

## 1956 AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY

by Margot Heinemann

I have been asked to give some personal impressions of the immediate impact of the 20th Congress on the British Communist Party and its long-term effects. I shall make no **attempt** therefore to describe the whole sequence of events in 1956-57, but concentrate on what happened in and to the Party itself.

I should explain that I took part in the discussion and upheaval as a rank-and-file branch member. Although I had earlier done various responsible jobs I had for domestic reasons retired from all these three years before. Thus I was not part of any discussion at higher levels, and can't speak with the authority that would imply. What I have to say must therefore be taken as a personal and in some respects limited view.

To understand the background one must **realise** the depth of solidarity and admiration for the USSR which had been a cementing force among communists ever since the Party was founded. The generation of Socialists already politically active in 1917 and the 1920s—many, like Harry Pollitt, Willie Gallacher, Arthur Horner, R. **Palme** Dutt, still among the foremost leaders of the British Party in 1956—had recognised the revolution led by Lenin as the most decisive break-through in history, the first to get rid of capitalists and begin to construct a Socialist order. The new Soviet state, attacked by capitalist military intervention and economic blockade from its very birth, had to be defended by socialists everywhere as one would defend fellow workers on strike. (Harry **Pollitt's** work to stop the *Jolly George* was an example.) Its survival and advance, under incredible difficulties, to build up a modern industry and become a world power was an immense achievement which proved that a Socialist economy was not a dream but a practical reality.

Those of us who (like myself) joined the Party later in the anti-Fascist struggles of the 1930s could never forget that the Spanish Republic would have had almost no arms without Russian supplies; that the movement to unite democratic forces against Fascism had been launched by heroic exiles like **Dimitrov** and Togliatti from the 7th World Congress of the Communist International on **Soviet** soil (and indeed the illegal revolutionary opponents of Fascism could have assembled nowhere else). At the League of Nations, we had seen **Litvinov's** repeated efforts as Soviet delegate to halt fascist aggression through collective security, and the

decisive rejection of this by Britain and France at Munich. Even if we argued over Soviet attitudes at the outset of the Second World War (which in any case we understood as resulting from the proven hostility of the Western powers to an anti-Fascist alliance) we knew that the Red Army and the Soviet people, with unimaginable sacrifices and 15 million dead, had broken Hitler's land armies and played a decisive part in his defeat. (Among other things these victories underlined for us the fact that the capitalist press had done nothing but lie about the alleged weakness and incapacity of the young Soviet state for over two decades). And after the war, the immense scale of devastation and Soviet war losses—which might have been ours but for their victories—made the need for solidarity seem as urgent as in the 1920's, especially after the Western threats to use atomic weapons against them. If there were hard times, stern discipline and insistence on the military security of the Soviet state as a guiding principle in foreign policy, this seemed understandable given that background.

The denunciation of Tito, however, and the succession of trials of leading Communists which followed in Eastern Europe, did cause uneasiness and doubts among British Party members. Whether or not one had reservations about Tito's political and economic policies, the argument that these could be attributed to capitalist subversion of leading Communists was not easy to accept. In practice it was the experience of these trials, held in the early 1950's, which helped to convince many of us that the allegations against Stalin at the 20th Congress must be substantially true. They explained so much which at the time had seemed almost inexplicable.

The revelations of mass repression, judicial murder and violation of Socialist and Party democracy under Stalin were not reported to the open Congress of the CPSU in February 1956 but conveyed to a secret session from which fraternal delegates from other countries were excluded. They were later reported orally to CPSU organisations. Thus it was in March when Harry Pollitt and others were already back in Britain reporting the achievements of the Soviet Union in reconstruction, just before the 24th Congress of the British Party,<sup>1</sup> that versions of the Khrushchev report began to leak out in the capitalist press, culminating in the June publication of what was claimed to be a full version as a supplement of the *Observer*. Unofficial and incomplete reports from the Soviet Union were reaching the Party soon after the Reuter report of 15th March, but it was not until the end of June that the Central Committee of the CPSU issued its resolution on overcoming the Cult of the Individual, and that, unlike the Khrushchev report, contained no detailed facts, though it referred to 'serious violations of Soviet law and mass repressions.' Indeed there has still been no full published account from the CPSU itself, though information from official sources has been assembled, for example, by Roy Medvedev in *Let History Judge* and by the French communist historian Jean Elleinstein in *The Stalin Phenomenon* (translation to be published

in 1976 by Lawrence and Wishart).

