

THE TWENTIETH CONGRESS AND THE BRITISH COMMUNIST PARTY*

by John Saville

I

No one in Western Europe could have foreseen the extraordinary events of **1956** in Eastern Europe.¹ The year opened with the general belief that the cautious de-stalinisation which had begun with Stalin's death in the Spring of **1953** would continue. In Yugoslavia—a useful yardstick by which to measure changes in Soviet policy—a trade agreement had been signed in October **1954**, and about the same time Tito's speeches began to be factually reported. During **1955** there was a continued improvement in diplomatic and political relations, with a visit of the Soviet leaders to Belgrade in May—in the course of which Khrushchev put all the blame for the bitter dispute between the two countries upon Beria—an accusation that was soon to be extended to cover most of the crimes of the later Stalin years. Inside the Soviet Union the principle of collective leadership was increasingly re-affirmed, and the cult of the individual increasingly denounced. Stalin was not yet, however, named as at least part villain of the piece. Indeed a Moscow despatch from Alexander Werth of the New Statesman (28th January **1956**) suggested a certain rehabilitation of Stalin's reputation in the closing months of **1955**. However, the 20th Congress was soon to define 'the Stalin question' in very certain terms.

The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union met towards the end of February **1956**. All the world's communist parties sent their leading comrades as fraternal delegates; from Britain these were Harry Pollitt, general secretary; George Matthews, assistant general secretary; and R. **Palme** Dutt, vice-chairman of the Party and its leading theoretician. The reports of Khrushchev and Mikoyan emphasised the 'negative' effects of the cult of the individual and the absence of collective leadership—for

*I must make it clear that Edward Thompson, with whom I worked closely and continuously throughout 1956 and subsequent years, has not seen this article in draft. The fault is mine. I wrote this essay so late before the publishing deadline that no one, save my co-editor, saw it before it was sent to the printers. I much regret that Edward Thompson did not see a draft; but readers may comfort themselves with the thought that this article is only the beginning of the historical documentation and analysis of this period. J.S.

approximately twenty years' said Mikoyan. Khrushchev denied the inevitability of war and Mikoyan accepted that in the past Soviet foreign policy had at times been responsible for increasing tension. The public speeches, therefore, emphasised and underlined the fact of **de-stalinisation** and it was now abundantly evident that the 'mistakes and errors' of the Stalin years were responsible for the repressive acts which had outraged opinion outside the Soviet Union and for which the world communist movement had acted for so long as apologists. It was, however, the speech of Khrushchev at the secret session on the last day of the Party Congress that provided the explosive material of 1956. Foreign delegations were excluded from the secret session, but it later became clear that at least an edited version of Khrushchev's speech had been made available to foreign Communist Parties during the month or six weeks which followed the ending of the Congress. It is also clear that some foreign delegates, Togliatti and Thorez, for example, knew about the secret speech and its content before they returned home, or soon after; and it would be interesting to know whether this was also true of members of the British delegation. Pollitt and Dutt are dead, but George Matthews, who was much younger, is still an active Party functionary, and the question ought to be addressed to him. There is no doubt at all that leading members of the British Party knew the main facts of the **Khrushchev** secret report by the middle of April at the latest (see below for a comment on **Pollitt's** article of **21st** April) and they then took up the attitude that Thorez adopted (for which see the interview published in this volume.)

The lid was certainly intended to be kept tightly shut within the British Party, but elsewhere, and above all in the Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe, events moved very quickly. During March and April there were announcements of the 'rehabilitation' of leading Communists who had been executed in the years after 1948—among them **Rajk** in Hungary and Kostov in Bulgaria. As early as March 4th Walter Ulbricht (then East German vice-premier) said in a speech reported in *Neues Deutschland* that Stalin had done 'severe damage to the Soviet State and the Soviet Communist Party' and on 17th March he elaborated these statements and added that the 'myth' of Stalin as a military leader of genius had been developed by Stalin himself. One of the earliest published summaries of Khrushchev's secret speech seems to have been by Jerzy Morawski, one of the secretaries of the Polish United Workers Party, in an edition of the Polish Communist paper *Trybuna Ludu* for 27th March. In the Soviet Union itself the attacks on Stalin developed by stages, and it was not until 28th March that *Pravda*, in a sharp attack on Stalin, mentioned him by name. On the 2nd April the **Russian** Academy of Agricultural Sciences ordered the re-publication of the works of N.I. Vavilov (who disappeared during the war and was believed to have died in a Siberian labour camp in 1942). On the 9th April Trofim Lysenko (a name well-known in the West

in the first post-war decade) resigned as president of the Academy of Agricultural Sciences.

The British Party took things along slowly and cautiously. According to the testimony of Malcolm MacEwen in this volume there was a stream of letters to the correspondence columns of the Daily Worker after the publication of the speeches at the Open Sessions of the 20th Congress, but by the 12th March the editor, J.R. Campbell, declared the discussion closed and rounded it off with an article on 15th March. On 17th March George **Matthews** wrote in World News—the only weekly journal the Party published—on the political significance of the Soviet Congress. His commentary was based entirely upon the published speeches of the Russian leaders, and his analysis was corn for the faithful. The conditions of war, or the threat of war, had produced an abnormal situation in which 'some normal practices were bound to be affected'. Moreover, crisis situations offer opportunities in which 'an enemy of the people', namely **Beria**, although he was not mentioned by name, could do 'enormous damage to the Party and the people'. But all was now well: 'the mistakes have been recognised and put right. . . as was clear from the Congress, an exceptionally healthy situation exists within the Party, with the fullest operation of inner-party democracy'. **Matthews** emphasised the general point about Stalin that was being made at this time: 'Nor is it the case that criticisms of Stalin and of the cult of the individual mean that his great positive services to the Soviet Union and the cause of Socialism, especially during the life-and-death struggles of the Second World War, should be denied'.

It is not known whether **Matthews** knew the content of **Khrushchev's** secret speech at the time he wrote this article, which presumably would be early March; but it was not long before it became known to leading members of the British Party. MacEwen reports that the main facts of the speech began to be available to the Daily Worker staff from about the middle of March; and the international specialists of the Party could hardly be unaware of the ferment that was growing in Eastern Europe. World News on 31st March republished a long extract of **the report** that Togliatti had made to the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party. His report, more detailed and much more sophisticated than George **Matthews'** account, did much to encourage speculation and discussion among the British Party.

