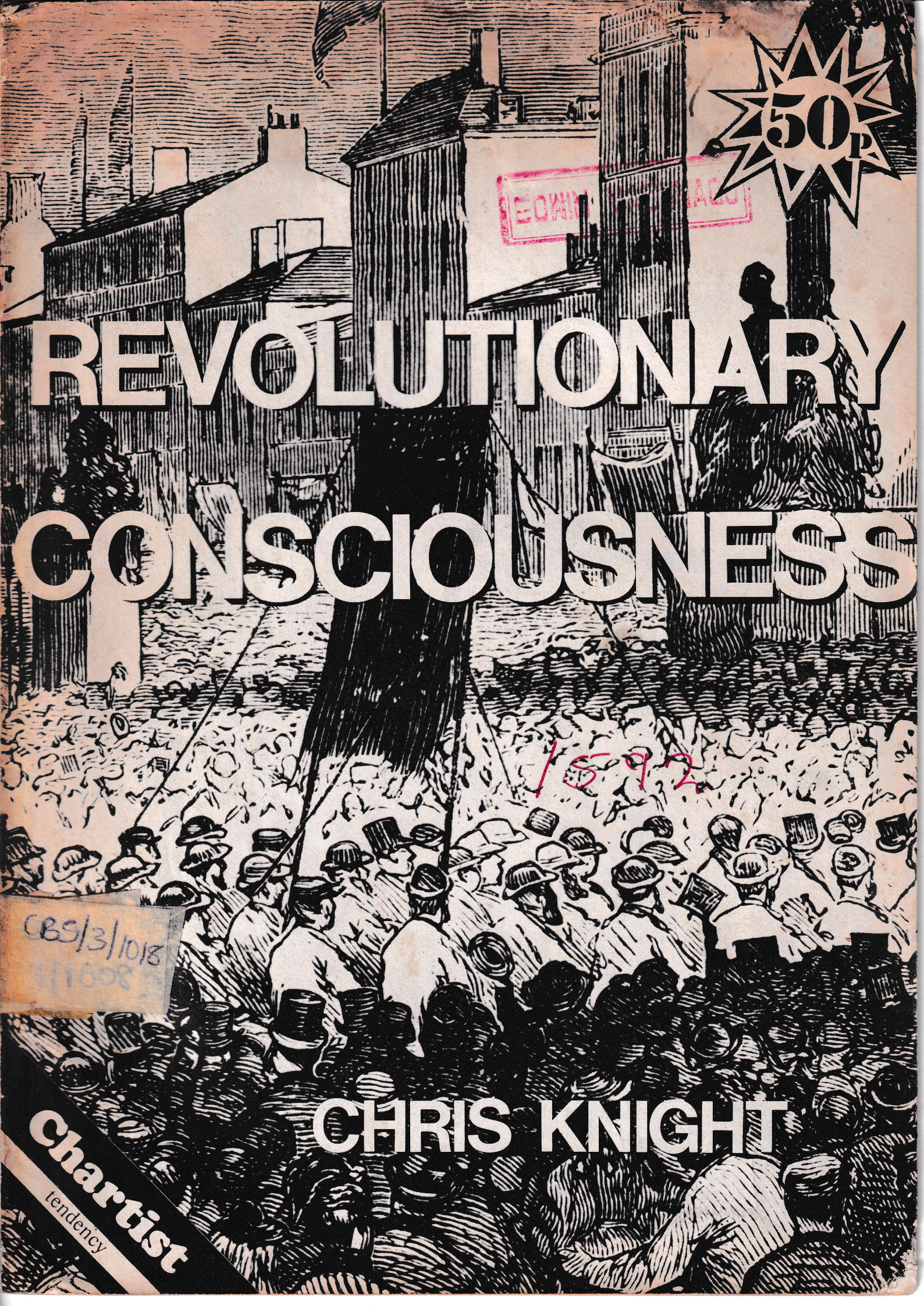
