

# Reviews

## What happened then

**Ralph Darlington, *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14*, Pluto Press, 2023, 336 pages, paperback, ISBN 978074339030, £19.99**

Darlington is Emeritus Professor of Labour Relations at the University of Salford. He has published several other books on this and cognate topics. The present one grew out of his article ‘Strikers versus Scabs: Violence in the 1910-1914 British Labour Revolt’, *Labor History* 63 (2022), pages 332-352. This volume is also available as an e-book. Darlington gives three lectures based on it at YouTube.

Other reviews, all favourable, include Madoc Cairns (*TLS*, May 26, 2023); Lindsey German, *Counterfire*; Dexter Govarn, *Scottish Left Review*; Jim Burns. *What’s New*. The last three are all online.

The book is divided into four parts (Backcloth, Revolt, Assessment, Aftermath), sub-divided into thirteen chapters, buttressed by footnotes, largely referential though sometimes adding considerably to the text, biographical profiles of (e.g.) Keir Hardie (alas, not mentioning his famous cloth cap), Churchill for his strike-breaking activities, and sundry male and female activists, the latter starring Antoinette Cauvin, once described by a Milan prosecutor as ‘the most dangerous woman in Europe’, fifteen meticulous statistical tables, a multi-division bibliography in which *Spokesman* readers will be glad see Ken Coates and Tony Topham, *The Making of the Labour Movement: The Making of the Transport and General Workers Union 1870-1922* (1994, a *Spokesman* publication), serviceable index, and nine black-and-white figures, the most dramatic being that of an unknown woman addressing the 1911 London Transport strike.

The prose is straightforward, uncontaminated by jargon, dry, frequently overwhelming with its statistical details, devoid of humour, albeit his subject does not allow much scope for levity.

Darlington’s survey of previous studies in his field mentions George Askwith’s *Industrial Problems and Disputes* (1920), George Dangerfield’s *The Strange Death of Liberal England 1910-1914* (1935), and Bob Holton’s *British Syndicalism 1900-1914* (1976). Surprisingly, since it’s in his bibliography, Darlington does not cite Lewis Mates’ *The Great Labour Unrest: Rank-and-File Movements and Political Changes in the Durham Coalfield* (2016). One important article, by oversight or design, that gets

no acknowledgement is Roland V. Sires' 'Labour Unrest in England,' *Journal of Economic History* 15 (2011), pages 246-266.

It should be stressed that Darlington surpasses all others in breadth and depth. I have rarely, if ever, seen a work so micro-macroscopic.

Darlington (p.9) emphasizes that he writes 'with a distinctive revolutionary Marxist assessment'. This makes it rather odd that he does not quote the writings on Britain in this period by Lenin or Trotsky. Lenin denounced the Labour Party for betraying the workers' cause in *Pravda* 85, April 12, 1913 (reproduced in his *Collected Works* 19, 55-56), whilst Trotsky's voluminous analyses include 'The Labour Movement 1906-1924'. Both are online. Marx himself receives scant attention (pages 45-47), primarily as a guide to his thinking for various activist groups and individuals.

As so vividly depicted by Darlington, this period was rather different from that seen in *Downton Abbey*. There, all the servants and workers are happy, the one dissentient note struck by the maverick Thomas Barrow who once complains that the working class 'always get the dirty end of the stick'. The predecessor television series, *Upstairs Downstairs*, when it reached 1926, had The Bellamys' staff members acting as scabs, working as a special constable, and driving a London double-decker bus.

As indicated by the rubrics 'Backcloth' and 'Aftermath', Darlington looks backwards and forwards for comparisons and contrasts with his own concentrated narrative. Perhaps worth mentioning, especially in the modern awareness of Slavery, is the surprising fact that labour unrest can be traced back to the Roman Empire, described and documented by myself in *Classical Journal* 59, 1963, pages 275-6. These took the form of organized riots, usually against food shortages, or actual withdrawal of labour, often fomented by wandering Cynic philosophers, a kind of ancient shop steward, in clothing as distinctive as cloth caps. Steeped in ancient history as he was, Marx will have known all about this. Indeed, the first strike provoked by financial and political demands was the Plebeian Secession from Rome c. 495-493, involving a physical mass exodus from the city. Oppressive debt was the primary economic factor. It, and further such actions, gained relief from this and significant political concessions from the ruling Senate. Marx drew on this for his article 'The American Question in England', in *The New York Tribune*, October 11, 1861 — available online.

