

Documents

IS THIS THE TIME?

by

Jean-Paul Sartre

The events of one week highlighted the tragic political deadlock of the French Left. On the one hand, the Government headed by the Socialist leader, Guy Mollet, capped its record of repression in Algeria by initiating the Suez adventure; on the other, the French Communist Party upheld its reputation as the most 'Stalinist' CP in Western Europe by its uncompromising endorsement of the Soviet intervention in Hungary. In the heat of these events, Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous writer who has long been a friendly critic of the French C.P., wrote a 50,000 word article for his journal, 'Les Temps Modernes.' The article includes a biting attack upon the degeneration of the French Socialist Party under Mollet, and a full analysis of the roots of 'Stalinism' in the Soviet Union and E. Europe. In the final section, 'IS THIS THE TIME?'—translated here, in a slightly abbreviated form, by Michael Segal—he argues that the future of French socialism is dependent upon a transformation in the policies and structure of the French Communist Party — Editors.

THE USSR condemned ! What a joke. "If you only knew how much she cared!" Oh, yes I know! In Paris, hundreds of thousands of us regard the Suez affair as piracy and we are unable to stomach the Budapest coup. Do we count ? Would not a mere half-helping of rocket *a la Bulganin* be enough to plunge the whole lot of us into total silence ? How can we claim, in the face of this, that our protests are not futile ?

I am, however, not at all sure that they are without effect. We can have little influence upon the USSR—we must have faith in the workers and students and all those who, within its own framework, are fighting for the destruction of Stalinism. In France, however, there is a party which will be no more able to dodge the guided missiles than us, and whose enthusiasm will be wiped off the face of the earth together with our protests. It is led by a political hureau^U which has congratulated the Soviet leaders on their wise action, and one of its members recently announced his 'relief' at these exemplary massacres. This party is our concern. We know it well and we have all been, for different lengths of time its fellow-travellers. We must, and can, exert our influence upon it. And this is exactly what brings me back to my correspondents. One of them a progressive (1)—has been deeply disturbed by me. Not because he disagrees with me—he even goes so far as to say he shares my opinion — but he, at least, has had the courage to remain silent and he regrets my lack of this courage. "Is this

(1) 'progressiste'—the Union Prgressiste is a small independent organisaion closely allied to the CP.

really the time? Anti-communist hysteria is at its height and the crimes of our own government rob us of the right to make these condemnations. We have but one duty—to unite against the war in Algeria/' Sir, if this is not the time, admit at once that the time will never come. Suppose that tomorrow the Russians invade Poland and deport Gomulka ? Anti-communist hysteria would reach such violent heights that it would be more than ever necessary to unite around the party. And if, the next day, Mig aircraft bombarded Bucharest ? There would be an immediate uproar in which I think you would join, even if you were to die later of bitter frustration.

I understand you. These howls, these burning torches, the arson, lynch-mobs—all this open sadism, the lofty indignation of the Tixier-Vignancourts and the Biaggis⁽²⁾—I agree with you, it is repugnant. I also know of the desire, which still remains to leap at the chance of dissolving the CP, and I know that our Prime Minister, if pressed too closely by the right-wing pack, will try to appease it by letting it gnaw the bone of anti-communism. Bourdet⁽³⁾ has said it and many of us repeat it. On that day M. Mollet will find the whole of the left ranged against him. This stated, I say to you, quite simply, that we will no longer be blackmailed by the cry of fascism. Remember this: a few communist intellectuals joined in a moderate protest against the Soviet intervention in Hungary. After the riot, the leaders of the CP accused them, 'in fact' although, of course, not 'in intent', of helping to provoke it. This too is repugnant. The communists who died or were wounded were used against their comrades. The USSR has made hundreds of mistakes and its leaders have publicly admitted them. If, however, you do not accept with enthusiasm its fresh mistakes, you are "objectively a murderer" . . .