The overwhelming majority of the active members of the British Party were, however, still wholly concerned with domestic matters. The 24th National Congress took place at the end of March. The Political Resolution and the Discussion Statement for the Congress was published in World News on 28th January 1956 and from this time until the end of March the correspondence columns were entirely devoted to comments from Party members; and throughout April instead of correspondence there were selected contributions from the discussion in the **Congress** itself. None of

these reports related to **the** important 'questions raised by the 20th Congress; and it was not until the first of two articles by Harry Pollitt (*World News*, 21st April 1956) that the British Party were given a summary of Khrushchev's secret speech. Pollitt, it should be noted, gave no indication that his article was based upon a text of the secret speech, and he completely omitted the specific details that made the impact of Khrushchev's speech so shattering: the fact, for instance, that 1,108 delegates to the Soviet Party Congress of 1934—out of a total of 1,966, including Central Committee members—had been arrested by 1938 (and almost all of them done to death, it could be added). But the greater part of what Pollitt wrote would either be new to his readers or they would not understand its full implications. Certainly to those who were already questioning and discussing the implications of the 20th Congress, Pollitt's article was further confirmation of the urgent need for a full debate within the Party.² Pollitt himself had a second article in *World News*, 5th May in which he attempted, within the context of his own narrow, unimaginative and basically sectarian assumptions and understanding, genuinely to answer the questions of how Stalinism came about. Its serious weakness was that it was couched in personal rather than **social/political** terms.

There was still no sustained discussion of the main issues of the 20th Congress in the British Party press, and those who tried to get letters published, failed. In *World News* the first letters touching upon the 20th Congress appeared in the issue of 12th May, but it was not until the following week that a long letter from myself was published which set out, in some detail, the issues that required serious argument. This was the one and only letter I ever had published in *Wmld News* during 1956. A second attempt a month later was rejected on the grounds that I had already had 'one crack of the whip', and after that I tried no more.

The context of my letter to *World News* was a growing appreciation of the dimensions of the **moral/political** problem that confronted Communist Parties everywhere. But most members of the British Party were not in my own privileged position, with access to good libraries, time to read, and a group of acquaintances within the Party, with similar advantages, **and** with whom I exchanged facts and ideas. Who in the British Party, for example, knew that on 14th April the American *Daily Worker* reported its acceptance **of** the facts about the destruction of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union after 1948, and the deaths of many Soviet Jewish intellectuals? The paper went on to express 'strong dissatisfaction that the Soviet leaders have not offered any explanation'. How could the overwhelming majority of the British Party know what had been written in the American press? Most only read the British Party's publications, their trade union journal and their local newspaper. And how would they become aware of the fact that two days after the American statement, Molotov and Mikoyan attended the Independence Day celebrations at the Israeli Embassy in Moscow; the

first occasion ever that Soviet officials had been present. And even if some of the evidence had become known, how did one put the jig-saw together? The British Party Press provided very few facts and offered no clues.

Pollitt's article on **21st** April must have been written about the same time as R. **Palme** Dutt's 'Notes of the Month' in the May issue of *Labour Monthly*. Dutt's statement was headed 'The Great Debate':

'What are the essential themes of the Great Debate? Not about Stalin. That there should be spots on any sun would only startle an inveterate Mithra-worshipper. Not about the now recognised abuses of the security organs in a period of heroic ordeal and achievement of the Soviet Union. To imagine that a great revolution can develop without a million cross-currents, hardships, injustices and excesses would be a delusion fit only for ivory-tower dwellers in fairyland who have still to learn that the thorny path of human advance moves forward, not only with unexampled heroism, but also with accompanying baseness, with tears and blood. . .'

To a growing minority of the Party membership who were becoming outraged at the lack of response of the leadership to the revelations of the 20th Congress, these words of Dutt's were a provocation; and such was the **clamour** against him (in letters to *Labour Monthly*) that Dutt published a statement in *World News* (2nd June) acknowledging his unfortunate treatment of the problem and promising that the June 'Notes of the Month' would be more 'helpful'. They were not, for what Dutt offered was only a more sophisticated apologetic. One incidental comment revealed that summaries of **Khrushchev's** speech 'have been made available' (p. 251) although these were never published, and as far as my present research goes, this is the only reference to them before the publication by the American State Department early in June of a complete version of the speech. It was published by the *New York Times* on 5th June and in Britain by the *Observer*, who gave their whole issue of 10th June to the speech, to the fury of many regular readers, who missed on this Sunday their book reviews, bridge and gardening columns. The speech, which went to 26,000 words, was also published by the *Manchester Guardian* in a booklet of 33 pages.

The publication of the secret speech did not lead to an intensified discussion in the communist press in Britain. The first reference in *World News* to the publication of **Khrushchev's** speech was on 30th June when the journal printed the statement of the Political Bureau of the *French Communist Party* published on 19th June. Apart from the now obvious reluctance of the British Party leadership to encourage a serious discussion, the Party had just launched a campaign for working-class unity. This had been a major theme at the 24th Congress in March, and on 9th June Emile Burns opened with a specially commissioned article for *World News*. A few days later John Gollan published a pamphlet *End the Bans*, and the discussion on unity henceforth became central to the Party's propaganda. It

was a bizarre episode. The leaders of the Soviet Union had themselves made nonsense of the uncritical and unswerving support given to every turn and twist of Soviet policy over the previous decades; Eastern Europe was in ferment with the Poznan riots at the end of June presaging the more bitter events of the autumn; there was a growing minority within the British Party who were demanding recognition of the developing moral and political crisis within the Party because of the Khrushchev **revelations**—and the British Party leaders apparently remained oblivious to the issues involved, and as became known later, deliberately suppressed much of the critical correspondence they were receiving. There was no absolute ban on such material. What happened was that letters on the 20th Congress were included as just one more item in a **broad selection** of differing interest with the unity theme being dominant. Edward Thompson managed to get an article in *World News* on 30th June—'Winter Wheat in Omsk' which brought a reply from George **Matthews** in the same issue; but by this time it had already become clear that no serious debate was ever going to be permitted. It was the growing realisation of this fact that led Edward Thompson and I to begin to plan the publication of a discussion journal, and in mid-July there appeared the first issue of *The Reasoner*.

II

The Reasoner was a duplicated journal of 32 pages, with a quotation from Marx on its masthead: 'To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality'. It sold for two shillings. The first number contained two editorials, the first 'Why We are Publishing' and the second 'Taking Stock' which developed further the political arguments which for us represented the crisis within the Communist Party. These were followed by a long article on Democratic Centralism; Edward Thompson's reply to George **Matthews** (see above) which had been submitted to *World News* but rejected; three (solicited) letters, since this was a first number; and three documents, two from America. The first of these was a letter from Steve Nelson to John Gates of the American *Daily Worker*, congratulating him on the frank editorial on the Rajk case (published on 2nd April); the second a statement by the editorial board of the American communist Jewish organ, *Jewish Life* (June 1956) expressing their horror at the annihilation of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union in the late 1940s; and the third, a translation of a long article in *Nowa Kultura*, the weekly journal of the Union of Polish writers. The translation was made by a good comrade and friend, Alfred Dressler, who taught at the University of **Leeds** and whose tragic death occurred a few years later.

