

EDWARD THOMPSON, THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND 1956*

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The death of Edward Thompson on 28th August **1993** has inevitably pushed memories back to the early beginnings of the New Left, and it may be helpful at this stage to survey the documentation and suggest some of the problems that require further political discussion. The account that I wrote for the *Socialist Register* in **1976** set down the chronology that led to the publication of *The Reasoner* July–October **1956** and the general crisis in the Communist movement in Britain that produced its three issues. This **1976** article provides a useful account that is still acceptable but it had some omissions of emphasis and gaps in fact that require to be remedied. Edward Thompson was not able to make it a joint article, as originally had been hoped, because he was teaching in the United States, and my draft was sent to the printer without his comments because I was already beyond my promised deadline.

Some preliminary observations are necessary. There are two main sources of information for the events in Britain within the Communist Party for the year **1956**. The first is the correspondence between Edward Thompson and myself, together with a considerable volume of letters from our friends and correspondents, the latter after the first number of *The Reasoner* had appeared. The second major collection of directly relevant material will be the Communist Party archives, at present (winter **1994**) being catalogued and soon to be deposited in the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester. There are problems with the large amount of correspondence between Edward and myself. On several occasions, over the years, Edward and I discussed the deposit of our material but always in a somewhat indecisive manner. This was not because we had any objections in principle, but because we both knew the amount of work that would be involved to get our correspondence etc. in reasonable order. We had both kept carbon copies of most letters we had written to each other,

*I am grateful to Dorothy Thompson for her permission to reprint extracts from Edward's letters

but the greater part of his correspondence to me was not dated; and on either side therefore we cannot be certain that every item is correctly placed. My papers are going into the Labour Archive of the **Brynmor Jones Library**, University of Hull, and in his last years Edward seemed to think that the **Bodleian** might be his depository: but the decision is for his executors.

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It will be useful to recapitulate, briefly, the main sequence of events in 1956 which brought about the very considerable ferment within the CPGB, and, of course, elsewhere in the Communist world. The story begins with the 20th Congress of the CPSU in late February 1956. The speeches of Khrushchev and Mikoyan in open session both emphasised the 'negative' aspects of the cult of the individual, and the absence of collective leadership in the Soviet Communist Party – 'for approximately twenty years' said Mikoyan; and these comments were naturally picked up and widely discussed in the world press. On the last day of the Congress, the 25th February, Russian delegates went into secret session; foreign delegates were excluded and for them a programme of visits to factories and various other activities had been arranged. It was in this secret session that Khrushchev pronounced his shattering speech about the infamies of the Stalinist regime. Some of the senior international leaders, **Togliatti** and Thorez among them, knew the main contents of the secret speech before they returned home; and it later became evident that what may have been an edited version of **Khrushchev's** speech was made available to foreign Communist parties within a month or six weeks after they had left Moscow.

The main points of the secret speech soon became known, at least to those who read beyond the London *Daily Worker*. On 4th March Walter Ulbricht, then vice-premier of East Germany, said in a speech that Stalin had done 'severe damage to the Soviet State and the Soviet Communist Party'; and a fortnight later he expanded his statement to include the comment that the 'myth' of Stalin as a military leader had been developed by Stalin himself: a repetition of what Khrushchev had also said. On March 16th the text of the secret speech was available in Bonn, and on the following day the Hungarian Government announced the rehabilitation of **Lazslo Rajk**, the former general secretary of the CP who had been executed after the usual 'trial'. The *Daily Worker* had begun to receive letters on the published statements of the 20th Congress in late February and there was great difficulty in getting them published. On the 12th March publication ended, with the editor, J. R. Campbell, explaining to readers that he was gratified that most letters had not indulged in 'exaggerated denigration of Stalin' but that now the space for correspondence must be given over to a discussion of the forthcoming Congress of the British Party,

to be held at the end of March. The flood of letters continued; the question of Stalin and the 20th Congress was debated in secret session at the British Party Congress and the resolution that emerged made the now familiar points that mistakes had been corrected and the further advance of Communism in the Soviet Union could now go ahead unimpeded. Throughout April and May comment and criticism continued to swell, and in reluctant and very piece-meal fashion, the Party leadership responded in cautious and wholly conservative ways, ignoring the central problems at issue. Much of the story of these middle months of the year, when serious debate was being refused by the Communist leadership in Britain, was told in the **1976 Socialist Register** by Malcolm **McEwan** and myself; but a re-reading of the correspondences requires further comment and a note of the omissions in my own original article.

