Hig’s Russia: ‘an absolutely different civilisation’

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Esmonde Higgins, younger brother of Nettie Palmer and nephew of H.B. Higgins, a Justice of the High Court, spent the first fifteen years of his adult life as a professional revolutionary. At the age of 23, he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain after returning from a visit to Russia in 1920. Back in Australia in 1924, he quickly became a leading member of Australia’s tiny Communist party, which sent him to Moscow as its delegate to the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in 1928. In the 1930s, as the party began to exercise significant influence among industrial workers and intellectuals, he began a long disengagement from Communism. In this chapter I focus on what Russia meant to Higgins, on the part these visits played in his joining and his leaving the Communist movement, and their effect on his expectations of Left politics in Australia.¹

While the trip to Russia in 1920 made Higgins a Communist it would be too dramatic to say it completely altered his life, for he had been searching for a way to commit himself to revolution for the previous five or six years.² This search was not just a matter of political ideology. He already had firm political ideals, which were socialist and nationalist. As a member of the Victorian Socialist Party (which he joined while a student at the University of Melbourne) he supported working-class militancy and the educational mission of socialist intellectuals. As a member of the
Young Australia National Party he placed Australia’s interests before those of the empire, scorning the jingoistic patriotism that surrounded Australia’s participation in the First World War. Yet neither socialism nor nationalism gave him a satisfactory political practice. In 1917, reversing his earlier opposition to the war, he enlisted in the Australian Military Forces. He needed, he said, not to stand selfishly aloof from the dangers faced by other young men, and most of all he needed to act. War, which is readily constructed as the quintessential setting for individual and mass agency, easily broke through Higgins’s reliance on the weak defences of reason. He knew that going to the war would not strengthen the causes he believed in, but nor did he want to seem, as he said, ‘unsympathetic’. He enlisted because war satisfied his need to relate action to existential choices, offering him a liminal moment of self-definition – in war he would be truly alive – and an historic opportunity to identify with ordinary people – to learn as he put it, ‘what was natural for a human being’. Thus he embarked on a life-long quest to unite feelings, ideas, and action.

As it turned out, the war did not provide Higgins with the kind of experiences he craved, because he arrived in France after the fighting was over. Released from the army in 1919, he entered Balliol College, Oxford, supported financially by his uncle. He soon tired of the University, which, he thought, was only valuable for making a career in the civil service or the universities. Still driven to find a life of meaningful action he was as likely at this time to model himself on Irish Nationalists as Russian Bolsheviks. In August during a cycling holiday in Ireland he declared in a letter to his sister, Nettie:

The most important thing these days seems to be to smash without worrying what is to be smashed … That’s why in Russia I’d be with the Bolsheviks
without worrying yet whether I liked their proposed reconstruction, and if I were an Irishman, I’d be a Sinn Feiner just to clear away one obvious part of the mess that has entangled Ireland. He decried the opportunism of parliamentary politicians, adding a remark that betrayed how much he was concerned with finding meaning in these events for his own political development:

    If the people in high places are hit sufficiently hard it will not be for them to do the rebuilding, and if the rebels do nothing at all they’ll at least have saved their own soul, and have given themselves as examples of that rare thing ‘sincerity’… There’s no particular row I want to kick up, or rather no one row … and I’d rather be in a row in Australia …

Alas, Higgins decided, the prospect for revolution in Australia was remote, although there were pointers to a class-conscious proletariat in recent strikes. So, if the process of smashing the old order were to spread, the example of Russia would be crucial, and the revolutionaries in Russia needed support. By this time he was part of a small group of supporters of the Bolshevik revolution within the Oxford University Socialist Society, and had joined demonstrations in London called by the ‘Hands Off Russia’ campaign to prevent the British government supporting the counter-revolutionary armies.

