

The Legacy of Phyllis and Julius Jacobson

written by Kent Worcester | June 28, 2025

Third Camp Socialism — A Phyllis and Julius Jacobson Reader, edited by Kent Worcester and Paul Heideman, is published by Brill as part of the *Historical Materialism* book series. The Brill edition is high-priced, for libraries, but an affordable edition will be published in 2026 by Haymarket Press.

Kent spoke to Workers' Liberty about the project.



Julius and Phyllis Jacobson, 1940

Can you introduce Phyllis and Julius Jacobson, for readers who may not have heard of them previously? Why is their work important?

KW: The Jacobsons are perhaps best known for founding *New Politics*, which launched in 1961, and which is still being published today. They described themselves as third camp socialists and played a crucial yet under-appreciated role on the anti-Stalinist left as writers and editors.

Phyllis and Julius Jacobson led full lives. They fell in love as teenagers during the Depression. Phyllis Garden (1922-2010) was from Brooklyn. Julius (1922-2003) grew up in the Bronx. Their parents were Eastern European working-class Jewish immigrants. They came from neighborhoods where the language of rebellion and class conflict was ubiquitous. Phyllis's parents were old school social democrats. Julius's extended family were mainly Communist Party (CP) members, and fellow travelers.

Phyllis and Julius (Julie to his friends) were in their early teens when they defiantly gravitated toward the Trotskyist movement. The relevant meeting halls and gathering spaces were clustered around Union Square in lower Manhattan. This was convenient since their families were on opposite ends of the city. They admired speakers like James P. Cannon, Farrell Dobbs, and C.L.R. James. But they were closer to Max Shachtman and participated in the 1939-40 faction fight inside the Socialist Workers Party that resulted in the formation of the "Shachtmanite" Workers Party (1940-49).

Like most men of his generation, Julie served in World War II. He took part in the Battle of the Bulge

and the liberation of Paris. After the war, he oversaw the Workers Party youth work and was the driving force behind its decision to sponsor a third camp student magazine, *Anvil* (1949-60). For many years, he worked in the group's print shop and later ran a small machine shop. He also edited its theoretical journal, *The New International*, during its final half-decade.

Phyllis, a gifted and tenacious organizer, was the more naturally outgoing of the two. After high school, she led a thriving party branch at Brooklyn College. During the war she worked on an assembly line at General Electric. She eventually became a script reader for a major studio. Both she and Julie were leading members of the WP's successor organization, the Independent Socialist League (1949-58), until its dissolution.

Their writings tackle weighty topics: organized labor, civil rights, intellectuals, revolution and counter-revolution. For a variety of reasons, Julie was more prolific than Phyllis. He happily conceded that Phyllis was the better editor. They shared a special joy in skewering apologists for "progressive" authoritarianism. And they were delightful company. They enjoyed nothing more than a convivial meal with friends. The Jacobsons were only "hard" on a handful of topics, most notably race, labor, the Democrats, and Stalinism.

Their journal can be viewed as both an extension of and a departure from the WP/ISL project.

On the one hand, the Jacobsons invoked Shachtmanite terminology - "bureaucratic collectivism," "independent political action," "socialism from below," "neither Washington nor Moscow," and the like - long after they stopped paying membership dues. In keeping with the third camp tradition, their magazine stressed the intrinsic connection between socialism and democracy. It championed civil rights, human rights, and artistic expression. It published authors like Hal Draper (in the sixties), Dan La Botz, Thomas Harrison, and Richard Smith who are steeped in this tradition. And it offered a platform for Soviet bloc leftists, most notably in the case of Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski's widely discussed "Open Letter to the Party" (1965).

At the same time, under the Jacobsons' editorial leadership *New Politics* accommodated disparate opinions to an extent that seems incompatible with any kind of sustained organizational ambitions. Greens, Mandelites [followers of Ernest Mandel, one of the most prominent leaders of post-Trotsky Trotskyism], social democrats, council communists, radical feminists, and left liberals all found a home in its pages. When it came to roundtables and so on, the final word usually went to the nearest "left-Shachtmanite." Yet it is significant that the Jacobsons insisted on publishing a 'little magazine' in which third camp perspectives were merely part of the equation.