When we denounced the war in Indo-China, we "stabbed French soldiers in the back." When we condemn Soviet aggression we "open the door to fascism" and "deliver our best comrades to killers." The procedure is invariable. Whatever the truth might be, there is always something of overwhelming importance—some sacred cow—to which it must submit. The morale of the troops, the Nation, the unity of the party or the honour of the family, The duty of a patriot, a citizen or a party member is to

⁽²⁾ This refers to the riots around the 'Humanite' building on November 12th when the building was set alight by a right-wing mob after a demonstration against the Soviet intervention in Hungary. 'Tixier-Vignancourt' and 'Biaggi' are two notorious extremist right-wingers in France. The former is a Deputy in the National Assembly, an ex-vichyite and a lawyer renowned in political lawsuits. The latter is an organiser of extremist gangs who break up left-wing meetings and assault left-wing individuals and organisations.

⁽³⁾ Well-known resistance leader and present editor of independent left-wing weekly, "Franca-Observateur."

peddle pious lies, to carry them on the tongue like a host and to spread them sanctimoniously. What is gained by this. ? Every now and again the sewer spills over—the Kruschov report, for example—and these well-meaning peddlers get all the muck at one go. Would it not be better to get it piecemeal ? { . . .

This is why, if we still have time, the only way to help the Communist party retrieve its good name, is to oppose truth to lies, as, often and as long as necessary, until all its members are convinced. A few months ago, in Budapest, a Hungarian woman journalist criticised the outrageous luxury enjoyed by important officials. Her article was reprinted in the British press and Rakosi went into a rage. Did she want to spread slander ? Did she want to feed imperialist propaganda ? She replied simply, "The scandal lies in your luxury, not in what I said about it/' And this is what I say to Fajon, Stil and Guyot⁽⁴⁾. It is true that I find their lies scandalous, and I say so. But I am making no discovery. Anyone can buy "Humanite" and judge for themselves. If I had claimed that one night, in some obscure alleyway in Montmartre, M. Stil became involved in murder, I would be guilty of a gratuitous and harmful slander. But everyone knows from his own articles that he went to Budapest, saw Hungarian democracy destroyed and declared himself satisfied. Why should I go further? I can say nothing worse about him that he has not already said. I can do him no greater evil than to invite you to read him. I cannot excuse the Soviet leaders when they lie to their people but I can understand them. They are in difficulties, caught up in internal struggles, paralysed by their ideology, trapped in a 'pacification' which constantly demands further violence. Even if the destalinisers suddenly won, they would have to imprison those responsible or carry on lying in order to prevent the dislocation of the machine. But when Andre Stil tranquilly continues to publish his claptrap in those same columns where others have retracted on Rajk, on the camps and on the doctors' plot, when, after so many denials and half-truths, after the rehabilitation of so many innocent people that he has covered with his spittle, the reader finds the same tone of serene infallibility and benign optimism, he must say to himself, "But he is not in difficulties. The leaders of the French party are not in difficulties." I know and approve of the strong friendship that links them with the Russians. But in the last analysis, they are responsible only to the workers of their own country. Far less excuse can be found for them when nothing prevents, and everything demands, the truth from them. They are not being asked for a violent condemnation of the Soviet intervention, but only to clarify the minds of their members and electors, to explain, to consider, not to sully themselves with blood that they themselves did not spill. What sort of frenzy are they

⁽⁴⁾ The editors of "Humanite."

in to make themselves accomplices in this far-off crime, when they could declare themselves innocent with one word ? Must they drag **with** them into discredit the workers who have faith in them ? Was it really necessary to insult the victims before knowing anything ? Could they not have avoided revealing before the whole world the poverty of their marxism and understanding, to the point of horrifying the historians of their own party? For ten years they have had to take black for white, and then, one fine day, they were brusquely told that they had been duped. In vain—they have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. Just recently the Soviet leaders put them on their guard. The day after Poznan, Kruschov spoke of fascism and imperialism and accused foreign agents of stirring up disorder. The Polish government issued an immediate denial and the Russian newspapers, without abandoning their attitude, turned a deaf ear and ended up by saying nothing about it. It was like a rehearsal for the Hungarian tragedy. The roles and points of view were known in advance. The whole world could foretell that if Budapest rose, Kruschov would discover the presence of fascist gangs and Arrow-Cross bands⁽⁵⁾ and that Nagy would reveal that the entire country supported the insurrection. To no avail. On that day the political bureau of the CP was seen advancing with a black banner and its members crying "What a beautiful, pure white." This is why I say to my correspondent that this is indeed the time, it may even be too late ! For things to reach this pitch, for the same mistakes, denounced ten times over, to reappear with the same implausibility, and to be hailed as the truth, the CP must really be a diseased limb. If it is not operated on in time, gangrene will **set** in. And how Duchet, Bidault and Tixier-Vignancourt⁽⁶⁾ will rejoice !, But the left will not rejoice. The CP remains, because of the votes it receives, the biggest party in France. Putrified, it **will** empoison the whole of the left.

