

Howard Fast and Socialism

By A. B. MAGIL

(This is the first of two articles)

WHEN Howard Fast closed the door on the Communist Party to which he had belonged for 15 years, he opened it on a host of questions that are agitating the Communist movement here and abroad.

The most prominent writer of the American Left chose to speak his piece first in the New York Times; then in the March issue of the Marxist cultural monthly, Mainstream, and in an interview with this writer in The Worker of March 10.

The interviewer's role is usually to be as inconspicuous as possible and my own dissent from many of Fast's views could only seep through here and there. In these articles I propose to express my own views in a spirit of friendly but nonetheless forthright debate with one who for so long contributed to this paper. Let me add that I write with great respect for Fast's achievement as a novelist and the courage he has shown over the years as a fighter for peace, democracy and the welfare of the American people.

In all he has written and said about why he left the Communist Party Howard Fast has difficulty in doing just that: explaining why he left. In his interview in the Feb. 1 Times he fails to deal with it directly at all. In his Mainstream article he says he resigned from the party firstly, to protest "the course of events in the Communist world," and secondly, "because I feel that the Communist Party of the United States—mostly through events beyond its control—is compromised to a point where it can no longer make any effective contribution to the continuing struggle for democracy and social justice."

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THE question of what compromises a working class political party and in what sense is one that requires much deeper discussion than Fast gives it. In the eyes of the majority of the American people the Communist Party was "compromised" in the first stages of the Korean war by its opposition to that war and by the conviction of its leaders under the Smith Act—more so than by the tragic revelations from the socialist countries.

Was opposition to the Korean war therefore wrong and should the Communist leaders have repudiated their principles in order to avoid Smith Act prosecution? Obviously not. And I'm sure that Howard Fast does not believe that after being "compromised" by these American events beyond its control, the party was no longer able to contribute to the "struggle for democracy and social justice."

Of course, there's a vast difference between being compromised by association with wrong and being compromised by association with that which is good but temporarily unpopular. But the Communist Party never consciously and deliberately condoned the anti-socialist distortions and crimes in the socialist countries. And as soon as it became aware of these evils, the party criticized them in a forthright way.

The fact is that the Communist Party has no reason to apologize—has every reason to be proud that over the years it advocated friendship and peaceful coexistence between the United States and the Soviet Union in our own national interests. It has every reason to be proud that it identified itself with the cause of peace, democracy and socialism in our country and everywhere else.

But American Communists have no reason to be proud that, partly through ignorance of the facts, partly because of dogmatic attitudes, they failed to criticize serious abuses and crimes in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Nor have they reason to be proud that they often allowed themselves to adopt mechanically

the thinking and methods of Soviet leaders and the Soviet Party. All this has hurt the American Communist Party—to a certain extent "compromised" it, just as every mistake of a Communist Party tends to "compromise" it.

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BUT does this justify the drastic conclusions Howard Fast draws precisely at the moment when the American party is making changes that will enable it to play a more independent and critical role in relation to other Communist parties and the lands of socialism?

And what about Howard Fast himself who for so many years lavishly praised everything in the Soviet Union? Is he too compromised to the point where he "can no longer make any effective contribution to the continuing struggle for democracy and social justice"?

In his interview with The Worker, Fast gave as a reason for leaving the Communist Party that "I cannot go back to writing within the censorship of either a local or international movement. . . . I don't believe that any change in the party will do away with the pervading question of being 'correct.'" He added that "I accept criticism, but I cannot accept censorship."

It is true that the American Communist Party has suffered from rigid, dogmatic and bureaucratic approaches to many questions, including literature and culture. The Communists themselves have criticized this in the main resolution adopted at their recent national convention.

It is also true that, in addition to the rich positive influence that the party exerted among writers and other cultural workers, some were harmed by the pressure for conformity, for toeing a "line." But here again changes in the direction of greater inner party democracy and away from dogmatism are a long step toward remedying this situation.

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WHAT makes Fast's statement a bit puzzling, however, is that none of the writers who suffered from party censorship was named Howard Fast. If books like "Citizen Tom Paine," "Freedom Road," "The American," "My Glorious Brothers," and others which were written during his membership in the Communist Party and sold in millions of copies throughout the world were produced under party censorship, it's like the famous Lincoln story about General Grant's addiction to whiskey. The fact is that Fast's own books are proof that he was subjected to no such censorship. Nor were his writings in The Worker and Daily Worker.

Fast's complaint might well be on the opposite score: that his work was inadequately criticized by the Communist movement, which was no help to his development as a writer.

And as one reader aptly put it (The Worker, March 31): "He complains that he cannot write in terms of 'correctness,' but so far it is the capitalist censorship which bars his publications because he doesn't write in terms of 'correctness' the way they see it, and not the other way round."

In his interview Fast did say something about the capitalist censorship imposed on him—but not enough. He didn't say enough because he spoke only of his own experience, which isn't typical. After his books were barred by commercial publishers, Fast was able to keep on writing and publishing because he had financial means to establish his own publishing firm.

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BUT what about the thousands of creative talents that are aborted or deformed by the economic censorship that is rooted in capitalism? I have known talented writers who were unable to continue writing be-

cause they had to earn a living for themselves and their families. Add many of those who turn out stuff for the pulp magazines and the lurid paperbacks, who work on trade papers, in advertising agencies or do publicity—all in the desperate hope that some day they will save enough to get to work on that novel.

Add the actors who, except for a lucky few, have to practice the art of well-dressed starvation. Add the painters and sculptors—in New York City, with all its galleries, a recent survey showed that hardly any artists are able to earn a living from their art alone.

All this Howard Fast knows. He knows too that the Communist Party is working for a socialist America that will wipe out this deadly censorship by money-power and make impossible such crimes against the mind and spirit of man. It is evident that he has left the party not because of what it is or will be but because of certain grave events in the Soviet Union. His interpretation of those events and his conclusions will be the subject of next week's article.

CALIFORNIA

By WALTER LOWENFELS

WE FINALLY made it . . . To California, I mean . . . It's true that's hardly news anymore. Tens of millions got here first. Still—this is our first trip.

We survived, not only the worst Spring blizzard in 40 years—it drove us off Highway 60 in Amarillo. Today we crossed American Desert for the first time, munching native dates.

With our snow tires burning up the desert highway at 65 miles an hour, I felt the ghosts of early settlers at my side. I kept looking over the arid miles of sand, wondering if I would see any bones of cows or people who never made it—just a hundred years ago.

Now I am typing this column out in the open, on the edge of the desert, at 6 a.m., with the famous California sunshine keeping my bald head warm on the East, and the San Jacinto Mountains protecting me from the Pacific Ocean draft on the West.

I have been in other deserts, including the outskirts of the Sahara. There is a difference about our desert: You get to the Sahara, not only across the Atlas Mountains—but also through the ruined gardens of Carthage and the remnants of Roman towns and Coliseums. Many North African oases have homes built from stone blocks taken from the Roman ruins.

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HERE in the United States I have found no trace of such native human history among white people. Our Indian civilizers we have tried to bury in museums or concentration camps (reservations), or in a few lingering pueblos.

The roads have improved and the old covered wagons are now Detroit's 1957 models. But you

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