

I Saw Democracy Murdered: The Memoir of Sam Russell, Journalist

By Colin Chambers & Sam Russell
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Sam Russell's career as a communist journalist and foreign correspondent began in Civil War Spain. It was the first – but, unfortunately, not the last – country in which he saw 'democracy murdered'.

Sam (born 1915) died in 2010. These memoirs are based on interview notes and recordings made by two of his colleagues at the *Morning Star* in the 1970s and 1980s – Colin Chambers and Chris Myant. As those who knew him will testify, Sam's personal voice was as strong and distinctive as the one he used in his writings. This book captures both voices to a tee.

Born in London to Jewish-Polish immigrants, 'Manassah Lesser' joined the Communist Party in 1934, enlisted in the International Brigades and fought to save

Madrid from Franco's Fascist forces in November 1936. Wounded and repatriated, he returned to Spain in 1937 where he served as an English-language radio broadcaster and then as the *Daily Worker's* Spanish correspondent. He also acquired his professional name: 'Sam Russell'.

Sam remained in Spain until almost the end of the Spanish Republic. Four decades later he returned to the Iberian Peninsula to report on the fall not just of Franco's dictatorship but of the Salazar regime in Portugal, too.

Sam's journalistic career was interrupted by a spell of wartime factory work and shop-stewarding but when the ban on publication of the *Daily Worker* was lifted in 1942 he became a home affairs reporter and after the war was appointed the paper's diplomatic correspondent.

Among his many memorable encounters as a foreign correspondent, the one that stood out for Sam was meeting Che Guevara just after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Che gave him a lecture on the pusillanimity of West European communists and about how armed revolution was the only road to socialism. Sam dutifully recorded and reported what Che said but the published interview was heavily edited and censored by *Daily Worker* editor George Matthews.

A running theme of the book is Sam's often prickly relations with Party leaders and the political appointee editors of the *Daily Worker* and its successor the *Morning Star*. His efforts at reporting the whole truth often rubbed against the requirements of the current Party line.

This was particularly true in relation to coverage of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Sam was *Daily Worker* correspondent in Moscow from 1955–59 and arrived on the eve of Khrushchev's secret speech to the 20th Party Congress. Sam was told about the speech by British comrades working in Moscow who had heard its text read out and tried in vain to report it as fully as possible.

Among Sam's good friends in Moscow was the former spy, Donald Maclean, and the book sheds interesting light on Maclean's character, politics and life in the USSR after his defection from the UK.

To an extent this is a memoir of regret in which Sam repudiates many of his communist beliefs. The disillusioning turning point was the Soviet crushing of Dubček's Prague Spring in 1968 – another event whose tragic aftermath he witnessed at first hand. He says the British Communist Party should have broken with the Soviets there and then, and that the only reason to stay in the Party was to oppose and criticise the Soviet Union from within the communist movement. But, as Sam himself admits, he was never active in the Party except as a journalist, and it was other like-minded comrades who mostly fought that battle.

Sam's own disappointments do not detract from this wonderful account of the idealism and commitment of his generation of communists. It is a book that from beginning to end is packed with amusing anecdotes, personal insight and acute political analysis.

Geoffrey Roberts