

AN EXCHANGE WITH HOWARD FAST

I: MY DECISION

HOWARD FAST

Several weeks ago the world-renowned progressive novelist, Howard Fast, granted an interview to Harry Schwartz of the *New York Times* declaring his wish no longer to consider himself a Communist. Among the factors determining his decision, most prominent was his disillusion because of past events in the Soviet Union and his disbelief that any radical change had taken place since the death of Stalin and the Khrushchev report.

Mr. Fast's announcement must be a blow to thousands of members of the Communist Party in whose minds he had been identified with every good cause for which they had fought as well as he. But many others, too, were disturbed by his act and particularly questioned the release of his statement through the medium of a newspaper which is surely no friend of the American progressive movement, of which Mr. Fast considers himself a part, as evidenced by the conclusion of his article. We, also, felt that he was most ill-advised to take this step and we therefore urged him, a former member of our editorial board, to state his position in our pages. We told him that we would, of course, comment on his declaration. Mr. Fast accepted our invitation. His article follows.—*The Editors*.

RECENTLY, I took the step of publicly severing my connections with the Communist Party of the United States; and in an interview with the *New York Times*, I presented some of the reasons for this decision of mine. Now I am asked by the editors of *Mainstream* to state my position more fully, and I have decided to do so in terms of communism and morality.

What follows is not a justification of my action, but an explanation. I took this action for two reasons; firstly, as the only extreme protest against the course of events in the communist world that I saw as being meaningful and purposeful; and secondly, because I feel that the Communist Party of the United States—mostly through events beyond its

control—is compromised to a point where it can no longer make any effective contribution to the continuing struggle for democracy and social justice. I feel that I must state this as a beginning to make my position very plain.

Looking back at my life, I find two major forces that brought me to communism. The first was a maturing belief in the goodness and inevitable brotherhood of man—a brotherhood in peace and common creativity. In this belief, I learned my equalitarianism out of the Prophetic teachings of Judaism, the love and brotherhood of man preached by Isaiah, and the morality, in terms of the poor and oppressed, of Jesus Christ. My democratic understanding was based on the writings of Jefferson and Lincoln.

The second force was an understanding of the role of the working class in modern history. The working class I was born into, and I studied it well through the first eighteen years of my life. I began to understand its historic role through the works of George Bernard Shaw, Jack London, Upton Sinclair and C. Osborne Ward. Later, in the process of self-education, I was able to read and understand the work of not only Marx and Engels, but of Mill and Veblen and Darwin and Morgan—and many other related Marxist and non-Marxist social thinkers.

I became a Marxist within my own personal structure, as I think many people do. I have been characterized as a religious person, and while I will not deny this within a broad frame of reference, my religion does homage to man, not to the supernatural. If a deep and unshakable faith in the goodness and splendid destiny of man is religious, then I must own to that.

I joined the communist movement for two reasons. I believed that in the Communist Party was the beginning of a true brotherhood of man, working with devotion for socialism, peace and democracy. Secondly, I believed that the Communist Party offered the most effective resistance to fascism. As a part of this, I believed, as did millions of men of good will, that the only truth about the Soviet Union was the picture presented by friends of the Soviet Union.

In these beliefs I will not admit to being anyone's dupe. Hindsight is all very well, but let us also use it to recall that during the past generation, millions of the finest and clearest minds in the world shared these beliefs. If I was slow in recognizing certain facts, recall the savage persecution of Communists this past decade in America. Whatever the truth of Russian police rule, the Truman government seemed determined to create a police state that would outdo it. That was not a time when clear and objective thinking came easily.

Nevertheless, I and others within the Communist Party realized that something was tragically wrong in the world communist movement long before the Khrushchev "secret speech" appeared. We were asked to swallow such absurdities as the Soviet theory of "cosmopolitanism." We saw Jewish culture disappear in Russia, and all our pleas for an explanation brought only silence. We saw capital punishment reinstated with a vengeance.

