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Finding his Kronstadt: Howard Fast, 1956 and American Communism

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The scholarship on the impact on communists of Khrushchev's "secret speech" to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 is limited. Generally it is located within broader studies of organisational upheavals and ideological debates at the leadership level of communist parties. Rarely has there been analysis of the reverberations at the individual level. Consistent with Barrett's pioneering approach, this paper seeks to incorporate the personal into the political, and inject a subjective dimension into the familiar top-down narrative of American communism. It will do this by focusing on the motivations, reactions and consequences of the defection of one Party member, the writer Howard Fast. It will thereby illuminate the story of personal anguish experienced by thousands in the wake of Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin.

The Defection

On 1 February 1957, the front-page of the *New York Times* (*NYT*) carried a story that reverberated across the nation and, thereafter, the world. It began: "Howard Fast said yesterday that he had dissociated himself from the American Communist party and no longer considered himself a communist".¹ The *NYT* article was carried by scores of local, state and national newspapers across the country. Why was this story such a scoop and why was it given such prominence? Until his resignation, Howard Fast was the single most important literary figure in the Communist Party, USA (CPUSA).² When *Citizen Tom Paine* was published in 1943, he was regarded as "one of the few major American novelists".³ According to an American academic who visited the Soviet Union in 1956, "the name of Howard Fast was on the lips of nearly everyone [I] talked with", and noted that his works were "required reading in universities

* My thanks go to the Frederic Ewen Academic Freedom Center at New York University, which enabled the research on which this article is based, Julie Kimber, Ellen Schrecker and the *AJPH* referees.

¹ *NYT*, 1 February 1957, 1. The article was written by Harry Schwartz, whose criticisms of the Soviet Union Fast had previously attacked; see *Daily Worker* [henceforth *DW*], 24 June 1956, 6.

² Fast was born in New York City in 1914. The first of his 75 novels was published in 1933, when he was 18. He worked for the United States Information Agency during World War 2, joined the Communist Party in 1943, appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1948, jailed for contempt in 1950, ran for Congress (under the American Labor Party banner) in 1952, and blacklisted from 1950 until 1957 when he was forced to self-publish. In 1974 he moved to California where he wrote 19 film and television scripts. He also wrote 23 plays, 13 lengthy pamphlets, 115 feature articles for the *Daily Worker*, and innumerable short stories. He died in Greenwich, Connecticut in 2003.

³ Daniel Traister, "Noticing Howard Fast", *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 20 (1995), 528.

and schools throughout the country”.⁴ Fast was also lionised in the satellite countries of Eastern Europe, where translated copies sold in their millions. An East German, all through his youth, recalled Fast’s books being ‘everywhere’ in the windows of bookshops.⁵ Until 1956, *Spartacus* alone had sold 800,000 copies in the GDR.⁶ Although his literary star had faded by 1957, primarily due to the Cold War and the blacklist,⁷ Fast’s historical novels, especially *The Last Frontier*, *Citizen Tom Paine*, and *Freedom Road* remained on the bookshelves in hundreds of thousands of American homes. Fast, then, was a clearly recognisable public face of the Party, an embodiment of its remaining credibility and prestige. For those cold warriors cheering the collapse of the Communist Party, Fast’s desertion appeared to hasten it.

This article will focus on Howard Fast: why he defected, why his defection was so important, the responses of others within and beyond the CPUSA, and the personal impact 1956 had upon him. Fast has already told his story, twice, but it is partisan, incomplete and, at times, self-mythologising.⁸ By focusing on an individual such as Fast, this paper seeks to provide a more textured and nuanced picture of the thunderbolt that struck the CPUSA in 1956, and from which it never recovered.

There is a small body of literature on the ruptures within the American Communist Party in the wake of Khrushchev’s litany of Stalin’s crimes. The standard scholarly references are Barrett, Howe and Coser, Shannon and Starobin.⁹ There are also memoirs, some very evocative, that

⁴ Deming Brown, *Soviet Attitudes Toward American Writing* (Princeton, 1962), 281-2. Deming estimated that in the Soviet Union alone, 2.5 million copies in twelve Soviet languages were printed between 1948 and 1957, easily outstripping all other American writers of this period. See also Rossen Djagalov, “‘I Don’t Boast About It, but I’m the Most Widely Read Author of This Century’: Howard Fast and International Leftist Literary Culture, ca. Mid-Twentieth Century”, *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27:2 (Fall 2009), 40-55.

⁵ Cited in Traister, “Noticing Howard Fast”, 534. The individual was Walter Felscher (1931-2000), a notable German mathematician and scholar.

⁶ In 1957, *Spartacus* was banned in East Germany; thereafter, sales were strong in West Germany, where had previously it been banned. *New York Post*, 22 May 1959, 39.

⁷ See Phillip Deery, “The Geography of the Blacklist: the case of Howard Fast”, *American Communist History* 11:1 (2012) for an analysis of the scope, character and consequences of blacklisting experienced by Fast from 1947 to 1956.

⁸ Howard Fast, *The Naked God: The Writer and the Communist Party* (New York, 1957); *Being Red: A Memoir* (Boston, 1990).

⁹ James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Chicago, 1999), 252-67; Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: a critical history* (New York, 1962), 490-9; David

deal, in part, with this period of CPUSA history: Charney, Dennis, Gates, Healey, Mitford, Nelson and Richmond.¹⁰ Insofar as each of these studies concerns the impact of the Khrushchev revelations, their primary focus is on the inner-party struggle between the three factions from 1956 to 1958. By the time the rigidly Stalinist William Z. Foster defeated the reformers (or “liquidationists”, as he termed them), the Party resembled an impotent sect: the *Daily Worker* had closed, its cultural and educative activities had ceased and its membership, stripped of defecting intellectuals, had shriveled to about 3,000 hard-core cadres.¹¹ Ten years earlier, it had 74,000 members.¹² None of the relevant literature, scholarly or memoir, is principally concerned with these members who left: their motivation, reactions to them, or the consequences for them. This article is. Generally, the literature has a wider canvas and a longer trajectory: the history of the CPUSA, albeit told from different angles. This history is usually top down – hence the preoccupation with the National Executive Committee meeting in March 1956, the National Committee meeting in April 1956 or the 15th National Convention in February 1957, and the positions held at each by the different factions. This article, in contrast, will examine a communist who was neither a leader nor involved in factional warfare. Its emphasis is on the subjective, or personal, dimension. It therefore contrasts with the more traditional political narrative that focuses on the organisational and ideological character of communism.

Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism: a history of the Communist Party of the United States since 1945* (New York, 1959), 272-353; Joseph R. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957* (Berkeley, 1975), 6-7; 224-37. For more recent studies, see Jerry Harris, “First Reaction: U.S. Communist Leaders confront the Khrushchev Revelations”, *Science & Society* 61:4 (Winter 1997-8), 502-12; Jerry Harris, “The Center Cannot Hold: The struggle for reform in the Communist Party, 1957-58”, *Science & Society* 74:4 (October 2010), 461-88. For a less accessible study, see James Charles Wigren, “Eugene Dennis and the ‘Americanization’ of the Communist Party, USA, 1956-1960”, Unpublished MA thesis, George Washington University, 1975 (for the impact of the CPSU 20th Party Congress, see 25-32).

¹⁰ George Charney, *A Long Journey* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968), 245-71; Dennis, *Autobiography*, 222-36; John Gates, *The Story of an American Communist* (New York, 1958), 197-91; Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers* (Oxford, 1990), 150-63; Jessica Mitford, *A Fine Old Conflict* (New York, 1977), 272-80; Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett & Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh, 1981), 380-98; Al Richmond, *A Long View from the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary* (Boston, 1973), 367-85.

¹¹ Barrett, *Foster*, 267; Shannon, *Decline*, 354-60.

¹² David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York, 1978), 114.

Examining the inner anguish of communists in 1956-57 is fraught. They belonged to a Party in which public expression of emotions was anathema and “everything personal was suppressed and despised”.¹³ As one veteran communist commented, the CPUSA could not “respond to each as individuals, only in impersonal political concepts”.¹⁴ Consequently, according to James Barrett, “much of the recent, more sympathetic scholarship on the Communist Party has tended to ignore the subjective dimension of the experience”.¹⁵ Barrett is an unusual historian of American communism: he is not afraid of injecting the personal into the political. He argued that historians must attempt to restore “the place of the subjective in our understanding of historical change – problems of personal identity, emotion, and experience”.¹⁶ This article represents one such attempt.

How, then, do we explain Howard Fast’s disillusionment with and, soon after, defection from the American Communist Party? In short, what triggered the front-page story in the *NYT*? Of critical importance was Khrushchev’s explosive “secret speech”. Close to midnight on 24 February 1956, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Nikita Khrushchev, began a four-hour report to a closed session of delegates to the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU. His focus was on Stalin and the speech was excruciating. Khrushchev exposed the mechanism of terror and the system of arbitrary rule that had dominated the country for thirty years. He deployed dozens of documents and a wealth of detail to reveal the brutal character of the terror. One such document, which he read aloud, was the letter by Politburo member R.I. Eikhe, who joined the Bolsheviks in 1905 and whose spine was broken by his interrogator. Khrushchev showed that the history of the CPSU under Stalin consisted of criminal acts such as responsibility for the suicide of Ordzhonikidze and the assassination of Kirov; lawless mass deportations of non-Russian peoples; political errors such as the breach with Yugoslavia; incompetent leadership, exemplified by the vulnerability of the Soviet Union to German attack in 1941; the methodical falsification of history written by Stalin himself or at his direction; and the replacement of the Leninist principle of collective leadership with the ‘cult of the personality’. In short, Khrushchev punctured the mystical aura that surrounded

¹³ Cited in Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York, 1977), 233.