The leader of the Bolshevik group at Oxford was Andrew Rothstein, a fellow Balliol student whose father, Theodore Rothstein, was Lenin’s representative in London. Also at Balliol was Tom Wintringham, nephew of a Liberal Member of Parliament, and like Higgins a convert to the idea of politics as popular action. In June 1920 Andrew persuaded Hig (as his friends called him) and Tom to join him
working in a Soviet Commissariat in Moscow during the summer vacation. Because Britain was still officially at war with Russia, the group’s travel had to be arranged clandestinely, through the Russian Trade Delegation in London. But there was still the problem of obtaining credentials that would allow them to work in Moscow. This problem was presumably solved when the Communist International’s secret envoy to the Unity Convention of socialists that formed the Communist Party of Great Britain, L.B. Kamenev, wrote a letter of introduction for Higgins as he had for Wintringham. If so it would explain why he had to return at the end of July to London from Dijon, where he had gone to catch up on his reading, particularly on the materialist conception of history. He then had to wait anxiously for his visa, which he obtained early in August through the representative of the All-Russian Co-operative Society. After rushing back to Oxford to dump his books and pick up clean togs, he set out for Moscow.

The journey distressed him. He had to travel on his own to avoid arousing suspicion, because there was an Allied blockade of Russia. On August 16, having reached Stockholm, he wrote one of his typical notes to himself:

Going to Russia: I looked at it this way: as the Government had refused to allow me to go, though I gave the soulfullest of reasons, I will just go by some more subtle means. I should have looked at it this way: as the Government has refused to allow me to go, I may be sure that there will be everything [done?] in order to prevent people who want to go from getting there without great scheming, delays, expense, lying, fears of solemn punishments, suspense and mental agony.
He was in Stockholm either to put the Government off the scent or because he had not realised that the blockade would prevent him getting to Russia via the Baltic. After Stockholm he went west by boat out into the North Sea again and then across the top of Norway to Kirkenes, a tiny town on the Barents Sea, entering Russia finally at Archangel in the third week of August.14

Higgins spent about two months in Russia, but our knowledge of what he did is sketchy. He kept a diary, mislaid it, and told Nettie that it was permanently lost. Then, mysteriously, five months later it turned up in the post at Nettie’s address. It is no longer extant, although in the sixties there were some pages surviving, which were transcribed before they too went missing. He also wrote a 75-page letter to Nettie about his Russian visit but this too has disappeared.15 He kept his snapshots of Moscow, taken while sightseeing with Wintringham and others, and in the surviving fragments of Wintringham’s diary there are several references to Higgins.16 His friend from Melbourne University days, W.K. (‘Joe’) Hancock received a photograph of Hig, his mouth smothered in foaming toothpaste, with the caption, ‘The Argus Refuted’. Apparently, the newspaper had asserted that Bolsheviks did not clean their teeth.17

Theodore Rothstein, recently expelled from Britain, had influence at the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, so it is probable that this was where Higgins intended to work. However, it is unlikely that he did so, because he spent only about a fortnight in Moscow, and Tom Wintringham did not start his job, checking English and French scripts for Russian radio, until after Hig had begun his return journey to London. While in Moscow, Higgins shared a room with Wintringham at the Hotel
Lux, where important foreigners stayed. They explored the city together, on one occasion, while walking in the gardens outside the Kremlin wall, hearing a lover call his sweetheart, 'Tovarisch'. They laughed, 'for that is the word with which you preface a request for direction in the streets, or address a clerk in an office, or speak to Lenin'.

On 24 September Hig and Tom toured the Kremlin with a guide and permits arranged by Rothstein senior. They saw Trotsky in his car, and Hig took photographs of Wintringham and Andrew Rothstein. Tom is standing by the Kremlin bell, facing the camera, casually dressed, his shirt open at the collar, a confident recruit to the revolution from the English bourgeoisie. Andrew is seated sideways on a low wall, wearing a suit, hair slicked, neat moustache above compressed lips, a European intellectual ready to serve behind the scenes. In later years Wintringham went on to command the British battalion in the International Brigades in Spain, and to inspire and lead the Home Guard; Rothstein became a Tass journalist and Comintern historian. That evening, seated in the former Tsar’s box in a packed Opera House, they listened to ‘reports’ at a meeting organised by the Moscow Soviet. When Trotsky spoke, ‘conversationally, as if to acquaintances’, everybody rose to stand.