We also witnessed many disturbing internal factors in the Communist Party of the United States, a destroying rigidity and unbendingness, a narrowing of approach and purpose that made it impossible for many good people to remain within it.

These things marked a process of development, both in myself and in many others. Yet it did not prepare us for the explosive and hellish revelations of the Khrushchev "secret report." The dimensions of this horror were not only beyond anything we could have dreamed of—but also beyond, far beyond, the worst accusations of the worst enemies of the Soviet Union.

My own reactions to this unspeakable document are a matter of public record, for I spelled them out in the New York *Daily Worker*. I was filled with loathing and disgust. I felt a sense of unmitigated mental nausea at the realization that I had supported and defended this murderous bloodbath, and I felt, as so many did then, a sense of being a victim of the most incredible swindle in modern times.

I also experienced for the first time the limitations of the man, Khrushchev, not only in his describing the hell he pictured as the work of one man, but in the cynicism of his definition and explanation of this as "the cult of the individual"—an explanation not only empty, but almost facetious in its unrelatedness to the events it describes.

A leading French communist intellectual, reading what I wrote in the *Worker* on this occasion, sent me a bitter letter (in English) charging me with playing into the hands of the enemy. "As you may have seen in the papers," he wrote, "following the publication by the bourgeois press of the report credited to Comrade Khrushchev, it (the French Communist Party) asked the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to give a more complete theoretical explanation of the serious wrongs attributed to Comrade Stalin. The Soviet Communist Party then issued a statement implying precisely this theoretical analysis, a statement which forms a document of major importance to every militant of the working cause and which has enabled the working class parties to make a sound appraisal of the ideas already involved."

Heaven help us!

I will not deny that I can never again be the person I was before I read that report. Then something broke inside of me and finished, but I waited nine months before I took the step I am explaining here. I waited because it was my whole life as well as the lives and hopes of so many dear friends that was involved; I also waited because friends whom I respected argued thus:

"Surely it is better to face the reality of this thing than to live in contented ignorance of it. Remember that the Soviet leaders themselves brought it into the open. Now things will change. Stalin is dead. New leaders are in power now. They must change."

It was at least a hope—a hope that the Soviet Union would pick up the banner of socialist democracy and perhaps begin to reclaim a world moral leadership, a leadership it had lost.

WHAT was the result of that nine months? I specify it, not as an indictment, but simply as a record of objective fact to which I reacted. First, there were the additions to the "secret report." We learned of the liquidation, in 1939, of the leading Communists of Poland—hundreds of the noblest and bravest men in Poland, murdered by Stalin and the men around Stalin. From a story in a Polish communist-Yiddish paper, *Folksbtimme*, we received our first "valid" proof of what had happened to Jewish culture in the U.S.S.R.: the extinction of every Yiddish newspaper, magazine, school, printing press—and the legal murder of a host of Jewish writers and cultural leaders. From an eye-witness report in the *Manchester Guardian*, we got the story of how some twenty elderly Jews were sentenced to from three to ten years imprisonment—for the possession of Zionist literature. From a host of sources, we learned of the fear, the pervading terror among Soviet Jews.

How do we account for such behavior after six million Jews were murdered by Nazism?

To continue: from the Soviet Union itself we learned of two more executions, and the blood hardly dry on the Khrushchev report! From Khrushchev himself we were treated to a new mode of diplomacy—diplomacy by insult and vulgarity. From the crisis in Egypt we learned of the new brink-of-war tactics of Soviet foreign affairs. For the first time, in relation to Israel, we witnessed the elevation of anti-Semitism to foreign policy. In November, 1956, Premier Bulganin sent notes to Great Britain, France and Israel. The notes to Britain and France were both reasonable and conciliatory in tone; the note to Israel was couched as an ultimatum in a tone both shrill and insulting. Since Israel was the least culpable of the three, and the only one of the three acting in

terms of direct national security, the uncontrolled prejudice was both apparent and significant.

From Hungary and its tragedy we learned of a new kind of socialism—socialism by slaughter and terror.