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Before I began corresponding with other Communist party members I had written privately to Harry Pollitt on March **19th, 1956**. I wrote because I was incensed by the leader in that day's *Daily Worker* which I said in my letter 'appears to accept as uncritically as was done in the past the present line of the Russian Party'. It was a longish letter and the quotation that follows is included to indicate what certainly was not an isolated opinion concerning the attitudes that we had to take towards the revelations of the secret speech. Page two of my letter:

A University colleague, supporter of the Labour Party, and personally friendly to me, said the other day: 'I feel less like **working** with Communists than ever before; how can I ever seriously believe your political line again?' I understand only too well why he says these things, and it seems clear to me, if ever a matter was clear, that we shall only convince people like my colleague if we are **frank**, open and honest in our criticisms of ourselves. My answer, which I shall give in public and private, runs like this:

There is no question of our not admitting our mistakes as a Party. Neither do I seek to exonerate myself as an individual party member. It is true that I was much more critical of certain aspects of Soviet society than the official party line (**i.e.** in private I always admitted the existence of labour camps, disliked the Stalin cult, and was appalled at the way people 'disappeared') but I never made these criticisms, except in milder form, public. I believe now, as I have always believed, that these were transitory phenomena, and I have, as I have always had, confidence in the long term development of socialism in Russia. But it is now abundantly plain to me that while I thought I was curbing my criticisms in the general interests of **working** class internationalism, I **was** wrong. I believe now that had the Communist Parties outside Russia been more critical, the forces inside Russia **working** for greater democracy would have been strengthened, not weakened as in fact they were; and the whole world movement would today have been stronger, because it would have been based upon honest opinion, and not double think. I hold fast to the Communist answer to the world's problems, and I value more than I can say in a few words my membership of the British party; but never again shall I accept any political line without question. I feel humiliated by what I **have let pass** in the name of the Party and the extension of inner party democracy means for me a much more personal responsibility for the work of the Party.

My letter ended with fraternal greetings. Pollitt had just resigned from the position of General Secretary because of poor health, and my letter

was acknowledged formally from King St. I have included it here because it illustrates several important themes that were to dominate the political discussions in the weeks and months that followed. It also exhibits how far along the road I had travelled in less than a month since the Russian Congress, as well as how far there was still to go.

I was late in contacting Edward Thompson over these impassioned matters. As I noted in the 1976 article I had been friendly with Edward and Dorothy for half a dozen years but we were not close. Edward did not take an active part in the work of the Historians' Group although Dorothy did in the years immediately preceding 1956. Indeed, in spite of the great volume on William Morris, which I very much admired, I thought of Edward not primarily as an historian but rather as a literary historian who because of his extra-mural teaching in the West Riding was becoming increasingly interested in the radical movements before 1850; at the same time as he was working on his *William Morris* and the revival of socialism in the 1880s. The more one examines Edward's career the more impressive becomes his capacity for research and his ability to express himself in vivid and exciting language. He published his *William Morris*, a volume of just over 900 pages, when he was thirty years old; then through the convulsions of the *Reasoner* years he produced *The Making of the English Working Class* before he was forty years old. It is an astonishing record.

Edward's reply to my first letter to him on the secret speech and its repercussions was dated 4th April, and it began:

Thank God for your letter. Never have I known such a wet flatfish slapped on the face as our 24th [Party Congress]. It is the biggest Confidence Trick in our Party's history. Not one bloody concession as yet to our feelings and integrity: no apology to the rank and file, no self-criticism, no apology to the British people, no indication of the points of Marxist theory which now demand revaluation, no admission that our Party has undervalued intellectual and ideological work, no promise of a loosening of inner party democracy, and of the formation of even a discussion journal so that this can be fought out within our ranks, not one of the inner ring of the Executive felt that he might have to resign, if even temporarily. The whole old gang back, who bayed after Haldane, threw Zhdanov down the throats of musicians and writers, alienated thousands, acted as apologists for the 'people's democracies' whenever our doubts rose; not even the concession of putting one or two men, like Bernal or Hill, on the E.C. who would retain the confidence of the intellectuals.