Their willingness to co-mingle with social democrats, non-Marxists, and nonconformist cultural critics may explain why Martin Thomas concludes that "Shachtman, Jacobson and Harrington got ground down into approximating left social democracy." This strikes me as unfair, not only to Phyllis but to the historical record. It minimizes the extent to which both Jacobsons remained stubbornly antagonistic vis-à-vis Democrats, the union bureaucracy, Cold War liberalism, and the like. The Jacobsons were not exactly optimists, but they retained an oppositional edge.

The Jacobsons I knew were preoccupied with producing the most engaging magazine possible on a shoestring budget. They "built low but on solid ground," as Leo Strauss said in a different context. They concentrated on immediate tasks such as drumming up new subscribers, encouraging new writers, drafting their own pieces. Their guiding assumption was that the level of strategic debate and political discussion needed to be raised across the American left. They were not wrong in this assumption.

All I can tell you is that Julie's childhood friend Irving Horenstein (Howe) would have been amused

by the suggestion that Phyllis and Julie, his bitter print media rivals, were anything other than incorrigible reds.

What's the background to this project? Who do you hope will read it?

There are two main audiences for *Third Camp Socialism: A Phyllis and Julius Jacobson Reader*. The first is those already "invested" in this tradition. The second includes anyone with a serious interest in the history of socialist thought. Both audiences might want to wait for the paperback edition, which will be out next summer. Librarians should order copies right away, however.

The background is as follows. I met Phyllis and Julie in the mid-1980s when they were tabling at a Socialist Scholars Conference. We immediately hit it off. After contributing a few pieces, they invited me to join the editorial board. When I tried shopping around a *New Politics* reader in the late 1990s, none of the publishers I approached expressed the slightest interest. The demand for books on socialist themes at that point may have been at an all-time low.

With the recent progressive revival, the time seemed ripe for a renewed push at raising the profile of the magazine and its founding editors. Someone pointed me toward the *Historical Materialism*/Haymarket series. When I learned that Paul Heideman was also putting together a proposal for a Jacobson reader, I reached out and we combined our efforts.

Paul is a generation or two younger than I am, but comes out of a broadly similar background. He has an interesting book out in November called *Rogue Elephant: The Republican Party Since Reagan* (Verso). We benefited from the advice we received from the book's advisory board: Lynn Chancer, Barry Finger, Thomas Harrison, Scott McLemee, and Daniel Randall. Daniel proved especially adept at identifying deep cuts to include along with better-known pieces.

If people on the left know about the third camp tradition, it's sometimes thought of simply as reflecting a doctrinal dispute over the class character of the USSR. But the material in the book shows third camp socialists developed nuanced perspectives over a whole range of issues, not just the analysis of Stalinism (although that was obviously central). Can you give some sense of that?

Even those who are familiar with the Jacobsons and their work will be impressed, I think, by the range and incisiveness of the material collected in this book. Rather than organizing the pieces in chronological order, we have arranged the book's twenty-seven chapters into five thematic sections: Social Movements, Left Debates, the Russian Question, War and Peace, and Students and Teachers.

This allowed us to front-end some of their punchiest material, such as "Coalitionism: From Protest to Politicking" (1966), "Union Conservatism: A Barrier to Racial Equality" (1968), "In Defense of the Young" (1970), "Kate Millett and Her Critics" (1976), and "Black Outrage in Los Angeles" (1992). The first three are by Julie, the latter two by Phyllis. We also placed Julie's "Isaac Deutscher: The Anatomy of an Apologist" (1964 & 1966) and "The Two Deaths of Max Shachtman" (1973) toward the front.

The middle section showcases Julie's "Reflections on Fascism and Communism" (1983) and Phyllis' "The Americanization of the Communist Party" (1986), as well as a series on Stalin and Stalinism that Julie penned after the fall of the Soviet Union. The closing sections recover pieces from *Anvil*, *Labor Action*, and *The New International*. I'm glad we were able to include Julie's fiery polemics on student movements and McCarthyism, most notably "Do Communists Have a Right to Teach?" (1949) and "Civil Liberties and the Philosopher of the Cold War" (1953). The latter is about Sidney Hook and was cowritten with Gordon Haskell.

In your interviews with the Jacobsons in the 1990s, you discuss their break with Hal Draper over the launch of the Independent Socialist Clubs in the late 1960s. They felt it was wrong to launch a new organization at that time. But in her contribution to the Oral History of the American Left conference in 1983, Phyllis had partially attributed the collapse of the first iteration of *New Politics* to the lack of “an organization to sustain us during the bad times.” What’s your view on this question? Was there a point at which you think it would have been viable for *New Politics* to evolve from being a journal into being a political organization?

