

Reds Under The Bed: ASIO and an Unusual Bunch of Suspects. By Michael Komesaroff. Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2018. ISBN: 9781925272987

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Socialism has recently made a comeback. In the belated fallout following the 2008 crash, a resurgent socialist left has taken over the UK Labour party and one of the most popular politicians in the US, Bernie Sanders, has declared himself and his program 'democratic socialist'. A major organisation both creating and riding this democratic socialist wave in the US is the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), who have expanded over the past three or four years to become the largest socialist organisation in the US for many decades. In August 2017, the 'Jewish Solidarity Caucus' of the DSA formed, publishing a platform which declared, '[w]e seek to renew the Jewish socialist tradition, to combat antisemitism, and to forge solidarity between Jews and other oppressed people.' They continued, 'Jewish life as it currently exists under capitalism is not freedom, and Jewish collective efforts to realize the prophetic vision of a just world will only be fully realized through socialism.'¹ Building on the work of Jewish left groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow, the Jewish Solidarity Caucus announced in no uncertain terms that Jewish socialism was back.

While debates and ideas in US Jewish communities continue to be influential in Australia, it seems we are still some way away from a resurgence of Australian Jewish socialism. There is however a rich history of Jewish involvement with progressive, socialist and communist politics in Australia. Michael Komesaroff's new book, *Reds Under the Bed: ASIO and an Unusual Bunch of Suspects*, offers a contribution to the recovery of some of this history. Komesaroff's volume is divided into 4 parts. The first part deals with the history of the Komesaroff clan and their migrations, the second and third, a history of Australia's counter-intelligence organisations and the Jewish groups they deemed subversive. The last section draws on the history outlined in the previous sections to examine seven intelligence files on Komesaroff family members who had links with left-wing political organisations.

While it is hard to locate a central argument, this short volume is full of interesting titbits and anecdotes. For instance, we learn that the author's uncle Yaakov Leib Mendelson was so dedicated to communism that he 'commissioned a terrazzo tile floor featuring a hammer and sickle for the side porch of his Melbourne home' (76). There are also some fascinating primary sources uncovered here which lend us great insight into some of the complexities and contradictions of Jewish left politics at this time. One highlight is Louis Komesaroff's 1940 letter to *The Argus*. Despite being a strong supporter of the Soviet Union, Komesaroff seemingly broke with the official party line to strongly criticise Russia's non-aggression pact with

Germany, stating, 'what are Hitler's pacts worth? Hitler the liar has broken more than he can remember' (118). It is through sources like these that we get some idea of the (limited) autonomy of Jewish communists and antifascists, differing from the party and Moscow whilst remaining devoted to the cause.

Komesaroff has an ambivalent take on ASIO and the intelligence services throughout, sometimes defending their invasive and repressive activities or periodising them so as to appear as relics of a bygone era. *Reds Under the Bed* is on stronger ground when using humour to poke fun at ASIO's activities, such as their tagging of a public newspaper clipping reporting on Tessa Silberberg's travels, 'secret'.

While at various points Komesaroff gives a good indication of why Jews may have been attracted to Communism in Russia and beyond, the perspective of *Reds Under the Bed* could have been broadened with a more critical historical approach to communist activities in Australia beyond a recycling of anti-communist tropes. Komesaroff at times utilises some questionable and outdated sources to discuss the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) as if its only purpose was a slavish devotion to Moscow. While there is no doubt that the leadership of the Soviet Union (particularly under Stalin) was repressive, authoritarian and murderous, if we interpret the CPA's history only through this lens our historical vision becomes distorted. There are many reasons, from a contemporary point of view to suggest that CPA membership was much more honourable than membership of the two major parties of this era, not least because of Communists role in fighting for workers' rights, opposing the White Australia policy, allying themselves with Indigenous resistance movements, and advocating against war.

Chapter Three covers ASIO's interest in Jewish organisations, focusing in particular on the Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Anti-Semitism. It is this section that will probably be of most interest to wider readers. Komesaroff's discussion here could have benefited from a broader framing of historical events, including a discussion of the transnational popularity of Jewish antifascism in this period and the laissez-faire nature of CPA involvement in organisations such as the Jewish Council. While the very successful anti-communist campaign against the Jewish Council is highlighted, it is important not to see this struggle as motivated purely by ideology or 'hysteria' (57). These events are better conceptualised as a Jewish right carrying out the political repression of the broader ruling class within Jewish communities, politically neutering them in an Australian context whilst re-orienting them towards a hegemonic Zionism.

Komesaroff has certainly successfully fulfilled his aim for this book, providing a fascinating account that will ensure, 'that all the descendants of those Komesaroffs that came to Australia in the first quarter of last century will have a better understanding of our family's history and how our

forebears embraced political life in their adopted country' (xi). This book grew out of a previous article published in the journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society (AJHS). Amateur historians through the AJHS have spent countless hours researching and writing Australian Jewish history, generating an incredibly rich archive and journal over the past century. Universities unfortunately have neglected Australian Jewish history to all of our detriment. With the major works of Australian Jewish history being written in the 1980s and 1990s, we are well overdue for new academic histories to emerge that can situate micro-histories within a larger historiography. These histories could place themselves in dialogue with the stirrings of political change in Australian Jewish communities. The important topics raised, and sources uncovered by dedicated historians such as Komesaroff should serve to further stimulate debate and research.

¹ See 'DSA Jewish Solidarity Caucus' <https://www.marxists.org/subject/jewish/jsc-statement.pdf>, originally published on medium.com on August 9, 2017, accessed October 2019.