¹⁴ Peggy Dennis, *The Autobiography of an American Communist* (Westport/Berkeley, 1977), 215.

¹⁵ James R. Barrett, “Revolution and Personal Crisis: William Z. Foster, Personal Narrative, and the Subjective in the History of American Communism”, *Labor History* 43:4 (November 2002), 482.

¹⁶ Ibid. See also James R. Barrett, “Was the Personal Political? Reading the Autobiography of American Communism”, *International review of Social History* 53 (2008), 395-423.

Stalin: he had revealed that, instead of the wise and beneficent object of their adulation, Stalin was a bloodthirsty criminal responsible for systematic physical and psychological terror. Within the Soviet Union, only a brief summary of the speech was published, but even the abbreviated version was a shock, “like the explosion of a neutron bomb”.¹⁷ Within Eastern European “satellite” countries, the time seemed ripe to challenge the legitimacy of Soviet rule and Stalinist structures. In both Poland and Hungary defiance was expressed openly although resolved differently: the first through compromise; the second through brutal repression. Within communist parties throughout the world the impact was profound and its effects convulsive. America was no exception.

“Ashes of grief”: Fast and the Khrushchev speech

Vague rumors about a “special report” that referred to “errors” committed under Stalin, and a “cult of personality”, had been circulating within the CPUSA but were believed to be without foundation. Then, on the evening of 30 April, at the Jefferson School of Social Science in Manhattan where the National Committee was meeting, rumor became reality. The Party’s political secretary, Leon Wolfson, began to read from a document obtained, ostensibly, from a British comrade. Notes were forbidden and confidentiality was sought. For the next three hours, dumbstruck delegates sat in a deathly, stunned silence as a résumé of Khrushchev’s report on the Stalin era was read aloud. The chairman of the meeting, the veteran organiser and proletarian hero, Steve Nelson, observed that

The words of the speech were like bullets, and each found its place in the hearts of veteran Communists. Tears streamed down faces of men and women who had spent forty or more years, their whole adult lives, in the movement. I looked into the faces of people who had been beaten up or jailed with me...now I felt betrayed. I said simply, “This was not why I joined the Party”.¹⁸

Within half an hour Dorothy Healey was “convulsed with tears”, and could not stop crying.¹⁹ George Charney, was “too shocked, too unstrung” to say anything. The mood was “eerie”, he

¹⁷ Zhores A. Medvedev and Roy A. Medvedev, *The Unknown Stalin* (London, 2006), 98.

¹⁸ Nelson et al, *Steve Nelson*, 387; see also “Leaving the Party”, 3, Steve Nelson Papers, ALBA 008, Box 9, Folder 4, Tamiment Library, New York University [henceforth Tamiment].

¹⁹ Healey and Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers*, 152, 154.

recalled. “Thus it was on that night each of us went home to die”²⁰ Indeed, on that night, at home in West Harlem, Peggy Dennis did experience a kind of spiritual death: “I lay in the half darkness, and I wept... For the years of silence in which we had buried doubts and questions. For a thirty-year life’s commitment that lay shattered. I lay sobbing low, hiccupping whispers”.²¹ These private reactions – which are as much a part of the history of communism as the more public expressions – were a foretaste of Fast’s response. Fast became the very embodiment of what soon happened: “With the Khrushchev report, all the accumulated frustrations, discontents, doubts, grievances in and around the Communist party erupted with an elemental force”.²²

One who at this landmark April meeting was John Gates, the recently appointed editor of the *Daily Worker*. In 1955 he had emerged from jail after a five-year sentence imposed under the Smith Act and was now jostling to displace Foster as leader. As a “reformist” opposed to the rigidly orthodox Foster faction, Gates opened the pages of the *Daily Worker* to critical comment; it became a key vehicle for genuine debate within the CPUSA. The staff was strongly aligned with the Gates faction.²³ In comparable communist parties overseas – for example, in Australia and Great Britain – there were debates and ideological fractures but not the bloodletting.²⁴ One of the reasons was that the *Daily Worker* was the *only* communist paper in the world that printed Khrushchev’s “secret” speech.²⁵ In the face of opposition from much of the CPUSA leadership, it appeared on the same day that it was published, famously, by the

²⁰ Charney, *Long Journey*, 270.

²¹ Dennis, *Autobiography*, 225.

²² Richmond, *Long View*, 369.

²³ Generally they (and Fast) fitted Shannon’s description of those who left the Party in 1956-57: in contrast with Foster (born 1881), they were “younger people... whose contacts with non-Communists had been wide, and... [inhabited] the mainstream of American culture”. Shannon, *Decline*, 319.

²⁴ John Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict: The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1951-1968* (London, 2003), 62-9; Phillip Deery and Rachel Calkin, “‘Cracking the Stalinist Crust’: 1956 and the Communist Party of Australia”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 54:1 (2008), 69-84; Malcolm MacEwen, “The Day the Party had to Stop”, in Ralph Miliband and John Saville (eds.), *The Socialist Register 1976* (London, 1976), 24-42; Carol Thornton and Willie Thompson, “Scottish Communists, 1956-57”, *Science and Society* 61:3 (1997), 68-93.

²⁵ *DW*, 5 June 1956, 2-3; the headline, stretched across two pages, read “Stalin’s Repressions Spelled Out in Khrushchev Speech Made Public Here”. The paper printed a condensed version of 4,000 words.

NYT. It was accompanied by a long, teeth-gnashing editorial.²⁶ Thereafter, in the words of Gates, “readers spoke out as never before, pouring out the anguish of many difficult years”.²⁷

Howard Fast read the full 26,000 words of this speech the day before, on 4 June 1956, in the offices of the *Daily Worker*. Fast was now on the permanent staff of the paper, for which he wrote a regular column, “The Current Scene”.²⁸ His 15 May column edged, for the first time, towards a less myopic appraisal of the Soviet Union. He noted that Khrushchev’s official report to the 20th Congress was not only “the record of what socialism brought to... a proud and happy people” but also “the record of mistakes, large and small”.²⁹ His next six columns, from 21 May until 7 June, steered clear of the Soviet Union. He often received praise. Dr Edward Barsky found them “very stimulating, very instructive, and very indicative of new paths of thinking...many, many people will be guided and heartened by what you say”.³⁰ But Barsky and other astonished readers would have been horrified, not heartened, by the entirely different tenor of Fast’s next column, “Man’s Hope”, on 12 June. For he had now read the secret report, and when he did, “something broke inside of me and finished”.³¹ As he later elaborated, “the edifice that I had become a part of thirteen years earlier came crumbling down in ashes – ashes

²⁶ *DW*, 5 June 1956, 1,5.

²⁷ Gates, *Story of an American Communist*, 161.

²⁸ He previously wrote a column, “As I Please”, which belies its adherence to the party line. The FBI tallied the number of feature articles he wrote for the *DW* up until 1 March 1956 at 115. 1956 Dossier on Fast, 53 (this single, updated dossier was 74 pages long, indicative of the range and frequency of his Party activities). FAST, Howard Melvin, File 100-HQ-327116-140, FOIPA No 1130357-000. [Henceforth Fast FBI file] A Security Card Index was first activated on 27 May 1946; his FBI reference number throughout the 1,603 pages of his file remained NY 100-61206.

²⁹ *DW*, 17 May 1956, 6.

³⁰ Barsky to Fast, 14 May 1956, Howard Fast Papers, Correspondence files, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania [henceforth Fast Papers]. The Fast Papers, acquired in 2010, have yet to be catalogued; thus there are no series, box or folder numbers. I am grateful to the curatorial staff for their assistance. Barsky and Fast knew each other from the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee (Barsky was chairman, Fast an Executive Board member) dating back to 1945/46. Both were jailed, along with the entire Executive Board, in 1950; see Phillip Deery, “A blot upon liberty”: McCarthyism, Dr Barsky and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, *American Communist History* 8:2 (2009), 175-205.

³¹ Howard Fast, “My Decision”, *Mainstream* 10:3 (March 1957), 32. A condensed version of this twelve-page article in this left-wing literary magazine was published in *I.F. Stones’ Weekly*, 25 March 1957, 2. It was also cited extensively by *NYT*, 7 March 1957 and, critically, by the Trotskyist *Militant*, 21:15 (15 April 1957), 3-4 (“Where Howard Fast Goes Astray on Stalinism”).

of grief, horror and helplessness”.³² His column was angry and anguished. It was the last that Fast ever wrote for the *Daily Worker*, a fact at the time not recognised or understood by his readers.³³ It is a remarkable statement for its candor, its bravery, its sense of moral outrage and betrayal and sorrow, and for its unparalleled sharp criticism of Soviet leaders. “There is little one can say”, he began, “to take the deadly edge off the ‘secret’ Khrushchev speech”. He continued (and it is worth quoting at length because of its unprecedented character):

It is a strange and awful document, perhaps without parallel in history: and one must face the fact that it itemizes a record of barbarism and blood-lust that will be a lasting and shameful memory to civilized man...I for one looked hopefully, but vainly, at the end of the document for a pledge that the last execution had taken place on Soviet soil...Instead I learned that three more executions had been announced...and my stomach turned over with the blood-letting, with the madness of vengeance and counter-vengeance, of suspicion and counter-suspicion.

He wrote that it was “some small comfort” that, until recently, he was ignorant of the facts in Khrushchev’s report. He knew that Jewish culture was being systematically destroyed, that writers, artists and scientists were intimidated, that the “abomination” of capital punishment was enforced. But all these things, he rationalised, were “a necessity of socialism”. But now, such blind faith was finished.