Looking forward to recent times, Darlington traces the progress of shop stewards and rank-and-file militancy and to their inception. Some elaboration is required here. I recall Syd Harroway with his famous 'The

Social Contract? You Can Stuff It'. Harroway is comically instanced in Ken Coates' 'Britain: Prospects for the Seventies', *Socialist Register* 1970, pages 195-201 — online. There was also militant docker Jack Dash, whose self-composed epitaph read 'Here lies Jack Dash/ All he wanted was/ To separate them from their cash'.

We hear much these days about rank-and-file and grassroots. These are not always talismanic words. After expulsion from Healey's Socialist Labour League, Brian Behan founded his 'Rank-and-File Movement'; it was a complete flop.

Darlington enhances past-present links by his brief mentions of such characters as Bessie Bradock and Fenner Brockway (pages 15, 161). He ends his 'Aftermath' with brief mentions of militant actions in other countries, including America. These are well brought out in Rebecca Solnit's *Orwell's Roses* (2021), featuring women's rights campaigners Helen Todd and Margaret Schneiderman, the latter extending their movement by adopting the Bolshevik chant of 'Peace, Land, Bread', often suffixed by 'And All Power to the Soviets'.

Also presaged in Darlington's chosen period are such modern-sounding issues as violence from the police and bosses who used the American tactic of 'Goon Squads' attacking strikers, mass picketing by sympathizers, and scabs — the term 'blackleg' I suppose has gone out. This issue is spotlighted in such films as *Billy Elliot* and *The Angry Silence*. What happened in the 1984-1985 Miners' Strike and at Grunwick in London in the 1970s had many precedents, exhaustively detailed by Darlington.

The other great upheaval of that time was, of course, the Suffragette Movement, memorialized in the film *Suffragette* (2015). Pankhurst and company would frequently, not always, lend physical and ideological support to particular strikes. One strike would be supported by outsiders joining the picket lines; again not always. And, there were frequent disjoints between strikers and union leaders who supported the likes of Asquith and Churchill in trying to quell 'unofficial action'.

Similar schisms were manifest during the Great War, with some unions and cognate movements supporting it, others not. In the television version of R. L. Delderfield's *To Serve Them All My Days* there is a vigorous argument between two Welsh brothers, one badly wounded in the trenches, the other a coal miner who makes light of the War, proclaiming that the real struggle is the Class War against the bosses.

There were no Trotskyist groupuscules at this time and the Communist Party of Great Britain was not founded until 1920. But outside influence and support came, albeit spasmodically, from such organizations as the

Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist Labour Party. Then, as often now, the Labour Party could be equivocal over strikes, compared to the Independent Labour Party, later stoutly defended by George Orwell's 'Why I join the I.L.P.' (*New Leader*, June 22, 1938).

The real meat of Darlington's account is in the 'Revolt' section, where a large number of strikes are inventoried by geographical locations and meticulously documented narratives of how they were organized, what happened, the degree of rank-and-file versus union leadership (or lack thereof), political influence (or not) from the left-wing parties and groups, and analyses of victories and defeats.

Nottingham and the East Midlands are conspicuously absent from this litany. Some amplification is here called for. The workers at Player's tobacco factory were quiescent, thanks to their exceptionally high wages and bonuses, exemplary working conditions, paid holidays, and recreational facilities. Some social historians have criticized this 'paternalism', but credit where credit is due. Full details are available on the LeftLion website ([leftlion.co.uk](http://leftlion.co.uk)).

Have to admit things did not seem all that rosy when I did a summer's stint at Player's in my undergraduate days in the 1950s. There was lots of compulsory overtime, which many resented; primitive machinery and operations. I had to stand in a box, showered by tobacco cascading from above. When the box was full, I had to rush it across the factory floor, then gallop back for the next avalanche. Still, we got fifty free cigarettes a week, and the canteen food wasn't half bad.

Robert Shaw, Gauleiter of the Socialist Labour League's branch at Nottingham, once contemptuously told me that the Tobacco Workers Union had never once held a strike. Don't know if he was right or not. One might investigate the Union's records held in the vast collection of such at Nottingham University ([table of contents online](#)).

