

The Communist writer's break with the Communist Party presents a test for the dissidents inside the Stalinist movement and for the critics outside of it. . . .

HOWARD FAST and HIS STALINIST CRITICS

By H. W. BENSON

When Howard Fast left the Communist Party in February he shook up American Stalinism as much as any single individual could. His novels had circulated by the millions in Russia; the party had counted him as one of its literary treasures; he was a Stalin Peace Prize recipient; and he was not just a fellow traveler but a regular, official party member, and had been so for fifteen years.

Like thousands of others he had been deeply shocked by the Stalin revelations and awaited a genuine turn to democracy in Russia with expectancy; but he waited in vain. His turn was definite and public.

Many others, in the party and out, deplored Stalinism and suggested that perhaps it was time to curb the dictatorship. But Fast made a sharp break denouncing injustice, murder, totalitarianism for what they are, proclaiming his own personal dedication to the fight for democracy.

He insisted that he remained a socialist, true to his socialist convictions. Yet, like so many ex-Stalinists who have been awakened to the bare truths without warning, he is not only shocked but perplexed. The Russian regime is dictatorial, he calls out with no evasion; its policy has been anti-socialist; but in his view it remains "socialist," a tragically dictatorial, totalitarian "socialism" that must become democratic and humanitarian.

The case of Howard Fast, if we can turn him from an individual into a symbol, puts all groups to a test. Those who profess to abandon Stalinism, and those who actually have, meet a forthright repudiation of it. Will they grapple with Fast's arguments with some attempt at honesty, or will they react as in the past with Stalinist-type abuse?

And those who have always been anti-Stalinist meet the test of opportunity. Can they receive those whose views resemble his, recognize that they are breaking with their Stalinist past, and call upon them to join in reconstructing a powerful democratic socialist movement in the United States? There are hundreds, not as articulate as Fast in his repudiation of Stalinism, but as thoroughgoing.

On February 1, the N. Y. Times announced Fast's break with the CP. It was there that the party first read the news.

The CP national convention was yet to come; the *Daily Worker*, not yet under the full pressure of a resurgent Fosterite faction, was calm enough. It deplored his action but understood it and expressed the hope that all could remain friends.

FIRST PHASE

In the *Worker* on March 10, A. B. Magil reported on his interview with Fast under the head, "He Affirms Socialist Beliefs but Severs Communist Ties," all in a friendly spirit. Where Fast was repelled by a record of unspeakable crimes, Magil noticed "shortcomings" which Fast made too much of.

"Clearly Howard Fast is deeply troubled, even bitter about some developments in the socialist countries," diagnosed Magil. "To this writer it seems that he tends to magnify serious

shortcomings in the Soviet Union and to see them in a one-sided way. To criticize those shortcomings, to urge changes is one thing. But doesn't Fast overlook the fact that the Soviet system made the greatest and most fundamental change in history . . . It is this change that world imperialism would like to reverse."

It was only a trace of a hint of the old tone. That was yet to come, blatantly from others.

Fast still felt compelled to credit the Communist Party in the United States with making "contributions"—at least, so Magil reported. But this was a concession that could hardly cancel out his open attack on the Russian regime.

Magil reported: "But more bitter than anything else was his criticism of what he described as 'an almost total lack of functioning democracy in the Soviet Union.' Fast said, 'What we witness in Russia is not democratic or humanist socialism. It is totalitarian socialism. It is to say exactly this—and to say it as forcefully as I can—that I left the party. There was no other effective way I saw to protest this terrifying distortion of all that socialism means to so many.'"

Fast told him too: "I can't close my eyes to the fact that a Russian writer who through his writings had attempted to expose the very real abuses of democracy in his own country would have had his work die stillborn. He himself, as the record shows, would have either been disgraced, jailed or even put to death."

The future? Fast remains a socialist, he said. "If at some future time a broad socialist movement comes into existence in the U.S., I'd like to be part of it. I plan to go on fighting with all my strength against perversions of democracy here, of which there are no small number."

"LOATHING AND DISGUST"

The editors of the Communist literary magazine *Mainstream* soon essayed a reply more in the old-fashioned tone. As a concession to the spirit of the times, they invited Fast to explain his views in their March issue, which he did in a nine-page statement entitled "My Decision."

The Communist Party, wrote Fast, "is compromised to a point where it can no longer make any effective contribution to the continuing struggle for democracy and social justice."

How could he have remained in the party while the Russian repressions went on? He explains: "I believed, as did millions of men of good will, that the only truth about the Soviet Union was the picture presented by friends of the Soviet Union."

But when "this unspeakable document" appeared—namely, the Khrushchev report—"I was filled with loathing and disgust. I felt a sense of unmitigated mental nausea at the realization that I had supported and defended this murderous bloodbath, and I felt as so many did then a sense of being a victim of the most incredible swindle in modern times."

And: "The dimensions of this horror were not only beyond anything we could have dreamed of—but also beyond, far beyond, the worst accusations of the worst enemies of the Soviet Union." And he will not be satisfied with a form-

al, gingerly, mechanical, passionless admission of past "errors."