This was only the beginning. It was a long, full-blooded letter which attacked the 'pitiful and fatuous' approach towards the Labour Party of Gaitskell; called for a 'sharpening of differences within the Party'; complained bitterly of the 'complaisance' of most members of the Yorkshire District Committee (of which he was a member); and towards the end of this highly charged epistle, much of which was to become the centre of a great deal of our personal debates and discussions in the months that followed:

If necessary we shall have to leave the Party and found a small Marxist educational league. I hope this will never have to take place, but it is more important that we should remain loyal to our intellectual integrity as Marxists than to the Party under all circumstances. Our

duty to the British workingclass as honest intellectuals is more important than blind loyalty to a Party which has become distorted and warped by a series of historical accidents. But this is the extreme position which I hope we shall not reach.

At the time of writing this letter, Dorothy Thompson was in the London area with her children, and she was planning to attend the Communist Party Historians' annual general meeting on 8th April. Nineteen out of a total of thirty-four members attended, and there was a vigorous debate around the failure of the 24th Congress to address seriously the historical problems thrown up by the Russian 20th Congress. A perceptive account and analysis of the Historians Group was published by Eric Hobsbawm in the symposium in honour of A. L. Morton (*Rebels and their Causes* 1978). In the present context, the main point to be emphasised is that of all the various groups within the National Cultural Committee of the British CP the historians were 'the most consistently active and flourishing group of communist intellectuals'; and inevitably, as Hobsbawm further notes, they were drawn into the debates precisely because historical analysis is at the centre of Marxist politics. Most of the full-time historians who were members of the Communist Historians Group left within a year or so of the Khrushchev speech. Their ten years of working together when the war ended had been conducted in a spirit of serious critical enquiry without personal difficulties or the translation of opposing views into recrimination. It was these characteristics that made the Historians Group such a lively and pleasant experience and it was the comradeship and friendship of its members that continued through the Reasoner years and their aftermath.

A month after the Historians annual meeting the National University Staffs Committee issued a long Resolution dated May 5th 1956 which was concerned entirely with the political problems that had arisen following the secret speech. It was a sober statement which both emphasised the crisis within the Communist Party and assumed that however difficult the political and intellectual analysis might be, it was within the Communist Party – as an essential component of the British labour movement – that the questions had to be resolved. By contrast, the national student committee produced an edition of their Newsletter (No. 7, May 1956) which summarised a two-day meeting of the national committee and which had nothing to say about the 20th Congress and Khrushchev's speech except that it was 'epoch-making in its announcement of the rapid advances in human freedom'.

To return to Edward's letter of 4th April, and the quotation taken from the end of his letter which expressed **firmly** the hope that the open discussion we were asking for would not be done outside the Party. It was a hope, and an argument, that went right through the debates that we had between ourselves and with a wide section of those who were in general agreement with the political stand that we were going to take; and it is necessary to appreciate the background and political history of those who

were to become dissidents. My own career was not untypical although I was eight years older than Edward and I belonged therefore to the generation of the nineteen thirties whereas his initiation into left wing politics was mostly an affair of the war years and their aftermath. What it is first necessary to appreciate is our complete rejection of the **Labour-Socialism** of the Labour Party. The record of the Labour leadership in the thirties was appalling. One would not expect them to support the four national hunger marches of the decade – 1930, 1932, 1934 and 1936 – since the National Unemployed Workers Movement was, mostly, Communist led, although in those days there was an active Left Wing in many areas which disregarded the bans that came from Transport House; and Clement Attlee, alone among the top Labour leadership, spoke at the 1936 rally in Hyde Park (Attlee was similarly alone among Labour's political leaders who actually went to Spain during the Civil War). But what exhibited the nature and character of the Labour Party of the thirties or rather its leadership through the National Council of Labour (on which right-wing trade unionists were in a majority) was the denial of support for the **Jarrow** March of the autumn of 1936. Ellen Wilkinson, who was M.P. for the **Jarrow** constituency, was refused the support of the Labour Party Executive at the Edinburgh conference of the Labour Party; and when the march was under way, with the unanimous support of **Jarrow** Town Council, and led on the road by a Conservative councillor as well as one from the majority Labour Party, the TUC circularised Trades Councils advising them against giving support. Chesterfield was one of the towns whose Trades and Labour Council obeyed the circular, and the local Conservative Party gave the marchers hot meals and accommodation for the night.