We do know how Hig reacted at the time to Russia’s contradictions and upheaval, and the momentous fact that he was experiencing the revolutionary ‘smashing’ that he had dreamed about. After he had been in Russia for a month he decided that he had ‘no right to be here’. Unhappily for a would-be man of action, he felt superfluous and excluded, for Russia was ‘too solemn, too strenuous, too hard-pressed to make room for others who come to look at it.’ The only foreigners who
ought to come, he recorded, fell into three categories. First, ‘delegates from
communist organisations on definite business’. He was not so privileged. Second,
‘people coming to work’, but only if they could ‘do something useful, know Russian,
and are prepared to stay for several months’ – and Hig met none of those criteria.
Third, ‘correspondents’, but only if they knew Russian and were already Communists
‘(and therefore can understand the purpose of the present dictatorship)’ – and Hig was
not yet a Communist. ‘But,’ he summed up:

> from my own point of view, I’m extremely glad I came, even though
> I’m only in the way. For the peep here has opened my eyes in a way
> nothing else could have done, and started me on new tracks.\(^\text{20}\)

So, ‘on new tracks’, he resumed his journey. Issued with travelling rations and a
permit, he left Moscow on September 25, carrying commissions to perform in London
for Tom, Andrew and his other Moscow friends. He was to proceed via Riga to Libau
on the Baltic coast, and then to England by ship. At the border with Latvia he
photographed a train load of refugees, although whether they were returning to their
newly-independent native land or fleeing it to work in the heartland of the proletarian
revolution, Hig did not record.\(^\text{21}\)

He finally arrived in England about October 13. Within a week of his return,
Higgins was invited by the Home Office to call at Scotland House, because ‘very
possibly you would be able to give us a great deal of extremely useful information’
about Russia. Hig replied politely that he would not be visiting London in the near
future.\(^\text{22}\) Perhaps his failure to co-operate was relayed to the College, whose Master
now assumed the role of ‘tough cop’. A.L. Smith, who was anyway known in Oxford
for his anti-Bolshevik views, took the opportunity to threaten Higgins with being
excluded from the College if he persisted with Bolshevik propaganda and failed to improve his academic progress. Prudently, Hig complied, telling his parents, ‘Balliol can’t afford to adopt any other policy’.24

The reason he could appear to conform was that privately his mind was made up. To his friends he was ‘more uncompromising’ and ‘grown up’. He too felt that he had become an adult, and referred to the time before his visit to Russia as his youthful years. He recognised that he now had little in common with the friends of his youth.25 This was the impact of a visit to Russia on Higgins: it had turned a youthful idealist into a Communist. Not a marxist, nor a revolutionary – he was those already, but a convert to a particular form of rule. As we saw, in Russia he had reconciled himself to ‘the present dictatorship’. Writing to his parents soon after his return to England, he explained it this way: through his visits he had gained ‘a tremendous admiration for the present rulers of Russia’. They had created ‘an absolutely different civilisation’. Having seen it, Hig declared that it ‘puts everything else into a new light’.26

That new light was a way to act politically, as a soldier in the vanguard of change. He tried to explain it to his parents, at first cautiously. He reminded them of his quest ‘to find out what the world was really like’, and of his determination to follow this investigation wherever it would lead. The trip to Russia, ‘though in a way only incidental to this investigation of mine, certainly helped to make me more “extreme” … No one can go to Russia with any sort of open mind without getting excited and becoming unpopular’. Moreover, these new ‘principles’ of action imposed a duty on him. It would be impossible to shirk them by getting a normal job. From now on he would live an ‘insecure’ life.27 In later letters he gradually revealed the
nature of his new life, which he began in the middle of 1921 after taking his final Oxford examinations. He was working in London, in the Labour Research Department, which the Fabians had set up but which was now controlled by young Communist intellectuals. He was one of them, his political beliefs ‘purely Communist’, which meant that he was not his own master: ‘a Communist is after all not so different from a Jesuit’. His only interest was the strengthening of the Communist Party’; his ‘only value to what I believe in lies in my being at people’s disposal’. He also worked on the Workers Weekly, where he wrote ‘to order’. He admitted that others must see him as ‘a narrow-minded bigot’, but that was only because he ‘hated things that were not useful to Communist agitation’. 28