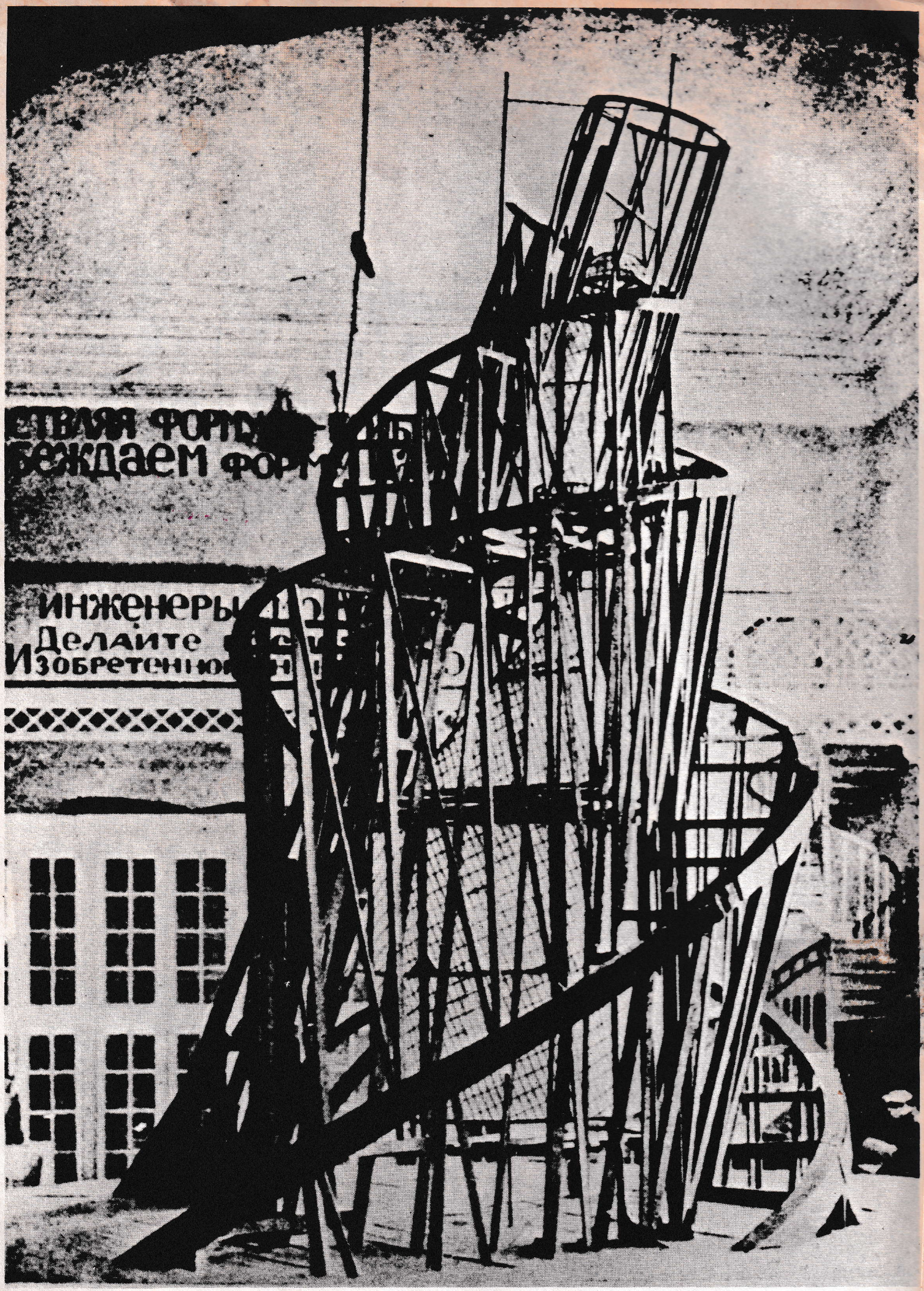