Almost all of my generation, and of Edward's, of course, served in the armed forces during the war. Many had a 'political' war, by which I mean that in quite a large number of situations in which one found oneself, it was possible to engage in political activity of some kind or another. About two years before his death Edward, who had been a junior officer in a tank regiment and saw service in North Africa and Italy, told me of the time when it was strongly rumoured that the regiment would be sent to Greece to reinforce the military intervention of December 1944; and of the serious discussions he had as to the political morality of being used in the suppression of a national liberation movement. In the event the regiment remained where it was. The Labour leaders' support of the Greek intervention was the beginning of the openly reactionary foreign policy which Ernest Bevin, when he became Foreign Secretary after the Labour victory of July 1945, was to develop and extend from the first days of taking office. Within a month the Labour government had begun its military intervention on behalf of the French in what was soon to be called Vietnam; at the same time it was sending troops to support the Dutch in Indonesia. A Party that further provided troops for the American war in Korea and supported

German rearmament and did not officially oppose imperialist repression in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus was not a politically comfortable home for those who tried to be principled; and by the middle nineteen fifties Labour-Socialism was a wholly tainted practice. By contrast, a re-reading of the correspondence of 1956 from members of the Communist Party who were increasingly critical of the way the Communist leadership was reacting to the Russian **20th** Congress underlines the extraordinary power of the idea of a disciplined organisation which was assumed to be incorruptible, intellectually as well as in more earthy matters. There was an interesting difference in certain matters between Edward and myself: at least that is how I now see ourselves. I remember a meeting of the Artists International in London – sometime in the winter of 1946–7 – when the speaker, Francis **Klingender**, was bitterly attacked from different parts of the room where distinctive groupings had assembled themselves; and it used to be accepted that there were various literary and writers' groups much in dissent one with the other. Writing of the early **1950s**, in his essay on Christopher **Caudwell** in *Socialist Register* for 1977, Edward Thompson commented (note 15): 'There were a good many frustrated proto-revisionists in the Communist Party in those days; in my own circles we designated the enemy as 'King Street' and as 'Jungle Marxism', of which we increasingly came to see *The Modern Quarterly* as the leading intellectual organ'. And Edward, who was a leading figure in the Yorkshire Peace movement in the first half of the nineteen fifties, and by 1956 a member of the Yorkshire District Committee (at a time when the majority were industrial militants) had a number of expressed disagreements with the full-time officials of the Yorkshii District.

My own experience of Party life **after** I was demobilised and had moved to an academic job at the then University College of Hull, was different. It was a friendly town branch and I accepted the usual chores, such as delivering Saturday copies of the *Daily Worker* round a housing estate. I had a special relationship with the North-East district and would tutor two or three times a year Party weekend schools, mostly of miners from the coalfields of Durham and Northumberland. But the most exhilarating intellectual times of my life were those with the Historians' Group, mostly in London. This first post-war decade of life in the Communist Party was, of course, the very difficult period of the Cold War, much more difficult than is often appreciated. No years were more fraught than those of the Korean War and to speak publicly against the war was to meet great hostility.