Edward Thompson and I were historians. He was an extra-mural lecturer at the University of Leeds—although he lived at Halifax and that was the area where most of his classes were; and I was an economic and

social historian at the University of Hull. We were both very active in our own party branches and Edward was on the District Committee of the Yorkshire region. I had been a party member since 1934, and Edward from about 1940. We were also members of the Communist Historian's group which had been meeting regularly since the end of the war, and which included a number of quite outstanding intellectuals who have since become well-known. Some in 1956 were already well on the way towards establishing an international reputation. As I wrote to Edward Thompson later in the year (29th November):

... It is, I think, significant that of all the intellectual groups in the Communist Party, the historians have come out best in the discussions of the past nine months—and this surely is due to the fact that over the past decade the historians are the only intellectual group who have not only tried to use their Marxist techniques creatively, but have to some measure succeeded. The interesting thing is that the writers as a group have been much more confused—a quite different situation from that in the Eastern countries—and it is precisely the creative writers who should have seen so much more clearly to the heart of things. Of what, otherwise, does their 'creativity' consist?

Edward and Dorothy Thompson and I had been friends for half a dozen years before 1956, but we were not especially close friends at that time. We were in fact rather late in communicating with each other over the 20th Congress discussions, but once we made contact it soon became clear that we were of one mind in our insistence that if the British CP was to recover its self-respect, let alone the respect of the labour movement in general, it must encourage an honesty of discussion that would, undoubtedly, be painful to many. By about the beginning of June—and I cannot, from the records available, date the matter more precisely, we had agreed first, that the Party leadership were deliberately curbing and confining discussion, and second, that the most obvious way to force an open debate was probably to publish independently of the Party press. The key word was 'probably'. We were highly committed Party members who had come through the tough and difficult years of the Cold War—more difficult than is often appreciated—and we had personal experiences of those who had left the Party to cultivate their own gardens, or of those who had left to become, in our eyes, renegades. One of the original sins for Communist Party members was to publish criticisms of the Party outside the Party press, and in this context journals such as *Tribune* or the *New Statesman* were no different from any other periodical. We therefore conceived our own independent journal as in no way disruptive of the Party to which we belonged, or, to be more accurate, to which we had dedicated ourselves. At the same time we had both been emotionally, politically and morally shocked at the revelations of what Stalinism really meant, and as Communists and historians we saw clearly that we were obliged to analyse

seriously the causes of the crimes which in the past we had defended or **apologised** for. And further, we argued that to take our proper place in the British labour movement demanded a thorough analysis and acknowledgement of past dogmatism and sectarianism. In the second editorial of the first *Reasoner*, we wrote:

The shock and turmoil engendered by the revelations were the result of our general failure to apply a Marxist analysis to Socialist countries and to the Soviet Union in particular. The absence of such an analysis is an admission of naivety, or worse. This failure bred Utopianism, and encouraged attitudes of religious faith amongst us. When, as so often happened, there came a recognition of the gulf between myth and fact, the disillusion which followed turned in many cases to bitterness. Our irrational approach to the Soviet Union, and our hostile attitude towards those who were not prepared to accept our myths, have brought some Socialists to the point of doubting our integrity, have been a factor **contributing** to the disunity of the movement, and have helped to drive others into **anti-Soviet** attitudes dangerous to the cause of peace and Socialism

Certainly, the establishment of Soviet power ■ the greatest historical event of this century. From the moment of **its** foundation, the defence of the Soviet Union from the attacks of the capitalist world was rightly at the centre of working class internationalism. The debt which all humanity owes to the Soviet people, the heroism of the Soviet people in the Second World War, can never be forgotten. But the balance sheet cannot be closed at this point. Our responsibility to our **own** Labour movement is no less heavy. To argue, as has so often been argued, that 'we do not believe (that) the interests of the British working class people conflict with the interests of the working class **and** people of other countries' (Gollan, *End the Bans*, p. 11) is to include the complexities of the real world within a platitude. Argument begins at the point where the phrase ends; and we must still interpret these interests in terms of political action. In practice, the interests of the British workingclass have been interpreted in such a way that we have identified them with the acceptance of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, and at the same time we have been indignant at accusations of blindly 'following Moscow'.

The discussion cannot rest here, for the uncritical character of our public support for the Soviet Union was carried over into other fields. Certain recurring themes in the history of our party demand particular attention. One is the chequered history of Communist-Labour relations; another is the ever-present problem of our sectarianism and dogmatism; a third is the slow growth of a native Marxist tradition. . .

The first number of the *Reasoner* sold out in a few weeks, although it must be added that we only printed a few hundred to begin with (we re-printed) and we gave away a lot of free copies, for what we thought were good political reasons. We received close on three hundred letters by early August. The great majority of our correspondents supported our initiative, and we received much more evidence about the suppression of discussion in the Party press and the difficulties of obtaining a real debate in Party branches. **Above** all, we were urged to continue.

It was not to be expected that the Party leadership would allow this unusual event in the history of the Party to go unheeded or unchecked. The

Daily Worker had accepted our first advertisement, before the *Ressoner* was published, but our request to insert a further advertisement to the effect that further supplies of No. 1 had been reprinted, was refused. Bert Ramelson, now (1976) national industrial organiser, was then in charge of the Yorkshire District; and we were summoned to appear before a specially convened Sub-committee of the District. For family reasons I was not able to attend, so I submitted a statement to the meeting on 10th August. Edward and I exchanged several drafts of this statement, and it is not clear from my files which draft was eventually sent. But none of them differs in any substantial way, and extracts are worth quoting to define our position at this time:

... It is necessary at the outset to emphasise that *The Reasoner* was conceived entirely in terms of the general interests of the Party. It is not, and we do not intend to allow it to become, a journal of faction. I am as firmly convinced as ever of the need for a Communist Party in Britain. Those who have sought to present it as an 'opposition' journal, aiming a destructive or factional attack upon the Party leadership, are entirely mistaken. This was clearly stated in our first issue.

Why then did we publish? We did so for a number of reasons. In the first place we believed that—before we published—there was a crisis developing in the Party which was not being reflected in the Party press or in the statements and actions of the leadership. We know now, from the dozens of letters that we have received in response to our first number, that we had judged correctly. There is a ferment in the Party that reaches out to its four corners. Nor is the alleged division between intellectuals and industrial comrades borne out by our experience. One of the most interesting and significant aspects of the support we have received has been the positive welcome that industrial comrades have expressed.

