

# Reflections on Fascism and Communism

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**“Stalinism is the most successful variant of fascism.” With that pronouncement, made at the American Workers and Artists for Solidarity rally, Susan Sontag became the eye of a political storm.** Oscillating between the penitential and accusatorial, which charged the atmosphere and added a touch of theatre to the event, her mea culpas and belated revelations about the unrelieved malevolence of Communist societies met with boos and hisses from a good part of the audience at Town Hall. And hardly had the meeting been adjourned when dozens took to their typewriters, providing several publications with an editorial glut. Unfortunately, the polemical torrent has been reduced to a trickle, which is both telling and sad because Sontag's concerns are neither trivial nor arcane. They involve basic evaluations (re-evaluations for Sontag) of myth and reality in the Communist world past and present; questions of history, politics, social and moral values relevant to the fate of us all and of special significance for those who consider themselves of the left.

It was not only declared at the meeting but made explicit in many of the letters to various editors (at least a majority of those published) that Sontag's equation of Communism and fascism was prima facie evidence that she had defected from the left to join forces with the neo-conservative right. Jessica Mitford, for example, found that "the logical conclusion implicit in Susan Sontag's speech" is "first strike, anyone?" Gary Wills didn't go so far as suggesting that Sontag's equation implies nuclear holocaust but was content to charge her with borrowing from the anti-Communist arguments of the Readers Digest and of having become a sort of latter-day McCarthyite: she aims "to shame the Left for having believed in the authenticity of anti-colonial movements, the untenability of Chiang's position, the nationalist tensions between China and Russia, and the fictive character of Senator McCarthy's 'investigation.'" Another letter writer shot from the hip: if Sontag visits Miami's "little Havana" she will be "flanked by ex-National Guardsmen from Anastasio Somoza's regime; and that they will give her a cocktail party funded from

the drug money that also feeds the Cuban terrorists." A Chicago union functionary rebuked The Nation for printing Sontag at all, advising that weekly to "leave anti-communism and Soviet-baiting in the paws of yahoo scribblers for ultra right magazines." An equally elegant indictment was handed down by another moralist, Abby Hoffman, who believes that "Sontag's song would have been best sung in chorus with Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra, not from the stage of Town Hall." And again we have the image of Sontag as a one-person-nuclear-threat from another correspondent, who didn't like "reviving the rhetoric of the Cold War, escalating the military budget" and warned that "increasing nuclear tensions do nothing to help the people of Poland, Afghanistan, etc." and concludes: "Why not give peace a chance?" An irate black woman delivered the following low blow: "I would opt for Joseph Stalin over a Strom Thurmond or a Jesse Helms any day. Under Stalin I could only vote for one 'president.' Under Thurmond or Helms, none." (Of course, under Stalin she might be dead.)

Thus for many, Sontag, through her equation, becomes a nuclear menace, spiritual heir of the infamous Wisconsin McCarthy, consort of American racists and Latin American killers, perhaps even a scribbler. To be fair, not all the critical responses were on this primitive level; some were better reasoned. There were also letters of support, only a few of which were interesting. However, a splendid article-length comment by Jacobo Timmerman, titled "Moral Symmetry," appeared in the March 6, 1982 issue of The Nation. And in her moving essay on life in South Africa, "Living in the Interregnum" (New York Review of Books, January 20, 1983), Nadine Gordimer concludes with a thoughtful discussion of the issues raised by Sontag.

Special mention must be reserved for Alexander Cockburn in whose Village Voice columns muddied political waters were so roiled that they occasionally emitted a whiff of old fashioned Stalinist vilification. In a discussion of the Costa Gavras film, Missing, he gratuitously entered Susan Sontag's name and formulation:

*"Is it so much the spirit of our times that the unspeakable or the unjust can never be faced: that the US contrived the overthrow of Arbenz; promoted the execution of a million Indonesian communists; murdered Vietnamese by the hundreds of thousands; tolerated and sustained torture and "butchery in Latin America?"*

*All is forgiven, because all is forgotten. A la Sontag, communism becomes fascism and vice versa. Between the two goes the US, treading the middle way, supporting El Salvador generals for a half-century and then feeling especially virtuous for forcing some National Guardsmen into the dock for murdering the nuns. It doesn't take much to purge the imperial conscience."*

Note the insidious weaving, a la Vyshinsky, of Sontag's name and point of view with moods, tendencies, even culpable regimes, prepared to tolerate, forgive, forget, perhaps be complicitous in, the torture, execution, butchery of millions in Indonesia, Vietnam and Latin America. At least there are no "fascist mad-dogs." [1]

If the equation Communism equals fascism implies that "all is forgiven, because all is forgotten" vis-a-vis the crimes of American imperialism, the formula must also imply that where the crimes of Stalinism have been forgotten, as in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, there, too, "all is forgiven, because all is forgotten." The Communism equals fascism formula would then be transformed from an intended equivalency of evil to an apologia for both Communism and capitalism, with Susan Sontag thereby becoming less a convert to the right than an unmitigated fool.

Has Sontag moved to the right? Is she the latest recruit to the French "New Philosophers" as Cockburn also intimated? Little in her remarks per se supports the charge. On the contrary, Sontag clearly separated herself from the Janus-faced right which laments the plight of the Polish people and simultaneously supports or rationalizes oppression and terror in rightist dictatorships. The meeting, she noted, was not only being held to support the "democratic workers' movement in Poland" but "to stake out a different kind of support for Poland than that tendered by, say, Reagan, Haig and Thatcher." Answering her critics in *The Nation*, she wrote of the "democratic movement in El Salvador whose struggle to overthrow the tyranny backed by the American government I passionately support."

For many of her critics, this is not enough to validate her democratic credentials. All they heard was her now total renunciation of the Stalinist church and that remains an unforgivable political heresy for those to whom unambiguous opposition to totalitarianism as a social system becomes a confession of right wing guilt. It is to

commit the sin of "fanatical anti-Communism" (no one ever speaks disparagingly of "fanatical anti-fascism"), as if to pin such labels on accused heretics absolves the accuser from the responsibility to answer arguments rationally or to review one's past allegiances and present commitments in the light of history.

Perhaps, when all is said and done, Sontag will move to the right. It is certainly true that many who discard all illusions about Stalinism are so traumatized by their new awareness that they lose the ability to distinguish between the perverse "false consciousness" of Stalinism (or "Communism")<sup>[2]</sup> and the political and moral values of authentic radical and socialist movements; not only is Communism now evil but the whole notion of socialism becomes Utopian at best or criminal at worst.

In any case, Sontag's political evolution is of far less interest and importance than the respective merits of the two contradictory formulations made at the Solidarity rally—the first, of course, is Sontag's view that Communism is successful fascism; the second formulation, made by her most vigorous critics, places an equal sign between Sontag's position and capitulation to the right. The latter position is indefensible, and what it suggests will be discussed later. But if many of Sontag's critics reject her view unfairly, that does not make her position, as presented at the meeting, unimpeachable. Sontag, or others who accept her equation, are obliged to make clear, at some point, on what level the equivalency of fascism and Communism is made. Is it an assertion of an ideological and class affinity of Communist and fascist societies? Or is it only intended to summarize, in an immediate descriptive and human sense, the similar levels of violence and oppression both use to achieve and retain power?

### **The Equation Viewed Sociologically**

Anyone who tries to identify Communism and fascism in a precise sociological sense would be hard-pressed to make a convincing case. On that level, differences and contradictions do exist that are serious and politically relevant.

Historically, fascism is the brutal response of a beleaguered capitalist class threatened by a profound economic and social crisis and menaced by a rebellious

working class. Seeking stability, fearful for its very existence, the ruling class can no longer tolerate even the limited freedoms of bourgeois democracy. It seeks salvation, instead, in a semi-autonomous state which suppresses traditional liberties, tames the working class and even circumscribes the rights of the capitalist class as a whole, as it continues to protect much of the power and privileges of private capital.