Our somewhat different personal histories during these years made no difference to the outlook of Edward and myself in respect of our general understanding and appreciation of the world we found ourselves in. Our rejection of the Labour Party at the national level – as well as our recognition of the nepotism and corruption of too many local Labour and

trade union bureaucrats – continued unchanged, and our belief in the political importance of the Communist Party comes through again and again in the correspondence between us during the spring and summer of 1956. As in Edward's letter of the 4th of April, quoted above, we were fully aware of the problems of ensuring open and free discussion and debate within the Communist Party, and of the consequences of failure; but we began and continued in the belief, and hope, that change would come about. The Labour Party was not an alternative, and what Edward described as the 'extreme position' of a small **marxist** educational league outside the Communist Party, was emphatically not a future prospect that could be welcomed. From April until late June when the decision to publish was taken we argued and debated, and changed our minds on this or that argument almost daily, yet never did we really believe that we should have to move outside the Communist Party. That came **later, and** from around the beginning of September – it is difficult to be precise about the timing – we both began to appreciate that we were confronted with a bureaucratised Party that could not accept the transformation for which we were working.

In the first number of *The Reasoner* (mid July 1956) our first editorial, under the title 'Why We Are Publishing' explained to our readers that it was a journal which in the main was written by and addressed to members of the Communist Party; and we went on to insist that it was above all a discussion journal concerned with fundamental questions which included issues such as the need for a Communist Party in Britain and what should its relationship be with the Labour Party. We stressed that in the existing crisis full and open debate was a necessity, and that, we emphasised, was not so far available through the existing journals of the Party. We continued:

The first need of our movement is a **re-birth** of Socialist principle, ensuring that dogmatic attitudes and theoretical inertia do not return.

We accept the need, as do all members of the Communist Party, for a degree of **self-imposed** discipline in action, based upon discussion and collective decisions. It may be that this concept of discipline has been interpreted too rigidly in the past; and it is certain that the democratic processes within the party are in need of attention. But we must state emphatically that we have no desire to see the party degenerate into a number of quarrelling sects and self-opinionated individuals. It is no part of the aim of this journal to encourage the formation of political factions.

It is now, however, abundantly clear to us that the forms of discipline necessary and valuable in a revolutionary party of action cannot and never should have been extended so far into the processes of discussion, of creative writing, and of theoretical **polemic**. The power which will shatter the capitalist system and create Socialism is that of the free human reason and conscience expressed with the full force of the **organised** working-class. Only a party of free men and women, accepting a discipline arising from truly democratic discussion and decision, alert in mind and conscience, will develop the clarity, the initiative, and the **élan**, necessary to arouse the dormant energies of our people. Everything which tends to cramp the intellect and dull their feelings, weakens the party, **disarms** the working class, and makes the assault upon Capitalism – with its deep defences of fraud and force – more difficult.

Neither the reason nor the conscience of man **can** be confined within the discipline and procedures appropriate to decisions of action; nor can great theoretical issues be solved by a simple majority vote.

We take our stand as Marxists. Nothing in the events of past months has shaken our conviction that the methods and outlook of historical materialism, developed by the work of **Marx** and Engels, provide the key to our theoretical advance and, therefore, to the understanding of these events themselves; although it should be said that much that has gone under the name of 'Marxism' or 'Marxism-Leninism' is itself in need of re-examination.

History has provided a chance for this re-examination to take place; and for the scientific methods of Marxism to be integrated with the finest traditions of the human reason and spirit which we may best describe as Humanism.

This opportunity may be of short duration. Once **passed it** may not soon return. It would be treason to our cause, and a betrayal of the strivings, past and present, for a class-less society, to let it pass in silence.