What in fact can the non-communist groups do ? To unite without the CP would be to condemn themselves to impotence. To unite against it would be to open the door to fascism. There is only one solution—unity of action with it. But its policy makes this impossible. Let there be no mistake, whatever the importance of smaller groups, the united front of the left will never be achieved without a lasting alliance between the two big working-class parties. For the past ten years we have ceaselessly supported this in these same columns and we shall continue to support it. Only a popular front can save our country, heal the running sores of our colonies, revive our economy, give it fresh stimulus and organise, with workers' control, mass-production to raise the standard of living. Only a popular front can provide social democracy, regain national independence, break with the Atlantic Bloc and place the power

(5) The fascist party in Hungary was known as the Arrow-Cross party.

(6) Right-wing leaders.

of France at the service of peace. Neither party is strong enough to follow this policy, which alone can serve the interests of the whole of France and enable us to avoid bloody upheavals, fascism and even civil war, without the other. Worse still, neither can escape the crisis that they are each experiencing without the other. The SFIO⁽⁷⁾ has aged considerably during the last ten years — Workers' International.'

the average age of its deputies and even its members continues to mount. The CP is also aging but more slowly. It is recruiting less and less among young people, and, at the top, the machine is not renewing itself. The rivalries, the fratricide and the mutual hatred between these two venerable parties has ended in schlerosis. They have both degenerated into criminality (the Mollet government launching a war of aggression beside the British conservatives; the leaders of the CP publicly approving the arrest and deportation of workers) and each uses the crimes of the other to justify its own. When one cries "Suez" and the other "Budapest" they may deceive their members but this mutual recrimination throws, discredit upon the entire left. We must acknowledge that our two parties are the most despised in the world. M. Commin, the SFIO representative to the Socialist International, left its meeting with jeers ringing in his ears. Stil had a bad reception in Poland and an even worse one in Budapest. At the CP Congress, Duclos was coolly received. This degeneration reflects that of the country. In a France stifled by a retrogressive employing class, social divisions harden, nothing changes and nothing moves. Elsewhere, changes in production are forcing trade union and political organisations to adapt themselves to the resulting transformation of the population, which in turn, is affecting the world of the working class. In France, a stagnating economy maintains a deep division within the working class, which is exploited by trade union leaders and politicians alike. They live by it and their biased and mangled views reflect it. But it is not merely a question of the defects of a group. The defects and the mutual hatred reflect fixed attitudes. This divided and paralysed left, however, part of which has driven itself into isolation, and the other playing the game of the right-wing, remains our last hope. If it falls a little lower we shall have fascism. If it revives and unites, overcoming its internal contradictions, France may live. We must bet on this, whatever happens. We must choose between the popular front or the morasse.

Here my correspondent takes up the thread. "Do you really believe that we shall be contributing to sticking these two disjointed halves together again by yelling at both of them at the same time?" Yes, I believe so. "If you must criticise, criticise the Socialist party. Everyone knows that its leaders oppose unity. But the CP, day in and day out, talks of nothing but unity! From Thorez (7) SFIO — initials of French Socialist party, means 'French Section of the

down to the local party member, every hand is stretched out to Guy Mollet, Daniel Mayer, and Lacoste. Is this not exactly what you want ?" No, not at all. I know that the CP demands unity of action but in such a way as to make it impossible. Let us look at it a little closer.