From Poland, where a struggle within the Communist Party was being waged between the Gomulka forces and the Soviet-backed forces, we learned only recently of how the Russians had attempted to swing the election to their own adherents by the use of anti-Semitism.

I itemize only a little, for my space is limited, but there must be an itemization because this is a connected picture. In June, 1956, our expressed hope was that Russia would do away with capital punishment, not only because this was implicit in the "secret report," but because criminology and history have demonstrated the futility and senselessness of this barbaric process. It would have required only a decision of leadership, but instead, while the dead made dead unjustly were being reinstated, the heads of the living continued to roll, without any proof of their guilt presented publicly. And all this after Khrushchev's long and terrible revelation of the results of secret trial and execution.

So with habeas corpus, so with self-incrimination. We have had news recently that guilt by confession alone would no longer be part of the Soviet legal system; but this is a far cry from the meaning of our Fifth Amendment, which guarantees that no accused can be forced to give evidence against himself in any form. The contrast of a socialist state claiming to be the highest type of social organization on earth, yet lacking the rudimentary legal rights and protections which both the United States and England grant their citizens is thought-provoking, to say the least.

Friends point out that it is not to be expected that Russia should have the same legal procedures as the West. A communist lawyer said to me recently, "But these have never been part of their legal code in Russia or anywhere else in Europe." That is to the point, and neither has there been socialism in Europe before. The incredible thing is that this is a socialism which denies and derides the democratic process. Yet it is socialism. Economically, Russia cannot be regarded as anything else but a socialist state, and economically, this Russian socialism works. No one can evade the evidence of production statistics; the growth of the Soviet Union as a socialist industrial force is beyond argument, and speaking economically and in a sense, socially as well, a miracle has been performed in forty years.

But one cannot discuss socialism economically and leave it at that. In Russia, we have socialism without democracy. We have socialism

without trial by jury, *habeas corpus*, or the right against self-incrimination, which is no more or less than protection against the abuse of confession by torture. We have socialism without civil liberty. We have socialism without the power of recall of government. We have socialism without public avenues of protest. We have socialism without equality for minorities. We have socialism without any right of free artistic creation. In so many words, we have socialism without morality.

Perhaps the cruelest and strangest development of history is the appearance of socialism under the domination of totalitarianism. And unless this is seen and faced and dealt with by the Left, both Communists and Socialists, then the present agony of mankind will continue far longer than it has to.

A ruling class can give only lip-service to morality; a dictatorship must eschew it as the sinner eschews his conscience. Yet what is morality—in its truest, deepest sense—but the ideology of the oppressed? From whence came the prophetic writings of Israel, the preaching of Jesus Christ, but from the tortured lips of the oppressed? I speak not of the dogma of the Church, but of the ethical content itself; and was it not this same ethical content that provided the first revolutionary ideology for the struggle against feudalism? The positive side of an ethic is in an understanding of the togetherness of mankind; this never changes; the ethic is the plea for equalitarianism, the human embrace of brotherhood, love and tolerance. The other side of the ethic is against oppression, for there is no brotherhood without freedom and human love cannot flower without liberty.

It is said of Rabbi Akiba that a heathen came to learn the Talmud. The rabbi told him, "It is not difficult. The substance is thus—love thy neighbor as thy brother. All the rest is commentary." Yet it was this same gentle Akiba who supported Bar Kochba in his glorious, pre-doomed revolt against Rome. Seemingly, these qualities are opposites; actually, they are one, for there is no freedom without brotherhood and no brotherhood without freedom. This is the basis of the ethic, the core and heart of it; and tyranny is immoral precisely because it interdicts the freedom which is not only the bread and wine of man's dignity but also gives him access to the bread of life. It was no accident that Jesus Christ, like the earlier prophets, preached more against temporal tyranny than against codified sin; it was precisely this that made him Christ.

