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Obituary

Peter Gowan - Scholar of international politics who led support for eastern bloc opposition groups

Thursday 18 June 2009, by [GLENNY Misha](#), [KOWALSKY Halya](#) (Date first published: 17 June 2009).

Peter Gowan, activist and academic, born 15 January 1946; died 12 June 2009.

Peter Gowan, who has died of mesothelioma aged 63, possessed one of the most formidable intellects among young radicals from the 1960s New Left. He had a prodigious capacity for work and a conversational style that turned him into a supremely effective educator. From 2004, he was professor of international relations at London Metropolitan University.

On the board of the *New Left Review* (NLR) from 1990, he was regarded as one of its intellectual giants, who became ever more prolific during the past decade. Countless friends and students benefited from his knowledge of international politics and economics, whether in the Trotskyist International Marxist Group (IMG), at the schools and universities where he taught and lectured, or in the many countries where he was engaged politically.

Peter will be particularly remembered for his work from 1978, with his wife, Halya Kowalsky, as co-founder of the highly influential journal *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, which supported socialist and democratic opposition movements including Solidarity, in Poland, and Charter 77, in Czechoslovakia.

Editing the magazine under the pseudonym Oliver MacDonald (the surname was his mother's maiden name), Peter created an island of co-operation among the sea of factionalism that characterised the 1970s and 80s British left. He persuaded members of the IMG and the Socialist Workers party to lay aside their arcane dispute on the nature of the Soviet state. He sought out Labour party members disillusioned with the tacit support their party offered to eastern European neo-Stalinist regimes. From this he created an eclectic group of British and émigré activists who provided concrete support for eastern bloc opposition groups. Peter also produced one of the finest documentary archives of the struggle for democratic rights under communism.

Following the end of communism in eastern Europe, Peter sharply differentiated himself from the many voices that saw "actually existing capitalism" as the only horizon for the future. But it was to the field of international relations and political economy that he directed most of his intellectual energies in the last two decades of his life. In *The Global Gamble*, a prescient work published in 1999, he began a probing analysis of what he called the "dollar/Wall Street regime".

His department at London Metropolitan University became a significant presence in the international academic scene. He was much in demand as a conference speaker in Europe and the US, as well as Brazil, Argentina, China and South Korea, invariably impressing audiences with his

insight into the fundamental weaknesses of the new capitalist model.

Born in Glasgow, Peter moved with his mother to Belfast while still a baby. When he was nine the family settled in England, where he was educated at Orwell Park prep school, in Suffolk, and Haileybury school, in Hertfordshire. He then studied history at Southampton University, became interested in radical politics, and focused his study on the legacy of the Russian revolution.

He later dropped his postgraduate work at Birmingham University's Russian studies centre for involvement in the radical paper *Black Dwarf*. This drew him towards the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC), and later to Spain and the Middle East.

He first met Tariq Ali through the VSC in 1968. They became leading figures within the IMG, the British section of the Fourth International, one of the two main Trotskyist groups within the 1960s and 70s British left. Peter organised the IMG's youth wing, the Spartacus League, where his pedagogic skills were readily evident. He taught in London schools at this time before taking a job at Barking College, east London. It was within the crumbling infrastructure of public education that he was most likely exposed to the asbestos that led to mesothelioma.

I first met Peter when we shared a dormitory at a Prague summer school for students of Czech in 1980. Not a natural linguist, Peter had as his primary aim liaising clandestinely with leftist members of Charter 77 and offering support for their struggle. Many Labour Focus activists, including me, were inspired by Peter's commitment, and assisted in the smuggling of books, Xerox machines and other material of practical help to the dissidents.

In stark contrast to the sectarian battles elsewhere, Peter encouraged *Labour Focus* to become a forum for discussion of all political views, whether they reflected his own socialist ideas or not. I owe him a huge personal debt for encouraging my interest in eastern European politics and introducing me to many leading opposition figures there.

The many students whom he guided through undergraduate and postgraduate work at North London Polytechnic (now London Metropolitan University) were grateful for his patient support and illuminating lectures. Peter was "one of the most generous comrades I have ever known, without a trace of ego," recalled Ali. "He was good with everyone, whether a student, a comrade or a celebrity, and he was a natural teacher."

Peter was diagnosed with his fatal illness only a couple of weeks after the onset of the world financial crisis. Despite knowing that his condition was terminal and his health fast-deteriorating, he not only bore it with good humour, but bravely continued to work to the limits of his capacity over the following months: his article for the January-February 2009 issue of *New Left Review* provides a succinct account of how he interpreted the origins of the financial crisis.

He met Halya in 1973. She survives him, as do their three sons, Ivan and the twins, Boris and Marko.

Misha Glenny

* From [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), *The Guardian*, Wednesday 17 June 2009.
[http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/...](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/)

"It is with great sadness that we write to inform you that Peter died at 9am on Friday 12 June"

It is with great sadness that we write to inform you that Peter died at 9am on Friday 12 June. On Wednesday he had a severe problem breathing and was taken to hospital, where he died two days later in his sleep with his family around him.

Up until early this week Peter was still very active and spent time in his local cafe enjoying a coffee, spaghetti bolognese (with chilli oil) and the Financial Times with friends and family. He battled against the cancer with great courage, strength and determination, without complaint until the very end. He maintained his good humour and ability to put people around him at ease. He faced his future head on and spent many hours helping his family come to terms and plan for the future.

Peter played a huge part in our lives and we will miss him dearly. He has influenced many lives with his generosity; and thirst and enthusiasm for knowledge and sharing; and his sense of adventure.

The funeral will take place on Saturday 20 June from 11am to 12 at Golders Green Crematorium, 62 Hoop Lane, London NW11 7NL (the nearest tube is Golders Green on the Northern Line). Following the funeral there will be a wake in Highgate.

His wish was to set up a fund to be able to award a prize to a graduate student in International Relations at his University, The London Metropolitan University. We have decided to set up this fund through the Lipman-Miliband Trust which for the last 30 years has been dedicated to socialist education and research. If you would like to contribute to this prize fund there are several ways in which you can do this:

Money should be sent by cheque to

By Cheque

Make cheques payable to Lipman-Miliband Trust with reference on the back of the cheque to Peter Gowan Prize Fund and post to:

The Lipman-Miliband Trust, Flat1
22 Chalcot Sq, London
United Kingdom, NW1 8YA

By Direct Transfer

Please credit our account number:

CAF Bank account 00090866
sort code 40-52-40

reference P Gowan Prize

By Foreign Direct Payment

If you would like to make a payment from abroad please send in the following way:

Lipman-Miliband Trust registered charity No267288

Bank account no. 00090866

sort code 40-52-40

reference P Gowan Prize

HSBC, Poultry and Princes St Branch, London

Swift Branch ID Code BIC MIDLGB 2141W

Favour CafBank Ltd

Sort Code/Acct No. 400530 72138549

IBAN No GB48MIDL4005307213 8549

On behalf of Peter and the family thank you for all your kind words and messages of support over the last couple of months.

Halya, Boris, Marko and Ivan