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The Socialist International and Destalinization

Anti-communism was one of the principal motivating forces of the Socialist International (SI) when it was founded in 1951 as a co-ordinating body for democratic socialist and labour parties around the world. The International devoted much energy to exposing and denouncing the evils of communism in Eastern Europe, whose exiled social democratic parties were admitted into membership of the organization as symbols of its rejection of the Soviet-imposed regimes on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The SI also strove to oppose the spread of Soviet-inspired communism in the Third World, seeking to use the influence of European social democracy in colonial territories to ensure that such territories would progress towards independence with a pro-Western orientation.

Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and other developments at the 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) in February 1956 produced much political fall-out among the democratic socialist parties of Western Europe. However, the immediate reaction, at least at the level of official leaderships, was that the 'secret' Krhushchev report confirmed that the SI had been correct in its analysis of the inherently oppressive and dictatorial nature of Soviet communism. If further evidence were needed, it was quickly provided by the brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising later in 1956. Thus the official reaction of the SI to the proceedings of the 20th CPSU congress was that 'nothing has really changed' in the fundamental character of Soviet communism, which was seen as remaining essentially repressive notwithstanding the public admission of Stalin's excesses. For this reason the CPSU's proposal, launched at the 20th party congress, for political co-operation between communism and democratic socialism was formally rejected by the International.

In the longer term, however, the destalinization process in the Soviet Union and its satellites resulted in a substantial evolution of the SI's attitude towards communism. By apparently demonstrating that communist regimes were susceptible to internal reform, destalinization increased the credibility and influence of those who argued that reformed

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communism was the natural ally of democratic socialism, at least when it came to confronting great issues such as the threat to world peace and security. It also facilitated 'union of the left' strategies in several West European countries where communist parties distanced themselves from Moscow and adopted 'Eurocommunist' strategies.

Such developments at the level of certain member parties inevitably had an effect on the attitude of the Socialist International itself. The organization's opposition to any official contact between its members and communist parties was gradually relaxed, especially in the context of offerts to develop relations with 'progressive' forces in the Third World. Moreover, although the SI has never taken up the oft-repeated Soviet-bloc proposal for a general dialogue between communism and democratic socialism, the International has entered into official exchanges with the Soviet Union in recent years, notably on the issue of East-West disarmament negotiations.

Anti-communist Orientation of the International in the Post-War Period

At the end of the Second World War many democratic socialists entertained hopes that in the post-war world it would be possible to recreate a unified International in the image of the Pre-1914 Second International. The aspiration of such people was to heal the split between socialists and communists caused by the 1917 Russian Revolution and the subsequent formation of the Communist International (itself dissolved by Stalin in 1943 as a gesture to his war-time allies). However, the forcible imposition of communist regimes in the Soviet-controlled countries of Eastern Europe, the liquidation of social democrats and the enforced merger of their parties with communist parties convinced most West European socialists that there was no possibility of co-operation with communism, at least in its Soviet-inspired form. Morover, with the formation of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) in September 1947, Stalin and his allies were already vilifying 'the treacherous policy of right-wight socialists' who remained 'in all aspects loyal supporters of the imperialists, bringing disintegration into the ranks of the working class and poisoning their outlook'[1].

The post-war initiative in rebuilding the International was taken by the British Labour Party (supported by the French Socialists), which inspired the establishment in November 1947 of the Committee of the International Socialist Conference (Comisco) as a direct response to the formation of the Cominform. At its first session in London in March 1948 Comisco strongly condemned the communist seizures of power in Eastern Europe and also expelled those social democratic parties (in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania) which had voted for merger with their respective communist parties. Subsequently the exiled rumps of these and other East European social democratic parties were admitted into membership of Comisco (and later of the SI itself).

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The next Comisco session, held in Vienna in June 1948, further defined the anti-communist orientation of the new International by expelling the Nenni Socialists because of their pact with the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and by deciding to admit the Social Democrats led by Giuseppe Saragat as the sole Italian member party.

