

## Books and popular politics: communist bookshops in Interwar Britain

*Donnerstag, 11. September 2025 10:40 (20 Minuten)*

In the interwar period, the book-minded Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), believed that political change could only happen if workers read the right books. State-performed censorship was limited in peacetime and an increasing number of left-leaning books and were published, thanks to innovators such as Victor Gollancz, Ernest Wishart or Allen Lane. However, politically and economically conservative booksellers and librarians often prevented them from reaching their intended audience.

Creating a distribution network that would make communist ideas widely available thus became a priority. This paper mainly focuses on the Communist and Workers' Bookshops set up across Britain from the 1920s and on Collet's Bookshops, successful "Popular front" shops run and funded by Eva Reckitt from the 1930s. More temporary bookshops and the bookmobiles that were used to reach rural readers are also mentioned.

The bookshops connected to the CPGB catered for activists and were primarily committed to their political education. However, communist booksellers also tried to reach a wider audience and to alter the perception of bookshops as austere and exclusive places. Reading rooms were opened, meetings were organised, as well as more informal social events such as dances. At times, communist bookshops became places where a specific brand of popular politics came to life.

But they also faced multiple difficulties and remained somewhat marginal. Did communist booksellers manage to combine their political role to the practical and financial necessities of shop-keeping? How were they affected by the CPGB's shifting political line and by the Conservative indictment of communist literature, manifested in the passing of the Incitement to Disaffection Act? What were the gender and class dynamics in these bookshops?

This paper draws on a range of primary sources, including the Communist Party Archive, the British Library's "Book Trade Lives" series, publishers' archives, contemporary trade papers and MI5 Files at the National Archives.

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**Sitzung Einordnung:** Panel