In the second place we published because we were of the opinion that there was a marked reluctance amounting to definite opposition on the part of those in control of the official Party press to analyse fully and frankly the consequences of the revelations of the 20th Congress. We could give many examples of the difficulties that comrades up and down the country have experienced in breaking into the Party press. The treatment of the now famous *Volkstimme* article, the subject of a recent letter by leading Jewish comrades in the *Daily Worker*, is an example known to wide sections of the Party. But there are many others. In this connection I would offer a quotation from R. **Palme** Dutt in 1929 when, with Comrade **Pollitt**, he was engaged in an internal Party fight for both a drastic change of policy and a sweeping change of the majority leadership. He said, and his words have a vivid relevance to the situation today:

'... the mistakes of the past two years have already cost us too much. The easy going attitude which is satisfied to "recognise" mistakes and pass on, without deeper analysis or drawing of lessons for the future, and with the inevitable consequence of repeating these mistakes in new forms must end.. . It is no longer sufficient merely to "recognise" a mistake after it has been pointed out, and pass on. It is necessary to draw out by the roots the *tendency revealed* by the mistake and brand it'

In the third place we published because we believed recent events have made it plain that without the right of free, open and unfettered discussion Communist parties will become victims of the disease of orthodoxy. . . In the fourth place

we published because we believed that the widespread discontent—vague, unformulated, often very emotional—would harden in bitterness, frustration or anti-Party attitudes (depending on the individual concerned) unless some evidence of a new spirit was forthcoming.

We see no reason to stop publishing *The Reasoner*; to do so would be a defeat, not for us, but for the principle of full and frank discussion we are determined to establish. But, if this principle is safeguarded, we are willing to try and meet serious and reasonable objections; we would be glad to publish more contributions opposed to positions expressed in the last issue—a reply from George **Matthews** to the article of Edward Thompson, a critique of the article on democratic centralism, and so on. Edward knows my views on this, and has my authority to discuss with you any proposals of this sort you wish to bring forward.. •

We were both present at a meeting of the Yorkshire District Committee on 18th August which discussed the report of the Sub-committee and our general position. The resolution below was adopted by 19 votes out of 21 present, with one vote against (Edward Thompson) and one abstention:

This District Committee asks Comrades Thompson and Saville to cease the publication of *The Reasoner*.

We told the District Committee that on grounds of principle, since no guarantee of open and free discussion had been given, we could not accept the instruction. On 26th August the District **Committee** held a further meeting, and a long resolution was passed by **15** votes to **5** with 2 abstentions. The resolution reaffirmed in stronger terms the instruction to cease publication, and referred the matter to the national executive. The Political Committee had already received a report of the first Yorkshire District Committee of the 18th **August**, and it requested Edward and me to attend a meeting prior to the September meeting of the EC. This took place on Friday 31st August at King Street (the London headquarters of the CP). Harry Pollitt was in the chair, and others present included John Gollan, the new general-secretary, R. **Palme** Dutt, and J.R. Campbell. The meeting began with a long statement from each of us in turn, and we then put forward some compromise proposals which Edward had already communicated in writing. Our statements, with one exception only, were summarised fairly in the 22nd September issue of *World News*. We made the now familiar points:

(1) there was a major crisis in the Party; (2) there was abundant evidence that critical letters etc. were being refused publication; (3) for democratic centralism to work there must be free and open discussion; (4) we were not engaged in factional activity. It was further alleged that we stated that we could not discontinue publication of *The Reasoner* because we had given pledges to others that we should continue. This was untrue, for at no time did we ask any one else to take decisions on our behalf.

The Political Committee members made a wholly constitutional reply to

our points; and the publication of *The Reasoner* was considered entirely within the context of Party rules and regulations, the meaning of democratic centralism, and so on. It was a complete failure of minds to meet; on our side we wanted to discuss politics, what the crisis was about and why we needed a much more serious analysis of the 20th Congress; while the PC talked only within the narrow framework of Party **organisa-tion** and the ways in which we had violated its rules. After three hours we adjourned for lunch and when we re-assembled we re-affirmed our decision to continue publication, arguing the same points that we had put forward to the Yorkshire District. We were asked to reconsider the matter further and to write to Pollitt individually prior to the September **8/9th** meeting of the Executive. We drafted our letters on the train going home, and Edward's letter expressed our position:

5th September 1956

This is to confirm our statement at the conclusion of the special meeting of the Political Committee last Friday. We consider it to be the fundamental interest of the Party that the fullest and frankest discussion shall continue. Since you were unable to give us either assurances of effective guarantees that it shall continue in other forms, we regard it as a question of Communist principle to continue publishing *The Reasoner* and the second number is in active preparation.

The second issue of *The Reasoner* was published twenty-four hours before the September meeting of the Executive Committee which proceeded to 'instruct Comrades Thompson and Saville to cease publication of *The Reasoner*'. We had got our timing just right; the problem now was the third issue. If we published again, after the **EC's** clear instruction, we should be disciplined—expelled or suspended. We still saw the maintenance of the Party as crucial, although we were becoming more and more aware of the deadweight of the bureaucracy upon it. What we had not yet achieved was any certainty that free discussion would be permitted and even more important that the leadership could be brought to understand what the fundamental issues were. We had long discussions between **ourselves**—usually at Halifax, since Dorothy was nearly always involved; with our own comrades in Yorkshire; and we wrote almost daily to each other. Here is an extract from a very long letter I sent to Edward & Dorothy on 22nd September 1956:

'... in all our discussions on what is to be done, I take it that we are agreed that the determining factor is our estimate of what decision on our part will make the greatest political impact—unless you are prepared to argue that the Party is finished and nothing can be done with it, **i.e.** there is no hope of changing it from below. ■ Whatever view we have of the leadership I take the line, and I believe Edward does too, that in the Party there are thousands of honest socialists. True that only hundreds are active; but the others would become alive, as we are

always arguing.

Therefore, we have to consider the effect of what we do, not only upon those who are completely with us but upon those many more who are only half-way to our position—what I have always called the middle group. This middle **group**—who want discussion but who [are] still uncertain how it can be organised—who want **new forms** of democracy in the Party but who fear (rightly) the degeneration into a Labour Party type of organisation—this group is very mixed in social composition and outlook, and is much larger than our group of supporters. Many of this group are only now going through the kind of intellectual crisis that we passed through in March and April. . .