The episode of the expulsion of the Nenni Socialists from Comisco is worth recalling in some detail because it highlights the issues then being agonized over by the leaders of the fledgling International. Pietro Nenni himself fought vigorously to preserve the right of his Socialist faction to belong to the International, arguing in a celebrated letter to Comisco that he could not break with the PCI without betraying the principles of socialism and of working-class solidarity; the world was fundamentally divided, maintained Nenni, into 'democratic' and 'imperialist' camps, and all socialists belonged in the former together with communists and other progressive forces. Such arguments cut little ice with the Comisco authorities, however, who noted in their response[2] that Nenni's theses closely resembled those of the Cominform and disputed his claim that the Italian Socialists were 'totally independent' of the Cominform. According to Comisco, Nenni had been duped by the 'criminal policy of Soviet imperialism', which was forcing the countries of Eastern Europe to break all links with the West and 'bind themselves hand and foot to the Soviet Union', notably by erecting the Cominform as 'an instrument of Marxist-Leninist policy' as laid down by the Soviet Politburo. All over Eastern Europe, Comisco maintained, true socialists were being imprisoned and persecuted by communists, while in Italy itself the quest for the unity of all true socialist forces was being prevented 'by the crypto-communist treachery of Nenni'.

Strong language of this type was typical of the ideological battle of the late 1940s, amid the pressures and divisions generated by the onset of the Cold War. In a somewhat moderated form, the same basic anti-communist orientation was enshrined in the ideological declaration adopted by the founding congress of the Socialist International held in Frankfurt in mid-1951 (with the Saragat Social Democrats representing Italy). The declaration's passages devoted to communism were contained in its preamble and were worded as follows:

> 'Since the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, communism has split the international labour movement and has set back the realization of socialism in many countries for decades.
>
> 'Communism falsely claims a share in the socialist tradition. In fact it has distorted that tradition beyond recognition. It has built up a rigid theology which is incompatible with the critical spirit of Marxism.
>
> 'Where socialists aim to achieve freedom and justice by removing the exploitation which divides men under capitalism, communists seek to sharpen those class divisions only in order to establish the dictatorship of a single party.
>
> 'International communism is the instrument of a new imperialism. Wherever it has achieved power it has destroyed freedom or the chance of gaining freedom. It is based on a militarist bureaucracy and a terrorist police. By

producing glaring contrasts of wealth and privilege it has created a new class society. Forced labour plays an important part in its economic organization.'[3]

As indicated by these passages from the Frankfurt Declaration, the SI set itself firmly in the Western camp on its formation in 1951. With variations of emphasis as between the different member parties, it was essentially a pro-American and pro-NATO organization, with many of its leading officers being as dedicated to pursuing the Cold War against the Soviet Union as any incumbent of the US State Department. Seeing itself as being in the vanguard of international resistance to the menace of communism, the International insisted on anti-communist credentials as the crucial qualification for admission to membership. As the two dominant SI formations of that era, the British Labour Party and the French Socialists both sought, with some success, to carry the SI's anti-communist preoccupations into the territories still then under British or French colonial rule, exerting all available influence on emerging labour and socialist movements to ensure their adherence to the true path. The result was that in the first phase of its history, which lasted into the 1960s, the Socialist International presented a solid, almost monolithic, front of unquestioning opposition to communism in any form.

Social democracy and communism after Stalin's death

With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that the beginning of an evolution in the SI's attitude to communism can be detected in the reaction of democratic socialist parties to Khrushchev's 'secret' denunciation of Stalin at the 20th CPSU congress in February 1956 and to other doctrinal hangle announced at that gathering. At the time, the organization's leaders gave no public indication of any shift in the stablished position on communism and the character of the Soviet regime; on the contrary, Khrushchev's revelations were taken to justify what the International had been preaching about Soviet communism since 1947 and as a salutary reminder that social democrats should be ever vigilant in defence of the open society and democratic competition between competing political philosophies. At the same time, however, the new formulations of the 20th congress — particularly the assertion of the avoidability of world war and the possibility of a non-revolutionary transition to socialism — inevitabli impinged upon the intellectual consciousness of the democratic socialist movement and stimulated a process of reassessment of the proper response to the challenge of communism.