IT IS equally no accident that the Russians contribute so little on the question of ethics. Ethics, fostered by the men in the Kremlin, could only amount to an invitation to resist them in their power. And there is

less importance in the fact that the "secret report" was an immoral document than that it imposed a moral necessity. It was a confession, not of sin, but of the vilest oppression—apart from fascism and colonialism—that the twentieth century has known; and the necessity it imposed was that the tyranny—call it a dictatorship of the proletariat or what you will, it remains tyranny—that had created and practiced this oppression should open the door to morality by removing itself from government.

It is also neither an explanation nor an excuse to quote the history of Russia under the Czar. We talk here of socialism, and if socialism is a science, such explanations only degrade the men who claim to lead it. There is nothing either racial, geographic or mystical about democracy; it is a stage in the development of civilized man within his social structure; and the Russian leadership's contempt for democratic process is only a commentary upon their own socialist understanding—or lack of understanding. Savage and intolerant "Puritanism" has never been a substitute for knowledge.

I remember well the violent moral judgment that the Soviet writer, Ilya Ehrenburg, delivered upon the Nazis and the hardly less violent denunciation of the Americans. But when Ehrenburg became aware of the content of the "secret speech," we waited in vain for his wrath, his righteous anger or his moral indignation. Strangely, for a man who had seen and judged Nazism as he had during World War Two, he evidently found nothing in the murder of Jewish writers and poets and journalists to protest.

Though Jewish himself, Ehrenburg survived, for evidently a variation of the "honorary Aryan" exists in the Soviet Union.

I met Ehrenburg in Paris after that. I did not know that the Yiddish poet, Itzik Feffer, was dead; for me, he still existed as I had seen him in New York years before, handsome and tall and proud in his Red Army uniform. On this occasion, I was chewing gum, as I often do, and Ehrenburg characterized it boldly and bluntly, as a bestial practice. As a gum chewer, I was morally judged by him, and perhaps rightly so, for in a large degree, this judgment characterized his understanding of morality. The ridiculous and the terrible often walk hand in hand. That Howard Fast could indulge in this barbarism of chewing gum injured Ehrenburg's sensibilities, even as the man who remained seated when a Victorian English lady entered the room offended her sense of the decent and fitting. But the moral response was no deeper than the Victorian manner. In a popular Soviet novel, a leading novelist pursued this line in describing how two sex-starved people, a soldier and a nurse, each of them celibate for years, spent a tortured night in the same room,

each yearning toward the other, each upholding the honor of a Soviet citizen through abstinence. When this writer, here in America, was challenged as to the validity of such a picture, he replied, "Our people like it that way."

Without begging the question of a writer's responsibility toward reality, is it true that any people like it that way? These are not petty examples; they are definitions of a fake prudery, a childish parade of virtueless virtue that is substituted for real ethic and real morality.

IT WOULD be both wrong and malicious to make any comparison between this Soviet tyranny and the tyranny of fascism; but my rejection of such a comparison does not lessen the culpability of a totalitarian socialist leadership. The Hitlerian state, which abandoned morality for racism and bestiality, embraced ignorance and the vilest medievalism, plunging headlong almost from the moment of its creation toward its final destruction in the holocaust of World War Two. The dynamic of the socialist state, even as it exists in Russia, is something else indeed. As much as the dictatorship at the top may reject and fear the truth in this area or that, the social and economic structure of the state itself propels toward an enlarging area of knowledge. A whole generation of engineers, atomic scientists, biologists, physicians, physicists, astronomers and a hundred other scientists and artists cannot be lulled or tranquilized forever with copybook maxims unrelated to the reality of life. The material concern for the health and welfare of the people, as demonstrated by the wonderful and amazing strides of the Soviet medical and health services must come into sharp conflict with the "Genghis Khan" attitude toward human life and humanism that was and still is exhibited by the leadership. And most sharply of all, the very teaching of a Marxist and materialist approach to history must inevitably challenge and unmask the crude corruption of Marxism that has taken place in the Soviet Party structure.

It is the brutalized and dehumanized practice of power that the theory of socialism has been most corrupted. But within the Soviet Union, an increasing contradiction between Communist Party leadership and practice and evolving socialist society exists; and in good time this contradiction will become intolerable to the Soviet people.