"Communism" (or bureaucratic collectivism, i.e., Stalinism as a social system), on the other hand, can be defined as a society in which politics transcends economics; where the means of production are owned and controlled by the state and the state is owned and controlled by a single party. The viability of this society depends on its ability to destroy the owners of private capital as an economic class and a political force (possibly permitting agrarian and minor vestiges of a market economy), to suppress all opposition and, above all else, to prevent or contain any manifestation of economic or political independence by its working class. Democratic rights, cultural autonomy and intellectual freedom are inimical to a ruling class which consists not of representatives of the working class or of bankers and industrialists but of the leading luminaries of the all powerful Communist Party and its subordinate government administrative and military bureaucracies.

These different class structures imply differences in social cohesiveness and suggest the theoretical limits to internal change in each society. Take Spain and Russia as prototypical systems. Franco's mission in the thirties was to preserve the Spanish bourgeoisie from the threat of godlessness, anarchy and socialism. He serviced his class well. But neither the Falange in particular nor fascism in general had a quintessential, permanent relationship to capitalism. Without capitalism there can be no fascism, but the converse is not true. In Spain, in Germany, in Italy, capitalism has survived and, arguably, benefited from the fall of fascism.

In Russia—and Communist societies in general—the same dichotomy between class and governing authority could not exist for any extended period, for there the Communist Party is the counterpart of both the bourgeois class and the fascist state. To challenge the Party is to challenge the ruling class and the converse is true.

In Russia the politically organized ruling class operates on a sophisticated level of class consciousness. It sees more clearly than many of Sontag's critics that any attempt to deprive the Party of its authority is at the same time, consciously or not, an attempt to undermine Communism as a social system. The Party can ease its terror but it cannot surrender what it euphemistically calls its "leading role." In all economic planning and state organs, in the military, in the judicial system, in the state-owned company "unions," etc. the Party must be eternally (sometimes murderously) vigilant in guarding and enhancing its supremacy.

There was not the same class rooted compulsion for Franco to weave Spain's social fabric so tightly. The fact is that after 35 years of fascist rule, the Falange was not able either to absorb or fully neutralize other potentially competitive institutions, bureaucracies and political tendencies—e.g., the church, state sponsored "unions," monarchists. This looser social organization of fascism compared to totalitarian Communism left Franco comparatively vulnerable to lateral pressures as well as to more basic resistance from below. By the seventies many a Spanish bourgeois had come to view fascism as an economic encumbrance and a political liability.

Spanish fascism, its power eroded for decades by internal stress and resistance, was toppled in a massive popular upheaval which raised the spectre of socialist revolution but, unfortunately, fell short of achieving a fundamental change in class rule. A parallel move to dispossess the ruling Party in Russia, unlike in Spain, would automatically raise the level of confrontation from one evoking the mere spectre of socialism to a social revolutionary struggle aimed at expropriating the ruling class. (Here it best be noted, at least parenthetically, that to describe Communism as more total in its social controls than fascism is not to picture the latter as benign. A particular fascist society can be more loosely controlled from above than a particular Communist state and, at the same time, be more cruel.)

The notion of Communism as not merely a variant of fascism but the "most successful" variant, when permitted to stand by itself, is also flawed in that it suggestively imputes to Communism a homogeneity and invincibility that is simply not the case. Just as Spanish, Italian and German fascism rarely operated as a

single unified force, Communism in power reveals anything but a spirit of mutual accommodation and dedication to an internationalist ideal. The historical circumstances (e.g., national and cultural traditions, internal opposition, unique economic needs, etc.) of the rise to power vary from one Communist country to another, leading to antagonisms and sometimes combustible contradictions within the Communist world.

Even a brief look at the different sources of power in Russia, Poland and China shows that on a meaningful historical level, Sontag's formula has more shock value than educational merit.

In Russia, the Stalinist ruling class emerged out of the ashes of the Russian revolution, not as a mythic phoenix, but as a brutal form of historical retribution for the inability of Russian socialism to withstand the corrosive and corrupting impact of years of civil war, hunger and isolation. In the twenties, Stalin, and the Communist Party he already dominated, instinctively moved to fill a threatening void. And fill it they did, with terror, slave labour and graves. Factories were also built but the foundations for this industrialization (and collectivization) were the bones and blood of millions upon millions of victims. (It was an industrialization that was about as "socially progressive" as the growth of German industry from 1933-1939. Hitler, too, reduced unemployment.)

The current Russian ruling class, then, emerged from within at a time when no traditional class appeared to have the vigour and resources for reorganizing society.

Poland was different. There, without a mass base, with a large percentage of its cadres systematically murdered by Stalin and Hitler during the war years, the Kremlin picked up the Polish Communist Party by its emaciated neck and returned it in Russian tanks to Warsaw, where it was enthroned as a new ruling class before whom the Polish masses were ordered to kneel and say their Hail Josephs. But potential discord is built into the ambiguous relationship between an imperialist power and its colonial compradors, torn between dependence on and fear of their foreign benefactors, on the one hand, and allegiance to their own national class and

personal ambitions on the other. And Poland provided excellent soil for the seeds of discontent to germinate. In addition to the Poles' traditional animus toward things Russian, there were the more recent bitter memories: the Nazi-Soviet pact, which gave the green light for the Wehrmacht's blitzkrieg; the Russian massacre of 10-15,000 Polish officers in the Katyn forest in 1941; the enslavement and physical liquidation of countless thousands of Polish socialists, Communists, Bundists, of nationalists and of Jews; the slaughter of Poles by Germans in the 1944 Warsaw uprising under the watchful eyes of a nearby Russian army led by Marshal Rokossovsky who was ordered to allow Warsaw and its citizens to burn before launching a Red Army assault to "liberate" the city.

While the Polish ruling class is a feeble and unreliable ally for the Russians, in other Communist countries the Kremlin has deadly enemies, above all, in China. There, the Communist Party did not move in to fill a threatening social vacuum as in Russia and it was not artificially imposed as in Poland. It was a genuine mass movement which conquered a strong foe (a foe backed by the most powerful country in the world, the US) after 20 years of civil war. Mao used Stalin's techniques—bloody purges, genocide, gulags—to consolidate the rule of the Party, but emulation is not obeisance. The Chinese Party could afford to and does operate independently of the Kremlin, motivated more by its own national class interests, including territorial ambitions, than by concern for long range international, ideological and class concerns.

The similarities, then, in class rule in Poland, Russia and China provide no greater impetus for collaboration than the common class denominator in capitalist countries has served to save mankind from the slaughter of capitalist wars.

Had Sontag coupled her formulation with an acknowledgment of this diversity and rivalry within the Communist world, some of her critics might have been a bit less indignant. Her failure to do so created the impression that Communism is a massive international conspiracy, which conjured up a rerun of McCarthyite hysteria.

This disorder and disarray within the Communist world also suggests that Communism is not quite as "successful" as Sontag might have us believe. Volcanic

pressures from below have erupted throughout Eastern Europe and exist within the mother country as well.

Sontag's Communism-equals-successful-fascism formula seemed confined to an equivalency between the two as state powers. How does one compare fascism and Communism ideologically when out of power? Can Communists be equated with fascists? Can Communist and fascist controlled organizations be coupled and is there an identity between fascist and Communist parties as opposition movements? The answers provide clues to understanding the essence of each movement and how radicals and socialists can most effectively counter the influence of both.

To present Communism as simply a variant of fascism runs the risk of obscuring important ideological distinctions. Fascism occasionally borrows some of the terminology of populism, even of socialism: it is against the "Big Bankers," "the monied interests," etc., but its propaganda is more heavily weighted with appeals that are blatantly primitive and base. It plays on and promotes racial prejudices and chauvinism. It is the force of "national salvation" committed to a holy war against Communism and Marxism.