Never again can I accept as a just practice under socialism that which I know to be unjust...Never again will I remain silent when I can recognize injustice – regardless of how that injustice may be wrapped in the dirty linen of expediency or necessity. Never again will I fail to question, to demand proof. Never again will I accept the ‘clever’ rationale, which appears to make sense but under scrutiny does not.

For Fast, the effect was cathartic: “with this said, I feel better – better than I have felt in a long time”.³⁴ The only letter printed by the *Daily Worker* that commented on Fast’s column revealed a ruthlessness against which the “reformers” had been fighting.

³² Fast, *Naked God*, 39.

³³ See letter, Albert Maltz to Fast, 30 July 1956, Fast Papers.

³⁴ *DW*, 12 June 1956, 6. The column was widely cited in the mainstream press; one report, captioned “Fast is Loose”, noted – correctly – that this was only published because the *DW* was under the control of a faction within

When we read of men convicted as accomplices in the crimes of Khrushchev's report being executed, I say good. And let's hope they don't abolish the death penalty until they get them all. My stomach does not turn over like Howard Fast's.³⁵

A quite different response to Fast's "Man's Hope" column came from Eugene Lyons, the editor of *New Leader*. Lyons had been close to the CPUSA, interviewed Stalin in 1930 while living in Moscow (1928-34), became bitterly disillusioned with Soviet society, flirted with Trotskyism and then moved to the extreme right. His 1937 *Assignment in Utopia* influenced George Orwell's *1984*. He had published three more anti-Stalinist books by the time he wrote his "Open Letter to Howard Fast". He praised Fast's column as "an act of courage and contrition by a man deeply troubled" and acknowledged his "tormenting inner struggle". He knew, personally, the "anguish of a cracking faith and bankrupt hopes". But he condemned Fast for indulging in "childish alibis based on transparent falsehoods". He was especially critical of Fast's moral equation between the evils of McCarthyism and the infamies of Stalinism: these were, Lyons stated, "a pimple and a cancer" between which Fast refused to distinguish. He urged Fast to reject the "opiates of self-deception," quit communism and rejoin the world "of free men".³⁶ Fast's response was angry and defensive: he castigated Lyons' patronising attitude and self-righteousness, reaffirmed what socialism still meant to him, and insisted that, notwithstanding its errors, "the Soviet Union is moving toward the future".³⁷ In his rebuttal,

the CPUSA (John Gates, Alan Max, Joe Clark) that drew inspiration not from Moscow but from Warsaw (where Gomulka was pursuing his Polish road to socialism in the face of Soviet opposition). *Washington Post*, 5 February 1957, 20. After Fast formally left the Party in early 1957, the *DW*, in sharp contrast, as we shall see, to the Soviet press and orthodox CPUSA leaders, refrained from labeling him a "traitor" or "renegade" or "deserter under fire". See, for example, A.B. Magill, "He Affirms Socialist Beliefs But Severs Communist Ties", *DW*, 10 March 1957, 4.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 16 June 1956, 4. In a similar vein, Charney recounts how he was present at a meeting in 1956 when "I heard charges made, first by Ben Davis, that had we had state power we would, like Stalin, have executed dissident comrades". Charney, *Long Journey*, 270. The African-American Benjamin J. Davis, a close ally of Foster and a New York councillor for Harlem until jailed in the "second string" Smith Act prosecutions in 1951, told a meeting in 1949 that he "would rather be a lamppost in Moscow than president of the United States". Cited in Gates, *Story of an American Communist*, 165.

³⁶ Eugene Lyons, "An Open Letter to Howard Fast", *New Leader*, 39:28 (9 July 1956), 6-8.

³⁷ "A Letter from Howard Fast", *New Leader* 39:31 (30 July 1956), 16-18. This reply was also published *Mainstream* 7:7 (August 1956), 54-8.

Lyons claimed that Fast was “shouting down” his own doubts and feelings of guilt.³⁸ This interesting midyear exchange exemplified Fast’s ambivalence. Although he still clung to the Party, the umbilical cord was stretched and damaged. Only Michael Walzer saw what was coming: “it is difficult to see how he can return to the paper. His article described a despair which, if it is honest, must drive him from the CPUSA.”³⁹

For the next six months, Fast lived out this despair. He withdrew from Party activity and retreated into self-imposed isolation. He no longer lived in the fast lane of Manhattan, but in the quiet, leafy suburb of Teaneck, New Jersey.⁴⁰ There, he licked his wounds. For another six years, apparently, he suffered from depression.⁴¹ As John Gates later commented, “One of those most shaken was Howard Fast... It was to be expected that he would react to the Khrushchev revelations in a highly emotional manner, [but] I know of no-one who went through greater moral anguish and torture.”⁴² Although he stated privately on 23 June 1956 that he intended resigning – this was reported to a highly-placed FBI informant, T-1⁴³ – no membership card was torn up. There was no cathartic moment, no confessional, no high apostatic drama. Just the full force of that moral anguish and torture. Personal memoirs, and especially institutional histories, tend to sidestep this dimension. Despair is difficult to document or retrieve. Thus, we know nothing of Samuel Sillen’s near emotional collapse. Sillen was the well-respected editor of the communist literary magazine, *Mainstream*; one day in late 1956 he walked out of his office and never returned.⁴⁴ Nor do we know much more than a newspaper report about the request of John Steuben, a communist union organizer and Party defector in early 1957, to live out his life “in agony and silence”.⁴⁵ Yet if we are to appreciate fully the impact of 1956 on an

³⁸ “Eugene Lyons Comments”, *New Leader* 39:31 (30 July 1956), 18-20. This debate made news; see Murray Kempton’s column in *New York Post*, 31 July 1956, in which he harshly described Fast’s performance as “sad and shabby”.

³⁹ Michael Walzer, “The Travail of the U.S. Communists”, *Dissent* 3:4 (Fall 1956), 407.

⁴⁰ The Fast family moved to Teaneck both for family reasons and in the hope that it may help Fast’s health. Since his imprisonment in 1950, he suffered from crippling cluster headaches. They were still afflicting him badly in 1956; see Fast to Albert Maltz, 7 February 1956, Fast Papers.

⁴¹ Personal conversation with Fast’s daughter, Rachel Ben-Avi, New York City, 28 April 2011. Fast wrote that “months would pass before I could write about the essence of this nightmare”. Fast, *Naked God*, 23.

⁴² Gates, *Story of an American Communist*, 169.

⁴³ Confidential Report, John J. Sullivan, New York Office, 26 October 1956, 2, Fast FBI file.

⁴⁴ Shannon, *Decline*, 283.

⁴⁵ *NYT*, 19 January 1957, 1, 18. Ukrainian-born Steuben was the author of *Strike Strategy* (New York, 1950) and editor of *March of Labor* (1950-54). The reporter referred to his “acute” “spiritual pain”.

individual – and therefore on tens of thousands of individuals who had devoted their lives to “the cause” – we cannot ignore the personal dimension. In Fast’s case, we have a document that captures his pain. It was written by the wife of a close friend, Carl Marzani, and it refers to a dinner party that Fast attended just before New Year’s eve.⁴⁶

I am very familiar with pain of many varieties and I felt the night you came [to our house]...I wasn’t able to reach you. And then all the little clever guests started in on you and if [you] did not feel isolated when you came you must have felt it when you left...There were more of us with you than against you that evening – though you were lashing out wildly in your distress...The Times article [*NYT*, 1 February] made me feel very sad that I had not contacted you in this period. We both wanted to – I called your home several times to no answer and when Carl did reach you...you were very distant, Carl said. How do we reach you – how do I reach you?...Remember, dear Howie, you are not alone. And nothing you said to Schwartz indicated that you want to be. Call on us if it will help – call me if you want to.⁴⁷

By mid-1957, he was more reflective, but still dispirited. In responding to a letter requesting some assistance, which Fast declined, he wrote: “I am a very tired man of forty-three and not in the best of health. I am trying to write, earn a living for my family, and think. There is a great deal to think about”.⁴⁸ These thoughts, as we shall see, became *The Naked God*.

The Jewish Question

It is clear, then, that, as with so many unnamed and unknown rank and file party members, the Khrushchev revelations were a decisive factor in Fast’s defection. But Fast was also a Jew, albeit secular, and his affinity with Judaism, he believed, was not mutually inconsistent with his commitment to communism. Here we come to the second explanation. When he joined the CPUSA in 1943, he was a Jew: when he left the Party in 1956/7 he was still a Jew. The position articulated by a leading Canadian Jewish communist also applied to Fast: “I never had a conflict about being a Jew and being a Communist. I became a Communist because I am a

⁴⁶ Marzani was an Italian-American communist and union organiser, imprisoned from 1949-51, editor of a union paper until 1954 and then, with Angus Cameron (another close friend of Fast’s) ran the Liberty Book Club (established 1948), of which Fast was a director until 1955.

⁴⁷ Edith Marzani to Howard Fast, 3 February 1957, Fast Papers.

⁴⁸ Private letter, Howard Fast to Mr Marcus, 8 July 1957, Box 54.5, Folder 3, Fales Manuscript Collection, MSS 001, Fales Library, NYU.