This was his outlook when in 1924 he left Britain for Sydney, where the Communist Party [CPA] had its only sphere of influence, through the Labor Council. He had no illusions about the difficulty of Communist agitation in Australia. Because ‘conditions were less stringent’ than in Britain most Australian workers could still benefit from capitalism, and consequently, ‘the revolution in Australia is bound to be later than anywhere else’. However, Communists had to build the party ‘in readiness’ not only for the revolution in Australia but for the anti-imperialist struggle in Asia and the Pacific, which would be a vital part of the world revolution. In his mind, Australia was significant not because of its specific history but only for its place in the larger history of international capitalism and the Communist-led struggle against it. 29

When he made his second visit to Russia in 1928 he had risen in the Australian party to become the editor of the Workers’ Weekly (circulation 5000) and head of the party’s Agit-Prop department. 30 Yet there had been moments of political
disillusionment and exhaustion since 1924, and a demoralising undertow of doubt about his capacity to identify with the party’s proletarian activists. His Agit-Prop circulars (‘Do not fail to get busy …’; ‘Herewith are suggestions …’) had a marked school-masterly tone. His relationship with his partner, Joy Barrington, who was ten years younger than him and unaccustomed to abstract thinking and self-reflection, was unsettling. They had agreed that while Hig was overseas Joy would be free to find other partners. He was aware that his love letters to her while he was away showed him as ineffectual and lonely. Reduced to the role of mentor, he sent thirteen questions to advance her political education, recommended she read Bogdanov (‘It is the goods, and very interesting.’), and promised more questions later on ‘Bog’ for her to answer. He was returning to Russia as a dedicated Communist bureaucrat, but his four years in Australia’s feeble, faction-ridden branch of the International had disrupted the heady alignment of experience and belief that nurtured his earlier enthusiasm.

He was going to Russia ostensibly as a delegate to the Sixth Comintern Congress but actually to persuade the International to provide better leadership to the Australian party. Amongst the matters the CPA wanted resolved the most important was how to manage its relationship with Labor Party [ALP] activists in the trade unions and electoral organisations, for these activists stood between the Communist party and the working class that it sought to divert from reformism to revolutionary politics. The immediate question was whether to run Communist candidates against the ALP in the 1929 federal elections. One of the rival factions struggling to control the Communist party argued that recent growth of the party in Queensland, where a right-wing Labor government had been in office for 16 years, showed that it was time
to engage in head-on conflict with the ALP; the other faction believed that the situation in Queensland could not be generalised to the rest of Australia, where the party was too weak to lead the working class. When Higgins went to Moscow the majority faction was leaning towards the Queensland approach; Higgins was part of the minority that feared that confronting the ALP would weaken the strategy of building the ‘united front from below’.

After a month-long journey via Hong Kong, Shanghai, Harbin and the Trans-Siberian Railway, Hig reached Moscow in the middle of August, after the Congress had closed. He described how he spent the next five weeks ‘making a nuisance of myself, hanging around looking hungry, and writing innumerable reports’ for the Comintern’s various committees. It was hard work, but ‘other insignificant countries are loudly envious of the way in which our questions are being taken up’, so he had reason to feel confident. In fact, however, the Comintern did not know how to deal with Australia, which seemed to have no revolutionary tradition among either its ‘proletariat’ or its ‘peasantry’. So, its resolution on Australia did not come to grips with the CPA’s particular needs, allowing both sides of the argument about electoral tactics to feel vindicated. The notorious ‘class against class’ line that this Congress adopted for the world Communist movement held no challenges for the Australian party, which was already mentally prepared for it as a result of its failure to make headway against the ALP. Perhaps Hig sensed, as he wrote another of his self-analysing letters, that his efforts had been fruitless, for he decided that there was no point in his rushing back to Sydney to enter the debates before the next Party conference at Christmas. Instead, he would linger in Europe, ‘look around a bit’,
justifying himself with the thought that he would be able to return on the eve of the conference ‘like a blast of fresh air’.\textsuperscript{35}