The ideological trappings of bureaucratic collectivism are another matter. Stalinist barbarism is adorned with a human face; a mask it must wear. Brezhnev cannot burn socialist libraries in Red Square; he can only choose selectively what appears on Party bookshelves, censor others and consign the rest to oblivion. The zeal with which Stalinism strives to preserve its false socialist image flows from its efforts to seek a popular mass base in the working class and, generally, among poor and exploited peoples. It also seeks a special place of respect and authority among intellectuals. Here, Sontag's equation, when offered without qualifications, can be misleading and dangerous for those of us who are committed to fighting Stalinism not only on an intellectual level but in real political life. For the endemic need of Communism to find a mass base in the working class, particularly where it is not in power, and to present itself as a force for social justice, puts Communist organizations into direct competition with authentic socialists and radicals. (The armies of fascism also seek proletarian recruits but not in the same way and seldom with any degree of success; their cadres come primarily from the middle class and

the military, with shock troops provided by declassed and marginal elements.)

Thus, in trade unions, civil rights organizations, the feminist and peace movements, etc., where our paths cross with Communists and their sympathizers, it behoves the socialist left to reach out to those activists whose acceptance of or sympathy with Communism may be subjectively motivated by idealistic sentiments and passions similar to those that move radicals and socialists to an uncompromising rejection of Communist totalitarianism. This paradoxical relationship of the anti-Stalinist (or anti-Communist) left to Communists was properly understood and acted upon in decades past, when Communist parties were even more intransigent than they are today.

A nostalgic example, at least for this writer: on the agenda of local left-wing socialist meetings, there was often the quaintly worded subject of "opponents work." This never referred to work among or within fascist organizations—what could be accomplished there?—but most often to efforts made to win over Communists and their sympathizers within Communist front organizations and sometimes to more clandestine operations within the Communist Party itself or its youth affiliate. It was understood that for all the moral equivalency and political symmetry that could be drawn between Communist and fascist societies, on an individual, human level fascism and Stalinism were not equal. The recruits that the socialist left found in Stalinist parties and their peripheral organizations could never have been drawn from the Silver Shirts, Coughlinites, the Liberty League or the KKK.

We have noted the difference between Communists and fascists as individuals. But what does it mean to sum up Communism as "successful fascism" with respect to organizations controlled by Communists? It is inconceivable that any radical or socialist would suggest a positive approach to, say, some component part of the Moral Majority. It is, or should be, no less far fetched for the same radical or socialist to reject dogmatically involvement in any organization controlled by Communists, presumably agents of "successful fascism."

Communism draws on the terminology and traditions of Marxism (at the same time violating both); it speaks of peace and social justice (as it mass produces nuclear

weapons and jails peace activists); its manifestos reject imperialism and denounce racism (as it overruns weaker nations and practices genocide). But it is the surface propaganda and appeal of Communism which concern us at the moment. What counts here, as has been noted before, is that Communism, when operating as an opposition force in bourgeois society, is driven by an inner dynamic to win the allegiance of the broad mass of people. It is driven, above all, to establish itself as a force within the organized labour movement—the trade unions. Consequently, Communists, when out of power, can be responsive to the needs and interests of workers in given situations up to the point where working class gains might conflict with Communist political objectives. By contrast, fascism lacks this incentive of its allegedly successful twin and operates outside of and in violent opposition to the union movement.

### **The Equation Viewed on the Human Level**

I have noted a few of the theoretical and practical political problems raised by the fascist-Communist equation when offered as a precise, historical equivalency. But how does one determine in human, moral terms if Hitler(ism) was more/less evil or more/less inhuman than Stalin(ism)? By numbers killed? Hitler destroyed 6 million Jews and millions of others in the death camps, and the figure would soar if we added all the others murdered in the 12 year history of the Third Reich. What about Stalin's toll? In the decade after Stalin emerged ascendant in the late twenties, there was the forced collectivization in the Ukraine with death as its major harvest. Additional millions were killed in the purges and in an unprecedented concentration camp system. All in all, it is cautiously estimated that in the longer span of Stalin's rule there were 15 million corpses to testify to the achievements of a man and a Party speaking in the name of socialist brotherhood and singing the Internationale.

Are we to measure the humanity or inhumanity of each system by an average-per-year body count?

Is it a matter of comparing the techniques of mass murder? Hitler used the unimaginably grisly method of the gas chamber and the ovens. Stalin relied on

more traditional techniques of starvation, torture, executions. Is there a basic moral difference?

Is there a moral choice to be made between the imperialist ambitions of a Hitler that turned to dust and the reality of Stalin's expansionism? Through the use of military force, sometimes "legitimized" by fraudulent elections, Russia subjugated Eastern Europe and the Balkans. (The three culturally distinct Baltic nations had been absorbed in 1941 as an integral part of Imperial Stalinist Russia.)

The level of cruelty that Hitler would have used to contain liberation movements had he succeeded in subjugating Europe is not difficult to imagine. But the methods by which Stalin and his successors crushed national resistance movements is a matter of record—armed intervention and unleashing the terror apparatus of Quisling parties. There were Communist tanks against the rebellious stone throwing workers of East Berlin in 1953. The Hungarian socialist revolution of 1956 . drowned in blood by Russian storm troopers. The tragic repetition of Hungary in Czechoslovakia 12 years later. There was Poland 1956 and 1970 and 1976 and 1982.

On this count, are the sins of Stalinism to be viewed tolerantly relative to what one might imagine would have occurred under the reign of a triumphant Nazi Germany?

We need not limit ourselves to comparisons of Hitlerism and Stalinism. How does the Russian invasion of Hungary measure up to Mussolini's bombs dropped on Ethiopian villages? (Let us not forget that the Italian army at the time was fuelled, in part, by Russian oil.) Which act was more acceptable in its perfidy? What of Stalinist Cuba, where the state jails its critics,. has executed opponents when it felt the need to do so, denies workers the right to strike, prohibits the formation of opposition parties, supports every imperialist outrage committed by the Russian bureaucratic ruling class? Is a Cuban gendarme, humiliating homosexuals as he herds them through public avenues en route to a "rehabilitation" centre, more acceptable than his fascist counterpart because he is decked out in a Guevara beret? The poet, Armando Valladares, was imprisoned for 22 years (the last six on

a starvation diet that crippled him) because he criticized the Maximum Leader. Is that more moral than the barbaric treatment of opponents in Spanish prisons during El Caudillo's reign?

What about the horrors of Maoism? Its persecution of an entire nation, the widespread use of torture and public executions by "cultural" killers? And isn't the evidence there, for all willing to see, that while Mao's successors have reduced the deceased Chairman from god to fallible, even miserable, human dimensions, the Chinese people remain the victims of a totalitarian ruling Party that cannot abide political liberties? Is Communist China's denial of basic human rights a lesser or greater evil than the outrages that were committed in, say, Franco's dungeons?

What are the comparative grades for the Cambodian Khmer Rouge and the Chilean dictatorship? In Cambodia the Communists beat, stoned and shot to death a significant portion of their own population. The Chilean dictatorship tortured and killed thousands upon thousands of opponents real and alleged. Is one preferable to the other? To be sure, the Reagan "intellectuals" make a choice. They prefer the Chilean, Salvadoran and other right wing dictatorships, especially those, no matter how barbaric, that are allies of the US. No one on the left should succumb to the same immoral approach by apologizing for, or minimizing, the venality of Communist dictatorships. The simple human realities of each system make it impossible to decide which is more, or less, brutal. There can be no scorecard. Let us say that, on balance, it is a draw, that on this level fascism and Stalinism meet as equals in the inferno of authoritarian/totalitarian repression.

