

Writers in the Shadow of Communism

An exchange of letters between the American, Howard Fast, and a Soviet author indicates that communism cannot permit a writer to speak honestly, even to a friend.

By HARRISON E. SALISBURY

FOR nearly forty years the list of creative artists first attracted by the Communist dream, then repelled by the Soviet reality has steadily lengthened. The list is a hall of fame—Silone, Gide, Malraux, Sartre, Spender, Koestler, Wright, Dos Passos. The newest name is that of the American novelist Howard Fast, who last winter broke with the Communist movement after fifteen years of dedication and belief.

Because the artist is a sensitive man, imaginative, philosophical, inquisitive and deeply concerned with the motivations of a confused world, he is seldom content merely to turn his back and walk away from the Soviet idea. He has put too much into it. He wants to know why and what it was that happened to him and to others. Must it happen? Where and how did the bright vision crumble to dust?

He turns inevitably to the persistent questions for the artist in this politically polarized era: Does a creative talent in an ideological society have no choice but to rebel or to accept

some degree of stultification? Can a writer create under communism? Is freedom—for the artist even more than for other men—the essential condition of his work?

These are some of the issues which occupy Mr. Fast today. And in his search for a solution he has had an exchange of letters with a Russian writer, Boris Polevoi, which casts a penetrating light into the substance of the problems that confront not only the conscientious artist but the thinking citizen.

Mr. Polevoi is the author of several very popular books in Russia. He was a war correspondent for Pravda, is a secretary of the Soviet Writers Union and has considerable political standing within the Communist party. Although he and Mr. Fast had met only once, in the course of a visit by Mr. Polevoi to the United States in 1955, they had corresponded for a number of years and felt themselves warm and close friends of long standing.

When he broke with the party Mr. Fast sent word of his decision to Mr.

Polevoi through another Soviet writer, Boris Isakov. About six weeks later the exchange of letters published below occurred. Mr. Fast withheld the correspondence for more than two months, hoping for an answer from Mr. Polevoi. When it was not forthcoming he decided to make the letters public.

The correspondence brings into relief precisely those moral issues that trouble Mr. Fast—like others before him—so deeply. The basic point might, perhaps, be phrased as simply as this: Can communism permit a writer to tell the truth even to good friends?

Mr. Fast announced his break from the Communist party in an interview published by The New York Times on Feb. 1. This news has not been printed by the Soviet press at the time of writing. Mr. Fast's books continue to circulate in millions of copies in Russia and several of his plays are popular hits of the current Moscow season.

However, a few days after the break Mr. Fast's fan letters from Russia

ceased abruptly. Presumably, they are still being written by admiring Russian readers, but are intercepted by Soviet postal authorities. A letter which Mr. Polevoi wrote to Mr. Fast on Feb. 15 has never arrived in the United States—obviously halted by the Soviet censors.

IN mid-March, Mr. Polevoi sent a second letter, which the Soviet authorities let through. Since he does not know English and Mr. Fast does not know Russian, Mr. Polevoi enclosed an English translation. This translation deviates in tone and, occasionally, in substance from Mr. Polevoi's original. It is possible that Mr. Fast's letter to Mr. Polevoi was similarly tampered with on arrival in Russia. Thus, as Mr. Fast notes, the very act of communication is rendered tendentious by censorship, interference and distortion.

"You may think this odd," Mr. Fast says, "but I was under the illusion that Mr. Polevoi was not subject to censorship. I really believed this. Yet, now we see that he is far more imprisoned than I ever was. My mail has never been tampered with. I have had no censorship. I have been free to write and, with some effort, to publish. And no American writer has been tortured or executed for his beliefs.

"We have for each other a love and affection that is very real. But, much as we mean to each other, we cannot communicate. It isn't permitted. Yet, we must communicate if we are to achieve real understanding."

* * *

THE correspondence follows, beginning with Mr. Polevoi's letter (italics indicate the Soviet translator's additions; brackets indicate omissions from the text):

DEAR HOWARD:

You see, I am writing to you and without a shade of the fear you have hinted at in your letter to our mutual friend Isakov. By the way, he did not deserve to be hurt by you in this way. You are too much of an artist not to understand that there is little point in taking such a tone with friends.