Since the elections⁽⁸⁾ the CP has constantly followed the same policy. In short, it tries to achieve on a national level what the USSR pursues in the international field. It must contribute to the relaxation of tension and extend the area of communist influence through the creation of a united front of the working-class parties. This policy is dictated to the USSR by the real destalinisation of soviet society. It reflects the 'thaw' and the need to broaden this potent force. In France it is senseless without a parallel destalinisation, i.e. of democratisation and a real broadening. The internal structure of the CP, its relationship with the masses and the other social and political groups, should have changed. There should have been some give and take. It should have been sufficiently sure of itself — in the field of culture, among others—to conquer and assimilate. Unfortunately, the party maintained its Stalinist leadership and structure. The policy of broadening was in contradiction to its deep mistrust and its unbending attitude. Today, the CP is neither a mass party nor altogether a party of leaders. This party of 180,000 members, rather than broadening itself like the Italian CP, preferred to close its ranks, leaving the working class outside. Since 1948 the communist leaders have bet on the possibility of war. The Atlantic Bloc was becoming more and more aggressive with each passing day. At the beginning of any conflict the French government would dissolve the party. They wanted to remain on guard, a well trained and disciplined group, unencumbered by too large a membership, and ready to pass easily into clandestine activity. The stalinisation and contraction of the CP in France and in Central Europe occurred between the first offers of Marshall Aid and the condemnation of Tito. The effect of this contradiction both here and in Central Europe resulted in severing the party from the masses. By removing the power of the masses to control the party it lost the means of acting upon them. Five million votes were cast for the party every four years but these votes cannot be considered as a control—these electors gave their votes to the 'party of the left,' but this does not necessarily mean that they approved its policy. A vote is always something of a compromise. Two things follow from this transformation. First, parallel to the party becoming a satellite, it became 'parliamentarised,' in spite of itself. Its victories are won not in the factories or the streets but in the polling booths on election day. Its power tended to be reduced to the number of its deputies, its action useless except in parliamentary

(8) Held in February, 1956.

terms. In reality, however, the manoeuvres of the other parties, and in particular, the treachery of the socialist party, resulted in reducing its effectiveness—whatever the original majority might be, another was immediately formed with the single object of neutralising it. The result ? Germany rearmed, war in Algeria, and ever-rising prices. The Labour party in Britain roused half the country against the Franco-British expedition. And what did we do ? What did the 150 communist deputies do ? What did the party do with its five million voices? Put them into cold storage. It is enormously weighty in our political life but this only means that the majority parties always decide their voting by taking its existence into account. On the other hand, its obvious importance and concealed isolation results in the maintenance and reinforcement of the dictatorship of the political bureau . . .

The XIVth Congress (of the CP) derives from the XXth Soviet Congress the theoretical form of the policy adopted by the political bureau. Part V of its declaration insists on "the possibility of the peaceful transformation of a capitalist economy into a socialist economy." But if armed insurrection and civil war are rejected, internal relaxation must follow, not only because it helps international relaxation, but also because this change in theory allows unity at the top to be substituted for unity from below. In effect, the alliance of the working-class and the middle classes 'will transform Parliament itself from an instrument of bourgeois dictatorship into an expression of the popular will.'

This theory has been severely criticised. But it is wrong to consider it as reformist. In fact it is not a matter of obtaining through universal suffrage a continuous amelioration of conditions, leading to the eventual disappearance of capitalism. The popular front, supported by the votes of the workers, peasants and intellectuals ought to achieve the definite and radical transformation of society. The revolution, taken as the moment of passage from a dying society to one about to be born, will be achieved on taking power. It has simply lost its violent character . . .

What are less theoretical and more dangerous are the new policy statements which embody the disastrous policy of the CP. "Because the voting of our two Parliamentary groups in the National Assembly combine, why do we not facilitate their work by acting together throughout the country?"⁽⁹⁾ In this astonishing text it is not a deep unity of interest or conditions that favour a new relationship between the two parties of the left. The socialist worker is not told that he is on the 'same side as his communist comrade and is, therefore, engaged in the same fight. No, but because the parliamentary groups vote in the same way, the workers who have elected these groups, whatever may be their

(9) Author's footnote — XIVth Congress (CP): Appeal to our Socialist Comrades,

differences on other matters, would do well to unite. Unity at the top legitimises unity lower down. There could be nothing less marxist. The argument . . . is concerned solely with an electoral regrouping in order to obtain a left majority in the Assembly. The place for unity is in Parliament itself. All this theorising aims at convincing the socialist government to accept communist support, officially. This explains Thorez's recent statement that "the socialist party must be won over for unity of action, in its entirety." Attempts could be made, from below, to detach the left wing of M. Mollet's party. In the Assembly, Mollet reigns both over his party and the country. He is the "socialist party in its entirety." Agreement must be reached with him.