The way in which the British Party got to know about the **Khrushchev report** (explicable now in view of the divisions in the leadership of the CPSU and the opposition of the Molotov group) increased the shock with which the news was received. The first reaction (of leaders as well as members) was that it must be yet another anti-Soviet lie. When the reports were not repudiated and even confirmed, it appeared that the **British Party's** own leaders were almost as much at a loss as the rank and file, defensive and confused (see for example the Daily Worker's editorial, 'The Role of Stalin', 18.3.56). Thus the confidence of the Party, which would have been strained in any case, was further undermined by the manner of the **disclosure**.

It is hard to convey now the degree of shock and **horror** with which the CPSU critique was received among British Communists. It was soon obvious that support for the CPSU and the Soviet Government could never again be as simple and instinctive as before. Underlying this support had been the conviction that the main forms of oppression and persecution known to us had their roots in the capitalist system and its **class** and property relations. Once establish a socialist system, it was thought, and such oppression would disappear. This conviction had now **been shattered**; it left a theoretical vacuum which the CPSU's resolution on the Cult of the Individual failed to fill.

Those who saw the repressions and executions as *unimportant* in comparison with the great advances were few. *The Labour Monthly* in May 1956 commented editorially: 'That there should be spots on the sun would only startle an inveterate Mithra-worshipper': but this drew indignant protests from readers at all levels, and the next issue acknowledged this by withdrawing the phrase and somewhat **modifying** the original emphasis.

#### Points from the Party Discussion

From March 1956 to mid-1957 there was intense discussion of the issues raised by the 20th Congress throughout the Party and its press. Short letters in the Daily Worker, and longer ones and articles in *World News*, show attempts by hundreds of members to re-examine the **fundamental** basis of their own thought and actions as Communists, to assess what had been wrong and what was still valid in our attitudes to Socialism, to **democracy**, to the Party and the state, as well as our own Party's relation to the Soviet Union. 'For or against the E.C.' was not the main issue, at least in the earlier stages, though naturally that came into it. There were **some** who argued that our leaders must have known it all, and had concealed it from **the** rest of us. I never shared that view, and neither did the great **majority** in the Party. But I do think—though of course it's easy to say now, and no-one can prove it—that if our leaders had felt it possible to make at the

time the kind of sharply critical statements the *Daily Worker* was already reporting from Togliatti and the Italian CP (see for example *Daily Worker* 16.3.56 and 18.6.56, as well as after the Hungarian events on 13.10.56 and **28.12.56**), some though not all of the later divisions, resignations and waste might have been avoided and the way opened for a new advance.

It's impossible to give a full treatment of the discussion here, but a few of the main points round which it centred can be summarised:

*Could it, and did it, really happen?* The immense prestige of Stalin, as well as the achievements of the Soviet people in the war, made some comrades unwilling to accept the CPSU version of events at all.

*How could it have happened?* A searching discussion of this was difficult because of the lack of factual information, though Harry Pollitt in his initial statement (*Daily Worker* 24.3.56) and other writers stressed the immense difficulties caused by famine, war threats and war, and the activities of foreign intelligence to subvert the socialist state, all of which tended to give more power to the security forces and seemed to justify secrecy about their actions. But a deeper analysis, going beyond the personal role of Stalin and **Beria**, was increasingly asked for.

*Was our condemnation of the abuses strong enough?* Many of us felt that the Party should speak not of 'mistakes' but of 'crimes': that it should admit what Togliatti had called 'certain forms of **degeneration**' in Soviet society; and that reporting on socialist countries in the Party press should be more frank and objective.

*Independence and autonomy of Communist Parties:* Was it valid to see the CPSU as having a 'central' or 'hegemonic' role within the world Communist movement? The Communist International had been dissolved in 1943, and the right of Communist Parties to independent determination of their own course of action had thus been established. So far as we were concerned, this independence had already shown itself in our approach to the struggle in Britain, but on international issues, the attitude of the CPSU was still a major determining factor. To many of us this no longer seemed acceptable.