Where then does the duty of the man of good will, the progressive, the socialist, the communist lie? I answer this question only for myself. I say that it lies with socialism, with the ancient and enduring dream of brotherhood, with the Soviet people, who twice created out of ruins the fabric and potential of a good society, with the Poles, who so gal-

lantly went their own way toward democratic socialism.

I say that it does not lie with the pretentious dogmatism of Soviet leadership, indicted not only for their acquiescence in the crimes of Stalin, but for their continuing record of intolerance and dogmatic bossism since the exposure of those crimes.

I HAVE come to believe that within the very structure and historical development of the Communist Parties, as we know them in recent years, there is an almost incurable antithesis to the socialist democracy which they name as their ultimate goal. In a struggle against fascism and colonial oppression, history has shown these parties to be magnificently disciplined and courageous, but in other circumstances, they fall prey to a tragic contradiction. Programmatically for freedom, their very structure denies freedom within itself; against oppression, their very structure oppresses within itself; and conceived as a liberating force, the monolithic power structure chokes both the democratic process and the liberating thought. Their historical development has been toward an ever increasing and ever more rigid bureaucracy—and this very process nurtures an egotistic and dehumanized stratum of leadership, which is perpetuated to a point where the threat of recall must be seen by leadership as a threat to the existence of the organization. The rationale of those in power can then turn into paranoiac hatred and corroding suspicion.

It is this development that is being fought by a great many American communists who remain within the organization of the Communist Party, and I acknowledge their integrity and purpose. But can one for a moment believe that a similar struggle is possible in the Soviet Union? It is the very lack of any operative channel for either free elections or free recall in the Soviet Union that has so far prevented the change—not of system but simply of government—that the society is ready for.

Since the appearance of the Khrushchev "secret report" nine months ago and since my initial written response to it, a number of things have happened to me personally. A flow of letters from the countries of Eastern Europe have pleaded heartbreakingly for succor—as if I had some power to intervene against the terrors and sufferings that beset them or some special persuasiveness to direct toward their leaders. I am afraid, however, that criticism of any validity is as abhorrent to the Kremlin leadership as social justice—in spite of their endless talk of criticism and self-criticism being a motive force in Soviet society. Where jail or death is the price of criticism directed at government, such claims are not only false, but even obscene.

I do not enjoy writing such things. I record them with distaste and soul-sickness. A life-long structure of belief lies shattered around me, and for nine long months I have paid the price for my own shortsightedness in mental anguish and turmoil. But I will not and cannot remain silent any longer. I judge no one else, but I know deeply that for me to hide my convictions would be despicable. If knowledge has unfolded for me a tragic and shoddy picture of the men who lead the Soviet Union, it has not lessened my faith and firm conviction in the ultimate brotherhood and basic goodness of man. Nor do I believe that mankind will be turned aside from socialist democracy and from the vision of the good world we will one day create. No power-clique of men of small soul and less humanity can long resist the tide of history.

As a postscript to the above, since it was written I received the inevitable summons from the House Committee on Un-American Activities to appear before them as a friendly witness. I made no bones about showing them, not only that I was an unfriendly witness, but that I utterly despised all they represented. Nothing I have said about injustice and petty tyranny here at home, or about the assorted madness of our foreign policy has been withdrawn in my mind. Let the issue not be confused. The fact that in the U.S.S.R. justice is so much of a stranger does not mean that justice walks uninhibited in our courts. I have written hundreds of thousands of words on the injustice that exists in my own country; I shall continue to write about it.

The fact that I have finally been able to spell out the facts above concerning injustice elsewhere does not close my eyes or my heart. It only opens both more.

I intend to continue my solidarity with all people of good will in America, communist and non-communist, who fight injustice and treasure the precious, the infinitely precious, traditions of Jefferson, Franklin, Lincoln and Douglass—to mention only four of the many great who built the foundations of that most splendid thing, American Democracy.