In several other respects—political, cultural and psychological—there is more than a modicum of merit in the Communism-fascism equation. They share common enemies and deeply rooted phobias. Neither fascism nor Stalinism can coexist internally with any institutional manifestation of working class independence, neither can permit genuine trade unions, nor can they tolerate an uncensored press, legal opposition parties, freedom of speech or any of the civil and political rights to which all are entitled and which are the very soul of socialism. Sexism is an essential feature of fascism; similarly, there is no Communist state that has overcome sexual repression, or is interested in doing so. (Women in Russia are

allowed the right to hard labour for meagre wages, along with their domestic duties. But a list of women holding important positions in what are, at least theoretically, decision-making bodies, would hardly fill a 3 x 5 index card.)

Also freedom of cultural expression and experimentation are clearly unacceptable to any modern ruling class which demands absolute political obedience. Instead, "art" is put into the service of the state and what emerges as a substitute are heroic novels, odes to leaders, lifeless romantic portraits, posters of muscular workers fulfilling production quotas, hideous totalitarian architecture (to borrow Norman Mailer's term). Modernism and innovation are "decadent" or "bourgeois" or "anti-social," always dangerous and, as genuine artistic expression, driven underground in Communist as well as fascist societies. Finally, psychologically, the impact of Communist Party rule on the individual can hardly be less devastating than it is in fascist societies. A quantitative comparison of the extent to which individuals are alienated in authoritarian and totalitarian states is obviously impossible. On the other hand, one need not be a trained sociologist or psychologist or Marxologist to understand that in fascist and Communist societies, where the individual is deprived of any authority at the point of production or on any level of the political process, where self-expression is repressed, sometimes criminalized, where work is hard, luxuries scarce, where the state attempts to regulate personal lives from thought processes to sensual pursuits, that in both societies, more or less equally, the individual is beset by a degree of loneliness, frustration and fear that many in the Western left fail to grasp.

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**Neither Sontag nor many of those who booed her may be aware that comparisons of fascism and Communism have a long and interesting history, as old as the anti-Stalinist left.** In the thirties and forties it was all part of the larger "Russian Question," the nature of Stalinism in and out of power, debated by social democrats, anarchists, revolutionary Marxists. Some came to the conclusion that Russia was a form of "industrial feudalism," others thought it "state capitalist," there were those who believed Russia was dominated by a new reactionary "bureaucratic

collectivist" class and still others who clung to the notion that Russia was a "degenerated workers state." In the course of those polemics, parallels between fascism and Stalinism were debated with considerable vigour. Norman Thomas wrote a book, *Red Fascism*, Trotsky found a political-symmetry between fascism and Stalinism, Franz Neumann discussed in depth what he believed to be their similarities, yet they and other radicals, some of whom saw an identity of the two systems, not mere parallels, were not therefore expelled from the radical community, cast into the nether world of reaction, by those who disagreed.

Why, then, should Sontag's borrowed use of an old, if controversial, concept within the socialist movement have so shaken her audience? Obviously it was a political response. But more than that, it was also a response to Sontag's "style," a reaction to someone who came to address the rally with hostile intent. Here was a meeting to support Solidarity, not to apologize to the Russians, yet the manner in which Sontag addressed the gathering smacked of a prosecutor holding her listeners complicitous in the crimes of Communism. If there was any doubt that Sontag meant her formula to provoke, not influence, it was put to rest by Sontag herself in an interview with Charles Ruas (*N.Y. Times Book Review*, 24 October 1982) when, referring to her role at the Solidarity rally, she recognized that "I said something I wasn't supposed to say, and I knew what I was doing. I knew I would be booed and I would make some enemies there. The idea of it is you were supposed to be a good guy and be mobilized for the pro-Poland rally on February 6 and the anti-nuclear rally on June 12. I didn't want to do that anymore."

If Sontag didn't want to be a "good guy" any more where Poland is concerned, why did she accept the invitation to speak in support of Solidarity? She clearly had no intention of seeking any rapport with her audience. The torch of her new-found enlightenment was used as a club, its flame emitting more smoke than illumination. Her presentation was predicated on a total misunderstanding of the current state of the left. There was not the slightest suggestion of awareness that the audience at the Solidarity rally was representative of an American left far more conscious of the nature of Stalinism than earlier left-wing movements, as evidenced by its readiness to rally against Communist oppression.[3]

Consider that, in the late thirties, the American Communist Party had perhaps 100,000 members and controlled a vast network of social, cultural and political peripheral organizations. Its influence in the trade union movement was strong and on the rise. If Stalinism did not look like the wave of the American future, it nonetheless made more than ripples in political waters. Its members not only enjoyed the sense of belonging to a Party that could make a practical difference at home, there was also the psychological uplift provided by the reality of power in the Soviet Union of which they were all made to feel somehow a part.

In contrast, the anti-Stalinist left was pathetically weak in numbers and influence. The Socialist Party was little more than a sect, and the revolutionary anti-Stalinist left—the Trotskyists—was a sect. I can bear witness that to be in the latter was a lonely existence. For it was a sect with the towering mission of building the vanguard party that would lead the masses in struggle against the bourgeois state, with the simultaneous task of destroying the influence of Stalinism, an ideology Trotsky aptly called the cancer of the labour movement. Thus a puny David taking on two Goliaths. To survive politically and psychologically, idealism had to be reinforced with a powerful sense of history and tempered by a sense of irony and good humour, since, while we may have had the correct program, they—the Stalinists—at least in comparison to us, had the masses.

It was a time when the Stalinists could fill Madison Square Garden while the forces of revolutionary socialism had to settle for a New York City-wide rally drawing, at best, 300 friends, relatives and "contacts" to Irving Plaza.

And now? While radicals today cannot fill the Garden, they did manage to fill Town Hall in defence of Solidarity. How large a hall can the Communist enemies of Solidarity fill in New York? How many will demonstrate in the streets on behalf of the Polish junta? Reflect for a moment that in New York City, the bastion of American Stalinism in its halcyon days, Communism as a conscious, organized political force has been reduced to virtual nothingness. Now they are immobilized. And it will not do to ascribe this impotence to fear of exposure, persecution, repression, etc. It reflects a profound crisis in a Communist world that would still like all to see it as far more "successful" than it is. There is no reason to help it out in

the image-making department.

Compare the attitudes of the left today with those of the New Left in the late sixties and early seventies. Neither the Prague spring of 1968 nor the summer roll of Russian tanks which overwhelmed it aroused more than a desultory note of disapproval in the left. Bear in mind that during those epic events Dubcek never kneeled before a Pope, nor were there ties to a Catholic Church for Stalinist apologists to exploit propagandistically. The Revolution was not avowedly anti-Communist; it was actually led by a wing of the Party and it aspired to "Socialism with a Human Face." Thus, whatever liabilities the New Left of that period might have found in the equivalent of a Polish revolution were absent in the Czechoslovakian. Still the New Leftists offered little support.

In 1982, there was an outpouring of radicals to demonstrate solidarity with Solidarity, and the left-wing press took up its cause despite the fact that socialism is not inscribed on its banners and the revolution is clearly anti-Communist. Moreover, the role of the Catholic Church and the image of Walesa genuflecting before the Pope has not proved to be the liability it would most certainly have been for a potential radical audience in the sixties. Here, too, the differences are instructive, revealing a left today that is more mature, with wider concerns and fewer illusions about the nature of Communism than the New Left of the earlier decade, again indicating a degree of failure, not success, of Communism. This represents an historic shift whose significance and worth are apparently lost on someone determined to let the world know that she will no longer be a "good guy."