Presumably he meant to give himself an opportunity to look around the heartland of world Communism. What did Russia mean to Hig, in the midst of all this busy politicking? Did it have an existence for him apart from the system of government of which he was an insignificant agent, and which he was vainly trying to influence? Of course he did some sightseeing. He saw the preserved body of Lenin, who ‘looked very small with a stubby ginger beard’. He went to some movies and a concert by the Moscow Komsomols, who displayed a ‘huge collective spirit’. In one of his postcards to Joy he reported that in Moscow there were ‘thrilling things to see and talk about’. But there were other things he did not want to talk about (issuing a warning to Joy to this effect), such as the fact that a pickpocket stole his notebook, that he was robbed of 48 pounds on the Moscow trains, that he was ‘diddled out of ’ another six pounds, and that an NEP shop wanted to charge him the outrageous price of thirty-five shillings to develop his films, so he declined to buy the service.\textsuperscript{36}

Back in Australia Higgins had several opportunities to describe his reactions to Russia, but these were occasions when he was fulfilling his party duty. On the anniversary of the revolution in 1929 he wrote an article for the \textit{Workers’ Weekly} with the heading, ‘Where the Workers Rule – Some of the Things that Make Russia Different – Reminiscences of a Visit, August-October 1928’. It consisted of a series of brief vignettes of places: the Trekhgorny cotton textile factory, a railway workers’ club, a prison workshop, a children’s home, and so on. At the cotton factory he notes that the directors were former workers; at the railway club there was a concert for
workers; he visited a former exclusive restaurant that was now a film studio for the Comintern organisation called Workers’ International Relief; and in the prison it was difficult to tell the prisoners from the warders (an irony he missed). On the Trans-Siberian train he was asked, ‘When are you going to have your revolution?’ He recalled that in 1920 two large churches blocked one of the main Moscow roads. In 1928, after a notice asking people to inform the authorities whether the churches were required, ‘one had disappeared and the other was being pulled down … The Soviet authorities were proudly laying asphalt where previously there had been only churches and cobbles.’

So the things that made Russia different, or at least ‘some of them’ - those that a Communist saw - were the attributes of a ‘proletarianised’ modernity: massification (at Trekhgorny there were 4000 female and 3000 male textile workers); roads and factories; organised culture for the masses; state-provided services; a propaganda machine; and workers’ participation in management. What Russia was not for Higgins was a geography and landscape, a region of the natural world. Nor, and this is to the point, did he describe a civilisation. Russia for Hig was not a culture (not even a political culture); it was certainly not a public; and nor was it a system of stratification – whether social, gendered, or ethnic. In fact, it would not be a great exaggeration to say that on his second visit Higgins went to Russia without seeing much of Russia at all. What he saw was a system of authority proudly laying asphalt.

Yet, even in 1928, this was not the full story of his enchantment with Russia. Because his search ‘to know what life is about’ predated his conversion to Communism and qualified his understanding of it, Higgins invested Russia with the
qualities of a community of sentiment as much as a society organised by ideology and power. He had as a young man embraced socialism as a way of connecting with other human beings, as a philosophy that could be embodied in personal relationships. As we saw, his fear of being ‘unsympathetic’ drove him to enlist in the First World War. The idea of fellowship underpinned his advocacy of democracy in education and in industry until the end of his life. So, it is impossible to believe that when he thought of Russia he did not idealise it as a space where relationships, unmediated by markets, were enriched by ‘good’ feelings – of solidarity, sharing, and mutual respect. When Hig went first to Russia his excitement was as much emotional as intellectual. In 1928 he could still thrill to this imagined world of socialist feelings, rejoicing in the ‘collective spirit’ of the Komsomol.39