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REVOLUTIONARY
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Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the IIIrd International*, 1919–20

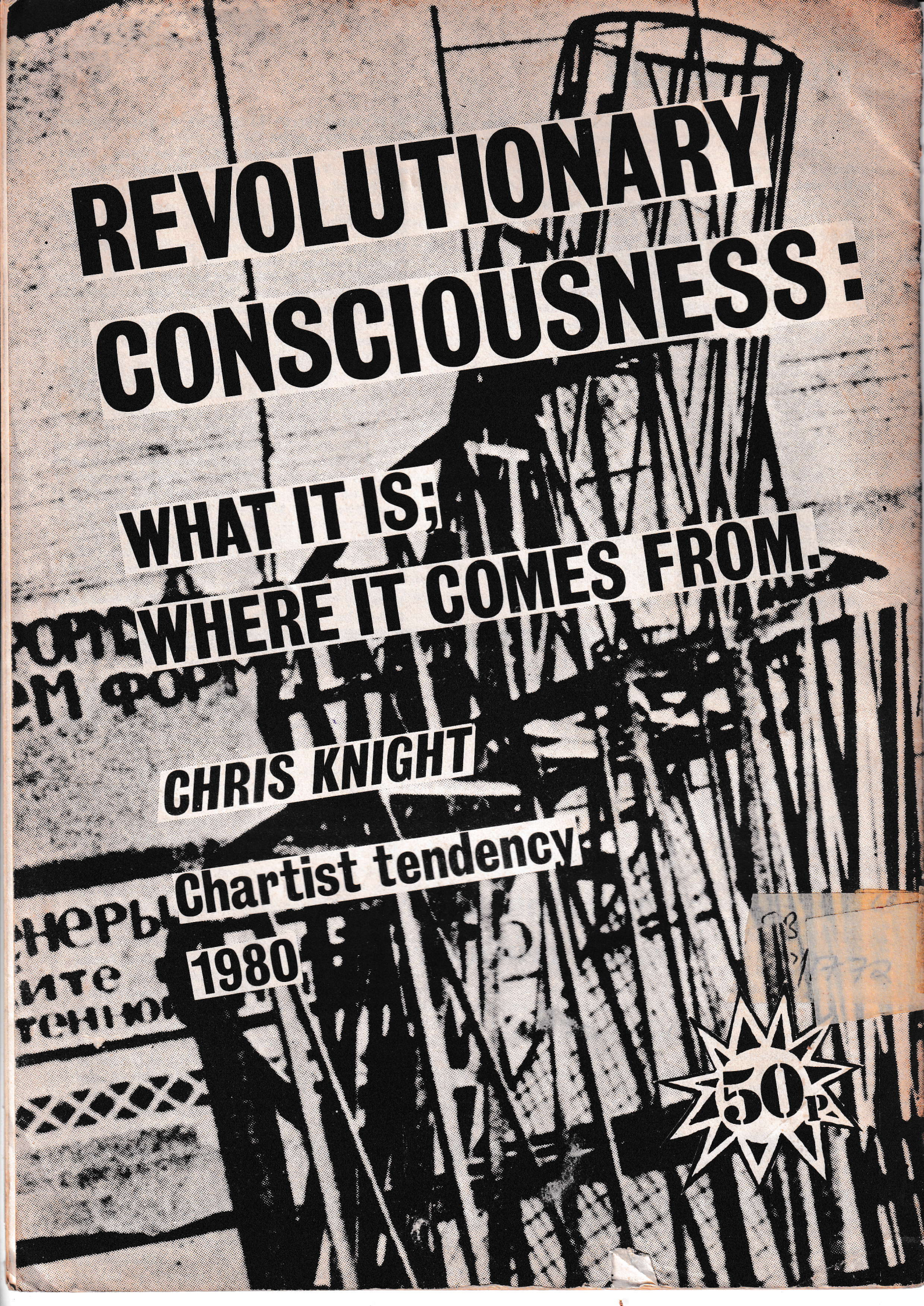
particularly in the writings of Marx and Engels, in the Paris of 1870 or the Germany of 1848. When it came to the demands of the situation in 1917, *this* sort of "conservatism" — the ability to preserve the experiences and the lessons of 1848, 1905 and so on through all the defeats and set-backs of the intervening years — was an absolutely vital precondition for the success of the greatest leap into the future ever undertaken in historical time.

