

Where Howard Fast Goes Astray on Stalinism —

By Murry Weiss

Howard Fast, the internationally known novelist who announced his decision to resign from the Communist Party of the U.S., Feb. 1, explained this act in an article in the March issue of *Mainstream*. He denounced Stalinism as "the most incredible swindle of modern times" and indicted Khrushchev and Co. "not only for their acquiescence in the crimes of Stalin, but for their continuing record of intolerance and dogmatic bossism since the exposure of these crimes." He declared that socialists must take their stand on the side of the Soviet people against the Soviet bureaucracy and he reiterated his opposition to capitalism and imperialism.

In our opinion one of the main weaknesses of Fast's position is the superficiality of his explanation of the rise of Stalinism. He is on the right road when he says that "within the Soviet Union an increasing contradiction between Communist Party leadership and practice and evolving socialist society exists; and in good time this contradiction will become intolerable to the Soviet people." But he loses the road again when he tries to explain how the "leadership" of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union became an obstacle to socialist progress that will have to be overthrown by the Soviet people.

Fast says: "I have come to believe that within the very struc-

ture and historical development of the Communist Parties, as we know them in recent years, there is an almost incurable antithesis to the socialist democracy which they name as their ultimate goal." (My emphasis — M.W.)

The substance of Fast's treatment of this point is that a "tragic contradiction" exists between the struggle against capitalist oppression and the kind of party that is necessary for waging such a struggle on the one hand, and the goal of socialist freedom on the other. What he overlooks is that the Communist parties, "as we know them in recent years," are the product of decades of Stalinist degeneration and demoralization. They are not parties that were educated and shaped as organs of revolutionary struggle of the working class of their respective countries. On the contrary, since the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, the Communist parties have been systematically transformed into bureaucratized and pliant instruments of Stalinism.

That is the reason why the Communist parties, despite all the revolutionary-minded workers who adhere to them, have long ceased to struggle for the overthrow of capitalism in their own countries. They have abandoned the Leninist policy of class struggle and gone over to a Stalinist brand of social reformism. All this in order to serve the interests of the conservative and privileged Soviet bureaucratic

caste that long ago turned its back on the international socialist revolution as the way out of the difficulties besetting an isolated workers state.

Therefore, we are compelled to seek the cause for the transformation of the Communist parties in the rise of Stalinism to power. If we try to discover the cause of Stalinism in the structure of the bureaucratized shells of what used to be revolutionary parties, we will be looking for the cause of a phenomenon in one of the results that this phenomenon has brought about.

MAINSTREAM EDITORS

The editors of *Mainstream*, in their reply to Fast's decision to quit the Communist Party, counterpose to the position Fast takes on the need for a revolutionary removal of the Soviet bureaucracy, the notion that this bureaucracy has itself embarked on a program of reform, and they cite Isaac Deutscher as being far more patient with these efforts than Fast. Deutscher, who is introduced as "surely no friend of the present Soviet leadership," is quoted as displaying a deep appreciation of these reforms and at the same time, unlike Fast, understanding the "decisive objective factor which sets limits to egalitarianism and democratic reform."

Deutscher's thesis in a nutshell is as follows:

Stalinism arose because of the objective historical circumstances

confronted by the young Soviet State. Russia emerged from the October 1917 Revolution with a backward, largely agrarian economy. It was surrounded by a hostile capitalist world. The socialist revolution failed to materialize in the Western world. Thus the Bolshevik party had to transform itself into a brutal Stalinist dictatorship and by using the whip on the Russian people it raised the industrial level of the country to its present height. Having accomplished this progressive task the bureaucratic dictatorship found itself in a contradiction; its method of rule was now outmoded, the advanced economy now required and permitted a certain degree of democratization and the elimination of the worst inequalities. Whereupon this material fact recorded itself in the consciousness of the bureaucracy and, despite a certain amount of friction and scuffling, a program of reform was introduced which will lead in the end to the establishment of socialist democracy.

WORKERS TRUE ROLE

The distinguishing characteristic of this mode of thought is the absence of any conception whatever of the revolutionary mission and capacities of the working class. The bureaucracy is endowed with qualities of historic statesmanship; from the bureaucracy all things — good and evil — emanate. The working class according to these

theorizers, is but the raw historical material out of which the bureaucracy shapes destiny.

Nothing could be further from the historic truth. It was the revolutionary Russian working class which led all the oppressed in overthrowing the centuries-old rule of the landlords and capitalists. In a display of revolutionary capacity and energy that shook the whole world, it created a new, democratic organ of workers' power—the Soviets.

The bureaucracy arose from the objective conditions confronted by the young Soviet state. In this observation the Deutschers are merely repeating a banal truism. All political phenomena arise from "objective conditions." The question is: what contradictory elements in the objective conditions did the bureaucracy represent and what did the opposition to the bureaucracy represent?

TWO ENDS

Leon Trotsky took up this question in a passage in his book, *The Revolution Betrayed*. He remarked, "The more honest or open-eyed of the 'friends,' [of the Soviet bureaucracy] at least when speaking *tete-a-tete*, concede that there is a spot on the Soviet sun. But substituting a fatalistic for a dialectic analysis, they console themselves with the thought that a certain bureaucratic degeneration in the given historical conditions was historically inevitable. Even so! The

resistance to this degeneration also has not fallen from the sky. A necessity has two ends: the reactionary and progressive. History teaches that persons and parties which drag at the opposite ends of a necessity turn out in the long run on opposite sides of the barricades."

By employing Deutscher's sophistries the editors of *Mainstream* close their eyes to the fact that the Stalinist bureaucracy conquered power in the Soviet Union by waging a veritable civil war to destroy workers' democracy. Before Stalin was in the position to commit his hideous crimes, the bureaucracy had to throttle the proletarian left opposition within the Bolshevik party.

The crucial struggle was waged in the USSR over a number of years and then continued abroad for decades. In the course of the struggle the Trotskyist left opposition elaborated a comprehensive theoretical analysis of the sociological causes for Stalinism and of the theoretical and political fallacies of Stalinism. After an extended experience the opposition arrived at the conclusion that only a political revolution of the Soviet working class could open the road for a new gigantic advance of the Soviet Union and that such a revolution would be a mighty link in the chain of the world socialist struggle. The opposition defended every step of the way the rights and interests of the work-

ing class. For this it was subjected to the most savage persecutions and its program was countered with a blanket of falsification and slander.

Is it possible today to trace the degeneration of the Soviet state and the rise of Stalinism without examining, on its merits, the analysis of the Trotskyist opposition is to defy the most elementary procedure involved in an honest, not to speak of a Marxist, investigation of historic reality.

It is very easy to say that

Trotskyism is a "dead issue" and thus dismiss with an air of wisdom the actual record of the struggle between the revolutionary and Stalinist wings of the Soviet Communist party. But, if theoretical clarity is to be achieved, nothing short of a complete accounting of the origins of Stalinism will suffice. In this respect Fast, as well as the editors of *Mainstream*, have the task of undertaking such an investigation and submitting their findings to the radical workers.

(Second of a series)

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