The contempt he feels for the new school of apologists is expressed in one simple incident. A French Communist intellectual wrote him a bitter letter pointing out that the French CP had asked for "a more complete theoretical explanation of the serious wrongs attributed to Comrade Stalin." The Frenchman was indignant that Fast remained unsatisfied, for "The Soviet Communist Party then issued a statement implying precisely this theoretical analysis, a statement which forms a document of major importance to every militant of the working class and which has enabled the working-class parties to make a sound appraisal of the ideas already involved."

To this incredible trash, Fast replies in just three words, completely and adequately: "Heaven help us!"

"THE DUTY OF SOCIALISTS"

Fast is torn by the apparent paradox of a "socialism" that is totalitarian:

"In Russia we have socialism without democracy. We have socialism without trial by jury, habeas corpus, or the right against self-incrimination. . . . We have socialism without civil liberty. We have socialism without power of recall of government. . . . Perhaps the cruellest and strangest development of history is the appearance of socialism under the domination of totalitarianism. And unless this is seen and faced and dealt with by the Left, both Communists and Socialists, then the present agony of mankind will continue far longer than it has to."

To those who claim that Russia is now at least on the road to democracy he replies: "Where jail or death is the price of criticism directed at government, such claims are not only false but even obscene."

Where, he asks, is the duty of socialists now? "I say that it lies with socialism . . . it does not lie with the pretentious dogmatism of Soviet leadership, indicted not only for their acquiescence in the crimes of Stalin, but for their continuing record of intolerance and dogmatic bossism since the exposure of those crimes."

Clearly, then, we have met a man who is not a shamefaced critic, a near-apologist or a half-apologist, but one who is ready to speak out his hatred for Stalinism, for totalitarian dictatorship in all forms. And if he still looks upon Russia as some form of socialism, albeit reactionary and totalitarian, this does not alter that fundamental fact.

BACK IN THE GROOVE

The editors of *Mainstream* begin the process of controlled and restrained vituperation.

"You admittedly knew nothing of all these crimes, they reply, but neither did we or the party; how can you hold us responsible for crimes and errors that were concealed from us? Thus they take refuge in a cloak of common ignorance.

But now they do know; Fast knows; he is sickened and horrified and he cries out in protest as any decent man should. They, the editors of *Mainstream*, know too; but they persist, with their newly found knowledge, in speaking as apologists for the Stalinist-without-Stalin regime of dictatorship. That is the essential difference between them and Fast.

When Fast attacks dictatorship, they protest that he only brings confusion "when the need to achieve some sort of working cooperation, if not unity, is apparent to almost all." If they insist upon unity as a substitute for criticism, it is because theirs is a unity which endorses the very totalitarianism which Fast rejects.

If Fast denounces the murder of Jews in Russia, they reply that the Israeli government confiscates opposition papers; if he protests against the lack of democratic rights, they take refuge in juridical irrelevancies and assumed ignorance. "We are not competent to discuss this." But they claim to be quite competent to discover that the main enemy in Hungary was the U. S. Intelligence Service.

If Fast insists upon democracy and exposes

Reaction of CP Hacks to Fast's Criticism Runs in the Old Groove . . .

hypocrisy in Russia, they deplore his lack of patience.

Their compendium of apologetics, irrelevancies, and diversions concludes: "we consider his statement a disservice not simply to the Communist Party, not just to the cause of socialism, but to the American progressive movement as a whole."

The form is somewhat restrained but the content rings familiarly.

CHORUS SINGS OUT

A month later *Mainstream* solicits comments on the exchange with Fast.

Herbert Aptheker finds a lot to attack; he denounces "reaction" in Hungary; he is merciless with British and French imperialism; colonialism meets his wrath, in British Guiana, Guatemala and Columbia. Franco Spain, West Germany and Japan are exposed as citadels of remilitarization. Naturally, he has little space left to deal with Fast's stinging repudiation of Russian dictatorship.

He is left only with this: in Russia "the real masses, the vast majority of toilers are themselves building a new life, are deciding by their own experience the most difficult problems of socialist organization." All this under the Stalin police dictatorship too? Did the masses choose that too by "themselves," or was it foisted upon them? Useless questions? Aptheker is Aptheker.

Another writer, one of *Mainstream's* contributing editors, concludes that Fast is guilty of "desertion under fire," which of course finishes him off neatly. Thus the author need only add, "I am not going to try to answer Mr. Fast's attacks on the Soviet Union."

Joseph Starobin, another commentator, is careful to note that Fast "neither grew as a writer nor gained as a man" while he was in the party. An interesting literary and psychological observation that might be fitted into something some time! "I have no sympathy for the way the Soviet leaders have behaved," he writes; "their society should never have been taken as the model for what we wish to build and it is not that today. But Howard's indictment is as extravagant and oversimplified as his passion used to be."