*Inner-party democracy:* Some comrades thought that part of the trouble was 'democratic centralism', which they believed stifled discussion and made the leadership self-perpetuating. They called for a radical re-organisation of the British Communist Party. Others thought there was no parallel between the situation in the CPSU and the British Party: for one thing, democratic centralism had not been operated for years in the CPSU under Stalin. Many felt that changes of the kind suggested would destroy

the unity, democratic organisation and effectiveness of the Party, and could lead in the end to its liquidation.

After the revolts in Eastern Europe later in 1956, and above all after the Hungarian rising, there was a polarising and hardening of attitudes. It became clear that we were not talking simply about the past, about abuses which now that they had been exposed had also been overcome, but about painful changes still in process, about the present and the future.

In October the British Party and its leadership was faced at one and the same moment with the British attack on Suez and the culmination of the Hungarian revolt in armed rising, its suppression by Soviet troops and the establishment of the Kadar government with Soviet support. On the day the E.C. met a crowd of 40,000 was gathered in Trafalgar Square to demand an end to the British attack on Suez. To many of them it seemed that a third world war was imminent.

The **EC's** immediate statement declared:

**'Coming after the murder and lynching of Communists, the open hostility of the Nagy Government to the Soviet Union and the repeated concessions which it made to the reactionary forces. . . the danger of fascism and Western intervention was acute.'** It therefore considered that **'the new Hungarian Government and the action of the Soviet forces in Hungary should be supported by Communists and Socialists everywhere.'** (*Daily Worker*, 5.1.56.)

The events themselves and the EC statement on them aroused bitter controversy in the Party (as well as in the Labour movement outside it, though there feeling was overwhelmingly hostile to the Soviet action). The dispute at this point centred round these main issues:

- a) The sovereignty and independence of other Communist Parties and states, including socialist ones, in relation to the Soviet Union. Could military intervention in the affairs of another State ever be justified, even to support Socialism or prevent a counter-revolution?
- b) Was the Hungarian rising really a **counter-revolution** or a popular movement? And had the events leading up to it and since been truthfully and fairly reported by the Party press?
- c) What right of dissent and public criticism did those members have who were not convinced (as in this case) of the rightness of the Executive or Congress stand on a key policy question?

At one extreme there was criticism of the Executive as accomplices of repression: at the other of critics as condoning and aiding counter-revolution. Most comrades held neither of these extreme views, and the *Daily Worker* carried appeals from a number of well-known members to stay in the Party and argue the problems out. Many of us, including some who if put to it would vote for rather than against the **EC's** statement, agreed with Eric Hobsbawm that while the final Soviet intervention was necessary to prevent **counter-revolution** and the danger of a Fascist base in

Hungary, the movement against the former Government **had** been a popular one, however misguided; that the past policy of **the USSR** as well as the Hungarian Workers' Party was at fault; and that '**the** suppression of a popular movement by a foreign **army** is at best a tragic necessity.' (*Daily Worker*, 9.11.56). **Arthur** Horner, in an interview headed 'I Stand by Our Party', declared:

**'The situation in Hungary reminds me of a pit. In a pit you have sparks which need do no damage, but if gas has accumulated an explosion can occur with terrible consequences... I would not be afraid of foreign espionage and subversion—however large the sums of money spent on them—if genuine Socialist democracy is introduced and maintained in any country.'** (*Daily Worker*, 19.11.56.)

Among people with differing views about the rising itself, there was a strong demand for the speediest possible withdrawal of Soviet troops. Thus the Marxist scientist **J.D.Bernal**, who was also President of the World Peace Council, argued that the main aim must be disengagement by the great powers. Foreign troops must be withdrawn from occupation and a serious start made on disarmament. 'Vital questions such as the freedom of **Hungary** can never be decided as long as small countries are forced to be attached to one side or other in the cold war' (*Daily Worker* feature article 6.12.56).

