

N.A.T.O., Neutralism and Survival

E. P. Thompson

THE Yugoslav Programme, and the renewed breach between Yugoslav and Russian Communists, seems to me to present a challenge of the greatest urgency to British socialists. It is astonishing that in all the commentary on this affair in our press, the one disturbing question of action is never asked: What response does this call for from us? We are left as smug observers of a peep show through the "iron curtain"; these things occur in an altogether different world; their only bearing upon our lives being that discord may weaken our potential antagonist.

But these things take place in *our* world. They concern us as socialists; they are a part of the argument of European socialism. For ten years this small nation has succeeded in remaining outside the two power-blocs, exerting a growing influence on the Communist world. Now once again the Yugoslavs have flung open a door and jammed a foot in it; are we going to stay put and goggle in alien incomprehension?

For more than three years the authoritarian features of Communist-ruled societies—those ideological and institutional legacies of a particularly unmerciful half-century—have been under constant, probing assault from within. Beneath the ideological pigment, people East and West have been rediscovering a community of human aspiration. "The Party membership and the Hungarian people," Nagy wrote in December 1955,

"do not want a return to capitalism. They want a people's democratic system in which the ideals of socialism become reality, in which the ideals of the working class regain their true meaning, in which public life is based on higher morals and ethics; they want a system that is actually ruled not by a degenerate Bonapartist authority and dictator but by the working people through legality and self-created law and order. They want a People's Democracy where the working people are masters of the country and of their own fate, where human beings are respected, and where social and political life is conducted in the spirit of humanism."

But throughout, neither before the Hungarian rising nor afterwards, has there been any action or initiative by the British labour movement commensurate to the needs of the situation. If we wish to relax the cramp of Europe, and make possible a greater political fluidity on both sides, then nations in the West as well as in the East must break through the taboos by which the Cold War is sustained.

The Communist taboo takes form in the theory of the Two Camps. No matter how flexible Soviet diplomacy may at times appear, it remains axiomatic that all diplomacy is polarized between these camps, the one under Soviet, the other under American hegemony. Whatever subsists in between either does not have effective existence, in terms of power, or must submit to the gravitational pull of one or other pole.

This polarization affects every aspect of orthodox Communist policy. So long as any deviation from Soviet hegemony can be held to offer strategic or political advantage to the West, to that degree it will be repressed or held in check. It was the heresy of Nagy in leaving the Warsaw Pact and courting neutrality—thus automatically bringing him within the orbit of the capitalist camp—which determined the Soviet intervention. Concessions or a diplomatic *detente* can be envisaged only as following upon Summit agreement between

the Heads of the Two Camps. Initiatives at a lower level are either symptoms of potential treachery (*vide* Krushchev's comment on the "two stools") or (as is evidenced by the attitude expressed in private by leaders of the British C.P. to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) pathetic illusions which ignore the facts of world power.

This analysis also governs internal developments in the Communist world. So long as an independent initiative from the West is absent, so long as there is no Western Nagy or Kardelj to reach out to the East, for so long the forces of democratization will be inhibited or repressed. Cold War tension reinforces and sustains the military and bureaucratic basis of "Stalinism," and is now creating a situation in which throughout Eastern Europe "*revisionism*" is the target of a campaign of intimidation, which could at any moment collapse into a new terrorism. Dissidents are accused of giving comfort to the West; they are intimidated from without and paralysed by inner misgivings.

It is for this reason that the Yugoslav Draft Programme is of such importance. Just as Nagy broke through the taboo in 1955, and posed the main question: "Which is the most practicable way of liquidating the power groups and power policies?" so the Yugoslavs refuse to fall back into the barren "Two Camps" analysis. Although "differently appraising the social-economic and political essence of the existing blocs," the Yugoslavs see in the continued existence of the power blocs not only the greatest threat of war, but also the threat of Stalinist and imperialist reaction. They reject the orthodox Communist prospect of an era of "peaceful co-existence" in which the blocs, still in close formation, disengage from each other and take part in political, ideological and economic competition. "There can be no lasting co-existence between blocs," they say, "for that would be no co-existence at all, but merely a temporary truce, concealing the danger of new conflicts." Instead they advocate the policy of "active co-existence." "Co-existence must not be passive, must not be entrenched in bloc positions; it must be active, must aim to achieve comprehensive co-operation between peoples"; it involves the active promotion of "political, economic, and cultural co-operation between countries with different social systems, whereby the sharp edges of the blocs will be blunted . . ."