Throughout the months which followed our first contact, we not only debated every day between ourselves, by correspondence or the telephone or in quite frequent personal meetings, but we listened to our friends and the comrades around us. The absence of any reference to others with whom we worked closely was an unfortunate and regrettable omission from my 1976 article. First, our wives. Dorothy worked actively and closely alongside Edward, and I often addressed my letters to both of them. My own wife did not hold a Party card, having been sceptical of the change of line in 1939, and retaining her scepticism in the years that followed. But she was active in many aspects of Party life, and during the time of *The Reasoner* she was an invaluable critic. There was the draft of an editorial in our second number that she dismissed as patronisingly *de haut en bas* and that we should think again; which is what we did. Of those outside our families, Ken Alexander was our constant support, in correspondence and in meetings. He was a lecturer in the department of economics at the University of Sheffield, then moved to Aberdeen and ended his academic career as Vice-Chancellor of **Stirling** University. He was involved with us from the beginning of our collaboration and he read all or nearly all of our joint editorials. After we had published the first issue of *The Reasoner* we were called to a meeting with the **Yorkshire** District Committee on 10th August. It was a meeting I could not attend and I exchanged several drafts of a statement I was going to submit. In the end, I left the matter of the final draft to Edward. An extract is published in the 1976 article (pp. 9–10). Before this was sent, Edward had written a long, handwritten letter to Ken Alexander (with a copy to me) which, although an interim view (his words) set down very well the questionings that were developing in our minds. The date of the letter was July 25th. He began by listing the kind of theoretical questions that must be discussed: a frank examination of the history of the British Party and of its international connections; the delineation of party democracy, and so on. He continued

by insisting that discussion must be in written expression as against 'soul-searching collective discussions' which could be useful but could also lead to nothing; and further, that we were agreed that 'eventually' changes would have to come in the leadership of the Party and probably in its organisational structure. If we could not get these changes, then two things would follow: first the British Party would probably not get anywhere or might even do damage, and second, that without change, and especially the acceptance of open discussion, we ourselves would be better outside.

Edward then followed these comments with an insistence upon the current role of *The Reasoner* as a *necessary* (his emphasis) instrument in doing the job that must be done; and arguing therefore the case for the continuation of further issues of *The Reasoner* since it had now become the symbol of the whole case for unfettered discussion within the Party's organisation. We could not, therefore, agree to any suspension of the journal until we had clear and precise guarantees that free discussion would become an integral part of the Party's general approach. He concluded on an interesting note which underlines once again that we were both continuing to work for serious change within the Party. It should, of course, be repeated that this letter I am summarising was not a public statement, yet it was, as the contemporary documentation makes plain, a fair summary of what our general position was at this time. 'Perhaps' he wrote 'we should modify somewhat the tone of *The Reasoner*— to develop possibly a more conciliatory tone' in order to encourage full-time officials such as Howard Hill, the Sheffield District secretary, who was much troubled by the developing crisis within the Party and who was far from being a bureaucratic hatchet. Conciliatory, Edward wrote, 'as is compatible with principle'. It was an interesting letter and as remarked above, it was followed within a few days by an exchange of drafts between Edward and myself that was to represent *my/our* views before the Yorkshire District Committee. The Yorkshire meeting was followed by one with the Political Committee of the Communist Party on Friday 31st August. Harry Pollitt was in the chair. It was not, in any respect, a meeting of minds. The members of the Political Committee took a wholly constitutional line on our independent publication outside the Party press and the violation of rules and regulations that was involved. On the central questions of the political fall-out consequent on the secret speech at the 20th Congress, there was no response. Towards the end of the day we made it clear that we were not prepared to cease publication without the guarantees we had stipulated, and later we both wrote, as requested, to Pollitt confirming our position. We managed to produce the second number of *The Reasoner* twenty four hours before the September Central Committee instructed us to cease publication, which meant that if we published again we should certainly be disciplined. We had a further meeting during September with John Gollan, now the General Secretary, and George Matthews, the

Assistant General Secretary. I think it was these meetings at King Street with the leading officials of the Communist Party that made me begin to **recognise** what I did not want to acknowledge: that we would never make a serious impact upon the leadership and that the Party hierarchy was imperishably bureaucratic. We were also becoming aware of the hostility that was growing against us among party members of long standing. That, of course, was to be expected but we were increasingly conscious that the personalities question was beginning to obscure the basic principles we were endeavouring to establish. In a letter written to Edward and Dorothy on 22nd September I included the comment: 'Whatever view we may 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.'