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**But the overt hostility to Sontag and to the notion that Communism can be equated to fascism was more than a backlash against brusquely presented, uncongenial views.** The intensity of the resentment and the political content it was given show that old barriers, although lowered, have yet to be scaled by the left on the road toward the full realization that the Polish people are the victims of a social system (call it Communist or Stalinist or bureaucratic collectivist) that is totally

retrograde. One might have hoped that the cracks in the Communist world would prove wide enough for all on the left to see that in these totalitarian animal farms, freedom is terror and Communism is anti-communism. Yet, there are those who, even while deploring the Kremlin's role in Poland and the anti-dissident campaign in Russia, continue to talk about basic reform "from above" in Communist states whose rulers "above" are preoccupied with the task of smashing recalcitrants "below." Above all, what clouds the perception of this segment of the left is the somewhat less than grand illusion that somewhere, somehow, even if only remotely, there is something fundamentally progressive about Communist societies. At the very least, they are more progressive than capitalism. Called into play by some is a ritualistic reliance on "nationalized economy" to give weight to shibboleths about Russia being "socially progressive." But a "nationalized economy" divorced from popular control and under the aegis of a political tyranny should have no greater charm for a socialist than a privately owned General Motors.

In and of itself, a nationalized economy is neither reactionary nor progressive; it depends on who controls the state. Nor can a nationalized economy determine the methods and the pace of industrialization. Where the economy is nationalized, only the state—whether controlled from above or, democratically, from below—can decide when and how to accelerate economic growth. This is crucial to our discussion because it is in Russia's forced industrialization in the thirties and its aftermath that so many seek validation of the "socially progressive" credentials of the Stalinist economic system. By attributing industrial growth to the imperatives of the nationalized economy rather than to the Communist Party's conscious policy of consolidating its supreme political-economic hegemony, the horrors of Russia's forced industrialization are minimized in favour of a dazzling display of economic growth statistics. Behind the statistical curtain can be seen:

- An upheaval that inflicted more suffering than any bourgeois industrial revolution, with millions of peasants, workers, and kulaks the inevitable victims of Stalinist industrialization.
- An upheaval in which the primary target was not the "remnants of capitalism" but the "remnants of socialism." The leaders of the Bolshevik revolution, its cadres, and all socialist and anarchist tendencies had to be liquidated and the road closed to any revival of Soviet democracy.

- An upheaval in which the beneficiaries were: the Party, whose totalitarian supremacy, under the aegis of Stalin, was established by the industrial counterrevolution and which became a new exploitative, economically privileged class that knew how to enjoy the perquisites of power (today, the Stalinist nouveaux riches have their dachas, chauffeur-driven limousines, the finest food from special commissaries where they do not have to queue up, and enough pocket money left to buy wardrobes of designer jeans on the black market); the military, for which the planned economy allocates whatever is necessary—at the expense of the consuming public (as in the US)—to build enough nuclear warheads to end all debate in all places for all times. For the masses, the benefits of Stalinist industrialization are more visible in the euphoria of some in the Western left than in their cupboards.

Homage is paid to Stalinist nationalization and industrialization for having raised Russia out of the cultural darkness of tsarism. Since no nation can reach modern industrial status if its workforce can neither read nor write, illiteracy had to be, and was, overcome. That was good. But how do we factor into our judgements the quality of that education—what the newly literate are permitted to read and allowed to write? And how are interpretations and evaluations affected by the fact that while the Party-state was obliged to raise literacy rates, the same state in the interests of the same nationalized economy was methodically fulfilling its parallel historic mission of jailing, torturing, and murdering countless thousands of the most literate and educated members of society—its poets, novelists, journalists, historians, teachers, philosophers. This massacre of the intelligentsia had nothing to do with an abstraction called "Nationalized Economy." It had everything to do with a particular nationalized economy in the service of a concrete totalitarian state which fears and despises the most literate and intellectual beneficiaries of its own compelling need to improve educational and technical skills. Extermination of vast numbers of the intelligentsia was a precondition for Stalinization of the nationalized economy.

This war against the intellectuals, though less bloody than in the past, exists in permanence in totalitarian systems. For those who grow too educated, read too much, write too much, the labour camps will never be closed and psychiatric cells

have been opened.

Another pseudo-Marxological boast: Russia's nationalized economy is free of capitalist "anarchy of production," "irrationality" and "internal contradictions," etc. etc. Of course, Russia is not plagued by capitalist contradictions and crises. Neither were paleolithic cultures nor slavocracies in antiquity nor feudal societies in the Middle Ages. How could it be otherwise where there are neither private owners of large-scale industry and capital nor a market in the bourgeois sense? No capitalism, no capitalist crises. That is not to say that totalitarian economies are free of built-in contradictions. Basic to socialist theory, a nationalized economy requires conscious democratic control and planning to realize its maximum social and economic potential. This socialist conception has never been tested. But it has won negative confirmation in the abundant evidence that totalitarian economic planning inexorably leads to mismanagement, inefficiency, imbalances, fraud, corruption, waste, shortages, demoralization, and loss of incentives; for the workers, denied any voice in economic planning, there is the certainty of alienation, exploitation and depressed wage levels.

**To accept the notion that a socialist economy can coexist with political dictatorship is to deny the centrality of democracy to socialism.** Yet, for Marx, "the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to establish democracy." For Engels, it is after "the proletariat seizes political power" that it "turns the means of production into state power." And it would be good if all in the left accepted Lenin's stricture that "whoever wants to approach socialism by any means other than that of political democracy will inevitably arrive at absurd and reactionary conclusions."

These pithy declarations of democratic socialist principles are unacceptable to some in the left. An editorial in *In These Times* (December 22-January 11, 1983) is proof of Lenin's warning that those who deny the indivisibility of democracy and socialism will arrive at conclusions that are "absurd" and "reactionary." The editors note their "more than deep embarrassment" caused by the denial of civil liberties in "Eastern European Communist countries and in Third World socialist nations."

Never mind for the moment that "deep embarrassment" is a rather feeble term of compassion for the victims of totalitarianism. The editors proceed to prove that they are not really that embarrassed:

*"Some democratic socialists attempt to resolve the contradiction by insisting that any regime that denies the right of free speech, free assembly, the right to form unions and strike, and the right to form political parties and freely contest for power is not socialist. We understand the motivation for this denial, but it doesn't make sense to us."*

From this inventory of freedoms denied in Communist countries, one might think that the conclusion would be: Communism is fascism, a la Susan Sontag. But, no, the Communist countries are socialist despite the lengthy list of derelictions. Why? Because they, the Communist leaders, say so. Even the head of the Polish Junta is taken at his word:

*"Whether we like it or not, Poland's General Wojciech Jaruzelski talks about "the great collective duty" of "strengthening the Socialist state." We may say, no, that's no socialist state, but the words ring hollow in most people's ears. The Communists can no more be denied their connection to socialism than can we. And because they have actually taken power, they appear in many people's eyes to have a better claim to it than we."*

There is something unreal about all this. It is as if a hardened criminal—we'll call him Yuri—had just been found guilty of the following crimes: he garrotted his grandparents, slaughtered his mother and father, strangled his children, terrorized his neighbourhood and hired thugs to invade adjacent turfs. Brought before the judge, he is asked if he has anything to say before sentence is passed. Yuri looks directly into the eyes of the judge and speaks: "Your Honour, my grandparents were socialists, my parents were socialists, my children were Komsomols and I am a Communist. And it was my collective duty to..." Fortunately for Yuri, the judge is no ordinary bourgeois jurist. He, the judge, is also a socialist! He even writes theoretical tomes reconciling socialism and despotism. Yuri is chastised by an embarrassed judge. But Yuri, who cannot be denied his socialism merely because of his criminal

record, is freed. How can one socialist confine another, especially Yuri, who, given his socialist ancestry, may even have a better claim to socialism than we?