It’s possible Phyllis had something like the ISL in mind when she made that comment. I never asked her. But she might have been referring to what *Dissent* achieved in terms of paid staff, a regular office, a donor base, money in the bank, and so on. We might be conflating two meanings of “organization,” in other words.

For the record, I never heard Phyllis and Julie express any interest in joining or leading a membership organization. Nor did they pay much attention to far-left gossip. Their general attitude was reflected in Phyllis’ response to Hal Draper, when he pressed them to join the newly formed International Socialists. She said it “wasn’t the season for that particular vegetable.”

On the other hand, they bemoaned the state of the magazine’s finances and were conscious of the fact that *Dissent* received support from private foundations that would have regarded *New Politics* as beyond the pale.

While the Jacobsons did not evince much interest in “party building,” they certainly sought to extend the magazine’s influence. They sponsored panels at Socialist Scholars conferences and Left Forum events. They backed the Campaign for Peace and Democracy (1982-2017), a human rights nonprofit led by *New Politics* editors Joanne Landy and Thomas Harrison that had a third camp orientation. They distributed bundles to political groups such as Independent Socialist Club branches in the 1960s, and so on.

In addition, Julie edited two *New Politics* collections, *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (1968) and *Soviet Communism and the Socialist Vision* (1973). Phyllis and Julie coedited the standalone volume *Socialist Perspectives* (1983). And they took satisfaction in the fact that several pieces that had appeared in the journal were widely reprinted, including Lewis Feuer’s “What is Alienation? The Career of a Concept” (1962) and Hal Draper’s “The Two Souls of Socialism” (1966).

Can you say something about the Jacobsons’, and *New Politics*’, relationship to the New Left? In that period, some non- or anti-Stalinist currents grew quite dramatically, as well as Maoism, which was obviously Stalinist but in a more oppositional geopolitical relationship with the USSR from the 1960s. How did the Jacobsons see that ferment? What was their view, and what’s your view, of why specifically Third Camp forces didn’t grow more in that period?

The Jacobsons’ decision to launch a “journal of socialist debate” was inspired by the achievements of the civil rights movement. They were thrilled when Berkeley’s Free Speech Movement erupted and provided a platform for campus leaders such as Mario Savio and Mike Shute. They were turned off by the unsavory politics and apocalyptic rhetoric of groups in the late sixties like Progressive Labor and the Weather Underground. Julie’s coauthored piece on “Neo-Stalinism: The Achilles’ Heel of the Peace Movement and the American Left” (1976), reprinted in our volume, touches on this issue. The question of why the third camp tendency flourished during the first “new left” and floundered during the second is harder to answer.

Who were the Jacobsons' main international correspondents and interlocutors? They published people from the "Cliffite" tendency in the UK (the International Socialists, later the SWP), including Tony Cliff himself, from a relatively early period. Who else did they see as potential international co-thinkers and allies? Did they have a view of what an international left regroupment might have looked like?

They did not have a position on "left regroupment" in the sense that you mean. Their horizons were lower than that. They had a decent track record of recruiting non-US writers. They published numerous articles, reviews, and symposia on Russian, European, and Latin American politics. Some of these contributors came from third camp or Cliffite backgrounds, but by no means all. Phyllis mostly handled the correspondence. Her focus was on maintaining a network of contributors rather than forging an international tendency.

Workers' Liberty supporters will be interested to know whether the Jacobsons took any view of our tendency's efforts to engage with and learn from the WP/ISL tradition. When we interviewed Herman Benson around the time we published the second volume of our *Fate of the Russian Revolution* anthologies, he was slightly bewildered as to why a small group in Britain would dedicate so much time and resources to republishing third camp material from the 1940s. Do you know if the Jacobsons had a view on this?

They were intrigued and a little bemused that a UK group was interested in this stuff. But they were preoccupied with other things. Phyllis had an incapacitating stroke in 2000, and Julie spent most of his waking hours at her bedside before he passed away in 2003. While they were happy to see the first *Fate of the Russian Revolution* volume, they were not here for the second.

There is still a wealth of valuable material from the archives that hasn't seen the light of day for many years. If only someone would reprint all twenty issues of *Anvil*, for example. Contributors included Simone de Beauvoir, Dwight Macdonald, Jules Feiffer, Arthur Miller, Harold Rosenberg, and Eleanor Roosevelt! That would be something.

This article originally appeared on Workers' Liberty.