While the process of reassessment varied in its preoccupations and conclusions as between the various member parties of the Socialist International, there continued to be virtual unanimity on the rejection of the communist thesis of the division of the world into two camps engaged in class conflict, i.e. the 'socialist' system represented by the com-

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munist-ruled states and the 'capitalist' system represented in principle by all other states however progressive or reationary in their governmental and socio-economic organizations. All the major democratic socialist parties continued to insist that the real division was between, on the one hand, the bloc of totalitarian one-party states (whose political institutions were seen as in reality a barrier to the construction of socialism) and, on the other, highly diversified free societies at different stages of political and economic evolution. If the Soviet-bloc communists were now declaring their commitment to peaceful coexistence, so much the better for the prospects of world peace; but democratic socialists naturally did not accept the corollary of the Soviet position — that the triumph of the communist system was historically inevitable because of its innate superiority. Nor did they have any doubt that they were in irreconcilable conflict with communism and that in this conflict they had no choice but to be on the side of the free societies which provided the conditions in which they could operate and fliurish.

In their assessment of the internal changes which had taken place in the Soviet Union since the death of Stalin (in March 1953), SI member parties tended to the view that some were of substantial importance and not merely tactical. It was noted that there had been a real reduction in the powers of the secret police; that a major reform of the penal system had been instituted; and that a general attempt was being made to reduce the role of compulsion in Soviet economic life and to increase the use of incentives. At the same time, however, it was noted that there had been no modification of the one-party dictatorship and that the Soviet leadership did not intend any such modification. So far at least, destalinization had not resulted in any move towards freedom of public discussion on any level, nor towards independent organization of different economic interest groups. In other words, democratic socialists detected no tendency towards democracy, either in Soviet society at large or within the CPSU, where the facade of collective leadership could not disguise the inherent need of a dictatorial party machine for the concentration of ultimate control in the hands of one man. For democratic socialists, therefore, there had been no modification in the Soviet doctrine that in the conflict with the 'imperialist' camp the victory of 'socialism' depended on total control being exercised by the monopoly communist party.

Notwithstanding this generally negative analysis of the destanilization process, democratic socialist Moscow-watchers also drew attention to an aspect of the reforms with potential longer-term significance, namely that the changes did not appear to correspond wholly with the wishes of the Soviet leadership but rather represented in part their attempt to preserve the party dictatorship by adapting it to growing social pressures outside their full control. This was seen as applying in particular to the extent and apparent venom of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the 20th party congress, since such a statement was bound to weaken the authority of the present leaders by exposing their own complicity

in Stalin's crimes and could therefore only have been extracted from them is important social forces were demanding a denunciation of Stalinism terror as a guarantee that it would not recur. The CPSU's theoretical repudation of Stalin's docrine that the international 'class struggle' was bound to intensify as progress was made in the construction of socialism was been as particularly significant: on the one hand, it represented a promise of increased personal and economic security to the Soviet people in general and to the privilegd bureaucracy in particular; and yet it tended to erode the theoretical basis for insisting that the party dictatorship should remain permanent. The new Soviet leaders were taking the rather bold step, possibly under pressure from below, of renouncing Stalin's policy of 'permanent revolution from above', with all its attendant discontinuity of organizational structures (not to mention personal lives). It remained to be seen whether his heirs could maintain the Soviet system by other methods, or whether the beginnings of serious concessions to social pressures would eventually result in the dismantling of the party dictatorship by the new privileged classes which it had created[4].

There was one other aspect of the destalinization process that was of particular interest to the SI parties, namely the dissolution of the Cominform, which was finally carried out two months after the 20th CPSU congress. The organization had in fact been dormant since Stalin's death in 1953, and the reconciliation between the Soviet and Yugoslav parties in 1955 had made the Cominform — from which the Yugoslav party had been expelled in June 1948 for anti-Soviet and 'nationalistic' deviation — an embarrassment to the new Soviet leadership. The official reason given for its dissolution was that because of changes in the international situation the Cominform had 'exhausted its function'. In reality, as democratic socialist analysts pointed out with some satisfaction, Stalin's refusal to recognize any independent communist centres (e.g. Yugoslavia and China) had become untenable, forcing the new Soviet leadership to replace the doctrine of 'the leading role of the Soviet Union' by the Leninist formula of 'fraternal relations between independent communist parties'. The intention of Stalin's heirs was plainly to confine the new 'dominion status' to the Yugoslav and Chinese parties and to maintain Soviet control over the East European satellites; but combined with the impact of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, the new doctrine was seen as inevitably stimulating the desire for greater independence not only among the East European parties but also among the communist formations of the capitalist world. In the latter respect, the phenomenon of 'Eurocommunism' still lay in the future; but certainly the loosening of international communist discipline dating from 1956[5] was already seen by democratic socialists as potentially opening up the rigid barriers between social democracy and communism which had been a central feature of the previous decade.