Predictably, things were different with the coal miners. The great strike of 1912 was preceded by one at Bentinck Colliery over minimum wages, before the mass action kicked off at Alfreton and quickly spread across Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. Full details available online on the Derbyshire Records Office website, also the *Daily Mirror* (February 27, 1912), its front page sporting a picture of an Alfreton collier. Nottinghamshire miners voted 17,086 for the strike, 5,386 against. There was a similar result in Derbyshire, and an enormous majority nationwide.

There was also trouble in the Nottingham Lace Market, occasioned by a large influx of German migrant workers. This is fully documented in an online essay by Ben Brader (University of Glasgow). A large collection of

papers relating to the local lace industry is held at Nottingham University.

Darlington has produced a superlative history of the period. It may spawn articles on particular details; otherwise, it bids fair to be the last word on the subject. In addition, I strongly recommend readers to watch his YouTube talks.

Darlington's final sentence speaks of the 'very distinctive militant features which remain of considerable relevance for contemporary union activists and socialists.' More succinctly: what happens now happened then.

*Barry Baldwin*

## Alongside and at sea

**Catherine L Grant, Alessio Patalano, James A Russell, Editors, *The New Age of Naval Power in the Indo-Pacific — Strategy, Order and Regional Security*, Georgetown University Press, 2023, 340 pages, paperback ISBN 9781647123390, \$45.95**

*The New Age of Naval Power in the Indo-Pacific* is published at a time when Russia's previous expansionist ambitions, addressed by Alfred T Mahan's 1900 study, *The Problem of Asia and its Effect Upon International Politics*, have been replaced by China seeking strategic regional dominance. The stated intent of what could be considered as an update on Mahan is to 'nourish the emergence of a future generation of naval strategists'.

The views expressed by the three editors (Catherine L Grant, Alessio Patalano and James A Russell) and the 12 other academic contributors generally reflect a US viewpoint. However, V.Adm. Ann Rondeau USN (Ret'd), President of the US Naval Post Graduate School, in her Foreword acknowledges 'our partners in the War Studies Department at King's College, the University of London'. This is exemplified by drawing heavily on Prof. Geoffrey Till's work on 'uses of the sea'. These are presented as three scenarios: a transportation highway, a resource, and a source of innovation to cross its expanses. Part I examines how Till's scenarios relate to five 'factors of influence'.

*Geopolitics and Strategic Geography in Sino-US Competition*: Christopher Twomey provides a quick review of largely insular Chinese history and, more recently, the effects of the Cold War. China's previous policy of anti-access/area denial, for example, by establishing regional hegemony with its own island chain, now turns towards becoming a blue

ocean navy. Meanwhile, the US continues to pursue Mahan's freedom of the seas while also fostering allies on the east side of the region — something China would like to replicate in the west.

*Law, Order and Maritime (In)Stability:* Peter Dutton reviews the factors affecting the very large number of states bordering the Pacific Rim which have increasingly been imposing their own territorial limits. This has led to regional rivalry directed at protection of trade. The US — and to some extent the UK — have constantly sought freedom of the seas with inevitable clashes with China.

*Marine Resources and Regional Competition:* Clive Schofield examines the main regional assets — ecosystems, trade routes, fisheries and seabed energy — and how they have led to boundary and, more crucially for regional stability, sovereignty disputes directed at claiming marine resources.

*Nuclear Order at Sea:* Nicola Leveringhaus proposes that nuclear order is best understood in terms of four pillars — nuclear deterrence, arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament — of which nuclear deterrence, she claims, is 'king'. She highlights the lack of communication between the nuclear states as the biggest danger leading to an accidental launch or inadvertent escalation of use, and suggests that the balance achieved by the emergence of submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) for second strike nuclear deterrence (a highly arguable assumption she does not address) could be upset by a shift towards the use of SLBMs as a first strike to counter superior conventional forces.

*Technology, Escalation, and War in the Indo-Pacific:* James A Russell forecasts that naval budgets will increase by as much as 60 per cent over the next decade because new digital technology, which has led to precision-strike land warfare predominating so far, will spread to naval forces and increase the risk of war at sea.