Jew”.⁴⁹ And yet Fast’s Jewishness caused problems within the Party. The leadership, according to Fast, “wanted to expel me” because of his “Jewish nationalist point of view” in *My Glorious Brothers*. Only the intervention of others saved him.⁵⁰ There is strong circumstantial evidence that, even before he had read Khrushchev’s “secret” speech, his awareness of Soviet anti-Semitism severely frayed the bonds of his CPUSA membership.⁵¹ The seeds of this disillusionment over the treatment of Soviet Jews stretched back to 1949. Before departing for Paris in April 1949 to attend the inaugural World Peace Congress, Fast met with two leaders of the influential Jewish Section of the New York District of the CPUSA. One, Paul Novick, editor of *Morning Freiheit* (whose circulation was greater than that of the *DW*), was also on the Party’s National Committee, with whose authority he spoke. They presented Fast with compelling evidence of anti-Semitic practices (arrests, executions, closure of Jewish newspapers, magazines, printing presses and schools) in the Soviet Union. Although “dumbfounded”, Fast agreed to their request to press the charge with Alexander Fadeyev, the chairman of the Union of Soviet Writers and the political head of the Soviet delegation to the Peace Congress.⁵² When this occurred, Fadeyev repeatedly denied the accusation with the mantra, “There is no anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union”. Fast recalled: “after I came away from the meeting, my own doubts grew”.⁵³ So must have Fadeyev’s: soon after the Khrushchev report, he shot himself through the head. Before Fast read that report, he would have read in *Jewish Life*, to which he subscribed, the formal apology from the editorial board for its specific failure to protest against the anti-Semitism that underpinned the notorious Slansky show trial in

⁴⁹ Irving Abella, “Portrait of a Jewish Professional Revolutionary: The Recollections of Joshua Gershman”, *Labour/Le Travail: Journal of Canadian Labour Studies* 2 (1977), 204. For his defence of Israel, see Fast, “My Decision”, 32-3.

⁵⁰ Oral History Transcripts, 15 April 1968, 12, Box 8, Folder 13, Frank Campenni Papers, 1932-1977, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Manuscript Collection, MSS 213 [henceforth Campenni Papers]. This was preceded by a protracted debate over “progressive Jewish consciousness”; this became the “Fast Controversy” after *Jewish Life* published *An Epitaph for Sidney* in January 1947. See Morris Schappes Papers, TAM 179, Box 25, Folder 19, Tamiment.

⁵¹ There is a parallel between Fast and the British intellectual, Hyman Levy, who made unyielding allegations of Soviet anti-Semitism throughout 1956 and 1957, and published *Jews and the National Question* in 1957. Levy was expelled in April 1958 after 26 years in the British Communist Party.

⁵² Eight years later Novick angrily accused Fast of misrepresenting Fayeyev’s fabricated statement concerning the Jewish poet, Itzik Feffer, in an interview with the conservative New York Jewish daily, *Forward*, published 3 August 1957. (“You were present...why didn’t you tell this story...?”) Paul Novick to Fast, 30 August 1957, 1-3. Fast Papers.

⁵³ Fast, *Being Red*, 206-7, 218-9.

Czechoslovakia in November 1952, and its general failure to condemn Soviet anti-Semitism since the late 1940s.⁵⁴ According to I.F. Stone, the detailed 1956 attack on Soviet anti-Semitism by J.B. Salsberg, the Canadian Jewish communist leader, published in *Jewish Life*, was “the final blow for Fast”.⁵⁵ Perhaps Fast was also aware, as many Jewish communists (who comprised 50 percent of the Party’s membership in New York⁵⁶) were in April 1956, of the article in a Polish communist paper, the Yiddish *Folks-shtimme*, which accused Soviet leaders of anti-Semitic actions, including the disappearance or death of Jewish poets, writers and artists. The article was reprinted in *Freiheit*, the Jewish communist paper located in the same building as the *Daily Worker*.⁵⁷ One Jewish poet, whom Fast knew personally and whom Paul Robeson met memorably in Moscow in June 1949,⁵⁸ was Itzik Feffer. He had been a decorated officer in the Red Army and a “beloved” Russian poet. Fast heard a rumor “a good while” before the 20th Party Congress that Feffer had been executed.⁵⁹ Fast asked the *Pravda* correspondent at a diplomatic reception at the Russian consulate in Manhattan about Feffer. The angry reply – which, if correctly recalled (and Fast swears by it), is, for its time, remarkable: “Howard, why do you make so much of the Jews? Jews? Jews? That is all we hear from you! Do you think Stalin murdered no one but Jews?”⁶⁰ Another Jewish poet whom Fast knew was Lev Kvitko, executed in August 1952. Fast’s “moral anguish and torture” (to use Gates’ phrase) over Kvitko is captured in a letter he wrote to the Russian writer Boris Polevoi: “And why – why, Boris, did you tell us here in New York that the Yiddish writer, Kvitko, was alive and well and living in your apartment house, when he was among those executed and long since dead? Why? Why did you have to lie? ... Why did you lie in so awful and deliberate a manner?”⁶¹

⁵⁴ “Review and Reappraisal”, *Jewish Life*, June 1956, 3-7. New York Jewish communists, who published *Jewish Life*, also published the daily Yiddish paper, *Morgn-frayhayt*, which had started reporting on the destruction of Jewish cultural institutions in the Soviet Union. See Gennady Estraiikh, “Metamorphoses of Morgn-frayhayt” in Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (eds.) *Yiddish and the Left* (Oxford, 2001), 150.

⁵⁵ *I.F. Stone’s Weekly*, 11 February 1957, 3.

⁵⁶ Shannon, *Decline*, 284.

⁵⁷ Gates, *Story of an American Communist*, 163. It was this that prompted Party leader Eugene Dennis to comment (“Sorrow and Perspective”) on anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union; see *DW*, 16 April 1956, 2, 4.

⁵⁸ Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York, 1998), 352-4. By then, he was already been charged with treason. In a bugged hotel room he gestured to Robeson that there was little hope and dramatically drew his finger across his throat.

⁵⁹ Feffer was executed on 12 August 1952, seven months before Stalin’s death.

⁶⁰ Fast, *Naked God*, 128-9, *Being Red*, 330.

⁶¹ Republished in *New York Times Magazine*, 9 June 1957, 10.

Writer turned activist

In addition to anti-Semitism and the “crimes of Stalin”, there is a third reason for Fast’s defection: the problem of reconciling art and ideology. Its explanatory value is diminished by its retrospectivity: there is no contemporaneous evidence, only Fast’s subsequent reflections. But it centres on the conflict between Fast the writer and Fast the communist. If what Stalin said was true –that a communist writer is a writer first and communist second – then Fast struggled to find a bridge. This conflict was both an inner one and with the Party leadership. One artistic clash with the Party arose over his 1950 play *The Hammer*. Communist leaders insisted, in keeping with its anti-Jim Crow casting policy, that the son of a small, slender, pale, orange-headed Jewish father be played by a tall (6’ 2”), deep-voiced, African-American actor, James Earl Jones. Fast was outraged, but lost. The first-night Yiddish-speaking audience laughed.⁶² Fast later referred to the difficulties of “writing within the censorship” imposed by the communist movement.⁶³ By late 1952 – although this may also be shaped by hindsight – Fast felt trapped: “I hated the Communist Party...remaining in it only because I was a goddam hero and there was nowhere else to go...”⁶⁴ The Party considered Fast not a hero but an ill-developed Marxist writer. A FBI informant had two private conversations with William Weiner, a financial director of the CPUSA, at the latter’s hospital bedside in May 1953. According to this FBI informant, Weiner stated that

FAST’s recent writings, particularly “Spartacus”, have not been up to standards set by the Party and for that reason he is not considered a good Party writer. WEINER said there is no doubt about this loyalty to the Party but he has no grasp of “Marxism” and is too much of an individualist in his writings.⁶⁵

We can assume that Fast was aware of the Party’s criticisms of *Spartacus*; he devoted eight pages to them in *The Naked God*.⁶⁶ He wrote at length about the negative role of the Party’s “cultural commissars”, especially V.J. Jerome (editor of *Political Affairs* and chairman of the

⁶² Indicative of the depth of humiliation, this incident occupied five pages in Fast’s memoir (270-4).

⁶³ *DW*, 10 March 1957, 4.

⁶⁴ *Being Red*, 303.

⁶⁵ Memorandum, “Secret”, SAC [Special Agent in Charge] Chicago to SAC New York, 3 July 1953, 16. This informant, with whom “special care must be exercised” to prevent her/his identification, was a “high placed informant with maximum security”. Emphasis in original. Fast FBI File.

⁶⁶ Fast, *Naked God*, 147-54

CPUSA Cultural Commission whom Fast described as “a horrible, rigid little monster who never knew what he was doing”⁶⁷), in identifying “errors of a bourgeois nature” in *Freedom Road*, “Trotskyite tendencies” in *Citizen Tom Paine*, anti-Party depiction of a character in *Clarkton*, “Jewish bourgeois nationalism” in *My Glorious Brothers* and “white chauvinism” in *The Proud and the Free*.⁶⁸ To the extent that Fast felt circumscribed or muzzled, his defection from the Party in 1956 was not altogether surprising. In a 1967 interview he stated: “I left the Communist Party because a point came where it was impossible to be a writer or a free spirit and remain in the Communist Party”.⁶⁹ However, this explanation needs to be kept in perspective. He wrote well over a hundred feature articles for the *Daily Worker* and not once was he curtailed: “I have never been censored, I wrote as I pleased and...[it] opened its pages to me, always and without question”.⁷⁰ His contradictory position is also revealed by his rueful observation that “no-one in the party leadership ever showed the slightest interest what I was writing or in reading any manuscript of mine before publication”.⁷¹ (This, in fact, is incorrect: on Fast’s request, Jerome wrote a highly detailed appraisal of the *draft* of *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* in June 1953.⁷²) A letter writer to the *Daily Worker* suggested that the tendentiousness and polemicism of Fast’s recent novels, which were “political rather than artistic creations”, was self-imposed. “P.S.” rhetorically asked: “did Party demands inhibit Fast’s best abilities? Was it instead what he thought these demands might be?”⁷³

Hungary

⁶⁷ Alan Wald and Alan Filreis, “A Conversation with Howard Fast, March 23, 1994”, *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 20 (1995), 516. For Jerome’s biographical details, see Alan Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 163-4 and, for another view of Jerome as a “feckless pedant”, see 368, n. 1.