This of course is "*revisionism*" rampant, the Beast in the Stalinist Book of Revelation. For if the edges of the blocs can be "blunted," what remains of the irreconcilable opposition of the two world systems? For this reason the Soviet leaders have renewed ideological hostilities. Their attitude is essentially negative and timorous; they fear the renunciation of any positions of power because no less than Mr. Dulles they fear the directions which popular initiatives might take. But the Yugoslavs do not abandon in any degree the view that the ultimate resolution to international conflict lies in world socialism; on the contrary, they are confident that the relaxation of tension will create conditions in which healthy popular initiatives will multiply; will weaken the power of militarism; encourage the colonial liberation movements; and at the same time relax Soviet "hegemonic policy," "shatter the basis upon which bureaucracy thrives and assist

the more rapid and less painful development of the socialist countries."

But a successful policy of active co-existence presupposes a response from the Western labour movement. If we are to do more than vacantly applaud the Yugoslav heresy, then some Western nation—and it can only be Britain—must break with Western taboos. Though clothed in more decorous language these are almost identical in application to the theory of the Two Camps. In Britain they are revealed by the fetishistic reverence attached to N.A.T.O. and the American alliance. Powerful political inhibitions are set up whenever these ineffable entities come under scrutiny; the very act of scrutiny suggests an offence against decency. So deeply has the concept of Communism—the antagonist sunk into Western thought, that the fact is overlooked by all official Labour spokesmen that it is not Russia, but the military expression of past antagonisms—that is, the power blocs themselves—which are the immediate threat to human survival. And even when the *New Statesman* argues cogently for disengagement, the old taboos still lurk beneath the surface. Thus in a typical editorial (April 26):

"... the basic function of a Summit Conference is to inaugurate a mutual retreat, however gradual, from the Cold War parapet, to dismantle the military relics of the H-bomb age, and so clear the ground for the continuation of the East-West struggle with the weapons of competitive prosperity. America may feel herself ill-equipped to enter this new phase. But she has no alternative ..."

I do not understand this kind of reasoning any longer. What is this "East-West struggle," in which British socialists will find more in common with "America" than "Poland" or "Russia"? What are we going to struggle *for*? What is it that is so precious that Mr. Bevan must align himself alongside Mr. Dulles but against Mr. Rapacki and Mr. Kardelj?

These are not disingenuous questions. I am suggesting that it is time that Western socialists ceased to think in terms of struggle-within-the-American-alliance, and instead adopt policies which would at one and the same time create conditions for a forward surge of the forces making for democratization in the East, and the resumption by Western labour movements of their own advance towards democratic socialist objectives; affirming thereby, not the apparent ideological gulf, but the underlying community of humanist aspiration which recent events have brought home.

The Aldermaston marchers

In essence, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, with its emphasis on unilateral action, is expressing this demand. Unilateral renunciation of the Bomb, within the framework of N.A.T.O. and under shelter of the American bases, would be not so much a moral gesture as a giving up of the whole problem. It could become a moral (and political) gesture of profound influence only when linked to other actions, summoning world opinion in support, and stepping altogether outside the routines of power diplomacy. This is what the Aldermaston marchers thought they were marching about; not only against the Bomb but also against all crooked attitudes of power which permit the Bomb to be used as an instrument of policy.

Mr. Bevan, then, is right to see this as the hub of the issue:

If we said that we as a nation had decided we would repudiate on ethical and moral grounds the hydrogen bomb . . . we would then have to repudiate all the alliances based upon the possession of the H-bomb . . ."

But he seems to me to be wrong, as a statesman, as a patriot, and as a socialist, on almost every other issue. He is wrong to declare that if we did this, "the Russians would laugh at us"; they don't laugh at India, nor at Yugoslavia. He is

shamefully wrong to shout at Labour delegates:

"Those who desire Great Britain should have no allies and only Russia should have allies are enemies of Great Britain and, not only that, they are enemies of the working-class movement."

It is a question of which friends, which allies. The N.A.T.O. power complex, so far from being a friend to any working-class movement, stretches from Algeria to Guatemala, from Portugal to Saudi Arabia; its pervasive retrogressive influence, as the holy alliance of the *status quo*, can be seen in the fact that during its period of dominance no Western labour movement has made any significant forward advance whatsoever.

Active neutrality

Why then this refusal to look the alternative in the face? Summit Conference, the ending of tests, limited disengagement—all may contribute to lessening tension. But if there is to be any resolution to the Cold War, if we are to deal with cause as well as with symptoms, then British renunciation of the Bomb must be complemented by renunciation of the military and diplomatic commitments of N.A.T.O., and the initiation in Europe of a policy of active neutrality.

I emphasize *active* neutrality: not the passive self-preserving isolationism of a small power, but positive, indeed aggressive, foreign policy aimed at relaxing East-West tension, dismantling military blocs, and resuming economic, cultural and political intercourse between the Communist and non-Communist world. It would entail a British initiative in building something like a "Bandung" group of uncommitted nations in Europe, with the Scandinavian countries, Yugoslavia, Austria and Poland as possible entrants. It would involve an open appeal by Britain to public opinion in Europe and America to support our initiative and press their respective Governments into line; and close association with India and the Afro-Asian peoples in developing this initiative on a world scale. Finally, it would assume the reassertion of the United Nations as the proper arena in which the struggle for active co-existence should be fought out.

