also known as 'pillarisation'. From the birth of the Dutch state and nation in the sixteenth century, society was divided into three different pillars: a Catholic pillar, which consisted of formal members of the Catholic Church; an orthodox Calvinist pillar, which united members of several orthodox Protestant churches; and a third pillar, which was more secular and included the majority of those who identified as



Dutch Reformed (a liberal Protestant doctrine), liberals, and a small group of non-practising Roman Catholics. In addition, a social democratic pillar appeared at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> These four pillars had their own institutions: newspapers, broadcasting corporations, trade unions, schools, hospitals, building societies, universities, sports clubs, and choirs. Every pillar, which united people from all classes, amounted to a subculture (sometimes isolated) within society. As the Cold War intensified in the 1950s, pillars, already not particularly welcoming to outsiders, closed their ranks to keep communists out. Dutch communists were therefore compelled to create their own – unofficial – pillar with a newspaper, choir, sports clubs, several youth organisations, a women's organisation, magazines for the whole family, a film organisation, a publishing house, a union, and camping sites. Within this relative isolation, communists were more likely to adhere to the communist ideology than their British peers who weren't actively kept out of non-communist cultural organisations.<sup>12</sup> Still, much like its British equivalent, the Dutch communist movement as a whole was too small to be self-sufficient, and its members and their children interacted with non-communists on a daily basis, in their schools and neighbourhoods. In fact, participants' parents encouraged relationships with non-communists, and wanted their children to blend in and 'be normal'. To that end, parents mixed Soviet ideology with Western values and culture. When looking at the structuring of family life and related child-rearing practices, friendships, and leisure activities, communists themselves, rather than the party, decided which elements of Soviet pedagogy and culture were adopted, if any at all, and blended into their own Western working-class culture.

In terms of participants joining communist organisations, an interesting difference emerges between both countries. Due to the extent of the experienced isolation brought on by pillarisation and Cold War attitudes, in combination with the tremendous sacrifices made by communists during the Second World War, Dutch cradle communists, as compared to their

11 Due to their historically hostile relationship, Dutch communists were excluded from all social democratic organisations and were therefore forced to form their own pillar.

12 It should be noted that, with the increasing rise of Cold War tensions and the CPGB's announcement of opposition against the Marshall Plan, the Labour Party and trade union establishment went on the offensive against communists and tried to keep them out of trade unions. Their campaign intensified after the seizure of power by communists in Czechoslovakia in February 1948. Their efforts resulted in the institution of bans on communists holding office in several trade unions, including the Transport and General Workers' Union. Furthermore, Prime Minister Clement Attlee announced a ban on communists holding 'sensitive posts' in the civil service. See: Steve Parsons, 'British Communist Party School Teachers in the 1940s and 1950s', *Science and Society*, Spring, Vol. 61 No. 1 (1997) 46-67, (p. 46).

British peers, felt more inclined to join communist organisations and remain a member of the party even though their commitment to and faith in communism had waned. Dutch participants felt morally obliged to carry the political torch passed on by their parents, especially in those cases where a sibling had already refused to do so. Yet, as illustrated by Mieke's story, none of the participants indicated that parents had expressed anger when one of their children decided not to join the movement. When the latter occurred – and almost all participants had at least one sibling who didn't join, and in quite a few cases they themselves decided not to become active – it didn't break up the family. Overall, communists' allegiance to their family unit appeared strong and no participant was disowned for not joining the movement, though some participants could sense disappointment when they didn't.

Rather than their children's membership of the Communist Party, parents appeared more concerned with instilling a sense of solidarity among their offspring. 'Don't be selfish', 'be aware of your social surroundings and the needs of the most vulnerable in society', and 'stand up for the rights of the oppressed' were among the life lessons parents passed on. Whilst many participants moved away from communism even before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, they never lost sight of these lessons. Many admitted to feeling 'allergic to politics', especially after the parties disbanded, but solidarity continued to be their guiding principle. They remained active – usually not within any political party, but in local contexts such as neighbourhood committees, or social justice initiatives, such as the international women's rights movement, Greenpeace, and Amnesty International.