By the beginning of October we had decided our line: to publish the third *Reasoner* and at the same time announce we were stopping further publication in what we conceived to be the best interests of the Party. We assumed that our action would have a disciplinary outcome—that we would either be expelled or suspended for a period, and that in either case we would appeal in order to keep the political issues alive. We were certainly by this time becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Party leadership, and were less and less sure that they would respond in any generous or positive way. We had had a further meeting in London with John Gollan and George **Matthews** and while, as always, they listened to what we had to say and the discussion was conducted in a civilised way, we were left in no doubt that until we stopped publishing there would be no consideration of our request for guarantees regarding an open Party Press. But we were still working within the framework of assumptions that had served us from the beginning, *viz.* that for the future **of** the whole Labour movement the democratisation of the Communist Party was urgent and necessary. As I wrote to a member of the staff of the *Daily Worker* on 4th October:

‘. . . I want to make one point, and I hope that I shan’t sound like Old Father Time himself. I would suggest that it would be wrong for you or anybody else to resign from the *Daily Worker* in the event of our expulsion. I think all of us have been so shockingly starry-eyed about the Party and believed that it is so very different from all other parties. In a number of crucial respects it is very different, not least in the **self-sacrificing** response it evokes from its members. But because we have set our sights too high and then for various reasons we miss the target we tend to throw in our hand (if you will excuse my mixed metaphors). What I am **trying** to say is that we must **recognise** that any party develops institutional structures, conditioned attitudes, a machine and a bureaucracy—and that the fight to reform always encounters hostility, opposition, trimming, verbal but no real agreement etc. In any party those who want a change must be both patient and impatient, tough and conciliatory, compromising and obdurate. Whatever happens the Party goes on and unless one believes there is really no hope, one should be prepared to accept defeat for the time being and continue to fight in perhaps less spectacular ways, always taking the long view. . .

Please believe me when I say that I am talking to myself as much as to you. It so happens that I dislike politics—and even more after the past few **months**—

and all I really want to do is to write history. What I have to keep telling myself is that this is exactly the kind of attitude that bourgeois society inculcates, and that in the end, if I accept it, it will and can only lead to stultification. Now my problem is not yours—but what I am trying to say is that I hope that you won't take any decision on the rebound—but at least postpone any decision for a few months. After all we may find surprising developments occur in the next six months—and in any case with Poland, Yugoslavia and the Italian Party, our Party here is going to find it increasingly difficult to remain unaffected. . .'

Surprising developments were, indeed, on the way. There is almost nothing in my correspondence up till this date about Suez, largely because we could all take our total opposition as agreed, and when the Anglo-French forces attacked Egypt it was just one more example—of a particularly monstrous, as well as absurd, kind—to which we had all become accustomed in the history of imperialism. But when the revolutionary disturbances began in Hungary at the end of October, reactions were quite different. Before the night of October when fighting began, it was already evident that widespread discontent was showing itself 'among the Hungarian people. 200,000 had attended the reburial of Laszlo Rajk at a time when the London *Daily Worker* was calling for 'no vengeance' against Stalinists who had been guilty of what became the standard phrase for massive injustices, torturings and killings: 'violations of Socialist legality'. Edward Thompson wrote a brilliant polemic in the third issue of *The Reasoner* against the approach of the *Daily Worker* during October towards both Hungary and Poland, where tensions were also considerable, and where the threat of Soviet **intervention** was also a reality.

We were writing and producing the third issue of *The Reasoner* during the second half of October. A long editorial which we printed at the back of the issue was dated 31st October, and Edward's article 'Through the Smoke of Budapest' which dealt with the first Soviet intervention in Hungary, was dated 1st November and published as a seven-page Supplement at the front of the number. The editorial was in part a comment on the EC resolution and statement published in *World News* 22nd September and in part a broad review of all the political issues involved in the original publication of our journal. We concluded with the statement that we were ceasing publication with this third number in order that the 'case of *The Reasoner*' should no longer be used as 'a diversion from the central issues of the discussion rights of the whole membership'. But throughout the editorial we emphasised the basic principle of free discussion for which we had been fighting, and that there were still no guarantees at all from the EC that the principle had been accepted. By this time we were, in fact, convinced that the Party leadership was too strongly conditioned by the history of the previous decades to be able to comprehend what the intellectual and moral ferment which *The Reasoner* represented was all about; but had not the Soviet intervention in Hungary

occurred, we should certainly have continued to fight for democratic rights within the Party. The **social** basis of the discussion had broadened considerably by the date of publication of the third issue; we knew, for example, about the fierce debates among the journalists on the *Daily Worker*, and our second and third issues carried a cartoon by Gabriel, the famous *Worker* cartoonist. The point we kept emphasising to each other, and those with whom we were in contact, was that the realisation of the meaning of the 20th Congress took different forms for different people, and their time-span was also different. The longer the discussion went on, the more debate centred upon some, at least, of the basic principles with which we ourselves were concerned. John Mahon was chairman of the Commission on Inner-Party Democracy and his opening statement in *World News* on 1st September caused a considerable adverse reaction; and there are other examples that could be cited of events and episodes which suddenly made **people** see things differently.

The second and third issues of *The Reasoner* were a considerable improvement over the first. The range of our contacts had widened considerably, and we were now beginning to raise important **questions**—such as an honest account of history of the British Communist **Party**—which were part of our general argument for our moral and political rehabilitation as an integral part of the Labour movement. Then came the Russian attack on Budapest in the early hours of 4th November. This was how our last-minute editorial, agreed on the phone during the Sunday of 4th November, began:

This final number of *The Reasoner* was planned several weeks ago; most of it was typed and duplicated before the events of the past fortnight in Poland and Hungary.

Three days before publication, Eden launched his brutal aggression against Egypt. Every one of our readers will be fully occupied in organising protests and demonstrations of every kind, to end this war and to bring down the Government. Our first thought was to withdraw or postpone this number while the emergency lasts.

But even while we considered, Soviet forces surrounded Budapest and, as we write these lines, we hear the tragic news of the attack on the city.

Even the urgency of the Egyptian crisis cannot disguise the fact that the events of Budapest represent a **crucial** turningpoint for our Party. The aggression of British imperialism is uglier and more cynical in degree than previous imperialist aggressions. But the crisis in World Communism is now different in kind.

The intervention of Soviet troops in Hungary must be condemned by all Communists. The working people and students of Budapest were demonstrating against an oppressive regime which gave them no adequate democratic channels for expressing the popular **will**. The fact that former fascists and those working for the restoration of Capitalism joined the revolutionaries does not alter this central issue. The criminal blunder of unleashing Security Police and Soviet forces against these crowds provoked the mass of the people to take up arms, in the name of independence, liberty, and justice, against an oppression that was operated in the name of Communism. Those Hungarian comrades of ours who

were innocent of the corruptions and abuses of the Rakosi regime were placed in a homfying and tragic dilemma. . .

In this crisis, when the Hungarian people needed our solidarity, the British Communist Party has failed them. We cannot wait until the 21st Congress of the CPSU when no doubt the attack on Budapest will be registered as another 'mistake'. The International **Communist** movement, and also the World Peace movement, must exert its full moral influence to effect the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary; at the same time demanding the neutralisation of Hungary and resisting all Western attempts to turn the situation to their military and political advantage. . .