The editors have a simple way of overcoming their embarrassment about the denial of freedom in Communist countries:

*“We can no longer rely simply on the equation of the principles of freedom and equality with socialism, because any fool can see that “real, existing socialism,” [the current Kremlin jargon for its system] while achieving a greater degree of equality, has stopped far short of the degree of freedom now possible.”*

Any fool should see the absurdity of trying to reconcile the embarrassing realities of the Communist world with socialism by simply redefining socialism to include all who say "We are Communist" or "We are socialist." One may come to the conclusion that socialism has proved to be a Utopian dream—there are many neo-conservatives who would agree—but to say that a society that cannot abide democracy can still be socialist makes as much sense as saying that a wooden object that has neither roots, nor trunk nor branches, is a tree. A truncheon, perhaps, but not a tree.

**Much of the in these times editorial is a poor echo of the sophisticated apologia for Stalinism advanced by the prolific Isaac Deutscher, who argued with great polemical skill that the dictatorship and much of its terror were historically necessary to consolidate the "social conquests" of the October Revolution.** There is this important difference. Deutscher accepted the implication of his views. He defended Stalinism in its post-war expansionism, and with few tears and no equivocation he supported the Communist suppression of every major effort by the oppressed people in the empire to free themselves of the Stalinist yoke. In post-war Europe, he saw the Russians bringing socialism to Eastern Europe "in the turrets of their tanks." In Hungary 1956, he wrote, the Russian invaders tried to "wind up with the bayonet, or rather with the tank, the broken clock of the Hungarian Communist revolution."

By contrast, today in the left, even among those who hold to Deutscherite

conceptions, the cruel logic of ideology has been overwhelmed by a deeper sense of decency, given the mounting evidence of the repressive nature of the Communist regimes. Nevertheless, the dilemma persists for those on the left who support Solidarity, on the one hand, and on the other perceive Russia as an imperfect socialist society.

It is barely conceivable that the editors of *In These Times*— perhaps the most widely circulated, influential publication on the left—would support the Russian-dictated suppression of democratic resistance movements in Eastern Europe. There can be no question however that these definitions and redefinitions of socialism have the potential of undermining the support they have given to Solidarity. The editorial in *In These Times* reflects these contradictory pressures.[4]

Inhibiting many on the left from acknowledging the reactionary character of the Communist systems is the fear that to reject Stalinism totally means, at best, to join the camp of capitalism as a liberal reformer or, at worst, to become an apologist for or supporter of the reactionary anti-Communism of the Reagans and Thatchers. (Nobel Prize winner Garcia Marquez admitted in a recent interview that he voices his criticism of "communistoids"—the term is his—only privately so as "not to play into the hands of the Right.") This assumption is reinforced by the political and moral devolution of so many theoreticians and intellectual luminaries of the anti-Stalinist left of years past. Sidney Hook, Irving Kristol, James Burnham, Max Shachtman are only a few names that come to mind of former leftwing and revolutionary socialist opponents of totalitarianism whose radicalism succumbed to their anti-Stalinism. They threw in their lot with "the West"—capitalism—as the only force capable of stemming the Communist tide in Vietnam, El Salvador, Chile. But it was not anti-Stalinism that proved to be sufficient cause for their capitulation to the West; the causal link between what they were and what they became was their abandonment of an independent socialist perspective. For some, socialism had become a force for evil, for others it was simply irrelevant to the struggle between East and West.

Those on the left who are persuaded that uncompromising anti-Communism leads to reaction have more in common with the League of ex-Bolsheviks for Nixon and

Reagan than they realize. Coming from opposite ends of the spectrum, they join in a mutually shared pessimism: a frozen conception of a world divided between just two camps—Communist and capitalist. Implicitly and explicitly, they deny the historical viability of socialism.

It is awe for "nationalized economy," misdirected fear of aiding the right and the downplaying of democracy which lead so many in the left, including enthusiastic supporters, of Solidarity, to adopt positions on questions of peace, political strategy and, most recently, the historic role of American Communism which are inimical to the cause of peace, of socialism and of the historical truth.

### *Peace*

One of the more commonplace and sophomoric arguments is that for the sake of peace we must show prudence and judiciousness in our criticisms of Communism lest we play into the hands of Cold Warriors in Washington and arouse the ire of the Kremlin. Seldom has so urgent a cause been so abused as by those who continue to pluck at these time worn strings. Would those who orchestrate or sing this tune not be jarred if the lyrics were revised to read: for the sake of peace we must show judiciousness and prudence in our criticisms of capitalism lest we play into the hands of the Cold Warriors in the Kremlin and incite the wrath of the Reagan Administration?

It is impermissible to dismiss negative accounts about Communists per se as just so much grist for the Cold War mill. Anti-Communists become Cold Warriors when their revelations about Communism are used to serve reactionary domestic and global objectives. When Jeane Kirkpatrick and her right-wing advisors from Social-Democrats USA decry Communist practices it is invariably for the larger purpose of presenting a Pinochet as a worthy ally or of justifying the sending of arms and military "advisors" to the Salvadoran junta. In this context, anti-totalitarianism becomes transparently hypocritical and fraudulent. On the other hand, to speak the truth about Communism and to be as forthright in exposing the crimes of capitalism provides the basis for the most effective struggle against the militarism and imperialist ambitions of both power blocs.

By the same token, it is wrong to dismiss Communist criticisms of Western capitalism or American foreign policy solely on the ground that they are always presented in the service of reactionary Communist interests. But, if to recognize that an Andropov, for his own reasons, can tell the truth or part of the truth at least some of the time about economic and social conditions in the West does not make one an apologist for Stalinism, why do so many in the left assume that whoever does not automatically dismiss righting motivated accounts of the unbearable quality of life in Communist countries is an apologist for the bourgeois right or a "fanatical anti-Communist"? It is a disturbing double standard.

If, in this country the left is urged, even by friends of Solidarity, to guard against militant anti-Communism for the sake of peace, should the same advice be given to dissidents in Communist countries with respect to their governments? In Russia, too, Cold Warriors hold rather high positions. Should dissidents limit their struggle against totalitarianism for the sake of peace? Remember, the Polish upheaval has provided the Reagan Administration with obvious propaganda advantages and a pretext for demanding a huge increase in the US nuclear arsenal (which the Kremlin claims to be just cause for expanding its nuclear weaponry). Therefore, if in the West the cause of peace requires toning down anti-Communism, in the East it suggests abandoning struggles for human rights and national independence. Put another way: if the cause of freedom in Poland upsets détente, arouses Cold Warriors in the White House, incites the Kremlin, escalates the dangers of nuclear holocaust, then, for caution's sake and in the interests of human survival, is it not better to have the Jaruzelski solution to the Polish crisis than to have Solidarity pursue a life-threatening struggle for justice? This logical construct is vulnerable only in that its premise falsely denies the indivisibility of truth, peace and opposition to both power blocs.

### *Strategy*

Sontag's harsh retrospective and current judgements clearly upset those who still cling to the notion that Communism should not be attacked as vigorously as capitalism because "the enemy of my enemy is my friend or ally." This strategy is

commonplace in bourgeois diplomacy, openly stated by Reaganite neo-conservative ideologues who refuse to mount attacks on rightist dictatorships—from Argentina to South Africa—because "the enemy of my enemy is my friend and/or ally." Guided by the same opportunism-cum-strategy, some of Sontag's critics, even among those prepared to denounce the Kremlin for its role in Poland, remain chary of fundamental attacks on Communism as a social system for fear of providing aid and comfort to the immediate enemy, American capitalism. Apply this thought process to Poland and we wind up with bizarre conclusions. There, the immediate enemy is the Soviet Communist Party; the Reagan Administration is also the enemy of the Soviet Communist party; ergo, Solidarity must be urged to seek ties to the Reagan Administration or, at the very least, to maintain a cynical silence about US supported violations of human rights in other parts of the world (exactly what Kristol, Podhoretz & Co. urge).