Part II concerns 'Naval Power in the Indo-Pacific as History'. Ryan Gingerus describes imperial competition in earlier centuries from the arrival of the Portuguese through the Dutch and then British exploitation of the region. Richard Dunley looks at the period immediately prior to the First World War in which British dominance was eroded by the rise of Japan and Russia. Over-confidence in its highly effective alliance with Japan led Britain to remove its battleships from the region, encouraging Japan to see itself as the new dominant player. Daniel Moran picks up on the continuing rise of Japan between the two world wars, eroding the US led 'open door' policy that Britain, Russia, Germany and France had signed up to; none of whom opposed the Japanese occupation of

Manchuria. Kevin Rowlands reviews superpower rivalry and strategic balances during the Cold War that followed. The Soviet attempt to create a domino effect of Asian countries becoming communist failed when the Soviet state itself eventually failed but, before that occurred, the US had already employed naval power using forward basing to take conventional and nuclear deterrence closer to Russia. The consequence was that by the end of the Cold War the Indo-Pacific was no longer a global backwater though no one superpower dominated.

Part III reviews 'Naval Power and Contemporary Security in the Indo-Pacific' across its five regions.\* The dominant factor is the rise of China. The effect has moved many states closer to the US, thereby emulating Australia. The recent AUKUS nuclear-powered attack submarine project also draws in the UK. This tri-partite alliance is intended to counter China's naval ambitions but also creates tensions in the region with India and its nuclear submarine force. It does not address the multiple problems of nuclear security, cost, industrial base and producing the newly skilled personnel to deliver the project.

This multi-authored, 340-page book is not a straightforward one to summarise. Suffice to say that it fulfils its purpose of providing, in considerable detail and extensively referenced, all the historical, contemporary, geographical and political factors needed to stimulate future strategic thinking by US military and academics. In doing so, it makes no attempt to suggest what that strategy might be other than to forecast that navies will increasingly be the instruments for power projection, maintaining freedom of the seas and protecting territorial boundaries. None the less, the editors commend all the good reasons for dialogue and co-operation between littoral States rather than entering into naval wars; fortuitously absent since the end of the Second World War.

***Robert Forsyth***

*Commander Robert Forsyth RN (Ret'd) served in the Royal Navy 1957-81 mainly in the Submarine Service — two years were in a Polaris missile equipped submarine — where he commanded conventional and nuclear-powered submarines and the Commanding Officer's Qualifying Course. He campaigns for nuclear weapon disarmament [in association with The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation].*

\**Ian Bowers — NE Asia; Alessio Patalano & Julie Marionneau — E & S China Seas; Sheryn Lee — The Taiwan Strait; James Goldrick — The S Pacific; Abjhjit Singh & James J Wirtz — The Indian Ocean*



## Oppenheimer

**Christopher Nolan, *Oppenheimer —The Complete Screenplay*, Faber, 2023, 220 pages, paperback ISBN 9780571381319, £12.99**

Three hours long, *Oppenheimer* the movie tests the stamina of its considerable audiences. It comes as something of a revelation to read the final section of Christopher Nolan's pacy first-person screenplay in which he counterpoints the differing scrutiny experienced by Oppenheimer and his then unidentified adversary, Lewis Strauss. Kitty, Oppenheimer's perspicacious and feisty wife, fingers Strauss as the villain of the piece before her cerebral husband does. It falls to physicist Leo Szilard's sidekick from Chicago, Dr David Hill (previously identified as 'glasses'), to expose Strauss during the US Senate hearings into his nomination as President Eisenhower's Commerce Secretary. Eventually, Strauss was rejected for the job. Hill told the Commerce Committee 'most of the scientists in this country would prefer to see Mr Strauss completely out of government'. In part, *Oppenheimer* is an account of Strauss's duplicity and its impact on the 'Father of the Atom Bomb'.

Nolan's highly readable screenplay helps unravel such complexities. For me, one moving aspect of the film was its attempt at faithfulness to the historical record. In part, this requires an extensive *Dramatis Personae* (the book would benefit from having one). Not only Einstein and Patrick Blackett figure, but also Kurt Gödel and Leo Szilard. 'Too many faces,' commented one viewer. If you're not familiar with atomic and nuclear history, *Oppenheimer* the movie presents some challenges to its audience. That's one of its virtues, in my estimation. Bertrand Russell doesn't make Nolan's cut, although in 1943 he met weekly with Einstein, Gödel and others at Einstein's house in Mercer Street, Princeton. '*These discussions were in some ways disappointing,*' Russell later wrote in his *Autobiography*, '*I found that they all had a German bias towards metaphysics.*'

Strauss reflects on Oppenheimer's predicament— '*But all along —with McCarthy on the rise — he knew he was vulnerable...*' This is because of Oppenheimer's close contact with men and women who were members of the Communist Party USA, including his brother who '*was blacklisted by every university in the country ...*' according to Strauss in the screenplay.