⁶⁸ Fast, *Naked God*, 135-44; Howard Fast, “The Writer and the Commissar”, *Prospectus* 1:1 (November 1957), 52-5.

⁶⁹ Oral History transcript, 15 April 1968, 6, Box 8, Folder 11, Campenni Papers. Perhaps Fast was simply confirming what Stalin always knew: that communist novelists are novelists first, communists second.

⁷⁰ *DW*, 17 October 1956, 4.

⁷¹ Fast, “The Writer and the Commissar”, 54.

⁷² V.J. Jerome, “A Letter to Howard Fast”, *Political Affairs*, 39:1, January 1959, 60-5.

⁷³ P.S., “Howard Fast’s Problem as Artist”, *DW*, 14 March 1957, 4. These novels were *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1953), with its overly-didactic thematic similarities to the Rosenberg case; *Silas Timberman* (1954), a doctrinaire tale about a sacked and jailed liberal university professor; and *The Story of Lola Gregg* (1956), about the wife of a prominent communist hunted by the FBI.

For these reasons, then – political, religious and artistic – Fast quit the CPUSA. It was a gradual break, not an abrupt rupture. And until January 1957 it remained a largely private decision. But the decision was confirmed by events in Hungary. In November 1956, Russian tanks rolled into Budapest for a second time and crushed its “Spring in October”: the reform movement, the workers’ councils, the embryonic multi-party political structures, the quest for greater national independence. Hungary was the country most profoundly affected by the 20th Party Congress. Within the Hungarian Workers’ Party, a movement seeking greater democratisation and independence gathered momentum. In July the first secretary of the central committee, Matyas Rakosi, was dismissed; in early October, László Rajk and other victims of the 1949 Stalinist trials were rehabilitated and reburied; and in late October the new leadership of Imre Nagy replaced that of Ernő Gerő. Reform, invasion, rebellion and pyrrhic victory; then occupation and doomed resistance. Each punctuated the brief story of the Budapest uprising of autumn 1956. The brutality of the Soviet regime, exposed by Khrushchev in February, had reasserted itself in November.⁷⁴

Very soon after these events in Hungary, Howard Fast received a mauling in a public debate at the hands of Irving Howe. Like Fast, Howe grew up in poverty (in the West Bronx), was Jewish and socialist. In 1956, he was a leading anti-Stalinist intellectual, but still a radical social democrat, having founded *Dissent* three years before. He was also “a brutal debater”.⁷⁵ There was no newspaper coverage of this debate, so we must rely on the recollections of Jeremy Lerner, who moderated the debate, and Howe himself.⁷⁶ Fast had been invited to debate Howe at Brandeis University, where Howe then taught, on the topic of “Politics and the Novel”, which was also the title of Howe’s soon-to-be published book. To Howe’s “astonishment”, Fast agreed. It was not a wise move. “I’d been lying in wait for something like this, and I really went after him”, Howe recalled. “I lashed Fast without kindness or mercy” and “I beat the hell out of

⁷⁴ From Eastern Europe, a group of diplomats, “shaken as they were”, gave him further information “even more monstrous” than Khrushchev’s original revelations. *NYT*, 26 August 1957, 8; *New York Post*, 26 August 1957, 20. Fast refused to identify these “diplomats”, in whose identity the FBI took a keen interest; see Memorandum, L.B. Nichols to Mr. Tolson, 27 August 1956, Fast FBI File.

⁷⁵ Comment by Todd Gitlin in *Arguing the World* (New York, 1997), documentary film on Howe and New York intellectuals (dir. Joseph Dorman).

⁷⁶ Jeremy Lerner, “Remembering Irving Howe”, *Dissent* 40 (Fall 1993), 540; Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York, 1982), 188; John Rodden and Ethan Goffman (eds.), *Politics and the Intellectual: Conversations with Irving Howe* (West Lafayette, Ind., 2010), 182-3 (Irving Howe, interview with Todd Gitlin, April 1985).

him”. In addition, bitter, bottled-up feelings were released by many of Howe’s friends who were present, such as Rose Coser, who repeatedly heckled Fast. Fast, who had not yet declared his breach with the CPUSA, was obliged to defend the indefensible. During his address, which, apparently, was rambling (“belying his name”) and lacking cogency and conviction, he upheld the principles of Stalinism. Howe was restless and asked “how long I was going to let this go on”. At this point, according to Lerner, “I’d fallen into a semi-doze when a bellow woke me with a jolt. ‘You have got blood on your hands!’ Irving cried, rising to shoot quick, sharp arrows into Fast”. He then demolished Fast’s arguments about the freedom of Soviet writers by pointing to Fast’s (and others’) willingness to bend the truth to fit the Party line. “The sad thing”, Howe recalled, was that Fast “was on the verge of breaking from the CPUSA...I didn’t realize [this] until later...he was helpless”.⁷⁷ This was indicated, Howe continued, by “the way he lied, for example, about the Jewish/Yiddish writers. And I knew he was lying and he knew he was lying”.⁷⁸ As Howe commented, Fast was “stupid” to put himself in that untenable position of having to defend Stalinism “straight down the line”. Conceivably, Fast was bruised and shaken by this experience – it is absent from his memoirs – and propelled him to go public to avoid repetition.

At the end of 1956, *Fortune* magazine phoned Fast for an interview about the CPUSA; it was then that he told *Fortune* that he had left the Party. This news was included in its January 1957 article about the Communist Party and the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ It was picked up by Harry Schwartz, the Soviet specialist for the *NYT*, who contacted a “reluctant” Fast on 31 January 1957 and then interviewed him.⁸⁰ The outcome was the front-page article the next day.⁸¹

⁷⁷ According to the *New York Daily News*, 25 August 1957, 27, it was “actually” during the Budapest uprising that Fast resigned, which, if true, makes his willingness to debate Howe soon after even more incomprehensible.

⁷⁸ Four months later, Fast would write that dissident Russian writers “would have either been disgraced, jailed or even put to death”. Cited in *Commonweal* 65 (22 March 1957), 629.

⁷⁹ The wording was simple and unambiguous: “Howard Fast, the novelist, who is no longer a member of the party...”. *Fortune*, January 1957, 238.

⁸⁰ This chain of events is detailed in Fast, “The Writer and the Commissar”, 32.

⁸¹ The communist writer, Mike Gold (see Richmond, *Long View*, 382), implied that Fast consciously chose Schwartz and the *NYT* – “I find something repulsive about such a choice” – when he could have announced his resignation in a left paper; *The Worker* (weekend edition of *DW*), 18 August 1957, 7. This view was echoed by some rank-and-file members; see letters published in *DW*, 5 February 1957, 4; 11 February 1957, 4; 14 February 1957, 4; 21 February 1957, 4. Typical was the comment from “A.S.” that Fast “knows very well (or should know) that turning to the New York Times, one of the chief spokesmen [sic] of capitalist power and reaction, is not going

Outside the Party

Thereafter, Fast did not go quietly into the night. He wrote an important and lengthy reflective piece, “My Decision” for *Mainstream*; answered critics and letter writers in the *Daily Worker*; completed a manuscript, *Moses, The Prince of Egypt*, that he sent to a commercial publisher, Crown; submitted the entire, fascinating exchange of letters between himself and a Soviet author, Boris Polevoi, to Harrison Salisbury, former Moscow correspondent at the *NYT*⁸²; and was interviewed for a two-part article by communist journalist, A.B. Magill, in the *Daily Worker*, for a long article focusing on the Jewish issues⁸³ and, curiously, for an “exclusive” three-part article by art critic and gadfly, Florence Berkman, in the relatively obscure *Hartford Times*.⁸⁴ And of particular significance – in response to an approach from the publisher Frederick Praeger, armed with a contract and \$2000, to write a companion volume to the more theoretical *The New Class*, just completed by Milovan Djilas, a dissident Yugoslav communist⁸⁵ – Fast started working on *The Naked God*. It was finished by August and published in November 1957. By then, his position had evolved into a less equivocal, more uncompromising one. Fifteen months earlier he would never have stated that his membership amounted to “a long and terrible nightmare”.⁸⁶ Before we examine the arguments of, and reactions to, *The Naked God*, what were the responses to the public announcement of Fast’s disillusionment and defection? These tell us much about attitudes by and about the communist movement in this period.

There were four sets of responses. First, the plaudits. Because there was so little public applause, we can assume that Fast was immensely heartened to receive this handwritten note from one he admired, the famous Upton Sinclair: “My dear Fast, thought I’d write + tell you

to provide him with the balm his wounds need”. Ibid. For an attack on the *NYT* (but not Fast) by the managing editor of the *DW*, see Alan Max, “Howard Fast and the N.Y. Times”, *DW*, 12 June 1957, 5,7.

⁸² It was published, with a forward by Salisbury, under the by-line, “Writers in the Shadow of Communism” in the weekend edition of *New York Times Magazine*, 9 June 1957, 10.

⁸³ This appeared in the non-communist Jewish daily paper, *Forward*, 3 August 1957.

⁸⁴ *DW*, 21, 28 April 1957, which in turned provoked a series of letters in the weekend *Worker*, 31 March 1957; *Hartford Times*, 24 September, 5; 25 September, 10; 26 September 1957, 4.

⁸⁵ Oral History Transcripts, 19 August 1974, 4, Box 9, Folder 1, Campenni Papers. Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: an analysis of the Communist system* (New York, 1957). By August 1957, it was in its fourth print run.