Discussions among the membership soon after the events showed a majority prepared to endorse the **EC's** general view of the Hungarian rising and the Soviet intervention, with an appreciable minority against. Roughly **three-quarters** of the branches discussing the matter supported the Executive statement, just under a fifth opposed and the rest were undecided; two-thirds of the members voting at branches supported the EC. At area and district committee level the proportion in favour of the EC statement was much **higher.**<sup>2</sup>

In my own branch, Highgate, critics were in the majority. It was a branch with a variety of experienced members determined to discuss the issues fully in a principled way and to avoid 'labelling' and name-calling. I remember vividly a whole series of packed meetings, sometimes with 40-50 present, with arguments going on late into the evening. There were sharp disagreements, but we assumed one another's good faith. In this atmosphere it was possible to face painful realities, to recognise that on many important questions we had been wrong for years, and that a lot still needed sorting out, and yet to feel that we were right to remain in the Party and try to change whatever we disagreed with.

We thought, for one thing, that the British Party had tended to stress central leadership at the expense of informed democracy in its own **organisa-tion**, and that further democratisation was needed—especially in relation to methods of electing the EC, freer expression of conflicting views by leading

members in **pre-Congress** discussions, and circulation by branches of discussion material for which there was no room in the Party **press**. We sent amendments on a number of these points to the Commission on Inner Party Democracy set up by the EC. None of our amendments was **accepted**. The Commission agreed that the Party 'should now correct **what** we believe to have been a serious error—too great an emphasis on centralism and an insufficient emphasis on democracy', but rejected proposals by a great many branches and individuals for specific changes in rules or organisation to secure this. It did, however, accept the need for more discussion. 'The decision of the EC to produce a regular discussion journal,, publishing a number of articles with which the Editorial Board did not necessarily agree, should encourage the publication of contending views' (Report of Commission on **Inner-Party** Democracy, 1957, p. 13). This new venture was *Marxism Today*, which began to appear later in 1957.

### *The Special (25th) Congress*

Because of the storm over Hungary the Executive decided to hold a Special Congress in April 1957. Meanwhile it instructed dissentients to abide by the rules and refrain from publishing their disagreements in the non-Party press, and suspended the editors of the *Reasoner* for continuing to publish it despite a request not to do so.

It seems now—as it did at the time—that those comrades who continued to issue journals attacking Party policy, still more those who published their condemnation in the *Daily Express*, did not in practice help to advance the discussion, but rather diverted it from the central *political* questions to those of loyalty and splitting. There was already an intense critical discussion taking place within the Party press. Not only was the *Daily Worker* allocating much space to letters, but *World News* was opening its columns to contributions, and added to its limited space with three special pre-Congress discussion supplements so that more comrades could get in. I was one of those who wrote in at this stage, arguing among other things that although we must take account of Soviet experience and policy, 'international working-class solidarity does not imply that we must at all times arrive at the same solution as the CPSU on a given problem. Our solidarity must be based on critical independence of judgment.' (*World News*, 30.3.57.)

At the same time, many of us felt the Executive should have been far more open-minded and flexible in relation to its critics. In this exceptionally confused and difficult situation, if Communists discussed the problems with others outside their own branches, or as individuals signed joint letters of disagreement or protest to the Party press, to condemn this as 'factionalism' was in my opinion entirely wrong. The crisis in Communist thinking and policy went very deep. Unity could not be achieved by

enforcing tighter discipline (which increased the divisions it was intended to prevent), but only, if at all, by a patient continuing effort to reach agreement and understanding based on a fresh Marxist analysis of all the available facts.

In preparation for the Special Congress the EC had defined its attitude to the Hungarian events in a draft political resolution. A number of branches which accepted the necessity for the final Soviet intervention nevertheless thought that this resolution did not bring out or criticise sharply enough the Soviet Government's share of responsibility for the whole situation under Rakosi and the events leading up to the rising, including the first Soviet intervention on 3rd October. A composite resolution on these lines was supported by our branch delegate at the Special Congress, but was decisively defeated.