I confess I was deeply grieved to hear of your decision. We have met only once, but we have corresponded for a long time, and I for one have always looked forward eagerly to your letters. From them, and from your books, too, of course, I have formed for myself a picture of a man who all his life has rowed against the current and sacrificed a great deal for the sake of a lofty goal. And in our literary discussions I often point to you as an inspiring example of true courage and staunch conviction.

Hence the latest news about you came to me as a great shock. The more so that (Continued on Page 28)

HARRISON E. SALISBURY of The Times won a Pulitzer Prize for articles based on his six years as this paper's correspondent in Russia.



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I learned about it not from a [friendly] letter from you or from [one of] the small but courageous publications you have been associated with for so many years, but from one of the organs of the big, rich and *sensation - mongering* [noisy] press and, moreover, from an interview granted a man I cannot respect as a journalist.* [Thus, this news was for me especially bitter.]

I AM an old soldier and my nerves are *pretty* strong. But that night I could not fall asleep. I kept thinking of your books. Their heroes crowded around me and together with them, as it were, I went over the whole situation. I felt sure that Gideon Jackson, who fought the good fight to the bitter end, would not have been less taken aback than I was by what had happened. Neither would Spartacus, even if he did live at a time when there were neither the philosophical theories nor the practical experience that throw light over mankind's path today, a time without the cultural values of today or the progressive intellectuals bearing aloft the banner of peace at all circumstances. You, of course, know your Spartacus better than I, but I feel sure that, had he been with me that night he would not have been any less *non-plused* [distressed and perplexed] than I. Or George Washington, the man I looked up to in my childhood and whom I rediscovered in your book; in like circumstances he surely would have said: "No matter how hard the battle, I must hold out today in order to win tomorrow!" As for Silas Timberman, logic tells me that, although he would find things just as hard as you, he nevertheless would actively disagree with your decision.

IT is said that an author invests some particle of himself in his heroes. For this reason alone your heroes, whom millions have come to love, would, for all their *grit and stamina*, *despair* [be disturbed] if they could hear what the [lugubrious] well-known *Voice* [radio-voice] has been saying by air for Russia, allegedly on your authority. Incidentally, its aim is clear to me. *The Voice* is quite obviously making a desperate effort to destroy at one stroke the popularity you and your books have won among a reading public some 900,000,000 strong. [They are trying to destroy the popularity of your books among 900,000,000 readers and that of yourself, as well.] However, your friends know how much the unscrupulous ravings of

*Mr. Polevoi refers to Harry Schwartz, specialist on Soviet affairs for The New York Times.

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the Voice are worth; we do not believe that you would try to justify your *latest* step which in itself is your private affair, of course, by renouncing in terms as violent as the Voice would have it everything you have accepted, championed and defended in your books, public speeches and letters only yesterday.

VERCORS, the chairman of the French Writers' National Committee, was here recently. You know him, of course, if only from his books and articles. He was very prominent in the French Resistance, a gifted artist and very far from communism in his political views. He came to see me and we spent a whole evening and a good part of the night talking. We emptied several pots of coffee in the process. Julia finally gave up and went to bed, but we were still hard at it. Of course we did not agree on a great many points, but we remained friends, because we both felt that the main thing now is to strengthen ties between writers of East and West, and that this can be accomplished not by quibbling and mutual recriminations—which only gives everyone concerned a headache and provides *malicious* pleasure to the outsiders—but by calm *cool-headed* interchange of views. And, of course, we found common ground on the principal issue, Peace, which is equally essential to East and West, to Rights and Lefts, to Catholics like Vercors and to atheists like myself.

I recall this visit of Vercors' [my dear Howard] because I want to say this. Many of my writer friends are not Communists, some indeed belong to what I consider reactionary parties. Different outlooks on life, different ideas about the future, however, do not prevent us from being friends, from corresponding, visiting one another and exchanging views on life and literature. But among these friends of mine there is not a *single* one who adds fuel to the fire of the cold war.