⁸⁶ *New York World Telegram*, 21 November 1957, 5.

how happy I am over your recent statements over the Soviet horror. Now I can love you!”⁸⁷ More grounded were the encouraging words from the historian Bertram D. Wolfe and author of the 1948 classic, *Three Who Made a Revolution*: “I have some notion of what you must be going through, for I experienced something like it myself”.⁸⁸ But the most eulogistic epitaph to his time in the Party came from a rank-and-file communist, who wrote this to the *Daily Worker*:

Howard Fast has left us – the words are cruel but true. A hole has been left in my heart. My body aches with the sorrow of his loss. It is as if a brother has left me. For was he not my brother in the battle for all that is good and right? But though he may march in different ranks all that he has taught us will march with us...[A]nd though his own flame has grown dim – it will burn within us. Hail and farewell Howard Fast... We weep that you may have left us. We hope you may return soon.⁸⁹

Fast, too, may have wept upon reading this letter. The impact of Fast upon a generation of communist activists was underscored by this, more critical but equally remorseful, remark: “It sure was a personal tragedy for me when Howard Fast turned on the movement. I sure had believed in him”.⁹⁰

Second, the CPUSA apparatchiks, who were far less generous. Some context: by mid-1957, William Z. Foster was firmly in the saddle. He had beaten his centrist and “Right” factional CPUSA opponents by default: those who would have supported Gates at the February 1957 Convention (and initially Gates had “the numbers”) had by now left the Party. Foster failed to see his victory was merely pyrrhic.⁹¹ Cleansed of reformers, the Party shrank further and was reduced to political impotence. When Foster was challenged by Dorothy Healey in the spring of 1957 about his indifference to the hemorrhaging of membership and the loss of valued

⁸⁷ Upton Sinclair to Fast, 22 September 1957, Fast Papers.

⁸⁸ Wolfe to Fast, 30 September 1957, Fast Papers. Praeger had just published Wolfe’s *Khrushchev and Stalin’s Ghost: text, background and meaning of Khrushchev’s secret report to the Twentieth Congress, 1956*. Wolfe’s political trajectory, from communist to anti-communist via Trotskyism, was not dissimilar from Eugene Lyons and a host of other Cold War anti-Stalinists who grouped around *The New Leader*.

⁸⁹ Letter, “L.A.C.”, *DW*, 11 February 1957, 4.

⁹⁰ Unnamed Los Angeles worker, cited in *DW*, 18 August 1957, 7.

⁹¹ Edward Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, 1994), 347-66.

comrades, he replied, “Let them go, who cares?”⁹² As one commentator noted, Foster had “foresworn the very possibility of moral shock”.⁹³

On the same day as the *NYT* announcement of Fast’s defection, a friend of Fast’s wrote to him: “I’ve no doubt the furies will descend upon you as a result of your statement in the Times this morning”.⁹⁴ He was prescient. It was not lone before William Z. Foster castigated Fast for his “emotionalism” instead of Marxist analysis; for his “hopelessly incorrect” understanding of developments in the Soviet Union, and for sowing “confusion and despair” amongst the workers. The events of 1956 had scraped off his “thin veneer of Marxism” to reveal the “bourgeois nationalism lying not far beneath it”.⁹⁵ Privately, he said that Fast was “worse than Max Eastman” – the ultimate epithet.⁹⁶ Joseph Freeman believed that Fast was an opportunist who stayed in the Party only sufficiently long to win the prestigious Stalin Peace Prize.⁹⁷ To V.J. Jerome, Fast was a “renegade” and an “embittered turncoat”,⁹⁸ while Fast’s *Mainsteam* article of March 1957, elicited this jaw-dropping, invective-laden response from Jim Jackson, invoking political rodentry and mirroring Joe McCarthy at his worst:

Howard Fast, continuing his psychotic conduct of wallowing in his own retchings in public print, is heard from again, this time way up a dirty creek without a paddle, in “Mainstream”. This piece is a fair exercise for entering into the lush “guts and gore” market... with a pen copiously filled and dripping with his own enormous gall...[T]he chicken scratches of this chicken-hearted one...[are] the rabid desecrations of such a

⁹² Healey and Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers*, 164.

⁹³ Walzer, “Travail of U.S. Communists”, 407.

⁹⁴ Mac G. [surname indecipherable] to Fast, 1 February 1957, Box 1, Folder 1, Campenni Papers. Despite disagreeing with Fast’s decision, he hoped to continue their friendship.

⁹⁵ William Z. Foster, “Howard Fast’s Call to Surrender”, *DW*, 17 June 1957, 5.

⁹⁶ Alfred Greenberg to Fast, 10 April 1957, Fast Papers. Eastman (1883-1969) was an early member of the CPUSA, a close friend of John Reed, editor of *The Masses*, and a visitor to the Soviet Union. In the 1930s he embraced Trotskyism but by the 1950s had become a pronounced anti-communist and, initially, a supporter of Joe McCarthy.

⁹⁷ Joseph Freeman to Daniel Aaron, 16 June 1958, in Wald, *Exiles*, 187. On Freeman, see Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Criticism* (New York, 1961), 68-72

⁹⁸ V.J. Jerome, “A Letter to Howard Fast”, *Political Affairs*, 39:1, January 1959, 60.

delinquent mind of such a smut-scribbler-on-subway-ads as this Howard Fast... Those whose heads are pointed and whose tails are long enough will follow him.⁹⁹

As Gates wrote in 1958: “Later when [Fast] announced his withdrawal and told his story, party leaders leaped on him like a pack of wolves and began that peculiar brand of character assassination which the Communist movement has always reserved for defectors from its ranks.¹⁰⁰

This *Mainstream* article also generated extended responses, all critical, but to varying degrees, from numerous communist cadres: Herbert Aptheker (leading CPUSA theoretician and historian), Joseph Starobin (former CPUSA journalist), Bert Cochrane (editor, *American Socialist*), Louis Harap (editor, *Jewish Life*) and Phillip Bonosky (writer and fulltime CPUSA organiser).¹⁰¹ The article was published as “Ma Décision” in the April issue of the French CPUSA’s *La Nation Socialiste*, whose editor, Pierre Hervé, wished to use it “as a weapon against those who would continue the Stalinist practices of arriving at truth by fiat”.¹⁰² We do not know if French communists were shocked by Fast’s tormented words, even in translation:

I was filled with loathing and disgust [after reading the “secret speech”]. I felt a sense of unmitigated mental nausea at the realization that I had supported and defended this murderous bloodbath, and I felt... a sense of being a victim of the most incredible swindle in modern times.¹⁰³

Third, the FBI. We can see a quite different response to Fast’s “My Decision” from the FBI’s clandestine Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which commenced operations only seven months before, in August 1956. Its main aim, in the wake of the Khrushchev revelations,

⁹⁹ Letter [undated, March 1957], Jim Jackson to Milton Howard, James Jackson Papers, TAM 347, Box 17, Folder 21, Tamiment. This was not necessarily typical of Jackson; see David Levering Lewis, Michael H. Nash and Daniel J. Leab (eds.), *Red Activists and Black Freedom: James and Esther Jackson and the Long Civil Rights Evolution* (London & New York, 2010). There was only silence from another African-American, Paul Robeson, to whom Fast had been very close; see letter, Robeson to Fast, 14 November 1955, Fast Papers, signed “Affectionately, Paul”.

¹⁰⁰ Gates, *Story of an American Communist*, 169.

¹⁰¹ *Mainstream*, April 1957, 42-56. Starobin’s contribution (51-4) was especially perceptive.

¹⁰² Alfred Greenberg to Fast, 10 April, 22 April 1957, Fast Papers.

¹⁰³ Howard Fast, “My Decision”, *Mainstream* 10:3 (March 1957), 31.

was to use defections to cause disruption and increase factionalism within the CPUSA. It focused on Fast. His resignation, a COINTELPRO memo to J. Edgar Hoover stated, “has provided an excellent psychological weapon to utilize in connection with wavering CPUSA members especially those who come from families of Jewish faith or who have spouses of Jewish faith”. It printed and distributed multiple copies of “My Decision” to dozens of FBI offices across the United States, from Boston to Seattle. Each office was instructed to select active CPUSA members who might be persuaded by Fast’s arguments for leaving the Party or who were disturbed by his allegations of Soviet anti-Semitism. We can obtain a rare and fascinating insight into the *modus operandi* of this early COINTELPRO operation through the following instructions:

Each office should anonymously mail a copy of this article to each of the selected CPUSA members in plain envelopes and in such a manner that they cannot be traced back to the FBI. The mailings should be varied, using different types of envelopes, and should not be sent to individuals who are closely associated, thus limiting discussions relative to the source for same. Each office should advise of any tangible results obtained from this mailing...¹⁰⁴

The efficacy of such an operation is notoriously difficult to gauge. But in light of the exodus of active rank-and-file communists in 1956-57, it seems plausible that at least some were influenced, via COINTELPRO, by Howard Fast’s decision to leave the CPUSA. A direct approach to Fast under the TOPLEV program (see below) was countenanced but not pursued.

Finally, the Soviet Union. Until 1957, Fast had been a pin-up boy in the socialist sixth of the world. He was “*the* representative contemporary American writer in the Soviet Union”,¹⁰⁵ where his name was a “household word”.¹⁰⁶ He was only one of two American recipients of the

¹⁰⁴ Memorandum, COINTELPRO to Director, FBI and SAC, New York, 2 April 1957, <http://www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/cointelpro/srihoover2april1957.htm>. Neither this memo nor the two memoranda approving the operation appear in Fast’s FBI file. COINTELPRO closed in 1971 after more than 2000 operations; see <http://www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/cointelpro/churchfinalreportIIa.htm>.

¹⁰⁵ Djagalov, “I Don’t Boast About It”, 49. Emphasis in original. Or, as *The New Leader* (12 February 1951) put it, “From Bratislava to Pyongyang his name is a banner and a byword”.