*Growing Up Communist in the Netherlands and Britain* is divided into two parts. Part I – Chapters Two to Four – examines and compares the social and political history of the communist youth movement in Britain and the Netherlands. Exploring communist youth organisations' varying levels of political isolation, these three chapters move chronologically across some 70 years of radical youth activism and provide a much-needed framework for understanding the political lives of the participants and their parents, and the two countries' national peculiarities, without rehashing party histories. Unlike the CPGB and CPN, which history has featured in myriad publications, the communist youth movement in both countries has received little to no academic attention.<sup>13</sup> This gap in communist historiography

13 Ger Harmsen published an excellent study of the Dutch youth movement between 1853 and 1940, which detailed the early history of the communist youth organisation, *De Zaaier* ('The Sower'), later renamed as the *Communistische Jeugdbond* (CJB; 'Communist Youth League'), see:

needs closing as communist youth organisations and their programs were an important factor in the development of a communist culture in Western countries. In his study into communist children's organisations and youth culture in the United States, Paul Mishler observes that an examination of Communist Party youth activities is 'a window into that political culture'.<sup>14</sup> In Britain and the Netherlands, these activities were largely organised by the British Young Communist League (YCL) and its Dutch equivalent, the *Algemene Nederlandse Jeugdverbond* (ANJV; 'General Dutch Youth League'). It was within these organisations that communist children, including the majority of the participants, were socialised into the values and mores of the communist community. The YCL and ANJV provided its members with a community of peers – and potential partners – and a place where they could feel safe when anti-communist sentiments flared up. In all, membership of these youth organisations shaped communist children's political and cultural identity during their formative years.

Ger Harmsen, *Blauwe en rode jeugd. Onstaan, ontwikkeling en teruggang van de Nederlandse jeugdbeweging tussen 1853 en 1940* (Assen: Van Gorcum and Comp N.V., 1961). Margreet Schrevel has written two informative articles about the Dutch communist youth organisation the *Uilenspiegelclub*, which catered to children between eight and fifteen, see: Margreet Schrevel, 'Romy Schneider' en 'Stalina' samen in een club: De communistische kinderorganisatie Uilenspiegelclub 1953-1964', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* Vol. 25 (1999), pp. 1-24, and Margreet Schrevel, 'A Dutch Mix of Scouts and Pioneers: The Uilenspiegelclub Children, 1953-1964', *Socialist History, Red Lives*, Issue 21 (2002), pp. 1-10. The *Algemeen Nederlands Jeugdverbond* (ANJV; 'General Dutch Youth League') and the much smaller OPSJ have not received any attention aside from two non-academic publications created to celebrate the fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries of the ANJV. See: *De duizend daden. Een geschiedenis van het Algemeen Nederlands Jeugdverbond 1945-1985*, ed. by Tamara Blokzijl, Corita Homma, and Willem Walter (Amsterdam: ANJV, 1985), *Wij hebben er geen spijt van. Een boek over strijd, actie, vriendschap en solidariteit uit de 50-jarige geschiedenis van het ANJV*, ed. by Nel van Aalderen (Amsterdam: Comité Herdenking 50 jaar ANJV, 1995). In Britain, Mike Waite wrote an outstanding thesis on the history of the Young Communist League, and published several articles based on this (unpublished) thesis. The articles primarily covered the 1960s. See: Mike Waite, 'Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll (and Communism) in the 1960s', in *Opening the Books. Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party*, ed. by Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman, and Kevin Morgan (London: Pluto Press, 1995), pp. 210-224, and Mike Waite, 'The Young Communist League and Youth Culture', *Socialist History*, Issue 6 (1994), pp. 3-16. Geoff Andrews dedicated a chapter to the impact of the YCL on the Communist Party in the 1960s and early 1970s, in Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times. The Final Years of British Communism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2004). Lastly, Graham Stevenson wrote the 'Anatomy of Decline: The Young Communist League 1967-86', which is available on his own website: <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2008/12/31/anatomy-of-decline-the-young-communist-league-1967-86/> (Accessed on March 26, 2021)

14 Paul Mishler, *Raising Reds. The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 2.



Whereas Part I discusses the extent of *political* isolation experienced by communist youth organisations and analyses their attempts to collaborate with non-communists, Part II examines the extent of *social* isolation experienced by communists and their children, and their attempts to mix Soviet ideology and culture with Western values and traditions. This part kicks off with a chapter dedicated to the impact of the Second World War and its aftermath, and the events of 1956, as these events definitively shaped participants' lives and have informed virtually all of their experiences. The remaining chapters in Part II explore the private and public life of Dutch and British communists in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and investigate what politics meant in these communists' lives.