In fact, he is the last person that the CP will ever get agreement with. There is no doubt about it. The anti-communism of the socialists is nowhere more virulent than in the parliamentary group. In the factory and offices the workers have common ties in their work and their demands. The parliamentary group, shut in on itself, is separated from the communist group by an unbridgeable chasm. Hatred and fear dominate. When an SFIO deputy think? of the terrible misfortunes of the social-democrat parties in the Peoples' Democracies, his hair stands on end. He turns purple with rage at the thought that his colleagues of the CP unanimously regard him as a traitor, and that their smiles and tender glances mask an unyielding mistrust. But these weighty sentiments are nothing in comparison to . . . the important question of electoral rivalry. Every time the CP and the SFIO unite, the CP makes the better bargain. The SFIO has its domains and wants to keep them. The result is that the policy of the CP is something like a graceful, if monotonous, ballet—a faune in constant but unsuccessful pursuit of the nymph. They save Guy Mollet, who refuses to acknowledge it. He either refuses communist votes or accepts them with marked reluctance. The CP voted in favour of special powers for his government and the government immediately turned and thanked the right-wing. The hatred and fear of falling into the arms of the communists tore it away from the left and pushed it towards the M.R.P. and the Independents. Did the party denounce this treachery? Not at all — we must "keep the door open," mustn't we? The parliamentary group abstains when it is sure that Mollet's majority is safe. Of course, they talk of Algeria, but moderately. In order not to lose face the press growls a little. But it is understood that there shall be no agitation. . . The effect on the working-class—and this is, perhaps, the aim of this policy—is to demobilise it completely. Nothing like the Marseilles dockers strikes or the demonstrations for the release of Henri Martin have developed. The workers are disgusted with the Algerian war but they have been left without guidance or direction. The CP is reaping what it has sown—when it needs the masses it no longer

finds then) . . . Meanwhile 500,000 young men waste their time, if not their health or their lives in Algeria, the economy stagnates and workers goon short time. And this is the result of this Ballet of the Left, with one partner waltzing smartly off to the right in order to avoid the embrace of the other . . .

You, who ask me if this is really the time to speak, look at this monstrous party which puts five million voices into cold storage, demobilises the working class, abandons mass action for parliamentary manoeuvre, soft-pedals on its denunciation of the war in Algeria' in a vain attempt to mollify the socialists and does not hesitate, at the same time, to prove its mistrust by its insane statements on the Hungarian events. Its attitude is no longer one of unconditional submission to the USSR but its leaders falsify and mangle Soviet texts or defer their publication. They hide or minimise the progress of destalinisation, even in the USSR, and they welcome with open arms any policy inspired by the ghost of Stalin. These same leaders no longer confine themselves to accepting the decisions of the Soviet Union. They even boast of influencing them. They support the most Stalinist wing of the apparatus and, in this way, help to strengthen its influence, and consequently help to slow down democratisation, everywhere. Remember, finally, that so many errors and mistakes, so much destruction, has resulted in ossifying within the CP a certain structure, suitable to the cold-war period, but which, today, renders it impotent. Weigh these errors, which can prove fatal, and then tell me if it is not time for the supporters of a united front to denounce in public those obstacles which retard its formation. Do not misunderstand me—we must work on the socialist party as well. But the socialist attitude is determined by the policy of the CP. The members of the SFIO will never lose their gnawing fear as long as the CP remains a powerful and terrifying prehistoric monster . . .