¹⁰⁶ Fast, *Being Red*, 356.

\$25,000 Stalin International Peace Prize, the East's version of the Nobel Prize.¹⁰⁷ No other living American writer was similarly celebrated. The royalties he earned from Soviet sales totaled a staggering two million rubles (US\$500,000).¹⁰⁸ His writing perfectly suited the needs of the Soviet literary policy. As Deming put it: "Not until their discovery of Fast had the Russians found an American who conformed so closely to their political and aesthetic demands that they could embrace him wholeheartedly".¹⁰⁹ So the Soviet literary world had invested heavily in Fast – emotionally, politically and financially.

For six months after "My Decision" Fast heard nothing from the Soviet Union. He was being silently liquidated. All mail ceased (the Russian post office seized the many letters addressed to him); all reviews stopped; all references to him disappeared. He was becoming a non-person. As Fast himself put it: "I simply ceased to exist...I not only was not but had never been".¹¹⁰ Then, on 24 August 1957, Moscow's chief literary magazine that had been the principal Russian publisher of Fast's journalistic articles, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (*Literary Gazette*), burst into denunciation. Entitled "Desertion Under Fire", the article accused Fast of serving "the most bellicose reactionary agents of Zionism". He had made a "malicious attack" on the Soviet Union and in "a tone favoured by anti-Communist fanatics from overseas propaganda centers, he borrows their false arguments and slanderous methods".¹¹¹

In what was, perhaps, a reciprocal relationship between the level of abuse and the sense of betrayal, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* published a second article, on 30 January 1958. Written by Nikolai Gribachev, it was far longer occupying most of the issue (the fully translated version runs to 22 pages). For its almost visceral, splenetic hatred of Fast, it outdid the August tirade. He was called a swindler, a renegade, a coward, a right-wing opportunist, a frightened

¹⁰⁷ He was awarded it in 1953 but a passport ban prevented his visit to the Soviet Union to collect it. It was finally presented to him by W.E.B. DuBois in New York in April 1954 (*DW*, 9 May 1954). In 1958 the Internal Revenue Service attempted to extract income tax from Fast on this \$25,000. *New York Post*, 30 October 1958, M6.

¹⁰⁸ After he defected, these were never transferred. *NYT*, 14 October 1957, 8; *New York Post*, 3 December 1957, 40. He collected only five percent of his Soviet royalties.

¹⁰⁹ Deming, *Soviet Attitudes*, 295. Deming also commented that, as a writer, Fast "was not worthy of the extreme praise which Soviet critics heaped upon him". *Ibid*.

¹¹⁰ Fast, *Naked God*, 32.

¹¹¹ Translation of article, 24 August 1957, Box 1, Folder 9, Campenni Papers. For Fast's reply (he likened his Soviet detractors to "petulant children"), see *New York World Telegram*, 26 August 1957, 7; *DW*, 26 August 1957; *Washington Post*, 27 August 1957, 20.

bourgeois, a worshipper of Wall Street and “not a Marxist, not an internationalist, but a militant Zionist”. Because he confused religion with Marxism, Fast was “never capable of good, logical thought” and in essence was “never a member of the party”. In addition he was sly, ignorant, indecent, craven, self-aggrandising and ready to be squeezed “as an orange” by “yellow journalism”, especially the “yellow Harry Schwartz into whose waistcoat Howard Fast wept during the first interview”. Gribachev, who had visited the United States in 1957,¹¹² preferred “to argue with an honest enemy than to rub noses with a chameleon” whose “spiritual fornication gives birth to only one monstrous child – doubledealing”. The tone ranged from icy contempt, scathing sarcasm, and the invective of the betrayed; the scope from Hungary and the Suez crisis, to Fast’s “hysterical” new book, “The Denuded Idol”[sic] – “197 pages of intellectual trash and eclectic hodge-podge!”¹¹³ It would appear that such vitriol was deemed necessary by Soviet propagandists to destroy, in one knock-out hit, the literary reputation that they themselves had so assiduously cultivated, if not created.¹¹⁴ Excommunication of the canonised is not pretty.

Finding an audience

The Naked God, published on 21 November 1957, was eclectic. In structure, it was a jumping narrative lacking logical development. In tone, it took a breathless moral high ground implying that he was the first, and not merely the most recent, to have discovered the psychopathology of Stalinism. In content, it sidestepped any measured reflection or self-analysis or self-exploration: it was no *Darkness at Noon* (1940).¹¹⁵ Nor did it have the intellectual weight of *The God That Failed* (1949).¹¹⁶ Instead, there was “rage and grief and anger”, for “when I wrote *The Naked God*, there was no perspective...I was very angry”.¹¹⁷ So the book vacillates between calm analysis of social fact (his boyhood poverty and conversion to socialism) and explosive

¹¹² This was reported by the same “yellow” Schwartz, *NYT*, 31 January 1957, 3.

¹¹³ Translation of article, 30 January 1958, 1-22, Box 6, Folder 8, Campenni Papers.

¹¹⁴ Fast hit back the next day at the “maniacal castigation” of himself by “this most ominous document”, which contained a “disgraceful display of bad taste and hooliganlike obscenity”. *NYT*, 1 February 1958, 4. In contrast see the marvellously measured open letter to *Literaturnaya Gazeta* by Dorothy Thompson, president of the US branch of the International PEN Club: “Who made Mr. Fast... You did”. *Washington Star*, 10 February 1958, 13.

¹¹⁵ Arthur Koestler’s seminal recantation of communism. The title (and the themes) of his famous 1945 essay, “The Yogi and the Commissar” may have influenced Fast’s “The Writer and the Commissar”. Coincidentally, like Fast’s *Spartacus*, Koestler’s first novel, *The Gladiators* (1939), was also about the Spartacus slave revolt in Rome.

¹¹⁶ Richard Crossman (ed), *The God that Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (London, 1949).

¹¹⁷ Wald and Filreis, “A Conversation with Howard Fast”, 511, 512, 516.

outbursts of deep hurt (his reaction to Khrushchev's speech and experiences with the CPUSA leadership). This was an anguished apostasy. The author, Hershel Meyer, commented on Fast's "orgy of exhibitionism", in which, martyr-like, he "flogs himself in public".¹¹⁸ And as another reviewer noted, "Each break of tight human relationships leaves a scar; often a painful scar. All scars are ugly. Fast has scars and his scars show in this book".¹¹⁹

Far more focused and coherent than the book was the 25,000-word article on which it was based. Entitled "The Writer and the Commissar", the central intent was a literary-political analysis, not an emotional-political catharsis. Although it comprised nearly two thirds of the book, it was stripped of the vignettes, anecdotes, observations and private correspondence (with a Soviet writer, Boris Polovoi) that made *The Naked God* so disjointed and montage-like. The outlet was a new periodical, *Prospectus*. This handsome, ambitious publication appeared only once and is now completely forgotten.¹²⁰ However, it sought to find a niche as a social democratic monthly magazine, with political articles by, *inter alia*, Maurice Dobbs (British Marxist), Harold Rosenberg (*ex-Partisan Review*), Joan Robinson (post-Keynesian economist), John Strachey (British Labour Government minister), and Norman Thomas (American socialist); an interview with Edmund Wilson (left-wing literary critic); and significant book, poetry, theatre and film reviews. But outstripping all else – at 26 pages in length – was Howard Fast's article. In a move designed to maximise pre-publication publicity, excerpts were released to numerous daily newspapers. All chose to give prominence to a remarkably melodramatic paragraph from the article in which Fast painted a blistering portrait of wealthy CPUSA sympathisers. According to Fast,

¹¹⁸ Hershel D. Meyer, *History and Conscience: The Case of Howard Fast* (New York, 1958), 43.

¹¹⁹ George Sokolsky, *Washington Post*, 22 April 1958, 15 (he also added: "an enormously significant book... a better analysis of inside the party techniques than I have yet seen"). *The Naked God* received an astonishing number of reviews in both the daily press and weekly magazines. For the former see, for example, *NYT*, 1 December 1957, 58-9 (Harry Schwartz was ambivalent about the book but claimed Fast's defection was "one of the biggest propaganda defeats Moscow received in 1957") and *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 December 1957, 23. For the latter, see Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s generally favourable "Life With an Illusion", *The Saturday Review*, 21 December 1957, 17,43, and Irving Howe's highly critical "A Captive Not Quite Freed", *The New Republic*, 16 December 1957, 18-19. The *DW* (19 December 1957, 4) was only mildly critical, claiming that Fast had "become an instrument of the cold war"). When the book was published in England (Bodley Head) in mid-1958, it was also extensively reviewed.

¹²⁰ A rare copy is located in the Tamiment Library, NYU. It was the brainchild of, and bankrolled by, Gabriel Gladstone, a highly successful New York investment banker and son of a Yiddish poet and writer, Jacob Glatstein. *NYT*, 30 August 1957, 2.

In the apartment of a millionaire rentier, who will not speak to me, for she considers me a renegade, I heard a wealthy owner of a chain of restaurants... call Gates a “traitor, opportunist, and renegade.”... Another woman slipped off her five-thousand-dollar mink coat as she said: “It has to be one way, the only way. You’re going to have to fight and die until blood runs like water in the streets!”... A business man at this same gathering, whose doll-like wife carried a price tag of ten thousand dollars in gown and jewels, raged at me: “So what if twenty-five thousand people died in Hungary! You pay a price for this kind of thing”.¹²¹

Fast claimed that these wealthy backers supported Foster over Gates in the inner-party struggle; one allegedly told Fast: “Yellow. You, Gates, Max – the whole crew of you –yellow – yellow!”¹²² With lurid headlines such as “Fast Blasts Stalinists And ‘Mink Coat Reds’”, and “Fast Says U.S. Reds Called Leaders ‘Yellow’”¹²³, this was all grist to the anti-communists’ mill. Fearful, perhaps, of another round of Smith Act prosecutions, Gates denied to Harry Schwartz that the CPUSA stood for or advocated force and violence – the “impression” created by Fast’s article despite the fact that he “knows it is untrue”.¹²⁴ Like the Brandeis debate, this was another case of Fast’s faulty judgment.