### *Compassion*

One also senses that compassion for the Communist victims of McCarthyism and the haunting memories of such outrages as the execution of the Rosenberg's clouds the objectivity of many radicals, inhibiting them from making the necessary distinction between a Communist as victim of bourgeois reaction and, simultaneously, proponent of a social system as vicious and repressive as fascism.

### *American Communism: The Search for Roots*

For the New Left of the sixties and early seventies, at least for a number of its more articulate and sometimes outrageous spokesmen, history was garbage and all those over 30 suspect. If history is garbage there was no need to study it and if all over 30 were to be discounted, there was no incentive to seek ancestral roots. The defiant symbolic act inevitably grew in importance at the expense of developing theoretical conceptions, historical discoveries or visions of the future. As a result, a movement with marvellous potential that reached its peak strength during the soul-searing horror of the Vietnam War foundered on the rocks of its own intellectual limitations. Repression took its toll, true enough, but its bloodiest wounds were self-inflicted, a lack of theoretical motivation and clarity—not the least of which was its

failure to take a clear stand against all oppressive societies.

By contrast, the left today has taken a stand on Poland in healthy contrast to the New Left's relative quiescence vis-a-vis the Prague Spring. And consistent with its concern for theory and history many in today's left are trying to find a place for themselves in the continuum of American radicalism. It is a splendid quest that deserves far better than what it has thus far produced.

In their genealogical excavations, a number of radicals exploring the past have dug up the old American Communist Party. It is not being put on display as the most inspiring ancestral find but, it is argued, how unworthy of affection and emulation could the old Communist Party have been if its members participated in the great sit-down strikes of the thirties and the formation of the CIO? There was Gastonia, Angelo Herndon, rent strikes, the Scottsboro "Boys," the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. There was pain, suffering, martyrdom; the human aspects of the Communist past no historian can overlook. All true, but in the hands of some left-wing historians and researchers, the political role of the Party in its "heroic" period has been so misstated and misunderstood that what emerges at times are not historical evaluations but silly, sentimental romances. (Perhaps the most hilarious example is Vivian Gornick's 250-page caricature, *The Romance of American Communism*, which appeared a number of years ago and received plaudits from some surprising sources.)

Any party or movement, present or past, must be judged by its ideology, its choice of models, its internal life, its relation to other parties, how its activities affect class consciousness. Certainly, one cannot find sustenance or make an historical generalization about the early Communist party on the basis of isolated party activities, divorced from a wider and deeper political context. "Loyalty" and "courage" may be, in the abstract, splendid virtues. And a militant strike moves all socialists. But the "loyal" and "courageous" Communist cadres sent to Harlan County by the Party in the thirties to promote class struggle activities (and the Party) could be the same comrades instructed by the same Party to break strikes in the coal mines in the forties, after the Wehrmacht attacked Russia. It is that reality which should clue us in to the basic role of American Communism. The same Party

which declared that "The Yanks Are Not Coming" during the Nazi-Soviet Pact berated the Allies with equal vigour for not opening a Second Front immediately after Hitler unilaterally dissolved the treaty.

The Party which demanded self-determination for the American black belt in the early thirties was the same Party that, a decade later, denounced black and white civil rights leaders as tools and agents of fascism for trying to organize a March on Washington to protest discriminatory practices in the armed forces and in industry. In the early thirties the chant at Party-organized May Day parades was "Free Tom Mooney and the Scottsboro Boys"; ten years later, the same Party beamed with pleasure when the US government sent Trotskyists to prison under the Smith Act and interned Japanese Americans in prison camps. The Party of the thirties which damned the crimes of American capitalism was the same party whose leader, ten years later, wrote: "I extend the hand of friendship to J.P. Morgan." The Party that tried to establish its credibility in the early organizing days of the CIO was the same organization which raised strikebreaking to an organizational and ideological art as it worked feverishly to force the trade union movement to surrender its precious hard-won gains on the altar of super-patriotism during WW II, on behalf of its Russian masters.

The Party that today decries America's nuclear build up (not the Russian, naturally) is the same party that applauded the most heinous war crime of WW II—the US's atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was the same Party and had the same mission. In all those twists and turns, the Party remained consistent to what American Communism was all about. And what this movement was all about historically is something that so many on the left cannot accept. Its function is revealed by the one unifying, consistent thread in the Party's maze-like history: an inflexible and absolute loyalty to the Soviet Communist Party from the late twenties until Khrushchev's shattering revelations and the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. A subservience that was total. The American Party responded to American life (and to the international scene, of course) only as it was permitted or ordered to by the Soviet Party. It operated in the monolithic image of its Russian role model and mentor and brooked no public disagreement or internal debate.

Even in the early twenties, when there were interesting factional disputes, everything was finally settled by Comintern appointed "American Commissions." As far back as 1926 the legendary Communist leader, William Z. Foster, said it all: "If the Comintern finds itself criss-cross with my opinions, there is only one thing to do and that is to change my opinions to fit the policy of the Comintern." In 1929, the internal totalitarian lid was shut tight when the Soviet Party ordered the expulsion of the leadership of one Party faction led by Jay Lovestone. Although Lovestone had the support of at least three-fourths of the Party rank-and-file just months before his excommunication, only a handful left the party with him, testifying to the degree to which—even at that early date—ideological principles and independence of mind were overwhelmed by the "persuasive" force of the Moscow behemoth.[5]

In all the tumultuous events, here and abroad, from that year, 1929, until 1956, I have not seen or heard of a single article, a mere paragraph, not even one lonely word in any American Communist publication that took exception to or even remotely and tentatively questioned a single position or reversal of position adopted by the Soviet Party, neither in its public nor internal press. Now there's Romance for you! The mathematical beauty of the precise meeting of minds, a unity of purpose delayed only for the time it took to make a transatlantic phone call or deliver a telegram from Moscow to New York.

Was not this need and talent of Stalinism to crush individuality, to build around its papal centre an aura of infallibility, to hold real, potential or invented deviationists in line with the threat of eternal damnation, to substitute rituals and slogans for study and reflection, to wed idealism to obedience and sacrifice to the cause of oppression all reminiscent of the techniques and psychology of fascist parties? Even where physical violence is concerned there are appreciable similarities between the two. Particularly during the Romantic thirties the anti-Stalinist left had to contend with Communist Party goon squads as well as the violence of fascist Coughlinites thugs.

There are other measures for judging the American Communist movement—the effect it had on its own members and sympathizers, and its impact on American radicalism as a whole.

From virtually year one of the Party (or Parties—there were two at the beginning) its ideological gymnastics turned the organization into a revolving door:

- The agrarian radical of the early twenties attracted by the Party's initially sane and positive approach to Midwest progressivism ran as from a disturbed nest of hornets when Moscow ordered a servile party to turn on LaFollette and his labour allies.
- The Western copper miner, the Mesabi Range ironworker, the Detroit lathe operator, the New York garment cutter— thousands of them—deserted the Party that shifted from dual unionism to the opposite tactic of "boring from within" and then went back to "revolutionary" union antics only to revert to participation in the official labour movement (soon, as strike-breakers)—somersaults that had nothing to do with American conditions or the needs and interests of the working class.
- Party propagandists ordered to pen mash notes to Socialists and union leaders who they had denounced only yesterday as "social fascists" and "labour fakers" eventually took their literary skills elsewhere, often to write their memoirs.
- Activists who deified Stalin as the anti-fascist saviour joined the apostasy when anti-Nazi cartoons in the Daily Worker gave way to realistic depictions of Russian emissaries hugging Nazi dignitaries.
- Thousands of faithful, seemingly unshakable in their belief in His infinite wisdom—whatever He did was good for Russia and whatever was good for Russia was good for the American people—fled the temple when Stalin's pallbearers soon revealed that what they buried was more Satanic than godly; defections that swelled to a mass exodus when the Russian Wehrmacht blitzkrieged the Hungarian nation.