Aside from the aforementioned pillarisation of society, the German occupation and communist resistance, and virulent anti-communism during the height of the Cold War, there is another important difference between the Netherlands and Britain that has proven decisive in terms of shaping communist identity. Much more so than in Britain, communism in the Netherlands was a hereditary affair. Dutch participants come from long lines of socialists, anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, and communists. Communism, or at least radical thought, was in their blood, so to speak. Unlike the majority of Dutch participants who had at least one communist grandparent, the British participants were often 'only' second generation communists.<sup>15</sup> British parents usually came from a non-political or religious background – only a very small minority were raised in socialist families. An explanation for this can be found in the fact that the CPGB was much younger than the CPN. The *Sociaal Democratische Partij* (SDP; 'Social Democratic Party'), the CPN's predecessor, was founded in 1909, eleven years before the foundation of the CPGB and sprouted out of a home-grown Marxism that predated the Russian Revolution. In Britain, on the other hand, Moscow instigated the foundation of the Communist Party.

There also appeared to be a much more powerful and influential orthodox Marxist tradition in the Netherlands than in Britain. Dutch participants' radical roots can be traced back as far as the 1880s with grandparents who supported the anarchist Domela Nieuwenhuis. In this context it is important to acknowledge that, compared to the Netherlands, Britain had industrialised very early and by the time that large sections of the Dutch working class became influenced by revolutionary ideologies like anarchism and Marxism, the British working class was already firmly anchored in a more moderate

15 Parents often joined together with other siblings. There are many examples of British participants who have a communist uncle or aunt.

socialist tradition. Communism, like anarchism, was unable to get a strong foothold within the British labour movement. On the contrary, despite its size, the CPN was able to mobilise large non-communist yet revolutionary sections of the working class, for example, anarcho-syndicalists. Therefore, the CPN, unlike the CPGB, was considered a real threat and was right from its foundation dealt with accordingly, which had an overall isolating effect. Another reason for the fact that the CPGB was not considered a threat is related to the British political culture; its two-party system based on disproportionate representation made it incredibly difficult for it to survive as a small party. The Dutch political landscape, on the other hand, has been characterised by segmentation intensified by a voting system based on proportional representation. Small parties like the CPN can still have a lot of influence on the politics of their nation, which is why, throughout the twentieth century, Dutch authorities were vigilant when it came to Dutch communists and tried to control and undermine the CPN as much as possible.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to the hereditary nature of communism in both countries, my findings correspond with Samuel, who notes that communism in Britain 'seemed to run in families, though laterally, within a single age band, rather than as in Labour homes, as a hereditary affair'.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Morgan, Flinn and Cohen state: '[t]he relatively brief appearance of communism in British political life does suggest, either that not too much should be made of its hereditary aspects, or that what was inherited was not necessarily a party affiliation, but a looser package of values, cultural reference points, and political practices which in a longer perspective were not coterminous with any single institution'.<sup>18</sup> Figures show that only a quarter of all British communists had parents who themselves were party members or active in

16 For a full discussion on the political history of the CPN see, for example, A.A. De Jonge, *Het communisme in Nederland. De geschiedenis van een politiek partij* (Den Haag: Kruseman, 1972), Ger Verrips, *Dwars, duivels en dromend. De geschiedenis van de CPN 1938-1991* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 1995), Gerrit Voerman, *De meridiaan van Moskou. De CPN en de Communistische Internationale 1919-1930* (Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, 2001). For a full discussion of the political history of the CPGB see, for example, Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), Noreen Branson, *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), Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times. The Final Years of British Communism 1964-1991* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2004), and Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause. British Communism, 1920-1991* (London: Pluto Press, 1992).

17 Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism*, p. 63.

18 Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991*, p. 261.



other labour movement organisations whereas for example, in France, much like in the Netherlands, two-thirds of party members came from left-wing families and half had at least one family member in the French Communist Party. Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn find an explanation for this discrepancy in the 'relatively modest proportions and weak sub-cultural characteristics of the CPGB and Britain's wider activist left'.<sup>19</sup> Yet the Dutch Communist Party, compared to the French Communist Party, was also rather small and had very little influence. Nonetheless, there was a much higher degree of continuity within the Dutch communist movement. Interestingly, the Dutch situation also shows that modest proportions and weak subcultural characteristics are not necessarily linked. As mentioned above, despite its size, the communist movement in the Netherlands was more evolved in the 1950s and 1960s and enjoyed a much more rich and varied cultural tradition than its British counterpart.