Reaction of the Socialist International to the 20th CPSU Congress

Whatever longer-term reassessment was in train within the parties of the Socialist International, the organization's official public response to the proceedings and decisions of the 20th CPSU congress was that they had done nothing to alter the basic oppositional relationship between social democracy and communism. As details of Khrushchev's secret report filtered through to the West, the SI Bureau met in London on April 7, 1956, and adopted an uncompromising statement asserting that the denunciation of Stalin and his methods had not fundamentally changed the character of the Soviet regime and reiterating the SI's established position that 'socialism and communism have nothing in common''.

The statement continued: 'The communists have merely perverted the very idea of socialism. Where they are in power they have distorted every freedom, every right of the workers, every political gain and every human value which socialists have on in a struggle lasting several generations. We believe in democracy; they do not. We believe in the rights of man; they mock them. This is not changed by the refutation of Stalinism. The repudiation of Stalin by those who — whether in fear of their lievs or in genuine complicity — previously helped in Stalin's crimes and praised his sins, has not fundamentally altered the character of the communist regime. Even with collective leadership it yet remains a dictatorship; and what they now call ''Leninism'' is nothing but an earlier edition of the misconceptions and misdeeds of Stalinism'.

The reaction of the International to the other main outcome (from a democratic socialist viewpoint) of the 20th congress — that social democrats and communists should enter into political co-operation in spheres of common interest — was an equally uncompromising rejection. But here the situation was more tricky for the SI parties, not least because the Soviet proposal was aimed as much at Western public opinion as at the social democratic parties themselves. Whereas in the Cominform era social democratic parties had normally been attacked as 'lackeys of the imperialist camp', it was now asserted at the 20th party congress that 'today many social democrats stand for active struggle against the war danger, for rapprochement with the socialist countries, for unity of the labour movement'. On the basis of this analysis, the CPSU nowe revived the formal proposal — last officially made by the seventh Comintern congress in 1937 — for friendly relations and co-operation with social democratic parties, asserting that the CPSU was 'willing to do everything necessary to unite our efforts in the struggle for the noble cause of peace and in the interests of the working people'.

Appreciating that this message was potentially seductive to their own rank and file (especially younger elements disinclined to be outraged by the post-war events in Eastern Europe), the International's leadership weighed its response carefully, both at a session of the SI General Council held in Zurich in March 1956 and at the London Bureau meet-

ting the following month. The public statements issuing from these meetings contained an outright rejection of the Soviet proposal for co-operation at the level of parties; but the second was careful to stress the desirability of co-operation between governments to facilitate the settlement of disputes. Moreover, from the documentation and reports which lay behind the public pronouncements it is clear that the International was fully aware of the broader and longer-term implications of the outcome of the 20th CPSU congress and that relations between social democracy and communism had entered a new era.

A resolution adopted unanimously by the Zurich Council Conference asserted that 'the changes of communist tactics which emerged at the recent party congress of the Soviet Communist Party are not adequate proof of a genuine change in the principles and policies of communist dictatorship and therefore provide no grounds for departing from the position taken up by democratic socialism, which firmly rejects any united front or any other form of political co-operation with the parties of dictatorship'. It added: 'The Socialist International considers the minimum precondition, even for the possibility of talks on an international basis, to be the re-establishment of genuinely free democratic labour movements in all those countries where they existed before and have been suppressed or eliminated by the communist dictatorship'.