I KNOW you will understand me and share my feelings in this respect. I remember with what love and *pride* you spoke of your fellow countrymen that time we met and how *bitter* [indignant] you were about newspaper men who thoughtlessly and *irresponsibly* [groundlessly] disparage all that your people hold sacred, *belittle* their achievements and *offend* their national pride and the Stars and Stripes. I fully shared your sentiments and quoted them in my "American Diaries." For my part I have done my best in that book not to offend the American reader in any way by hasty judgments or superficial opinions. *Incidentally*, I sent you a copy of it long ago so [if you wish] you can judge for yourself. I think, Howard, I am entitled

therefore to expect similar consideration from you.

As for your books, the *frenzied vituperations* [all the efforts] of the Voice have failed to dislodge them from the place of honor they hold in progressive literature [not damaged them]. Our magazines and book publishers continue to bring them to the reading public [adults and children]. [In particular, dear] "Lola Gregg," which has just appeared in Russian, as I wrote you in my letter of Feb. 15 [which you probably already have received], is beginning to win the hearts of its readers.

WELL, [dear] Howard, that is how things stand. I shall continue to look forward [with impatience] to your letters for I *firmly* believe that we both of us—yes, both of us, I am sure of it—have much [in common] to do in the [precious] fight for peace and progress. [Yes, I am very hopeful of this—even of work in common.]

We are both family men. You have two children, I have three. [Really—devil take it—] Is not that in itself a common platform on which to work together for peace—peace for them? [Eh, old man, how good it would be for us to get together over a glass of vodka or whisky—it makes no difference which—and after the old custom of the intelligentsia talk and argue late into the night, regardless of the yawns and angry glances of the wife.] *I am truly sorry that my long-cherished dream of meeting you again and chewing the rag into the wee hours cannot be materialized—not yet, at any rate.* I wouldn't be allowed inside the U. S. and you wouldn't be allowed outside it.

But I really have rambled on this time! I had better stop before this letter becomes too heavy to be airmailed. To dear Bette, best regards from me and from Julia—nothing has changed in their relations, at least, although they have never actually met. But, then, wives are always wiser than husbands.

Yours sincerely [Your],
BORIS POLEVOI.

18 March 1957

P. S. I think I shall cable you simultaneously with this [letter because it looks as if the post has become sluggish and my last letter to you, sent in mid-February, evidently has not yet reached you]. *The letter I sent you in mid-February seems to have been held up in the mails, post has become slow indeed.*

* * *

ON the day he received Mr. Polevoi's letter, March 25, Mr. Fast replied:

DEAR BORIS:

To hear from you was good, believe me. Your letter came today, and I read it hungrily;

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and I felt the warmth and happiness of hearing your voice again, for I hear it in any letter of yours. You and Isakov I treasure as friends, as Bette does; this must not change.

But if only in your letter you had answered some of our questions! It's neither important nor significant that the Voice of America makes capital of my action. I assure you they made much greater capital of Khrushchev's "secret speech," and one cannot silence any and all criticism with the protest that the Voice of America will use it.

I raised questions, points of heartbreaking life and death



significance; are there no answers? Are we children or fools that our pleading insistence for some 'explanations' is always to be met with rhetoric? Can it do more harm than has already been done to tell us why Jewish writers were murdered by your Government, why Bulganin uses anti-Semitism as foreign policy, why a whole disgraceful theory of anti-Semitism was born and used in your land under the foolish name of "cosmopolitanism"?

Is it beyond the power of your Government or yourself to tell us something more sensible in explanation of the unprecedented orgy of murder under Stalin than such nonsense as "the cult of the individual"? We are told that Beria stood up against Stalin, opposed Stalin's madness and was murdered by Khrushchev and others because he had the facts of their crimes. Why isn't this refuted? Why are not these rumors put to rest? Where are the minutes of Beria's trial?