There was a time the British communist movement did cater to the whole family. In his book *Communism in Britain 1920-1939. From the Cradle to the Grave*, Linehan suggests that '[f]or those who opted to commit fully to the communist way of life it would offer a complete identity and reach into virtually all aspects of life and personal development'.<sup>20</sup> If it ever did offer a complete identity from the cradle to the grave, which is difficult to judge based on Linehan's very short timeframe of nineteen years, in post-war Britain, the communist movement no longer offered such an identity. Indeed, being a communist 'from the cradle to the grave' was, even for its most faithful followers, no longer possible, simply because many cultural organisations in Britain had ceased to exist. In the first twenty years of its existence, the CPGB catered for the whole family; at the age of eight, children could join the Young Pioneers,<sup>21</sup> and parents could read about rearing a healthy cradle communist in the *Worker's Child*. After the war, together with the Young Pioneers/Young Comrades Club, the *Worker's Child* was disbanded and the CPGB became less family-oriented. By contrast, the majority of the Dutch participants read the *Uilenspiegel*, which was a communist family magazine that contained a children's page, and were members of the *Uilenspiegelclub* which was geared towards children between eight and fifteen and organised weekly meetings and summer camps.

19 Ibid., pp. 250-251.

20 Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920-39. From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 1.

21 In 1925, inspired by the Pioneers movement in the Soviet Union, the British YCL created communist children's sections alongside YCL branches named the Young Pioneers League (renamed the Young Comrades League in 1926). It is unclear when the Young Comrades League was disbanded, but there is no evidence of its existence after the Second World War.



The discontinuation of the Young Comrades Club in Britain meant that British participants had to wait until they turned fourteen before they could enter the first level of party structure – the YCL. Once in a communist youth organisation, it was a natural step to join the next level of party structure, ultimately leading to party membership when turning eighteen, without this being a conscious decision. The majority of participants who joined a communist youth organisation joined the party, but there were significantly less British participants who joined the YCL, which translated into a smaller number of participants joining the CPGB. As noted above, the moral pressure to join communist organisations described by Dutch participants was also largely absent in Britain, and non-communist youth organisations weren't closed off for communists either, like they were in the Netherlands. All of these factors explain why communism in Britain lacked a strong hereditary aspect. The role the CPN played in the resistance in general and participants' parents war traumata in particular, together with a strong tradition of anti-communism, which was most visible in 1956, motivated Dutch participants to join the movement and become politically active.

Part II is brought to a close with an Epilogue in which participants look back on their childhood and evaluate their political upbringing. It particularly focuses on participants' feelings and thoughts on the years around the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. Some participants felt that they grew up with a lie and look back in anger. A few directed this anger towards their parents, others to the party, and again others to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the majority of participants, Dutch and British alike, look back positively and have managed to make peace with their parents' choices.

Ultimately, this book argues that rank-and-file communists were never 'just communists'. Yes, in theory they shared the same encompassing worldview that supposedly provided them with all the answers. But, in practice, communists were diverse and had different needs and priorities.<sup>22</sup>

22 The experiences of my participants suggest that when describing a communist mentality or identity, a clear distinction should be made between a relatively small militant inner-core and a much larger group of more moderate rank-and-file communists. The label 'Stalinist' isn't used in this book, as this term is somewhat misleading. After all, militant communists in Britain and the Netherlands didn't refer to themselves as Stalinist, unlike other identifiers on the left, and in the context of these two countries, the term is largely pejorative. In regard to the more moderate rank-and-file communists, another sub-group emerges – that of the bohemian communists. These were often artists, writers, or academics and had an altogether much looser interpretation of the communist ideology than their blue-collar peers. Among my sample, there were two participants, one Dutch and one British, whose parents could be characterised as bohemian.

Consequently, they also had different interpretations of the communist ideology – interpretations that fit their personal and national circumstances, but also the time. Aside from their politics, they had many identities and allegiances. For example, they were also members of a nation, a social class, a gender group, a family, a local community, and a racial or ethnic group, and had varying levels of allegiance to these groups or social constructs. And sometimes these allegiances jeopardised or even trumped their commitment to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union.



# Part I