We went on to urge all our readers, like ourselves, to dissociate themselves from the leadership of the British Communist Party in their **support**—which was unequivocal—of Soviet intervention in Hungary. For this, as well as for our publication of the third number of *The Reasoner*, we were suspended ~~from~~ membership of the Communist Party, and contrary to our intentions *before* the Hungarian intervention, we both resigned, believing that the Party was now wholly discredited. We were also highly conscious of the change in the internal situation within the Party. Had the Hungarian situation not happened, suspension from membership would have allowed us, and those *who* thought like us, to continue the fight for unfettered discussion within the Party. I put the matter in this way to a **correspondent** on 17th October, 1956:

You will know that the EC suspended us for three months and that we refused to accept this, and resigned. I am enclosing a copy of our statement. My position is briefly this: that as the result of our four months fight around *The Reasoner* it had become very clear that the leadership is Stalinist to a man and that it is going to be impossible to shift them. Had not Hungary occurred I was prepared to stay in and continue the fight so long as the ban on discussion was not complete—not so much because of any real effect upon the leadership that might result but only to help further the processes of new thinking that despite its limitations *The Reasoner* has undoubtedly encouraged. Now, however, it seems to me that the Party is hopelessly discredited and compromised and I see no future for it except as a militant industrial force on the factory floor. This doesn't mean that I believe people should come out without a fight—on the contrary. What I personally am urging is that those who are prepared to stay in should do so (many, of course, have lost all stomach for the internal Party struggle) but that no one should be under any illusion that the leadership is going to be shifted. Let me qualify my dogmatism, and say that I think it is improbable that the leadership will be shifted. They might be moved if the USSR performed a volte-face over Hungary for example. But on my present assumptions there can be only one reason for staying in, and that is to continue the discussion of new thinking in opposition to the Stalinist rigidity of King St. There are many **many** honest people who have only since Hungary woken up to what has been done in their names. The intellectual processes of reevaluation develop at very different rates **within** different individuals, and it seems to me that it be very wrong not to appreciate this important fact. .

The internal Party situation had indeed hardened. One of the reasons for

our decision to cease publication of *The Reasoner* was the growing bitterness towards us. This was not a serious problem from our personal point of view, although it was unpleasant; but continuation of independent publication was undoubtedly getting in the way of a discussion of basic principles. In particular anti-intellectualism within the Party was developing fast: the most vociferous critics being usually other intellectuals. Hungary, which was a traumatic experience, meant that ideas of accommodation and compromise were no longer practicable. When a number of well-known party intellectuals published a *Reasoner*-type letter in the *New Statesman* (1st December 1956) they were each in turn addressed by John Gollan in tough language of a kind never used to Edward and **myself**.³ The debates at the 25th Party Congress in the spring of 1957 exhibited a roughness and sectarianism which was the product of the political agony that **everyone**—Stalinists and anti-Stalinists—had experienced in the previous twelve months. When Professor Hymie Levy made an impassioned speech at the Congress attacking the leadership for having so misled the members of the Party about the real situation in the Soviet Union, he was answered next morning by a speech of great vituperation, in which the parallel was made with the Bolshevik Party around 1905 who also lost many members: 'The Russians, too, were confused by the backboneless, spineless intellectuals who were turned in on their own emotions instead of using their capabilities for rallying the Party'. The *Daily Worker* headlined this stinging stuff as 'Revisionist Views Smashed'.

Some 7,000 or so members left the Communist Party during 1956. The belief that most of these 7,000 were intellectuals is untrue, although several hundred intellectuals did certainly resign. But from the evidence we gathered at the time, there were a large number of resignations from industrial workers, including trade union officials. 1956 is a main landmark in the history of the British CP. There have been two periods in its history in which its membership declined sharply. The first was spread over the years 1929-32 when as a result of the frenzied sectarianism which followed the directives of the 1928 Sixth Congress of the Communist **International**—the 'social-fascist period'—both the membership of the CP and its political and industrial influence were at the lowest point in the whole of the inter-war period. At that time the number of intellectuals within the Party were few, and it was the working-class membership that had declined so sharply. In 1956, while those who resigned represented a cross-section of a now more socially variegated membership, the large numbers of intellectuals who left, almost all of whom had come through the Cold War and were seriously committed to left-wing politics, meant a severe loss for the future. There were, of course, other periods of decline: the change of attitude towards the war in 1939; the Yugoslav question after 1948; the Lysenko affair—but none achieved the impact that occurred in the early 1930s or in 1956. The crisis within the British Communist Party was **grow-**

ing throughout 1956 but was far from having reached a critical point by the middle of October: Hungary was responsible for that being achieved. Without Hungary the course of events might well have been very different, but that involves the large assumption that de-stalinisation in Eastern Europe could have occurred without an uprising from below. Most Stalinists in positions of power at whatever level of authority proved incapable of transforming themselves and their power structures except under the pressures from without. In Eastern Europe there has been no radical change of any kind; and in the Communist parties of the rest of the world the history of the next twenty years has been extraordinarily diverse, with Stalinism proving extremely durable and persistent in many places.

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III

There will be a good deal more flesh on the bones when the complete story of 1956 is told. As I indicated at the beginning of this article, for reasons of time it has not been possible to allow Edward Thompson to see a draft, and this has meant that I have not felt it proper to quote from any of his many letters to me. Without his account the story is obviously incomplete, and he may well have a somewhat different analysis to offer from that which is made here. There is also a great deal of illuminating material in the large collection of letters we received following the publication of *The Reasoner*, and again, because I have not discussed the general issue with Edward Thompson, I have refrained from quotation.

Edward Thompson and I usefully supplemented each others' qualities. I should make it clear that at the time I was conscious that by myself I could not have carried through the publication of a journal like *The Reasoner*—I lacked both experience and editorial imagination—while I believed that Edward could have succeeded, provided that he was able to attract sufficient local labour for the many chores involved: in addition, that is, to the editorial side of things. I still think I was correct. But since we did join together, we made a useful, and somewhat tempestuous, working team. We never treated each other's ideas with a less critical approach than we accorded those belonging to anyone else, and we were on many occasions rude and rough in our comments. There never was a major issue, during the whole of *The Reasoner* period, on which we agreed from the beginning. We always had to argue and debate our tactics and our strategy, and whatever the pressures upon us, we always talked matters through. Naturally, there was an underlying respect and trust, predicated upon the recognition of each other's commitment to the cause of Socialism. Without that we should never have lasted; but with trust and affection we could be wholly candid and frank. One example of a not untypical exchange between myself and Edward is dated 15th October 1956, and

relates to the third number of *The Reasoner*:

... About the Harry **Pollitt** insert. No. Emphatically no. And for exactly the same reason, but with much more force that you argue for the removal of the comment about [Comrade **X**]. If [Comrade **X**], who hasn't really done anything for the working class movement in this country, will rally 'defensive emotions' to himself, how much more will it be with Harry. There's a difference in age here between you and me that is important. To me Harry is linked with Spain, **anti**-appeasement and the Hunger Marches. He's washed up now, but the affection for Harry is tremendous among my generation. And your additional comment would be considered much-raking of a type that would nullify the effect of the whole article. I feel all this very strongly although there isn't time to make it clear to you. So your comment can't go in.. .