Russia on this level merged with Hig’s own psychology, becoming an aspect of his relations with his comrades in Australia. And it was this imagined Russia, transported to the antipodes and projected onto the Communist movement, which let him down. The process of Hig’s defection was tortuous. Although he defended the role of the Soviet Government in international affairs until the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, his disenchantment with Communism had begun in the early 1930s. Significantly, the front on which it advanced was defined by interpersonal relationships, especially the inability of Communism to speak to ordinary people in Australia about their everyday interests and needs. This was not only a problem with Marxist language, more tellingly it was, as he put it in his shorthand style, ‘the Marxist type’ that was out of touch with ordinary Australians.40 He had in mind the militant and manipulative kind of intellectual that the Communist party produced, especially in the ‘Class against Class’ period.41 Higgins had never been
entirely comfortable with that mode of intellectual work, preferring research and
education to the battle of ideas, even in his most ‘Jesuitical’ days in the early 1920s.
His decision in 1936 to enter the field of full-time adult education was connected with
a moment of epiphany at Asquith on the rural fringe of Sydney (whither he had
retreated with Joy to escape party work), when Hig had a vision of perfect
‘persuasion’. It involved ‘solid [ie proletarian] blokes’ being engaged by intellectuals
through ‘patient, diffuse, deliberate personal contact and conversation about “human
interests” and assuming nothing [ie, no immanent proletarian class interest] but an
interest in living.’\(^{42}\) Communist intellectuals were, by implication, failing to persuade
because they were impatient, narrow, impersonal, and abstract in their thinking. And,
we should add, masculinist.

He had been coming to this conclusion (saving the critique of masculinism)
for some years, in the process of fighting for his strategic line in the party’s inner
circles. He reported one example of the attitude of Communist leaders that he
despised in a letter to his friend, the British Communist leader, Harry Pollitt. Whereas
Hig placed great emphasis as editor on making the *Workers’ Weekly* the voice of
militant workers, the leader of the opposing faction, Bert Moxon, remarked
‘contemptuously that workers’ letters should be put away somewhere together in a
couple of columns’.\(^{43}\) In 1930, Higgins lost the editorship when he was removed from
the leading committee of the party. He correctly interpreted his removal as not only a
victory for the opposing strategy on the Labor Party but also a change in leadership’s
understanding of the relationship between the Communist party and the working
class. The new leadership suppressed rival opinions, acted recklessly in
demonstrations, and exercised a ruthless control over the party’s membership. For
calling them ‘little Mussolinis’, Joy was suspended from membership until she made
a humiliating public retraction. By 1935 it was clear to Higgins that the entire world
Communist movement, under the influence of Stalin’s supporters, was exhibiting the
same characteristics. Communists had forfeited the right to regard themselves as
leaders of the oppressed workers and peasants of the world by aligning themselves
with the Realpolitik of the current rulers of Russia.