Their fear and loathing will only be dissipated in so far as we can influence, first of all, the CP. In India, the caste system contained irreconcilable contradictions at all levels of society but Gandhi thought it useless to take them all into consideration. "We must find the mainspring of the structure and concentrate our efforts upon it alone," he said. He found it without difficulty—the pariah caste. In the same way, we must work on the proud pariahs of our own society in order to break down those rigid barriers which threaten to transform the French left-wing movement into a caste system. We must work on the untouchables — the communists. If they change first, all is saved . . .

In Stalin's lifetime, the USSR was the truth. This is no longer so. The XXth Congress has disclosed the mass of lies, errors, and faults beneath the distorted facade of Stalinism. How can a brother-party be asked to remove the mantel of infallibility from Stalin, only to put it back over the shoulders of Kruschov?

On the other hand, the USSR is not the lie, either. It is a nation in the making, floundering in the contradictions of socialism, whose leaders sometimes see much further, and sometimes much less, than us. The time for revealed truth, for evangelism, has passed. In the west a communist party cannot survive without the right of free discussion . . . The communist party is responsible only before the working-class of its own country, and it follows that the USSR must treat the western parties on the basis of equality. Real information (which does not mean 'objectivism'), true and sincere appreciation, the sovereignty of the working-class—all this is bound up with equality in our relations with the USSR. Without this pre-condition, the French left is dead, the party is mummified.

A united front can never be achieved while the CP insists on trying to construct it from the top through an alliance of parliamentary groups. It will, and must, emerge from below. But while the party retains the rigid structural characteristics of a persecuted sect, threatened with dissolution and preparing to enter into clandestine activity, it is completely unsuited for the achievement of that immense upheaval which, one day, must produce unity. Its watertight compartments result in the division of its members into heterogeneous groups of workers, lower middle-class people and intellectuals. The diversity of structure, interests and settings demand and legitimise the dictatorial authority of the machine and this is aided by the isolation of these groups⁽¹⁰⁾ . . . The dreadful accusation of 'factional activity' re-inforces the rigid compartmental structure and gives rein to the Terror which prevents communication between men and the circulation of ideas. Factional activity can be condemned, as Lenin condemned it, on the understanding that 'tendencies' are allowed to express themselves within the party organisation. Today, however, it cannot be doubted that tendencies become factions because they cannot express themselves within the constitutional framework of the party. The only way to avoid factions, is to allow, at all levels, criticism and discussion. Reduced to silence within the constituent groups, condemned if he expresses himself outside them, the member of this party of the masses is, in reality, completely isolated before the leadership and his isolation reflects that of the CP. If the party wants to recover the support of the workers, it must accept their control. As long as the basic units cannot communicate except through the leadership, the party will remain a closed circle. If

it wants to weld itself to the masses, to give them unity, and to revive itself through them, it must lose its rigidity. It is this movement, based on a policy of broadening, that we call democratisation . . .

Equality in relations with the USSR, information based on truth, democratisation, the renewal of contact with the masses and their mobilisation, first against the war in Algeria—these are the necessary conditions for the success of the CP, and for the achievement of a united front of the two parties of the working-class. Each 'left' has its own problems. Ours is that of working-class unity . . . For our part, we have been arguing with the CP for the past twelve years. Violently at first, and then later in friendship. But our aim has always been the same—to add our feeble strength to the achievement of this union of the left which alone can still save our country. Today, we return to opposition, for the simple reason that there is no other path to take. An alliance with the CP as it is, and as it intends to remain, would have no other effect than to compromise the last chances for a united front. Our programme is clear. In spite of a hundred contradictions, internal fights and massacres, destalinisation continues. It is the only policy which, at the present time, effectively serves socialism, peace and the reunification of the two parties of the working-class. With our resources as intellectuals, read by intellectuals, we shall try to assist in the destalinisation of the French party.

(10) Author's footnote: The intellectuals have no contact with the workers. Students act within student cells, teachers within school cells. The presence of the waiter in the refractory should not, however, be considered as a direct contact with the industrial proletariat. Writers, who generally live in middle-class areas, meet the lower middle-class in the local branches. The leadership profits from the distrust that the intellectuals inspire in the manual workers. Even at meetings of the Peace Movement, the 'hair-splitter' is compared to the 'worker on the knocker.'