In the same month that *Prospectus* appeared, so did a substantial article in the far more widely read *The Saturday Review*. A half-page photograph of Nikita Khrushchev introduced the piece, which generated further comment in the commercial press. Again, it was drawn from *The Naked God* (whose imminent publication was advertised) and, again, it was more focused and, therefore, more cogent.¹²⁵ It cannot be said that Fast was publicity-shy. For those who missed these publications, Fast could also be seen on NBC television: first, on Dave Garroway’s popular “Today” show on 29 August; then on Martin Agronsky’s authoritative “Look Here” program on 13 October.¹²⁶

¹²¹ *Prospectus* 1:1, (1 November 1957), 40.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 41. Max refers to Alan Max, the managing editor of the *DW*.

¹²³ *New York Post*, 29 August 1957, 33; *Washington Star*, 29 August 1957, C7. See also *NYT*, 29 August 1957, 3; *Washington Post*, 30 August 1957, 7 and 7 September 1957, 6.

¹²⁴ *NYT*, 30 August 1957, 2.

¹²⁵ Fast, “On Leaving the Communist Party”, *The Saturday Review*, 16 November 1957, 15-17, 57-8.

¹²⁶ For a transcript of this lengthy interview, see *Progressive* 22 (March 1958), 35-38. Fast referred to the now-irretrievable \$500,000 in lost royalties from the Soviet Union, which showed he “did not leave it [the CPUSA] for

In none of these publications or interviews did Fast adopt the confessional, “I have sinned” tone of so many repentant former communists.¹²⁷ His *Naked God* may have been a *cri de coeur*, an angry and agonised personal testament, but it belonged to an entirely different genre from that anti-communist memoir literature that many Americans had recently been reading: Louis Budenz’s *Men Without Faces: The Communist Conspiracy in the USA* (1950), Elizabeth Bentley’s *Out of Bondage* (1951), Whittaker Chambers’ *Witness* (1952), or Bella Dodd’s *School of Darkness* (1954).¹²⁸ As a result he was not taken to the bosom of the red-hunters. To their disappointment, his apostasy was only partial. His commitment to communism was over, he wrote, but “I am neither anti-Soviet nor anti-Communist”.¹²⁹ So despite repeated assertions by erstwhile comrades that he had “gone over” to the enemy, the FBI knew better. Under the Top Level Informant (TOPLEV) program, the FBI typically interviewed defectors from the CPUSA. Previously many disaffected Party members had cooperated by becoming informants or prosecution witnesses. Permission was twice requested to interview Fast, and twice rejected: intelligence was needed to confirm that Fast had “crossed over sufficiently”, so that an approach would be “more likely to be productive”.¹³⁰ The FBI report noted that evidence of insufficient repudiation of communism was his appearance before House Committee on Un-American Activities: he repeatedly invoked the Fifth Amendment and refused to name names.¹³¹ In his own words, and much to Louis Budenz’s disappointment, “I made no bones

financial gain”. One academic wrote to Fast: “On Sunday, October 13, I saw you in the interview conducted by Mr. Agronsky. I felt that you...must have had a very high sense to an ideal to have suffered as you have”. Bruce L. Melvin to Fast, 18 October 1957, Fast Papers.

¹²⁷ However, George Sokolsky hoped that “now that Fast has overthrown Marx, he may, in time, and after considerable struggle, come around to God”, *New York Journal-American*, 16 May 1957, 28. Similarly, Mary Hornaday believed that Fast’s confession would be the forerunner of “absolution and penance”. *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 June 1956, 14.

¹²⁸ For the latter’s discovery of God, see Bella Visono Dodd, *School of Darkness* (New York, 1954), 230-7.

¹²⁹ *NYT*, 1 February 1957, 1.

¹³⁰ Memoranda, SAC, New York to Director, FBI, 22 March 1957, 2 April 1957, Fast FBI file. The FBI was also concerned that as a writer, Fast could “turn a contact with him by the FBI into an embarrassing situation”. However a marginal handwritten comment recommended that “we should follow this and reconsider” if the situation changed. The FBI had a long wait. In an interview in 1959, he remarked that the concept of the professional anti-communist was “terrible”. *New York Post*, 6 September 1959, M11.

¹³¹ Although Fast did not cooperate with HUAC, it was reported that, privately, he informed counsel for the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, Robert Morris, that he would talk “off the record and without an official transcript being made”. The offer was not accepted. *NYT*, 22 February 1957, 2.

about showing them, not only that I was an unfriendly witness, but that I utterly despised all they represented”.¹³²

Fast’s broadcast over Radio Liberation in November 1957 was, similarly, less a conscious selling out to the class enemy – as a veteran labor reporter for the *Daily Worker*, Art Shields, alleged¹³³ – than a vain and naïve attempt to reach otherwise inaccessible Soviet writers. He implored them to make known their “anger and indignation” over the imprisonment of communist Hungarian writers connected with the Uprising for “anti-State activities”.¹³⁴ His impassioned letter to the *NYT* on 23 October against “watching and waiting in silence” was his attempt to arouse domestic opinion. Consistent with this, we find Fast in 1958 speaking out, vociferously and repeatedly, against the successful Soviet pressure on Boris Pasternak to reject the 1958 Nobel Prize for *Doctor Zhivago*. He referred to “the filthy slanders directed against [Pasternak], the evil threats, the dirty names that he was called – the whole exhibition of degenerate boorishness on the part of the paid and directed Soviet critics”. Downgrading, or forgetting, the impact on him of Khrushchev’s revelations, he continued, “I don’t think anything that has happened in the Soviet Union in my lifetime was quite as disgraceful, as sickening, as this spectacle around Boris Pasternak”.¹³⁵ Fast’s statement was carried by innumerable papers across the country. In a mirror image of the situation three years earlier, Fast was ignored by the communist world but applauded within the United States.

Fast’s congratulatory telegram to Pasternak for winning the Nobel can be read as a literary doppelganger: as a summation of Fast’s *own* life since the Khrushchev revelations. “I

¹³² Cited in Louis Budenz, “The Reds—What Now?”, *Catholic News*, 11 May 1957, 3. In an irregular practice, the identical article was published on the same day but, ostensibly, written by his wife; see Margaret Budenz, “The Reds—What Now?”, *Tablet* (Brooklyn, NY), 11 May 1957, 4. Budenz (1891-1972) was an ex-editor of the *Daily Worker* turned professional anti-communist government witness; his testimony was crucial in the Smith Act prosecutions in 1949 that jailed the CPUSA leadership and decapitated the organisation.

¹³³ *DW*, 8 December 1957, 7. See Shields’ autobiographical *On the Battle Lines, 1919-1939* (New York, 1986). Shields concluded his letter with: “it is sad to think that the author of ‘Peekskill’ has come to this”. Like its counterpart Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberation (which targeted only the Soviet Union, not the satellite countries), was funded by the CIA.

¹³⁴ *New York World Telegram & Sun*, 16 November 1957, 3. Fast knew one of those imprisoned, Tibor Dery, who was then a contender for the Nobel Prize in literature.

¹³⁵ *New York Herald Tribune*, 1 November 1958, 10. *Doctor Zhivago* was banned in the Soviet Union but was a best-seller in the West. For an outline of the “Pasternak drama”, see *Publishers’ Weekly*, 10 November 1958, 29-30.

congratulate you with all my heart”, he cabled, “for you have endured and must win a lonely and terrible and noble struggle – the struggle of a writer to write as his conscience dictates”.¹³⁶ Loosened from that “hook upon the soul”¹³⁷ and, consequently, from the ideological moorings of the CPUSA and its straightjacket of socialist realism that so disfigured the quality of his writing, Fast now felt free. Communism had ceased to be “the anchor in my life”.¹³⁸ True to Stalin’s dictates, he had become a writer first, activist second. He had jettisoned communism but retained some socialism. He had found his Kronstadt.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Copy of Western Union telegram, Fast to Pasternak, 25 October 1958, Box 6, Folder 8, Campenni Papers. What Fast did not know was that Olga Ivinskaya, Pasternak’s mistress and muse (and on whom Lara was modelled) was in this same period informing on him to the KGB. *NYT*, 27 November 1997, 6.

¹³⁷ Gornick, *Romance of American Communism*, 13.

¹³⁸ Cited in Natalie Robins, *Alien Ink: The FBI’s War on Freedom of Expression* (New York, 1992), 236.

¹³⁹ Kronstadt refers to the rebellion of a sailors’ soviet at the Kronstadt naval base in 1921 that was ruthlessly suppressed by the Bolsheviks. Like Fast, the sailor-rebels repudiated Bolshevism but retained their socialism. In the 1930s “Kronstadt” became shorthand for the realisation of the disjuncture between Soviet words and deeds. In 1949, the journalist Louis Fischer observed that for every communist who defected from the Communist Party, there was a catalyst, a last straw, that transformed doubt into decision. He called these moments “Kronstadts”. “What counts decisively is the ‘Kronstadt.’ Until its advent, one may waver emotionally or doubt intellectually or even reject the cause altogether in one’s mind and yet refuse to attack it. I had no ‘Kronstadt’ for many years”. Crossman (ed), *The God that Failed*, 204. For Fast, as this article has demonstrated, his Kronstadt moment was 1956.