Emile de Antonio's documentary film about US Senator Joseph McCarthy, *Point of Order*, had impressed Russell. In 1965, de Antonio



offered to film Russell's obituary while he was still alive. Russell was seemingly charmed by the idea and filming commenced in London and North Wales, where Russell lived most of the time, and on the train between the two. Peter Whitehead was cameraman and Glyn Johns did sound, which is very clear. Russell's distinctive voice rings out. Unfortunately, the film remains incomplete for various reasons (see *Spokesman 150*). De Antonio went on to make *Rush to Judgment* (1967), an acclaimed documentary film about the shortcomings of the official Warren Report on the murder of President Kennedy in November 1962.

A short time earlier, Russell had been approached by filmmaker Lionel Rogosin, famous for his 1956 documentary *On the Bowery*, which influenced Martin Scorsese who grew up in that part of New York City. Rogosin was making a film about what war was really like and enlisted Russell's help. Russell provided Rogosin with letters of introduction, including one to Josip Broz Tito, President of Yugoslavia, which enabled Rogosin to obtain and use previously unseen footage of partisan fighting during World War Two when Yugoslavia was the only country to liberate itself from Nazi occupation. Rogosin interviewed Russell for his film, which was released under the title *Good Times, Wonderful Times* (1965). The ironic title quotes a Chelsea Pensioner who reminisces about his wartime experiences. The backdrop of 'swinging London' provides more irony (see *Spokesman 144*). Russell saw the film at a private screening in Wardour Street.

Russell and Edith, his New Yorker wife, liked movies. They would surely have wanted to see *Oppenheimer*, which 'thrusts audiences into the mind' of the physicist, according to the DVD blurb. Russell knew Oppenheimer and, in 1955, reviewing his book, *The Open Mind*, commented:

*'Since Dr Oppenheimer was refused security clearance his personality, his character and his outlook have become matters of public interest. I am quite unable to see how any candid person who has read this book and the evidence upon which the adverse verdict was based can fail to be convinced that that verdict was mistaken and resulted (to take the most favourable hypothesis) from a lack of comprehension of a very sensitive character accustomed, as all men of science should be, to the balancing of conflicting hypotheses ...'*

Christopher Nolan has performed a notable service in revisiting J Robert Oppenheimer in film and in print. The nuclear era had a turbulent beginning.

***Tony Simpson***

## Momentous burdens

**Ralph Dutli, *Osip Mandelstam: A Biography*, translated from German by Ben Fowkes, Verso, 2023, 424 pages, £25, ISBN 9781839761584**

**Osip Mandelstam, *Tristia*, translated from Russian by Thomas de Waal, Arc Publications, 2023, 128 pages, £11.99, ISBN 9781910345931**

*The people need a poem that is both mysterious and familiar  
So that from it, they should wake up for eternity  
And bathe themselves in the flaxen-curled,  
Chestnut wave of its sound.*

Lightness, unexpectedness, contemporaneity: these lines written in Mandelstam's second place of exile, Voronezh, in 1937 and translated by Ralph Dutli testify to the poet's undiminished capacity to confront and confound, a year before his death. All utterance in Mandelstam from the Revolution onwards proceeds *Under the Sign of Contradiction* (the title of Anna Razumnaya's meticulously even-handed recent study), and pushes that contradiction to its limit, between a fervent engagement with the demands of the epoch – the historic mission of the Russian intelligentsia inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century – and the limitless possibilities of “the blessed and the senseless word”, as in the poem ‘We shall meet again in Petersburg’. The mismatch between the sombre utopian project of Soviet Communism and Mandelstam's constant self-abandonment to an “eternity” of song – one wave of the future replaced by another – could, he had long predicted, have only one outcome: “If an authentically humanistic justification is not at the base of the coming social architecture, then it will crush man as Assyria and Babylonia did” [1923].