In short, this policy envisages not a Third Camp, nor a third force independent of both camps, but a group of European powers exercising a mediating influence between the two main contestants, parallel to the influence of India in the Far East. The ideological and military polarization of the world is certainly a reality from which effective analysis must flow. But it does not follow that the only way to a *detente* is to make the two poles kiss. On the contrary, a *detente* is far more likely to ensue when the two giants feel their strategic and economic advantages crumbling around their feet, and their allies shifting their allegiance.

In the long run the prospects could be exciting. As the pressures of the Cold War are relaxed, so new popular forces will be released. In Eastern Europe ideas and international intercourse will flow more freely, and the forces of socialist democracy may be able to assert themselves, with varying degrees of success. In the West new prospects of social advance will open up, with the relief of military burdens and the relaxation of those anti-Communist inhibitions with which the labour movements are hedged around. Such advances would take us further towards bridging the ideological rift across Europe. The divided labour movements of France (if still in being) and Italy would be offered an opportunity to turn their backs upon the sterile quarrels of the past, and to achieve a new unity under leadership which bypassed the discredited apparatuses of the era of Mollet and Thorez. In Germany it would provide a breathing-space within which *bona fide* indigenous movements for reunification might gain ground, on the lines proposed by Harich.

Citizens of countries East and West might be able once again to think of themselves as Europeans.

I do not suggest that these consequences will follow necessarily; nor without set-backs. The dangers are obvious enough. Stalinism is far too deeply entrenched to fall at the first trump of active neutrality. American strategists would be only too likely to attempt to exchange Western Germany for the British alliance. Moreover, sharp repercussions within our economy would be inevitable, as we realigned our overall foreign economic policies.

It is easy enough to see why our politicians prefer to take mincing ineffectual steps within the known limits of N.A.T.O. strategy rather than embark upon policies which may sever them from allies, immerse them in unknown problems, and release new popular forces. And yet, sooner or later, if a *detente* is ever to come, every one of these problems—in Europe, in foreign economic relations, within the Commonwealth—will have to be faced.

I am not suggesting that an immediate break with N.A.T.O. should be a dogma which socialists should press upon all supporters of the Nuclear Disarmament Campaign. But nuclear disarmament—the immediate objective—will set up a chain of consequences, which could lead either to mute dependence upon the American "deterrent": or to an active policy taking us altogether outside the framework of the American alliance. Socialists should not hedge so much and be so mealy-mouthed: they should make their preference clear now, and educate opinion to prepare for this break. Moreover, what is the real alternative? A massive disengagement of both blocs is an ultimate possibility: but *have we got time!* Already, Schweitzer tells us, the problem of peace or war has been reduced to the mechanical operation of two opposing radar screens. Moreover, with each month that the Cold War continues, a terrible distorting force is exerted upon every field of life. As it drags on the half-frozen antagonists become more sluggish in their reactions. Political and economic life is constricted, militarism and reaction are infused with new blood, reaction and the subordination of

the individual to the State is intensified, and the crooked ceremonies of destructive power permeate our cultural and intellectual life. A context which has already given power to an Adenauer and a de Gaulle, may soon bring some shabby Corsican general to Paris (with possession of the H-bomb), and some latter-day Bismarck to Bonn, while the Yugoslav and Polish peoples may be re-absorbed by the Monolith.

Every pointer indicates Britain as the nation best placed to take the initiative which might just succeed in bringing down the whole power-crazy system like a pack of cards. We are still a major power, not in terms of death-dealing fireworks, but in terms of world influence. Our ties with India could link the European and the Asiatic struggle for active co-existence. Our labour movement is undivided, and is well placed to appeal to the people of Europe, East and West. Our democratic structure is still scarcely impaired, the Campaign is growing, there is an election in the offing.

Of course, the politicians from Westminster to King Street will dismiss all this as freakish utopianism. And in terms of political opportunism it is. Politics must take into account the known forces at work, the known facts of power. But it is power that is going to kill us all, unless some major nation breaks with nuclear diplomacy and places its faith in people instead. This policy assumes that if Britain acted, a world-wide popular response would result; new popular forces would assert themselves, in Germany, in Russia, in France. It assumes that we have reached a point of historical development where rational and humane public opinion, as expressed above all in the diverse international forms of the organized working-class movement, is also a fact of power and could be—in favourable circumstances—the governing fact within the total complex. Such assumptions are incapable of proof. Recently we have seen two unpredictable acts of courage from peoples in the East. Are we going to sit down and wait for more, or is it our turn to move? Even now one small nation after a devastating total war and ten years of international ostracism is still standing on its own feet, holding the door ajar. Are we going in?