The real test of a revolutionary leadership is of course its ability to keep in touch with the *actual* pulse of events, to know what *real* forces it can command, to change and adapt to *actual* swiftly-changing circumstances as they arise. It must know how to speak a language which real workers can feel as their own. But just as the fastest-moving animal needs a backbone, so the most "flexible" revolutionary leadership must have something hard and stable at its core. A *certain* immobility and conservatism — on a certain level — has its necessary place. In order that the workers of Petrograd in 1917 should find adequate political expression for their own strivings and attempts to act, something more than "flexibility" on the part of their leadership was required. There had to be already in existence what might almost be called a "fossilized" preservation of the traditions of 1848, of 1870, of 1905 and of every other European revolutionary experience — embodied in the heads and actions of politically-organized groups and parties — available for reanimating or bringing back to life. A *pre-existing* revolutionary leadership steeled in revolutionary experience and embodying a revolutionary culture and tradition had to be there. This leadership might have seemed to many in the immediately-preceding period to have been "wrong", "dogmatic", "orthodox", "fossilized" and so on — but it rather suddenly began to seem "right" once again now. In this sense (and the statement needs, of course, to be heavily qualified) there is always *an element* of the proverbial "stopped clock" (which tells the correct time, but only twice every 24 hours) in every genuinely revolutionary Marxist party or leadership. To take only the example of one individual, Leon Trotsky might have seemed, to many, "right" while he was Chairman of the St. Petersburg Soviet in 1905, but then "wrong" while he was in relative isolation between 1907 and 1917, then "right" again from early 1917 until about 1923, then "wrong" again by and large from then until his death — and finally "right" to many of us in the revolutionary movement throughout the world today. Trotsky's *positions* were not substantially changing in these various periods. It was the conditions in which his ideas were being expressed which changed, and which made the ideas seem mainly "right" at one time, mainly "wrong" at another. In periods of downswing and reaction, Marxists — all of us — are "wrong". Our views don't correspond with "commonsense". Our "logic" doesn't seem superficially to be the "logic" of the world we are living in at all, but is the logic of some other world. But this doesn't mean that we are dreamers or just mad. The point is that we represent the *underlying* necessities of social development rather than the surface demands, the *permanent* objective requirements of the working class rather than its changing perceptions of its own needs.

8 The future

In short, to the extent that events are against us, we represent the *future* strength of the working class, rather than the forces which exist in the *present*. Yet this "future" — if it is to mould our ideas in a scientifically adequate way — must in turn have received material embodiment of some kind already. It must already have been anticipated by history itself in the form of some "premature" pre-revolutionary crisis — in the form of an experience of crisis giving a glimpse of the future, and moulding our own consciousness in a relatively permanent way. We ourselves — the Chartists and most of the revolutionaries of our generation throughout Europe — have indeed passed through such a "premature" experience of crisis. It may be said that it began with the events in France and Czechoslovakia early in 1968 and came to an end (partially and in certain respects) with the oil crisis, the beginning of the present world recession and other events (including the revolution in Portugal and the overthrow of the Heath Government in Britain) in 1974. The dates are pretty arbitrary, but they help to delineate the characteristics of a period which has passed. In many respects, it was a period of youthful optimism and insubstantial, immature revolutionary fervour (particularly on the part of students) quite strikingly like the year of revolutions in Europe in 1848. A cultural revolution has begun to get under way as a result, the women's movement being one of its most precious manifestations and products. In the realm of sexual politics, anthropology and all the social sciences, an immense intellectual ferment is taking place. Ideas which would have seemed almost crazily far-fetched only ten years ago are now becoming (albeit within overwhelmingly middle class revolutionary circles as yet) almost commonplace. This crisis of consciousness *within* the bourgeoisie — nourished by the ruling class experience of crisis which has remained endemic since the late 1960s — is one of the best possible auguries for the success of the workers' revolution in Britain and throughout Europe and much of the world at a later date. It is not revolutionary consciousness in and of itself. That can make itself felt only to the extent that — through organization in the trade unions, the trade union-based mass parties and a united revolutionary alliance — workers themselves are proving invincible as a class and are becoming aware of their own strength. But in embryo, the necessary ingredients are there.

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REVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS:

WHAT IT IS; WHERE IT COMES FROM.

CHRIS KNIGHT

Chartist tendency
1980

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