


Man's Hope

by howard fast

THERE IS little that one can say to take the deadly edge off the "secret" Khrushchev speech, and I, for one, have no desire to enter the argument as to the manner of its presentation. I am puzzled but not deeply concerned as to why Mr. Khrushchev made the report public in the fashion he did; my concern is not with the manner of the document, but with its content.

It is a strange and awful document, perhaps without parallel in history; and one must face the fact that it itemizes a record of barbarism and paranoic blood-lust that will be a lasting and shameful memory to civilized man.



I recognize that the public appearance of this document indicates that deep and important changes are taking place in Russia, and there have been other heartening indications as well. Yet in presenting it, Mr. Khrushchev led men of good will to understand that the document itself would be a warning of the monstrous dangers inherent in secret and dictatorial government. I, for one, looked hopefully but vainly at the end of the document for a pledge that the last execution had taken place on Soviet soil. I looked for a pledge of civil rights, for the sacred right of habeus corpus, of public appeal to higher courts, of final judgement by one's peers rather than by professional judges.

I looked for these things knowing full well how they have been mishandled and perverted in the courts of capitalism—but knowing also that thousands of brave men had given their lives so that these rights might be a part of mankind's growth. I looked for them knowing that they are sacred to the individual so long as injustice lingers anywhere, and knowing also that under socialism they need not be mishandled.

Instead, I learned that three more executions had been announced from the Soviet Union, and my stomach turned over with the blood-letting, with the madness of vengeance and counter-vengeance, of suspicion and counter-suspicion. I don't think I am alone in this feeling. I think millions of human beings share my disgust at this idiotic behavior—wicked, uncivilized, but above all, idiotic.

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HAVE I BECOME an enemy of the Soviet Union? The answer is no. I don't think anything that happened or is happening here in these United States could make me an enemy of the United States, a land I love so deeply and which has given me so much. I also think I can say that few people during this past decade have written so bluntly and consistently of the injustice that exists upon its soil. I do this not out of hatred, but out of an affinity with what is at least in small part mine. Therefore, it is also in some part, my trust and my hope and my burden. Even so is socialism, in some part, my trust, my hope and my burden.

Where I failed miserably and where I swear by all that is holy that I will not fail again, was in not exercising the same judgement toward the Soviet Union. This would not have lessened my belief in socialism; it would have increased it, and it would have increased and strengthened the belief of others as well. For I saw only a land that had won socialism, and I failed to see that to win socialism and to abandon the holy right of man to his own conscience, his own dignity, his right to say what he pleases when he pleases, to speak clearly and boldly for the truth as he sees the truth—and fearing no man, whether right or wrong—is no victory at all.

It is some small comfort to say that I did not know the facts in the Khrushchev report; but I cannot rest on that. I knew that the death penalty existed in the Soviet Union, and I knew in my own heart that capital punishment is an abomination and a disgrace to mankind. I knew there were prisons, and I believed that civilized society would make a short shift of prisons, and yet I failed to charge the Soviet Union with this. I accepted the fact that Jewish culture had been wiped out in Russia; and I know that this is a fate no culture should ever meet; yet this too I did not challenge. I knew that Jews were forbidden to leave Russia for Israel, and yet I did not raise my voice to protest this restriction, even though I could make no sense or reason out of it. I knew that writers and artists and scientists were intimidated, but I accepted this as a necessity of socialism, even as I accepted all else that I have enumerated as a necessity of socialism.

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THIS I CAN never accept again—and never again can I accept as a just practice under socialism that which I know to be unjust. I have not become an enemy of the Soviet Union; my faith in socialism would be small indeed if I did—just as my faith in democracy would be worthless were I to become an enemy of the United States. I know that socialism is the inevitable stage toward which mankind is moving, and I know that socialism will bring social justice, so long as men believe in it and fight for it without fear or compromise.

The Soviet Union is a socialist land, and for that reason I have been proud to defend it publicly. If of any value, it still has in me a friend—a man whose devotion to socialism and to social justice has not been shaken. I will never forget the achievements of socialism, the destruction of the Nazi madmen, the building and rebuilding of the great Soviet land, the goodness and humanism of the Soviet people, the leadership of the struggle for peace—and the good right hand stretched out to colonial people and oppressed people everywhere.

Only a fool or a scoundrel would deny that these things are of the facts of our time, and I still say that only fools or scoundrels use the madness and wickedness of a handful of Soviet leaders as an excuse to preach the destruction of the socialist part of the world. As well take McCarthy and his contemptible cronies, and by their measure preach the destruction of all the good and splendid things in these United States. Of that, I will have no part.

But I must say that if Russia has in me a friend, it also has a severe and implacable critic. Never again will I remain silent when I can recognize injustice—regardless of how that injustice may be wrapped in the dirty linen of expediency or necessity. Never again will I fail to question, to demand proof. Never again will I accept the "clever" rationale, which appears to make sense but under scrutiny does not.

And with this said, I feel better—better than I have felt in a long time. There are many rewards in life, but I know of nothing better than for a man to feel whole and to say what he thinks bluntly. I think that, too, must be a part of man's hope.

All this has been written very personally, and it must be; for it is only what I have been thinking and I must take the total responsibility for saying it.