In the event the (25th) Congress, made up of delegates directly elected from branches, by very large majorities endorsed the **EC's** stand on all the issues under dispute, including Hungary, relations with the Soviet Union and the organisation of the Party itself. Essentially this expressed the feeling of the majority that the CPSU, having boldly initiated the process of restoring socialist democracy, would carry it through, and that criticism, necessarily uninformed, by the British Party would not help it to do so. Further, despite the crimes and errors revealed there and in Eastern Europe, the total achievement of the Soviet Union was seen as overwhelmingly positive and the foundations of socialist economy and state unshaken. While sectarianism was criticised, the greatest danger, nationally and internationally, was stated to be 'revisionism'—including a negative and **over-critical** attitude to the Soviet Union, a weakening of international solidarity and of Party discipline. In general, the analysis accepted was close to that made in the CPSU resolution itself and in Soviet statements on Hungary. But it was clearly stated that this did not represent automatic approval of Soviet policy at all times, and that the Party would examine in an independent and critical way all future policies from whatever quarter they **came**.<sup>3</sup>

Some 7,000 members—around a fifth of the total<sup>4</sup>—had resigned or lapsed before the Congress, and others left soon after it, including some delegates such as Christopher Hill, Michael Barratt Brown, and Hyman Levy, who had argued a case in the discussion there and been defeated. The resignations over this period included a number of the Party's best known intellectual and professional comrades, but also some leading trade unionists, among them Bill Jones (TGWU), Dick **Seabrook** (USDAW), John Homer (FBU), Bert Wynn and Lawrence Daly (**NUM**). Many of us who disagreed with the minority on some points were indignant at the irrelevant attacks made on them as 'wavering intellectuals' (mostly, it must be said, by other intellectuals), as if workers were less concerned about freedom of discussion and the rule of law.

The resignations of many sincere and principled comrades were prompted not only by disagreement with the policy adopted, but by a conviction that the Party would never again be a serious force in the British Labour movement, or develop an independent approach and style of work following the lessons of the 20th Congress. I don't think it can be seriously argued that the loss of such members strengthened the unity and effectiveness of the Party; rather it weakened it and slowed 'down the reassessment of its work. Many of them have continued to make outstanding contributions to Marxist theory and practical politics, and to maintain close relations with friends and comrades still in the Party.

There were many of us, however, who, while very dissatisfied with the positions taken at the Congress, were nevertheless convinced that our right place was still in the Communist Party, and that as a Marxist organisation including some of the finest and most selfless activists in the working class movement it had an essential role to play. Any necessary developments and changes in its work would not be furthered by narrowing the membership. The last twenty years have, I believe, validated this view. For our Party, as for so many others, the 20th Congress was not only an end but a beginning.

### *Twenty Years On: The Party in 1976*

It is hard now, and perhaps unprofitable, to try to separate the effects of the 20th Congress from other factors—such as the long period of cold war and unexampled capitalist boom, the increasing political power exerted by television from which the Party was virtually excluded, and the divisions between Soviet and Chinese Communists—all of which would have made the last twenty years a difficult period for the British Communist Party. But these effects were undoubtedly important.

Not only among its own members, but in the workingclass movement, confidence in the Party and its credibility were undeniably **lessened** for a time. To that extent it was made less effective in challenging right-wing policies in the Labour movement and in winning support for an alternative, socialist way forward for Britain. Although it neither dissolved itself (as some had suggested it should) nor faded away as its veterans passed out of action, for some years recruitment was low, and when it revived there was still a certain sense of a 'missing generation' that should have been coming into leadership (those who would now be in their forties and early fifties). Nevertheless the Party worked on, above all where it had always been strongest, in the trade unions and in industry.

Communists undoubtedly have greater trade union and industrial support today than they had in, say, the earlier 1950's. Total membership (at 28,500) is slightly lower than in 1956 (though higher than in 1957) but all-round influence is certainly greater—for example in the factories, the unions and the student movement, and in closer relations with a larger and

more active left wing in the Labour Party. On the other hand, electoral support (for a variety of reasons) has declined over the period. But contrary to the impression given by the media, the Communist Party today is not an ageing organisation but a relatively young one. The average age of the delegates at the 1957 Congress was 36. Less than half of the present Executive were EC members before 1971. Among the newer EC members are a number in their twenties and thirties, who nevertheless have already years of experience as leaders in the trade union, women's or student movements.