This was the fundamental cause of the bureaucratic degeneration of the
movement, Hig said, borrowing the idea from his Trotskyist friends, a degeneration
which could not be offset by the Comintern’s switch at this time to the more palatable
but opportunistic line of the united front against Fascism. Bureaucracy stifled
thought and turned comrades into apparatchiks. He was appalled by the Moscow trials
in 1936, concluding that Russia was so far from socialism that it had to shoot its
critics. In 1937 he foreshowed Leninism and the dictatorship of the proletariat,
because it led to Stalinism and was unnecessary in countries with a strong democratic
tradition. In 1938 he asked himself, ‘Am I still a Communist?’ - and answered that
he distrusted ‘Communist nationalism, and bureaucracy, and terrorism’. As he
moved through this disturbing period, the Russian experiment was constantly in his
mind, but so of course was the Australian branch of the international movement. The
failure of Communism in the heartland of the revolution was mirrored in the
peripheral Australian party. What he saw was hope withering, friendship betrayed,
and solidarity denied. Whatever positive role Russia played in combating fascism
would never compensate for its betrayal of the dream of a communism of shared
feeling.
Thus he reached the final stage of his defection. Disenchanted with Russia and with the dictatorship of the proletariat exercised through a Leninist Communist party, he joined the Labor Party in 1944. He directed his political energies into adult education, which he persisted in thinking of as workers’ education, hoping thereby to develop an alternative socialist practice, a pedagogy based on liberal tolerance, persuasion and democracy.\(^4\) He wrote a biography of one of the founders of workers’ education in Australia, gained a higher degree for a thesis on the Queensland Labor governments, and became an ABC radio commentator, confessing however that he often had problems of conscience in this latter role.\(^5\) In 1951, in letters to friends who had formerly been comrades, he was referring to himself as ‘a sort of Fabian with an over-attachment to democratic methods’, and as having ‘relapsed more and more into nineteenth century liberalism’. He never, however, relapsed into the Australian nationalism of his youth. Although he admitted that ‘putting all our hopes and principles on a revolution that had taken place in Russia’ was stupid, Hig’s recognition of Australian difference, and his own identification with his native country, did not make him a ‘nationalist’, nor in any uncomplicated way an ‘Australian intellectual’.\(^6\) This is important to understand: national identity was not destiny. Australia, like Russia, figured in his intellectual life as the site of an international project to move the history of the world into a socialist phase. As Communist or Fabian, liberal or Marxist, Higgins was always consistent in this respect.

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\(^1\) Terry Irving, ‘Defecting: Esmonde Higgins Leaves the Communist Party’, *Labour History*, number 87, November 2004, pp. 83-102. There is an entry on Higgins in the *Australian Dictionary of*


3 Esmonde Higgins [EMH] to Nettie, no date but mid 1916, and 27/11/18, Palmer Papers, National Library of Australia [NLA], 1174/1/53 and 1174/1/1704. Nettie Palmer, Esmonde’s sister, was thirteen years older. She guided his intellectual, political and emotional development from an early age.

4 EMH to his parents, 18/9/19, E. M. Higgins Papers, Mitchell Library [ML], Sydney, MSS 740/5.

5 EMH to Nettie Palmer, 9/8/1919, NLA 1174/1/2212.

6 Andrew Rothstein recalled Higgins’s 1919 doubts about Australia’s working class in a letter to EMH, 17/12/57, J. N. Rawling Papers, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University [NBAC], N57/190.

7 EMH to his parents, 6/4/19, ML MSS 740/5.


9 EMH to his parents, 9/6/20, ML MSS 740/6.

10 Purcell, p. 25.

11 EMH to Nettie, 8/7/20, ML MSS 740/7.

12 Note by EMH, no date, ML MSS 740/3/19/77.

13 Loose note in Higgins Papers, 16/8/20, now lost, but transcribed in 1960s by J. N. Rawling, see Rawling Papers, NBAC, N57/201. Higgins also wrote a letter to Nettie from Stockholm at this time, saying that he was alone – see Nettie to EMH, 25/9/20, ML MSS 740/8/371.

14 Higgins Papers, ML MSS 740/3/19/79. There is a police pass dated Goteborg 13/8/20, and a steamer ticket for Kirkeness, dated 16/8/20. Although there is no evidence that Higgins entered Russia at Archangel, this was Wintringham’s port of entry. See Purcell, p. 24.

15 Nettie Palmer’s diary for 1921, NLA MSS 1174/16/diaries (entries for 17 February and 31 March); Nettie Palmer to EMH, 25/9/20 and 16/10/20, ML MSS 740/8/371 & 377.

16 The photographs by Higgins – typically small, indistinct and deteriorating snapshots of the Kremlin wall, the square outside the Opera House, a cathedral, etc – are in E. M. Higgins papers: Snapshots of Moscow in 1920, and various family portraits, ca. 1885-1942, ML Pic.Acc.1303; Wintringham’s diary
is in the T. H. Wintringham papers, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College London, University of London, file 36, ‘Moscow 1920’.