Despite the political pressures, I find from our correspondence that we spent quite a lot of time explaining to each other where and why the other was wrong, or going wrong. Edward had some splendidly sustained polemics against me and he was always a good deal more able at literary and political argument than I was. The first drafts of editorials were usually his, for example; but since for reasons already explained I am not able to quote from his correspondence to me, the following extract from a long letter from me to **Edward** must suffice as an **example** for our **personal/political** dialogue. It was written after we had resigned from the Communist Party and when we were beginning to discuss seriously the launching of what became *The New Reasoner*. The date of the letter was 29th November 1956:

I think a typewriter must have a peculiar effect upon you, because how you do rampage! Of the two long letters that you recently [have] written me, the first accused me of intellectual and moral arrogance and the second, a couple of days ago, of cultural philistinism. I certainly agree that what for shorthand purposes we have to call our culture vs **politics** approach is a very real one; but the assumptions from my side are not what you think they are. One reason is that in writing you always find two words where one will do, while I set down in a totally inadequate form what I think—and therefore get **misunderstood**. The fault is mine in this respect. And this is why there is no substitute for personal discussion.

Let me come to this bleeding question of culture. Basically, I react so strongly against your general proposals on this side because I have no confidence in our people to produce what is needed. As far as I am concerned practically nothing worthwhile has been produced in the past decade. The important exception is Doris [**Lessing**] who has roots in a quite different environment and who has apparently been uncontaminated by Stalinist values. But who else would you mention by her side?.. . And at least part of the answer lies in the uncertainty of our moral values. Let us take yourself, for example, and your constantly expressed desire to write poetry. I ask myself why someone with the poetic urge doesn't write poetry, or at least not very much. You cannot surely believe that 'more time' on your hands, more leisure, would result in a flowering of the poetic impulse in yourself? There are some obvious answers, but here are you, with an integrity and an honesty fundamentally untouched by all the horrible things to which we have agreed in our name, unable to write worthwhile poetry. Maybe

you're not really a poet—I don't know—maybe you are a devastatingly good literary polemicist and historical writer that showed itself in your magnificent book on Morris But for all the other literary characters—none of whom have your power and ability—I reserve judgement . .

. . . I am not asking for a Modern Quarterly publication—nor a Science and Society. I am asking for an English Marxist Esprit—which to me is the best periodical afloat—and I am sending you three numbers so that you may look-see. Second, I cannot accept your suggestion of a dividing line between the **editors**—this would be unworkable. There is, as I see the editorial problem, no substitute for the painful business of hammering out an agreement. Third, I am quite prepared for a bloody great row on editorial matters at some point in the **future**—and by prepared I mean that naturally I don't want it but that it would not be unexpected My personal predilection at the end of the third Reasoner was no more—I do want to get back to history—and I shall within a year—but I do feel, as you do, that there is a moral responsibility to go on. And it is a sign of our wretched times, isn't it, when one always feels one has to qualify expressions such as 'moral responsibility' with some such phrase as 'said unpompously' or words to that effect I would be very happy to slide out and suggest Randall **Swingler** in my place—except that I don't think he would take my place. You do need someone who is prepared to belch and be earthy when you soar on your higher flights and you do also need someone with the physique and the psychological **armour** plating of a sergeant major. . .

We were both writing similar kinds of letters to our many correspondents who over the Reasoner period as a whole offered us much contradictory advice. It was partly this that forced Edward and myself to argue continually between ourselves in order to prevent our basic points of reference from being obliterated. We were, that is to say, involved in a constant process of political re-education, and the correspondence with others helped greatly to focus our minds on the principles we were endeavouring to define and act upon. There was also some gentle domestic pressure. My wife, who morally and politically sustained me throughout, and whose advice I constantly quoted to Edward, threatened to leave (sic) me if we did not publish the third number of The Reasoner (or so I wrote to a correspondent). **Below** is an extract from a letter I wrote to a **very** well-known Communist intellectual with whom I had, and have continued to have, a very friendly relationship. The date of the letter was 7th September and it came, therefore, just at one of the points of greatest pressure upon us:

Your letter.. . strikes me as the most able argument of the case against our position that has yet been put down on paper. I must apologise for what will be only a brief note, but after Edward has read it and returned it I will set out the situation as I see it . .

There are so many things I take exception to in your letter—the whole approach to which is quite alien to anything that Edward or I or anybody else stands, that it is difficult to pick out isolated points. What you don't apparently assume, and here the whole of King St. appears to be with you, is that there is a bloody raging crisis in the Party. When you say that we 'are gravely willing to weaken the Party' you are missing two things—apart from a rather surprising **mis-**

understanding of our point of view. First, that the Party has been gravely weakened already by the line of the leadership since the 20th Congress, and regardless of whether *The Reasoner* was published or not, resignations would have been considerable. You can't surely be ignorant of this, and you can't be unaware that the Party, from a political and intellectual angle, is hopelessly compromised unless it undertakes a thorough house cleaning. You may be, I note again with a good deal of surprise, that you have concentrated your published letters upon electoral matters, not unimportant I grant, but certainly not the crucial issues at present before us. So you may deny both the intellectual crisis and the political crisis—in which case, as we found with the PC, we are talking in different languages. The second point you are missing arises out of the first. Why has *The Reasoner* stirred up all this passion? Surely it's nothing to do with two relatively unimportant intellectuals who have done something 'unusual' which, at any other time than the present, would have led immediately to expulsion. **It—i.e. the ferment—is only explainable in terms of this crisis.**

I gather that you would have had little to say against us if we had resigned quietly—like [Comrade X] for example; and I also understand that **you will do** the same thing if ever you come to the point when either you feel that **you can** make no further impact or you consider the Party is no longer necessary. Let me put this to you. Would there never be an occasion when, in the interests of Socialist principle, you would never bring yourself to the point of taking a public stand? Or is the argument of the unity of the party so powerful that come what may, principle must give way before it?

Frankly, I suspect that we shall continue to talk different languages. You **write** in terms of 'trump cards', 'bluff' and so on while we are talking about a crisis of ideas, the integrity and honesty of the party, our relations with the Labour movement and such things. There is no urgency in your letter and you imply that a push here and a shove there, and extra pages in *World News* is the sort of answer that will bring about the necessary and desirable changes in attitudes and approach.. .