For years the Party's theoretical and cultural work was weakened by the loss of a number of its outstanding intellectuals (particularly historians and writers). The late 60's and 70's brought in many students, who have now grown into a new generation of Communist intellectuals with standing and respect outside the Party. For example, the annual 'Communist University of London' (an outsize summer school organised by the National Student Committee) has grown in size and range till in 1976 it brought together over 1,000 people for 9-day courses in basic Marxism and its application to various fields of knowledge—history, literature, art, science, economics, philosophy and social science—an educational undertaking far larger and more complex than anything attempted in the 1950's, involving both Party and non-Party Marxists.

### Divisions on the Left

One of the most obvious results of the 20th Congress has been the increased fragmentation and division of the left. There have always, of course, been alternative Marxist organisations in Britain, but the disillusioned reaction after the Stalin era and the **Russian/Chinese** divisions helped to encourage their growth, especially though not exclusively among students and teachers. The Communist **Party** remains by far the largest and strongest organisation on the Marxist left, having both deeper working-class roots and much greater stability in membership and policy; but its members have had to recognise that an interest in Marxism or revolution does not today lead inevitably straight to a card in the Communist Party.

The groups around *New Reasoner* and later *New Left Review*—which included many of those who resigned in 1956-7—have continued active discussions and made valuable theoretical contributions, especially to Marxist history. But they did not provide an alternative organisation to that of the Communist Party (and indeed were not intended to do so).

There is no ban by the Party on political dealings with members of IS, IMG, etc. There is now a good deal of public debate, not all of it sterile, and sometimes practical cooperation with their members. At the same time, in the student, labour and peace movements, the sectarianism and disruptiveness of some ultra-left groups has turned off many of the uncommitted and played straight into the hands of the Right. Damage of this

kind is part of the price socialists have paid and are still paying for the events that led up to the 20th Congress, and also for our own failure to analyse the facts seriously enough as a Marxist party.

### *Independent Communist Policy*

Some comrades in the 1956-7 discussions complained that the British party would never criticise anything about the Soviet Union unless the CPSU had already done so, for fear of making common cause with the enemies of Socialism. And the readiness of the media to cash in and distort any such criticism still makes this a difficult problem, which cannot be solved by silence or 'sunshine' reporting.

The independence and autonomy of Communist parties have nevertheless been increasingly stressed in the statements and actions of the British CP over the last twenty years, and especially since the removal of Khrushchev in 1964 (the undemocratic manner in which it criticised). Important aspects of this have been the insistence at international level that all CP's have equal rights, so that agreement between them can be reached only by consensus, not by majority vote or imposed decisions; and the refusal to endorse the exclusion of the Yugoslav or Chinese CP's from discussions between Communist Parties (for details on CP conferences in 1960 and 1969 see Gollan's article in *Marxism Today*, January 1976).

As early as 1951, (in advance, that is, of other parties in Western Europe) the British CP in its programme *The British Road to Socialism* had declared its aim as socialism based on a left parliamentary majority supported by mass action in the country (rather than the earlier concept of a Soviet Britain). Later versions of the programme, amended by successive Congresses, have defined it more precisely to emphasise freedom of speech and publication, freedom of creative work in the arts, and the right of political parties, including those opposed to socialism, to continue legal activity. Moreover the Party has categorically stated that such a Socialist Government would hold regular elections, and if defeated would accept the verdict of the people.

An EC discussion statement on *Questions of Ideology and Culture* (*Marxism Today*, May 1976) spelt out explicitly its view that the Party, during the fight for or under Socialism, should not lay down a 'line' to which scientists or artists should conform. It argued for freedom of debate and experiment among scientists (no more Lysenkos), the widest variety and freedom of subject and style in the arts, and no insistence that all artistic work can or should play a direct political role. It argued also for developing further the dialogue between Marxists and Christians, recognising that religion can be a support for reaction but may also inspire progressive actions, and laid down a present and future policy of 'complete freedom of religious worship, for the right of all faiths to worship in their

own churches with their own sacred hooks, and for making available the resources necessary for ritual articles'. 'Both under capitalism and socialism, religious and non-religious views should freely contest' and religious beliefs are no bar to CP membership. This remains the fullest statement of the Party's attitude on questions of art, science and religion, in accordance with which it later made public criticisms of the trial and sentence of certain writers in the Soviet Union (Sinyavsky, Daniel and others) and the treatment of dissent generally.