Dutli's biography intends first and foremost to avoid the pitfalls of martyrology and to prioritise the writings – the spellbinding flow of poems, essays, memoirs, children's stories, letters, imbued throughout with Mandelstam's irrepressible, unique brand of “metamorphic excitements” (Seamus Heaney) – as the true index of a lifetime's recoil from tyranny. But the darkest, most haunting pages are perhaps inevitably those devoted to Convict Transfer no. 1152 and the last, pitiful days at Vtoraya Rechka, en route to but never reaching Kolyma, their harrowing facticity scrupulously distilled from witness testimonies and post-Glasnost research conducted by Shentalinsky, Pavel Nerder and other Russian scholars in the FSB (formerly KGB) Literary Archives. “The body was disinfected with sublimate of

mercury chloride. The attendants then attached a piece of wood to the deceased's big toe, bearing his inmate number ... his body was thrown naked into a mass grave": compare this savagery to the image with which Mandelstam began his earliest collection, *Stone* – "A tentative hollow note / As a pod falls from a tree / In the constant melody / Of the wood's deep quiet ..." [1908] – and one has something like the full measure of the tragedy that befell a society.

Dutli is in no doubt as to the continuing historical value of a poetry so exposed and yet so intransigent in its commitment to the "fragile dignity of the human being ... the preservation of the individual self during the age of its attempted obliteration" ("like a match burning in a high wind" according to Joseph Brodsky). He brings an exemplary clarity, characteristic of the biography as a whole, to the narrative of its exhumation and rehabilitation – Nadezhda Mandelstam's tireless advocacy through more than 40 years of widowhood; samizdat in the 1950s; Akhmatova's deliberate public *faux pas* in 1965, linking Mandelstam to murdered fellow Acmeist Nikolay Gumilyov (both still *personae non grata* at the onset of the Brezhnev era); the bowdlerized *Selected Poems* of 1973 with allusions to "nervous sickness"; retraction of the charge of "counter-revolutionary activity" under Gorbachev; and in the 1990s international symposia and the first instances of uncensored publication since 1928. Published originally in 2003, the story breaks off, however, with Dutli needing to redouble his efforts on behalf of the Mandelstams' moral legacy in an atmosphere of political and personal denunciation, "part of a process of self-justification and self-exculpation engaged in by Soviet intellectuals", and with an anguished cry from the *First Voronezh Notebook*, "Oh for an inch of blue sea, for just enough to go through the eye of a needle!" One wonders, too, at the future prospects of a writer whose notoriety – beyond the cognoscenti visiting modest commemorations such as the 'Mandelstam Street' Exhibition at the State Literature Museum ("Russia celebrates", *Novye Izvestia* proclaimed somewhat disingenuously at the opening in 2021) – is surely better represented, for the population at large and the watchful eye of the Kremlin, by a postcard-sized plaque on the site of his brief residence in Moscow in 1933, one of "more than 1,500 signs" installed by the civic initiative Last Address across Russian cities and towns, as of May 2023, honouring the "victims of Stalinist repressions".

Unsurprisingly, the Mandelstam industry in the West has faced fewer obstacles, starting with the New York editions of his poetry published by Russian exiles between 1955 and 1971 and allegedly sponsored, Dutli tells us, by the CIA. The slew of translations into English continues unchecked, with de Waal's *Tristia* now completing the troika of major texts presented in

their virtual entirety, alongside Robert Tracy's magnificent *Stone* and recent highly accomplished versions of the *Notebooks*. Where a problem arises, if such it is, may best be surmised by looking to Mandelstam's own vitriolic interventions in the literary-ideological battles of the 1920s, poised as Gregory Freidin has said "between the most sacred core of the culture and the profane masses", an assuredly mandarin stance but simultaneously open, indeed passionately committed, to the realisation "that to read poetry is a most sublime and difficult art, and that the vocation of reader is no less respectable than the vocation of poet". A test case for this interaction, dwelt on at some length in the biography because of the enduring debate over how far it mired him in sycophancy, is the 'Stalin Ode' of 1937, whose spiralling ironies, oscillating almost gratuitously between exorbitant praise – "I'd speak of the man who moved the earth's axis" – and nightmare – "The mounds of human heads recede into the distance", are of a piece with a lifetime's dedication to the freedom of the poetic word, "like a bundle of sticks, that point out of it in different directions, and do not hasten one to a single publicly-endorsed point". The general secretary of the Soviet Writers' Union, writing close on the heels of the first show trials to Nikolai Yezhov, head of the NKVD, denounced the 'Ode' in robust proletarian fashion as "a lot of incomprehensible babble, which is inappropriate where Stalin is concerned": not for him the feverish, compulsively associative play of metaphor that for Mandelstam, always wittily irreverent, meant a poem must "run across the whole width of the river, jammed with mobile Chinese junks sailing in various directions ... [nor will] the boatmen – tell how and why we were leaping from junk to junk" ['Conversation about Dante'], even, astonishingly, *this* one.