The above, of course, is only a random sampling of the reasons for disillusionment, but it is sufficient to illustrate that the history of American Communism, far from being a Romance, was a tragedy in that it exhausted the energies of vast numbers in a cause that was unjust and destructive.

The contradiction between the personal hopes and beliefs of so many caring men and women and the reality of what they were doing could not withstand the historical evidence indefinitely and when the shock of recognition came it was often with stunning finality. Literally hundreds of thousands of militant workers, intellectuals and young people were permanently scarred, politically and sometimes psychologically, by their association with the Party. A few who left moved in a socialist direction. Others, well trained by the Party, became prominent union bureaucrats. (Joseph Curran, for example, head of the National Maritime Union, was rewarded with the Stalin Peace Prize, in recognition of his special talent for cracking the skulls of union dissidents. A few years later, he applied those skills to breaking the heads of Communist and anti-Communist oppositionists in the same NMU.) Others remained politically alive in liberal causes. More than a few shifted to political conservatism. But the vast majority, given over to weariness or cynicism, were lost to organized radicalism forever.

In any meaningful historical sense, then, American Communism was a major obstacle to the emergence of a significant socialist movement in this country, and it was a disaster for the broad labour movement and even for its own members and sympathizers. It was not a movement of the American left but a totalitarian incubus that fed on labour and progressive organizations, functioning in the left and against it.

And what is true of American Communism, past and present, can be more emphatically asserted about societies where the Communist parties hold state power. They do have characteristics paralleling fascism. They are systems, call them what you will, which can be defined first of all by what they are not: neither socialist nor left in even the broadest sense of the term. For if words, concepts, traditions and history have any meaning, to be "left" is to acknowledge the right to organized political opposition—socialist, Communist, anarchist, liberal, conservative—something that is anathema to Communist parties in power.

To be "left" is to recognize and resist economic inequities; yet, in Communist countries, gross wage differentials between workers and bureaucrats rival those of

capitalism.

To be "left" is to fight racial bigotry and sexual exploitation; yet anti-Semitism is semi-official policy in Communist countries, and women have less responsibility and power than they do in Western capitalist states. To be "left" is to fight for the right of working people to form independent class organizations known in the West as unions; such independent organizations are denied even the right to exist (let alone the right to strike) in Communist countries.

To be "left" is to demonstrate against the imperialist adventures of one's own country; to demonstrate against anything advocated by the ruling Party in a Communist country is an act of heroism—to resist Russian imperialist occupation, domination or outright absorption of weaker states can mean imprisonment, psychiatric punishment, even death. And on it goes: freedom versus anti-freedom, culture versus anti-culture, self-determination versus imperialism—the left versus the Communist right.

Certainly, "the left" is not a narrowly defined category, but neither is it so all-embracing as to include hardened tendencies, organizations or ruling powers committed to a denial of fundamental human rights. Someone who identifies with Solidarity but fails to see the basic similarities between a Jaruzelski and an idealized Castro is different from the person with a firmer and wider commitment to totalitarian ideologies and regimes. What is important, though, and this is the responsibility above all of the thinking, intellectual left, is to show that simultaneous support for Solidarity and for Castro is inconsistent, that even minimal endorsement of the latter (who supports the Polish junta and martial law, denies Cuban workers independent unions and denies the populace as a whole the democratic rights for which Solidarity still carries on its heroic struggle) undercuts the cause of freedom in Poland. To view a Castro, a Pol Pot, the Kim II Sung dynasty, Chinese despotism or any Communist tyranny in a favourable light is about as politically "left" a stance as Irving Kristol's embrace of the Chilean and South Korean dictators.

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**For the socialist left, Stalinism must be fought as vigorously as capitalism.** The anti-Communism of the left has nothing in common with the attitudes of a Reagan or Kirkpatrick. Their purpose is the defence of capitalism, relying on military postures, and their alternative is a Latin American dictator, a Turkish tyrant or an Iranian Shah. Their anti-Communism has no place for a working class Poland. For them, the Jaruzelskis are the lesser evil to the Walesas. Their anti-Communism provides a diet on which Communism thrives; if righting anti-Communists did not exist, the Communists would invent them.

The anti-Communism of the socialist left is inseparable from its anti-capitalism. It is not only antithetical to everything the Cold Warrior stands for, it is also potentially more effective because it stems from an affirmation of peace, freedom, democracy, national rights—not only when it is convenient or for the sake of appearance—but genuinely and universally: in Poland and El Salvador, Cuba and Chile, Russia and the US.

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## Notes

[1] In the finest tradition of Stalinist amalgams, Cockburn recently (*Village Voice*, January 4, 1983) linked Norman Podhoretz and George Orwell, "As far as I'm concerned, Podhoretz and Orwell deserve each other." What moves Cockburn to couple a Reaganite reactionary with the author of *Homage to Catalonia* who fought alongside the revolutionary POUM in Spain? The answer might be found in his "From Brezhnev to Andropov—Yuri-Communism: What Is Its Future?" (*Village Voice*, November 23, 1983). From it one might conclude that it is Cockburn and Andropov who deserve each other.

[2] The terms "Communism" and "Stalinism" are used interchangeably in this article. Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, etc., are all Stalinist countries in that they share the basic socio-economic class character of Russian society as it emerged under Stalin's rule. However, the term "Stalinist" is so closely associated in the public consciousness with the extraordinary violence of Stalin's dictatorship that there is an understandable resistance to using "Stalinism" as a generic descriptive term. As difficult as it is for a communist to surrender the term "Communist" to the Stalinist enemy, it is best to do so for the sake of clarity. My own descriptive preference is for the term, bureaucratic collectivism, which sums up the view that Russia is neither socialist nor communist nor capitalist but a society where control of the "collectivised" means of production is exercised by a new exploitative ruling class whose "executive committee" consists of the Communist Party's top bureaucrats.

[3] The overall "left," which I believe has moved closer to an awareness of Communist realities compared to the attitudes of decades past, is neither homogeneous nor organizationally identifiable. Some are members of pacifist organizations, others are affiliated to the Democratic Socialists of America, but the left as a whole is manifest more in a "literary" sense, revolving around radical publications such as *The Nation*, *In These Times*, *Radical America*, *Working Papers*, *Mother Jones*, *Monthly Review* and books published by South End Press and Monthly Review Press.

While the readership of these journals and books represents the large majority of the political left, moving in an anti-Stalinist direction, I am also aware of the smaller counter-tendency represented by the proliferation of tiny sects that have moved into the camp of Stalinism and neo-Stalinism. My argument is not with them for they strike me as impervious to reason, frozen in a state of intellectual rigor mortis for which I know no cure. Between these sects and the broad left there is the school of "official Trotskyism," which I place in quotation marks, for it, too, is part of the counter-tendency, in my opinion, adopting positions which have as little relationship to the anti-Stalinist spirit and politics of Trotsky as the chauvinism of Stalin in the twenties had to the revolutionary politics of Lenin. Can one imagine a Trotsky wooing a Castro today? It is with the broader "literary" left that I am primarily concerned here.

[4] While the editors of *In These Times* have taken a position that in its clear implication is a retreat from support of Solidarity, that is not necessarily reflective of the majority of its readers or all its editors. In its January 19-25 issue, there is a number of very effective criticisms of the editorial, including a sharp rebuttal by dissenting Associate Editor, John B. Judis.

[5] In the dark days of McCarthyism this subservience of the American Communist Party to its Russian overlords was cleverly and demagogically used by the Cold War philosopher, Sidney Hook, as the basis for his argument that Communism here was more a "conspiracy" than a "heretical" political movement. It was a clever twist of words and concepts that provided an intellectual rationale for repression, such as firing Communist teachers. Subservience, however, is not conspiracy; and to be a dupe is not to be a spy. Individuals were **not** forced to **join** the Party, membership was voluntary; and it is a strange conspiracy where thousands of alleged conspirators defected regularly.

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