### *Czechoslovakia*

The British Communist Party's commitment to the autonomy of each Party and sovereign state, and its determination to examine events critically and independently, were clearly demonstrated in its reaction to the Czechoslovak events in 1968. The Soviet invasion was immediately condemned by the Political Committee ('intervention' was the actual term used) and solidarity expressed with the Czech Communist Party, which had attempted to move towards a different and as it considered a more democratic version of Socialism. **This** was a quick but not an unconsidered decision, since the Executive of the British Party had been in touch with both Czech and Soviet comrades over a considerable period, and its press had been closely following the course of events. Its attitude (later endorsed by, among others, the Italian, Spanish and French Communist Parties) was steadily maintained when it repeatedly protested against the treatment of Dubcek and other leaders of the Czech party, and gave Marian Sling the opportunity to write in the Party press on her own experiences of Stalinist repression and imprisonment and the trials of old Communists in the early 50's. Successive Congresses of the Party, after considerable debate, have upheld the critical attitude taken by the Executive on this issue.

In the resolution on the international situation passed at its 34th Congress in November 1975, the Party, after paying tribute to the steady advance in living standards and quality of life in the Soviet Union in contrast to the deepening economic crisis in the capitalist world, went on to say:

**This does not mean there are no problems, including those involved in the further development of socialist democracy and the handling of dissent. We believe that socialism must provide for the expression and publication of dissenting views, and that political dissent and the combatting of anti-Marxist ideas should be handled by political debate and not by administrative measures.**

Ever since 1968 successive Congresses have shown that there is a substantial minority opposed to this whole political trend in the British Party and in particular to any criticism of the Soviet Union. Although the vote has consistently upheld the Executive's stand the minority have at

each Congress been given the opportunity to re-raise and re-debate the issues involved, often repeating previous discussions. The leadership and Congress have relied on the Marxist method of settling policy by full and free discussion of opposing ideas, rather than limiting controversy by administrative methods, even on the grounds (often true enough) that other important questions are being robbed of time.

Resolutions and speeches by this minority have often urged the British Party to 'get back into the mainstream of the world Communist movement', and stop criticising the policies of the Soviet Union. But it is a strange kind of 'mainstream' that would exclude, for example, the great Italian, French and Spanish Communist parties, all strong enough to have great influence on the transition to socialism in countries with a long history of popular struggle for democratic rights. In many points their approach to these questions, decided independently by each Party, is similar to ours.

Anyone who thinks there is now little rank and file participation in policy-making in the British Party, or little political controversy, need only listen to debates like those at the 1975 Congress (largely centred round over 1200 amendments to the draft resolutions submitted by the Executive, and over 200 resolutions from the branches) or **read the** discussions in *Marxism Today*. It is true, though, that despite illuminating articles by individual comrades like Maurice Dobb and Monty Johnstone, there has been an unwillingness by the Party leadership to examine fundamentally what *caused* the disastrous turn of events in the Soviet Union exposed in 1956, on the grounds that we have not sufficient facts on which to base an analysis and that it is the responsibility of the Soviet comrades themselves to provide it. At present, however, this seems unlikely to happen.

Now, with the publication of John Gollan's important article *Socialist Democracy—Some Problems: The 20th Congress in Retrospect* (*Marxism Today*, January 1976) these hesitations have been set aside. I myself think this should have been done much sooner. Our Party is now in a position to make what contribution it can, along with other Communist Parties, to a serious Marxist examination of these events which will help to plan its future course.

Gollan's article does not advance any new facts, though some of the horrifying ones he quotes from Khrushchev, Medvedev and **Elleinstein** (all derived from official Soviet sources) will be new to many comrades. It does offer a serious treatment of developments in the Soviet Union and open the whole question of socialist democracy (which must include the trade unions and industrial democracy) for discussion in the Party. This should help many who were not around in 1956, including some who have argued for a 'firmer', less 'liberal' attitude by the Communist Parties in Western Europe, to understand exactly what the rejection of Stalinism was **about**. On the other hand, any socialist Government will have to face hostility and economic sabotage by the old capitalist class, and new forms of active

democracy will have to be evolved, especially in industry, so that the power of the organised workers can counter them.