By the beginning of October we had agreed our policy: to publish the third issue of *The Reasoner* while stating that we were stopping **future** publication for reasons that we thought were in the best interests of the Party. We expected of course that we would be disciplined but I think we assumed we should be suspended rather than expelled. So we wrote and published the third and last *Reasoner* and our long main editorial was dated 31st October 1956. Then came the **first** Soviet intervention in Hungary, and Edward's article 'Through the Smoke of Budapest' was dated November 1st. Our **final** editorial, which we agreed over the telephone, was November **4th**, and printed as the first two pages. It demanded that the executive **Committee** of the British Party dissociate itself publicly from the Soviet intervention; the withdrawal of Soviet troops; that it proclaim solidarity with the Polish Workers Party; and that District and National Congresses should be summoned early in the New Year.

We were suspended, and immediately resigned, along with a total of about 7,000 other members including, contrary to myth, large numbers of industrial workers and trade union officials.



It is interesting to speculate what would have happened if the Hungarian crisis and Soviet intervention had not occurred. I doubt whether Edward and I would have remained members, although for me it might have been a very difficult decision at least until the Easter 1957 Congress of the British Party. That Congress showed two things of quite central significance. The first was that the Party leadership were not prepared to confront in any way the political problems that flowed **from** Khrushchev's speech; and the second was that the leadership could count upon a majority of its membership to follow its lead. The Party was now incapable of encouraging a theoretical and political debate; its leadership had been too long in place and were dominated in their thinking by the past; and too many of the rank and file were burdened with the weight of encrusted beliefs, unchallenged

by the creative thinking that Marxism ought to provide and which Stalinism had degraded.



Statement in Response to Suspension

The Executive Committee of the Communist Party has informed us of its decision – taken last weekend – to suspend us from membership of the party for three months, and to 'review' our position at the end of this period, as a result of our action in publishing the unofficial Communist journal *The Reasoner*. The Executive Committee's statement makes it clear that a decisive factor in their action was our editorial **condemning** Soviet intervention in Hungary.

The meaning of the Executive's **decision** is this: despite our own attempt to **find** some way for **compromise**, the leadership of the British Communist Party is determined not to permit discussion to develop in the party free from their control, since they fear that such discussion might lead on to the '**de-Stalinisation**' of the British party – the ridding of the party of authoritarian methods and attitudes, and of political **subservience** to the Soviet leadership.

The response to our journal has shown that a very large number of British **Communists** – **including many** of the most active members – want to see sweeping changes in methods and policies, but are prevented from breaking through by the Executive's command over the party's publications and the loyalty of most of the full-time workers.

We do not intend to appeal against the Executive's decision, and we have both decided to resign from the party at once. The alternative would be for us to remain silent during the three months of our suspension, and then to hope for re-admission next February upon a **promise of good behaviour** in the future, and **perhaps** a confession of past mistakes. This is **quite unacceptable** to us on three **grounds**. 1. **We believe** that in our **attempt** to promote a serious discussion of Communist theory, we – and not the Executive Committee – have been defending Communist principle. 2. We cannot remain silent while the official organs of the Communist Party attempt, day by day, to justify Soviet actions **in Hungary**. 3. While we **sympathise** with those who **are** remaining in the party in the hope of effecting major changes in policy and leadership at the emergency Congress next Easter, we do not believe that they can shift the full-time machine without a real rebirth of Socialist principle throughout the movement. This cannot be effected within the restrictions and controls imposed by the present leadership, nor in an atmosphere of faction.

We **are** also much concerned about the hundreds of Communists, many with years of active service, who have left the party during the past few months, especially over the question of Hungary. We ourselves have no intention of promoting a breakaway party: nor do we want to see Communists and ex-Communists wasting energy in mutual recriminations. The times call above all for a new movement of ideas, reaching out beyond party barriers and bringing socialists together on the basis of principle rather than of opportunism. Organisational questions will become clearer later. To this end, we ourselves will promote the publication of discussion pamphlets and we are in touch with others who are hoping to initiate a new socialist journal, on non-party lines, early in the New Year. In our view ex-Communists should keep together, and should take the initiative in forming local socialist groups, open to all irrespective of party affiliations, in order to keep alive in every locality centres for Socialist propaganda and for the discussion of theory and policy, alongside the practical activity of the members within the organised labour movement. If this is done, regional and national conferences of such groups might later be held. The question of future relations with the Communist Party can be reconsidered in the light of any changes effected at its emergency Congress next Easter.

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November 1956