A month later the SI Bureau repeated the Council Conference's rejection of the proposal for co-operation between social democrats and communists, recalling that 'where socialist parties in the Russian-dominated part of the world have co-operated with them, they were crushed out of existence, compulsorily merged or otherwise eliminated by the ruthless methods of dictatorship which ironically calls itself People's Democracy'. However, while rejecting 'all forms of co-operation with communist parties', the Bureau was also recorded its support for 'forms of co-operation between governments which will facilitate the peaceful settlement of disputed issues'. The statement went on to give examples of where such co-operation might be fruitful: 'The Soviet Union together with the Western powers has a heavy responsibility for the settlement of such major questions as disarmament and the reunification of Germany — solutions for which the whole world is waiting'. But at the same time, added the statement, the Soviet Union Could immediately contribute to the relaxation of international tensions by 'halting the virulent propaganda campaigns directed against democratic countries and by permitting the free dissemination of news and opinion'. These public statements were issued on the basis of detailed analytical reports on the 20th CPSU congress submitted by leading representatives of SI member parties, notably one by Haakon Lie, then secretary of the Norwegian Labour Party. Lie noted that in the period before the congress the CPSU had put out feelers to a number of West European social democratic parties, including his own during an official visit to Moscow by the then Labour prime minister of Norway, Einar Gerhardsen. The Norwegian party and others had rebuffed the overtures, but this had

not deterred the CPSU from publicly launching the co-operation idea at the congress itself, linking it to the new doctrine that the transition to socialism could be achieved by parliamentary means in the highly developed capitalist countries. This new doctrine, warned Lie, was likely to create a widespread impression that the communists had now accepted social democratic methods of transforming society by parliamentary democracy and would therefore be 'most potent in creating political confusion in the labour movement'. Accordingly, the parties of the SI must give equally wide publicity to the passages of the congress proceedings which showed that what the Soviet leadership really had in mind was to use the parliamentary system to establish the dictatorship of the communist party [6].

What the SI leadership perceived was that the proceedings of the 20th CPSU congress heralded a new period of greatly intensified activity by the communist parties in favour of united fronts and popular fronts with social democratic and other 'progressive' forces. Moreover, the new campaign would be more sophisticated and flexible than previous such manoeuvres and would also benefit from the fact that the new Soviet leadership had dissociated itself from the excesses of Stalinism. The assumption of the International (clearly a correct one) was that the immediate objective of the campaign was not so much the winning of governmental power by Western communist parties (although in both France and Italy this was a serious possiblity which the new tactical line was designed to advance), but rather the sowing of disunity within the ranks of social democratic parties and also within the Western world as a whole, given that governments were likely to respond differently to the new overtures. Also perceived as crucial to the new Soviet strategy was the establishment of an effective tactical line in the developing countries, where native communist parties were usually small but were there existed powerful anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and thus anti-Western feeling within the large nationalist formations. Indeed, over the succeeding decades it was this last challenge that was increasinly to preoccupy the Socialist International as it sought to extend its own influence, and that of democratic socialist modes of political and economic organization, into the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. In this process, however, the SI has often aligned itself with anti-western revolutionary movements and it went to great lentghs to demonstrate its support for various 'progessive', totalitarian and pro-soviet forces in the Third World.

The more sophisticated Soviet approach to 'progressive' and 'pro-peace' movements in Western Europe also forced a modification of the social democratic attitude. On matter of East-West relations the SI gradually adopted a policy of neutrality and came out increasingly in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament. At the same time much effort has been made to promote cooperation between Socialist and so called 'Euro-communist' parties.

Notes

[1] From the manifesto adopted at the founding conference of the Cominform held in Szklarska Poreba (Poland) in September 1947.
[2] Notes on Nenni letter to Comisco, dated 18th January 1948, now in the Labour Party's Archive.
[3] From *Aims and Tasks of Democratic Socialism*, adopted by the founding congress of the Socialist International held in Frankfurt, June 30-July 3, 1951.
[4] See R. Lowenthal "Post-Stalin Russia and Co-existence". That rapport consistuted the background for the discussion during the meeting of the Socialist International, which took place in London, the 7th of April 1956. The text of that rapport has been published in *Socialist International Information* (Vol. VI, n. 34).
[5] As well known, it was Togliatti who created the theory of "Policentrismo". For the reaction of the Socialist International to that theory, see J. Braunthal, "History of the International". New York, 1961-1981.
[6] See Haakon Lie, "The relations of the Socialist International and its member parties with other political forces", in *Socialist International Information*, Vol. VI, n. II.

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