WHY don't we hear your voice, Isakov's, and other voices in defense of the book "Not by Bread Alone"? Perhaps the book is worthless; must not the writer be defended? Why will no one tell us how Yitzak Pfeffer died? The Poies informed us that Khrushchev attempted to use anti-Semitism to sway the inner struggle in Poland. Why does no one deny this? Where is one little word of the criticism and self-criticism we

have been hearing so much about?

Why did Pravda try to sway the inner struggle of the party here, supporting Foster and the men around him? These are not good men. They are men who are divorced from every reality in our land. The best, the bravest in the party here are ranged against them.

AND what of your own letter, Boris? Why must you indulge in such nonsense as the "post becoming slow indeed"? [Actually, this was the translator's phrase, although Fast did not know this.] For the past year, there has been hardly a day when I did not receive one or two letters from Russia. All sorts of people wrote to me—school children, workers, teachers, editors, theatre people—and, of course, you and your colleagues. How was it then that, three days after the announcement in The New York Times that I had left the Communist party, all my mail from Russia abruptly ceased?

You know as well as I do that then there was no mention of my action in the Soviet press. Yet not one letter got through. Obviously all letters to me were stopped in the post office—just as your earlier letter to me was stopped in the post office. Is this freedom—or even common sense? For all you say about the United States, I have been writing to Russia for years and receiving mail from Russia, too, and none of it has ever been stopped because of anything I said or did.

WHY do these things go on?

Can no one leave the Communist party honestly and openly, criticize Soviet leadership honestly and openly, and still be treated as a part of mankind? Your own letter says that you still regard me as a friend, in spite of what I have done—intimating that I have done something dishonorable and tragic.

But has it ever been dishonorable to follow the dictates of one's own conscience? There are millions of good and honorable people in the world who feel as I do and who are asking the same questions I ask. Are you going to win them with the kind of argument you put forth in your letter? You speak of Vercors, whom I also respect. But Vercors was not a Communist; he did not put his life and his honor as a seal on the actions of the Soviet Union. I did, and that makes a difference, if you will only think about it.

If you see this only in terms of myself, you and your colleagues will learn nothing. I am not the first intellectual to leave the party here since the news of the "Khrushchev report." _____, _____, _____, _____,* those are only a few of the many who left already. And with them went hundreds of workers and other party people, good, honest, clear-think-

*Four names deleted by Mr. Fast.

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ing people whom I honor and respect.

Last summer, Boris, I received a cable from Radio Moscow, asking for my views on testing the atom bomb. I replied that all nations should stop testing it, but that the Soviet Union, as a Socialist nation dedicated to mankind, should lead this. I said that the Soviet Union must stop now, whether or not the others agree. I may have been wrong, but this was my opinion. Why was it never used? Why did I get no reply? What kind of childish pretense is this that any ideas you find distasteful can be quietly buried? Wasn't this the same thing as the idiotic deletion of Gene Dennis' comment on the destruction of Jewish culture—when the rest of his speech was printed in Pravda?

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 as your neighbor, when he was among those executed and long since dead? Why? Why did you have to lie? Why could you not avoid the question and tell us you did not know or would not discuss it? Why did you lie in so awful and deliberate a manner?

By now you have my state-

SOME WHO BROKE AWAY



Ignazio Silone.



André Malraux.



Jean-Paul Sartre.



Stephen Spender.



Arthur Koestler.



Richard Wright.



John Dos Passos.



Howard Fast.

ment in *Mainstream*. Publish it. Publish this letter. Answer my arguments. Tell me that terror is gone. Tell me that anti-Semitism is over and done with. Demand an end to capital punishment—the old and fine dream of socialism. Tell

us the truth—only that, the truth. I may have been a fool not to have known of this terror before, but I did not know. Do you want me to worship the Communist party as an icon? Believe me, I worship something better—

truth and freedom, and how can you ask that one tyranny be traded for another?

I ventured my life and fortune to speak the truth as I saw it. Will you? Print this in *The Literary Gazette*. Open the doors! Let the words fly!

Only in that way can the world-hurt be healed. And let no man suffer for speaking his mind forthrightly and honestly.

And I want to remain your friend. Can I? It is up to you.
HOWARD FAST.

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