17 W. K. Hancock to John Rickard, 15/6/1979. A copy of this letter was kindly provided by Jim Davidson. The photograph has not survived.


19 The quoted words are from Wintringham’s Moscow diary; the photographs are in ML Pic. Acc. 1303; for Wintringham’s career see Purcell, chs 7 to 12; for Andrew Rothstein, see Lazitch, p. 346.


21 Wintringham’s Moscow Diary; the photographs of refugees are in ML Pic. Acc. 1303.

22 W. H. A. Heald (Scotland House, S.W.1, London) to EMH, 18/10/20 and 21/10/20, ML MSS 740/11/131 & 133.

23 A. L. Smith to EMH, 21/10/20, ML MSS 740/11/137.

24 EMH to his parents, 31/10/20, ML MSS 740/6.


26 EMH to parents, 13/10/20, ML MSS 740/6.

27 EMH to his parents, 1/2/21 (marked, ‘not sent’), ML MSS 740/6.


29 EMH, notes entitled ‘Moralising while on S.S. Baradine’, no date, but June/July 1924, in NBAC N57/174.


31 EMH to Harry Pollitt, 30/8/26, ML MSS 740/7. Higgins and Joy spent the period between August 1925 and September 1926 freed from CPA responsibilities, working mainly in Victoria and West Australia.

32 These circulars are preserved in the National Archives of Australia, Canberra, A8911/1, item 56, Communist Party of Australia, Central Executive Letters and Circulars, 1929.


EMH to Joy Barrington, 20/9/28, ML MSS 740/7/233.

EMH to Joy Barrington, 20/9/28; postcard to Joy, 30/9/28 (from Moscow); postcard to Joy, 7/10/28 (from Moscow); EMH to Joy Barrington, 22/10/28 (from Berlin) – in ML MSS 740/7/233 and following.


EMH to Joy Barrington, 20/9/28, ML MSS 740/7/233.

EMH to Joy Barrington, 20/9/28; postcard to Joy, 30/9/28 (from Moscow); postcard to Joy, 7/10/28 (from Moscow); EMH to Joy Barrington, 22/10/28 (from Berlin) – in ML MSS 740/7/233 and following.

Workers’ Weekly, 8/11/29. In 1931 he made notes for a talk, ‘Have we anything to learn from Soviet Russia’; in 1932 he addressed a rowdy audience on behalf of the Friends of the Soviet Union at the University of Sydney, see NBAC N57/200.

A typical Higgins phrase. This particular formulation comes from a ‘moralising’ note written in 1937, see ML MSS 740/3/19/285, but it first surfaces in 1917.

EMH to Joy Barrington, 20/9/28, ML MSS 740/7/233.

Higgins, memorandum, 15/9/36, ML MSS 740/3/19.

Terry Irving and Sean Scalmer, ‘Labour Intellectuals in Australia: Modes, Traditions, Generations, Transformations’, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 50, part 1, April 2005, pp. 1-26. I use the term intellectual in the sense defined in this article, ie, as knowledge producers in (labour) institutions.


EMH to Harry Pollitt, 11/1/31, ML MSS 5762/2/11-18.

Joy Barrington to EMH, 27/5/30, NBAC N57/178.

Jack and Edna Ryan were his conduits to Trotskyism. In a letter to Andrew Rothstein in 1937 Higgins confessed that while he ‘agreed’ with the Comintern’s ‘united front’ turn he steered clear of arguments about the Soviet Union; see A. Rothstein to EMH, 9/7/38, ML MSS 740/12/209. Rae Frances, ‘Edna Ryan (1904-1997)’, *Labour History*, number 72, May 1997, pp. 244-5.
Between 1936 and 1950 Higgins taught university-based extension programs in Launceston, Auckland, Newcastle, and Sydney. From 1951 to his death he was Assistant Director, Department of Tutorial Classes, University of Sydney. In each of these places he offered positive support to the local branches of the Workers’ Educational Association.