Bert Cochran, alone, shows understanding and real sympathy: "Howard Fast's break with Stalinism is the only way one should make this kind of a break . . . straight from the shoulder, clear-cut, and public. What has been so disturbing about many of the post-20th Congress reformations was their queasiness. . . . Fast's statement has the earmarks of something personal, something deeply felt and sincerely meant. That is why it deserves to be taken seriously."

APOLOGETICS AGAIN

Time passes. A month later, A. B. Magil returns to the scene with two articles in the *Worker* (April 21 and 28).

The first article stalls along, expressing three columns of belated surprise that Fast should

find the CP "compromised." Of course, Magil adds, mistakes have been made, even serious ones, but we have acknowledged them. Why, he asks blandly, draw such "drastic conclusions?"

By the following week, Magil has supplied the raw materials for a reply to his own question. He addresses himself to Fast's criticism of the Russian regime and we begin to hear, more audibly than before, the voice of the apologist.

"It seems to me," he writes, "that Howard Fast has become confused about who is the enemy of mankind." There follows the inevitable thrust at imperialism—in France, in Britain, in the Near East, as though the crimes of capitalism somehow mitigate those of Russian dictatorship.

Yes, the enemies of mankind have been myriad. Is Stalinism perhaps one of them? Magil hastens on without a reply.

He is amazed that Fast discovers socialism without democracy in Russia but his objection has nothing in common with those like ourselves who find no socialism in Russia. No! Magil insists that Russia is socialist and therefore it must be democratic; no need to examine the facts, no need to face Fast's indictment; for "Isn't 'socialism without democracy' a contradiction in terms? When all the means of production are taken away from a small group of private big capitalists and landowners and converted into public property, when the labor of the workers ceases to be a source of private gain for non-workers—isn't this itself an enormous democratic transformation?"

A curious reader might wonder: if democracy was inherent in Russian "socialism," why, where, what was Stalinism? No place for it in Magil's scheme.

There wasn't and there isn't a trace of democracy in Stalinist Russia. Neither was there socialism. The fact is that the means of production were owned not by the "public" but by the state, and the state in turn was controlled by an exploiting bureaucracy.

When Fast exposes the lack of democracy, Magil replies that the Soviet legal system "was fashioned in bitter struggle against external and internal class enemies." That might have impressed some of his friends three years ago. But now we know that the Stalinist legal system was fashioned against workers, socialists, and Communists, and that under it more Communists were executed in Russia than in any other country in the world.

Magil concludes: "Fast has tossed away the compass of scientific socialist principles and is steering by intuition." If that were so we would have to conclude; a thousand times better Fast's intuition than Magil's apologetics!

FOSTER'S DIATRIBE

Our last chapter begins on June 9 when Fast released the text of his correspondence with Russian writer Polevoi to the *Times*. It added little to what Fast had already expressed in *Mainstream*.

But he was quickly castigated for going to the bourgeois press, by none so sharply as William Z. Foster. His critics, however, were curiously undisturbed when Khrushchev chose to use the bourgeois-owned television industry to present his defense of the policies of the Russian dictatorship. Obviously, the proscriptions apply only to the enemies of Stalinism, not its apologists!

If Fast chose to make his views known not merely to the world of 7000 *Daily Worker* readers but to the hundreds of thousands who read the *New York Times*, who can blame him? His break from Stalinism was not intended to be a private act before a select circle but a public declaration against tyranny.

Foster's diatribe against Fast, available for inspection in the June 17 *Daily Worker*, is worth attention only as a token of the public revival of Stalinist methodology.

Fast expresses open horror at the Stalin revelations in strong words—but that is only the beginning. Now he rejects the Russian regime because it remains totalitarian and dictatorial. Foster doesn't waste time with so decisive a point; he busies himself to explain that Stalin's crimes can be easily explained by objective conditions.

But objective conditions, however potent, can only explain. It takes Foster to try to explain away. And when Fast protests against the continuing suppression of democracy in Russia, Foster hurls epithets: "slander"; "monstrous distortion"; "playing directly into the hands of the class enemy."

IN THEIR NAME

And so, we repeat, the case of Howard Fast has become a test for all.

He left the Communist Party because he would not wait indefinitely for a fundamental change and lost all hopes of a transition to democracy in Russia by the ruling regime. But there are those who still remain inside the Communist Party in the hope of moving it toward a democratic conception of socialism. The least they can do, the very least, is to protest against the defamation of the name of Howard Fast and the Stalinist-type distortion of his views.

Fast writes and speaks in his own name; but in his views he expresses the feelings of thousands of others who have no way of putting forth their opinions. They are horrified at what existed in Russia and at the dictatorship that still exists. They have left the Communist Party or cease to sympathize with it. Despite everything, however, they imagine that Russia is still somehow "socialist." It is to them a terrible form of "socialism." They want not that but democratic socialism. These are the thousands of radicals who are breaking away from Stalinism or who have already broken from it.

A militant socialist organization, worthy of the name, would know how to take these people as they are and channelize their energies, abilities and idealism in the common cause of democratic socialism.