### *Why it still matters*

In reacting defensively to attacks as they hit the working-class the Party has been at its strongest. It has had less success in winning support for socialist and Marxist ideas in the wider labour movement, and its programme is not as yet widely supported by workers who readily look to the Communists they know to provide effective shop stewards or trade union officers. Reservations (in the Party and outside it) about freedom, human rights and democracy in Socialist countries have reinforced the 'economist' tendencies which have always been strong anyway among British workers, to see trade union action on wages as sufficient and shy away from involvement in socialist politics, which **are** left to the 'political wing'—and often in practice, to the Right.

With the deepening crisis and unemployment in which the British capitalist economy is now trapped, it is becoming obvious that the standards and quality of life of the people cannot be maintained or advanced without *political* changes. And there is a pressing danger that if the left doesn't offer a clear alternative policy and leadership, right-wing Tory and Fascist trends could gain ground.

In this situation, where socialist alternatives seem so necessary and urgent, socialist democracy is more than ever a crucial question. This cannot be resolved merely by programmes. Because the Soviet Union is seen as the outstanding socialist state, any deformation or degeneration of democracy there is not a matter of private worry or guilt for the Communist Party, but affects the perspective and support for the whole socialist left. The fear that socialism or any move towards it must entail repression or foreign domination is still a powerful argument with millions now suffering the effects of capitalist crisis. (This, and not his literary skill, is why the media give so much publicity to Solzhenitsyn.)

It would be useless for us to try to forget that the bad things ever happened: we still need to explain *how* they happened, to show that they are a perversion of socialism and not its inevitable outcome. This is vital for the fight against reaction, the unity of the Left, and the removal of the bans and proscriptions which still prevent Communists from playing their full part within the political as well as the industrial movement.

### *Postscript (July 1976)*

At the recent conference of European Communist Parties in July 1976—long-delayed because of differences on the relations that should exist between them—it was publicly agreed that no Communist Party has a leading or directing role, though the struggle against war and reaction is of common concern to them all. Each Party works out its own path to

socialism in accordance with the conditions in its own country. All have the right to differ and where necessary, publicly to criticise one another's policies: for example, criticism of Soviet attitudes to democracy and dissent was expressed in the discussion by, among others, the Italian and British leaders, and the conference was addressed by Marshal **Tito** as well as by Communist leaders from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. A full treatment of the conference cannot be attempted here, with this article already in proof: but the changes it indicates have been long maturing, and will clear the way for new advances towards **socialism**, especially in Western Europe.

#### NOTES

1. It was immediately after this Congress that **Harry** Pollitt resigned the secretaryship. He was 66 and had been in poor health for some time, but on 25th April he suffered a haemorrhage behind the eyes which made him unable to read at all for three months. He was ordered to rest and did not return to work until August. Pollitt had been an exceptionally loved and trusted leader: his illness and incapacity could hardly have come at a more difficult time for the Party. He was well enough to chair the controversial Special Congress in March 1957 with what most of his critics agreed was admirable fairness. From that time, though he went on working, he suffered a series of strokes from the last of which he died in 1960.
2. Detailed figures were given in *Daily Worker*, 17.12.56. Reports from 322 branches showed that 240 supported the EC statement, 69 were against and 23 undecided. Of these, 188 reported voting figures—2,095 for, 745 against and 301 abstentions. Area membership meetings showed 1,029 for, 295 against and 89 abstentions. On area committees voting was 167—8—7 and on district committees 291—32—17.
3. One practical example of criticism going beyond the official attitude of the CPSU was in the report of the British Communist delegation which went to the Soviet Union in November 1956 to examine progress in carrying out the decisions of the 20th Congress. The section on anti-Semitism and treatment of the Jews in particular was highly critical not only of the past, but of continued restrictions of cultural rights and current policy generally. On the Stalin period the report stated: 'Crimes and distortions of this type cannot be the work of one man. It must have been the case that sectors of the administrative personnel must have been aware of what was taking place and must have taken the steps necessary to implement it. This argues a certain level of degeneration in this sector.' (*World News and Views*, 12th January 1957). The report was signed by J.R. Campbell (Chairman), W. Alexander, I. Hackett, J. Law, H. Levy, W. Moore, A.L. Morton and W. **Warman**.
4. The membership reported at the 1956 Congress was 33,960.