IV

We brought the publication of *The Reasoner* to an end with the third issue mainly because we believed that its continuation would obscure the central issues of the discussion rights of the party membership. But there were other contributory factors. One, as noted above, was the bitterness that was developing against us. There was increasing personal hostility and there was no question that some members of the party leadership were deliberately emphasising the intellectuals versus industrial workers division that was supposed to exist over the political questions represented by *The Reasoner*. By September we were having to spend some time with our correspondents denying allegations about our personal ambitions, our publication of material without the consent of authors, and the dark sources of our finances. Bitterness increased sharply **with** the development of the Hungarian situation and Soviet intervention, and just about this time, at an aggregate meeting of my own Party branch, when I was present, *The Reasoner* group were described as 'running dogs of imperialism'. The mood of the party leadership hardened notably during the aftermath of

crisis which followed the Soviet action in Hungary, and the possibilities for a strategy of de-Stalinisation were no longer practicable.

The physical pressures of actually producing our duplicated journal were, of course, not inconsiderable. Edward typed all the stencils—in a note to a correspondent I remarked that Edward had typed nearly 40,000 words on stencils for the second issue in a period of five days, and he similarly typed the whole of the longer third issue. At the same time he was, of course, exercising his editorial functions in laying out **articles** etc. in a coherent way. The stencils were then sent by post or by train to Hull where I duplicated them. I cannot now remember where the first issue was run-off, but for the more substantial second and third numbers I was able to use the office duplicator of a business friend whose premises were in the Old Docks' area of the Old Town. Since we planned the maximum output the stencils would take for the third and last number, the duplication of 1,500 copies of some 50 stencils took a fortnight's evening and weekend work. On the last weekend of **3rd/4th** November, when we had to write an editorial by telephone, following the Soviet attack on Budapest, I duplicated Friday night, Saturday afternoon and evening, all day Sunday and through the night until 7 a.m. on Monday morning, I travelled by bicycle since we did not possess a car at that time, and the transport of the duplicated sheets to my home was always a difficult problem, involving many journeys. The sheets were laid out on a large table at my home, and put together and stapled by a dedicated group of volunteer labourers. Each copy was checked twice to ensure that pages were in correct order: first when all the sheets were collected together and second after stapling.

We financed ourselves from our own salaries but the burden was less than we had expected since we received dozens of donations, totalling, by the time the third issue was published, about £70. A part—the smaller part—of our own editorial expenses were therefore met, since we had relatively few bad debts on sales; and two shillings a copy was quite a high price in those days.



This is not the place for the subsequent history of the years of the New Left. By the spring of 1957 *Universities and Left Review* had published its first number, and Edward and I had brought out the first issue of the printed *New Reasoner*. Nearly three years later the two journals amalgamated to form the *New Left Review*.

Nor is this the place for a detailed review of the subsequent history of the British Communist Party. The Party suffered a severe membership loss in the year following Khrushchev's secret speech and, as already noted, while the social composition of those who left included many trade unionists and industrial workers, there was a large scale resignation of

intellectuals. Many of these belonged to the generation of the 1930s and 1940s, and they undoubtedly **represented** a serious capital loss, although it was certainly not understood in this way for many years after 1956. Anti-intellectual attitudes hardened as a result of the trauma of 1956, and some of the intellectuals who remained within the Party were not unwilling to go with the stream. As Arnold Kettle explained to the delegates of the 26th Congress in 1959, the recruitment and acceptance of professional people is often a difficult matter:

It is difficult not only because there are always certain obvious problems in winning over middle-class people to the side of the working class, but also because, as everyone knows, in the difficult days our Party went through in 1956-57, it **was** the intellectuals in the Party who were, as a section, the most influenced by revisionist ideas.

We should not, as Marxists, be surprised by this. It is due: basically to the class and social position of professional workers and to the fatal separation of theory and practice which class society has brought about.

It would be very foolish for us to believe that most of the ex-Party revisionists, are wicked or insincere people.

Their principal trouble is a persistent desire to have the best of both worlds, to have their cake and eat it—to retain the privileges of their position in bourgeois society while at the same time attacking bourgeois **society** and associating themselves with the socialist movement

Our job is to convince them—through experience and argument—that Socialism is indeed the answer to their problems, their frustrations and their hopes. . .

The world has continued to change since 1956, and it is safe to assume that these words just quoted could not have been spoken in quite the same way during the past decade. Marxism in Britain is no longer the prerogative of the Communist Party—as it mostly was until 1956—and the processes of de-stalinisation have acted in Britain as elsewhere. In this area change has been slow and uneven but the **long-term** trend has meant a Communist Party different in a number of ways from that of 1956. The official reaction to the Czech events in the late 1960s, and towards the question of dissent within the Soviet Union, are among the indications that the spirit of Stalinism no longer exercises the baleful dominance it once occupied. John Gollan's recent article in *Marxism Today* (January 1976) entitled 'Socialist Democracy—Some Problems. The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Retrospect' is a good measure of how far the British Communist Party has begun to accept new ideas as well as the length of the road it still has to travel. Gollan's summary of what happened within the British Party in 1956 (p. 28) is scandalously inadequate and misleading, and it continues the practice of the British Party in the suppression of unpleasant facts and episodes in its own history. At the same time Gollan's article does show the extent of the change in ideas and understanding, even though it has taken twenty years to admit many things that were accepted

facts in 1956. What Gollan does not however deal with seriously are precisely the central problems that emerged from the Khrushchev revelations. These are the nature and character of socialist democracy, its forms and institutions, and above all the ways in which freedom, democracy and socialism can be realised, and then maintained, as integral and living processes of social life. On the historical evidence it is exceedingly difficult to begin; but the even more difficult problem for the future, and one for which we have not yet produced a satisfactory answer, in theory, and certainly not in practice, is how to avoid the decline into degeneration and arbitrary government. Twenty years after Khrushchev's secret speech we have to admit that the realistic debate on socialist democracy has hardly begun.

NOTES

1. Documentation has been kept to a minimum. The account in the text is based on two groups of sources: first, the published files of the *Times*, the London *Daily Worker*, *Tribune*, *New Statesman*, *World News*, *Keesings*; and second the unpublished correspondence of Edward Thompson and myself and the many hundreds of correspondents who wrote to us during 1956.
2. The identification in the text of **Pollitt's** speech of **21st** April with at least a version of Khrushchev's secret speech has not, I think, been made before. If I am correct, the culpability of the Communist leaders in Britain in terms of the deception of their own members is considerably increased.
3. The letter read: 'At its last meeting the Executive Committee considered your action in publishing, in company with other members of the Party, a letter in the non-Party press attacking the Party.

It instructed me to write to you and inform you that such an action is **un-**permissible and will not be tolerated in future.

You have the same rights as all other Party members to put your views on Party policy in your Party branch and in the Party press, and the Party cannot and will not give you the right to go outside the Party and make public attacks upon it'