Why did it take so long for Mandelstam to reap the whirlwind? The suicidal explicitness of the earlier 'Stalin Epigram' trashing the "soul-corrupter and peasant-slayer" for whom "every killing is a treat" already constituted (Dutli endorsing Shentalinsky's hyperbole) an act of resistance "unparalleled in the history of literature". But it was also just one further instance, albeit the most glaring, of a subversiveness that ran the length and breadth of his textual practice, intensifying dramatically from the mid-1920s onwards, as witness the withering indictments of systemic corruption – "I alone in Russia work from the voice while all around me the bitch pack writes" – in 'Fourth Prose' (1930, suppressed until 1989); the torrent of rancorous epithets, a veritable "tribunal of accusation" reserved for the dictator himself – the "Judas of peoples to come" – in the poems of the final years; the satiric undertow, laced with personal trauma and loss, one finds secreted even in children's stories such as 'The Two Trams'.

*Tristia* breathes a similar air of revulsion and dislocation, the poet's last

impossible full-scale attempt to fuse a pan-European sensibility shaped by classical antiquity, medieval Catholicism, the Renaissance, the light-filled Mediterranean and Crimea (“Accept some sun from the palms of my hands / and take some honey for your delight. / It is as Persephone’s bees commanded”) with treasured instances of the Russian lyric tradition, primarily Pushkin – all of this subject to the violent erasure he now saw being acted out on the streets of Moscow and the former St Petersburg reconfigured, in his imagination, as Petropolis, the city of the walking dead. The poem ‘Freedom’s Twilight’, not unlike the ‘Ode’, somehow manages to raise a cheer – a resoundingly propagandistic heave-ho and the only one in the collection – for the heroic sacrifices entailed by the “momentous burden”, like it or not, of the oncoming night. ‘To Cassandra’, however, written in 1917, leaves no doubt as to the fate awaiting its dedicatee Akhmatova and all those who tend the sacred flame: “One day the Scythians will hold an orgy / by Petrograd’s demented riverside, / to the hideous music of their revels / they’ll tear the shawl from your lovely head”. Sophocles, Homer, Sappho, Plato, Virgil, Apuleius, Ovid (the author of those other, mischievous and ingratiating *Tristia* sent to the Emperor Augustus from barbarian Tomis), Racine, Schubert, Gluck: the literary and musical references are just one aspect of an immense orchestration designed “to create poetic palimpsests ... multi-layered images that endow the modern age with historical resonance” (Clare Cavanagh) whose bewildering impact de Waal compares to that of the “heap of broken images” in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, also published in 1922. Luckily, the English reader has this edition’s judiciously selective, elegant notes to hand, a pliant erudition, enough to respond with a measure of confidence to the richness and fluency of what Mandelstam here achieves in support of his belief that “the whole of our two-thousand-year-old culture is a setting of the world free for play” (*Journey to Armenia*). If that all-inclusiveness lacks anything, it’s the consummate joy of life and fearlessness of the poems that poured out of Mandelstam in the thirties, “no longer a human being but a Michelangelo” according to one Voronezh visitor, a hard won rekindling of his creativity for which the *Tristia*, and the desolate intervening years – “My age, my beast, where is the man / Who can look into your eyes” – were essential preparation. The *Notebooks*’ airborne escapades, those of goldfinches, swallows and swifts, boys on sleds, “thin-waisted wasps”, children’s smiles that “open, oceanic, into anarchy” and overarching sky rarely pause to question the fullness of the passing moment: “I present the green promise of sticky leaves to my lips”.

*Stephen Winfield*