

## Another Look at E. P. Thompson and British Communism, 1937-1955<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Examination of E.P. Thompson's activism in the Communist Party (CPGB) has been limited. Some historians, basing themselves on his memories and interpretations of his 1955 biography of William Morris, have portrayed him as a dissenter, at best a loyal critic of CPGB policy. Others have deduced political conformity from his fourteen years membership of a declining organisation. This article reappraises the literature and reassesses the making and unmaking of a Communist intellectual. It explores Thompson's contemporary writings – rarely exposed to critical scrutiny – and employs recently-released security files to reconstruct the historian's ideas and activity across the postwar decade. The article concludes that in these years Thompson remained a faithful supporter of the Soviet Union, the party line and 'high Stalinism'. Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and the Russian invasion of Hungary did not validate pre-existing dissent. They were the pivotal factors provoking a rupture with the Stalinism Thompson had championed from 1942 to 1955.*

**Keywords:** E. P. Thompson; Communist Party of Great Britain; Soviet Union; Stalinism; Cold War; William Morris; Cultural Politics.

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E. P. Thompson was one of the great historians of the twentieth century: he combined scrupulous scholarship and theoretical iconoclasm with a compelling historical imagination and a memorable prose style to achieve global popularity (for a succinct summary of Thompson's achievements as a historian see Eastwood, 2000, pp. 634-637). A quarter of a century after his death he remains a commanding figure in the historiography of labour, the subject of a stream of monographs and essays which shows little sign of abating (see Hamilton, 2011). Eric Hobsbawm remarked that Thompson was the only historian he knew possessed of 'genius in the traditional sense of the word' (Hobsbawm, 2002, p. 215). Perry Anderson reflected: 'Readers of *The Making of the English Working Class* or indeed *Whigs and Hunters* will always remember these as major works of literature.' (Anderson, 1980, p. 1). Thompson was a socialist historian who blended assiduous primary research and a poetic sensibility with iconic activism. Each of his major works constituted '...in its own way a militant intervention in the present as well as a professional recovery of the past' (Anderson, 1980, p. 2). Everything he wrote represented an intense personal encounter with the evidence by 'one of the most outstanding personalities of our age' (Saville, 1993, p. ix). Doris Lessing recorded:

Edward Thompson is in the middle of that process, being frozen into the past, as the Marxist historian of working class Britain. But his contemporaries remember him as several times larger than most people, romantic, always in passionate debate and with that kind of imagination that lights every scene he is part of or describes, with generous hopes for humankind. I wish I believed that there were young Edward Thompsons growing up in Britain to take his place, but alas, we live in a grudging, cold, cautious time. (Lessing, 1998, pp. 328-9)

Thompson's histories have attracted extensive examination. It has been claimed, in contrast, that his politics, 'his engagements with the Communist Party, his political involvement with the New Left and his ideas about nuclear disarmament have been largely forgotten or are barely mentioned in academic discourse...there is almost a silence about his early political affiliations and activism' (Efstathiou, 2015, p. viii)). Although such comments

take insufficient account of recent evaluation of Thompson's role in the New Left and the peace movements after 1956, (Matthews, 2013; Newman, 2013; Davis, 2013; Taylor, 2013) assessment of his years in the Communist Party (CPGB) remains unsatisfactory (a pioneering study is Palmer, 1993, pp. 52-77; see also Efstathiou, 2015, pp. 54-5). To some extent this is a product of circumstance. Thompson's papers are closed until 2043 and he never published memoirs.<sup>3</sup> In consequence, commentators have frequently based interpretation of Thompson's experience as a Communist on his own retrospective comments. They have also relied on perceived dissonance between the Stalinised Marxism of the CPGB and ideas in his major text of the time, *William Morris* – ideas about historical materialism, base and superstructure, necessity and desire, morality and vision – to depict Thompson as a dissident (Thompson, 1955).

His recollections are fragmented, terse and unfurnished. In a 1976 interview, he recalled he had been 'very active' in the CPGB. But that 'didn't mean that one didn't have many inner doubts and also wasn't guilty of many casuistries explaining away what one should have repudiated in the character of Stalinism' (Thompson, 1976 interview with Mike Merrill, in Abelow, 1983, p. 11). He noted: 'There were a good many frustrated proto-revisionists in the Communist Party in those days...we designated the enemy as "King Street" and as "Jungle Marxism"...' (Thompson, 1977, p. 272, note 15). In a tribute to CPGB poet, Edgell Rickword in 1979, Thompson wrote:

Long before "1956" there were centres of "premature revisionism" among Communist intellectuals and among others who resisted the didactic methods of the Party's officers, the wooden economism of its politics and the correct pabulum offered as "Marxism". This incipient heresy was unfocussed, lacking in articulation, was expressed as often as not in jokes and resistances and we identified our enemy far too loosely as "King Street" – a bullying and bumbling bureaucracy rather than (as it was) a highly articulated

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<sup>3</sup> Conradi (2012) was given access by Dorothy Thompson for *A Very English Hero*. Croft (2003) used Thompson's letters to Randall Swingler in his *Comrade Heart* but observed Dorothy's request not to quote from them, *ibid*, note 7, 277. Both books suggest the value of the archive.

Stalinist clerisy (Thompson, 1994, pp. 239-40).

He stated in 1976: 'To defend the tradition of Morris (as I still do) entailed unqualified resistance to Stalinism' (Abelove, 1983, p. 21). A postscript to the revised 1976 edition of *Morris* observed: 'My book was then, I suppose, already a work of muffled revisionism' (Thompson, 1976, p. 810). Thompson concluded: 'Morris by 1955 had claimed me...When in 1956 my disagreements with orthodox Marxism became fully articulate, I fell back on modes of perception which I'd learned in those years of close company with Morris...' (Thompson, 1976, p. 810).

Such reflections are hardly authoritative. Thompson also remarked: 'In describing this orthodoxy as Stalinist I, of course, employ hindsight' and remembered his 'simplistic pro-Soviet feelings' (quotes from (Thompson, 1977, p. 173, note 15; Dworkin, 1997, pp. 17-8). 'Inner doubts', were far from unusual and their revelation frequent after 1956 by those orthodox in earlier years.<sup>4</sup> The precise nature of 'heresy' and how 'incipient' it was goes unspecified. That Morris influenced Thompson from the early 1950s is apparent; that this influence turned Thompson into a dissenting Communist before 1956 is questionable. A variety of views on agency and morality were compatible with CPGB politics. Watersheds are defined with a degree of arbitrariness, demarcation may neglect prior developments. But there is a danger in diminishing the transformative impact of Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin and Hungary without contemporary corroboration. We should be cautious about casting Thompson as a critic of CPGB policy before 1956.

Nonetheless, largely on the basis of his recollections and their interpretations of *Morris*, some historians have depicted Thompson as uncomfortable with or opposed to CPGB policy prior to that date. Eastwood (2000, p. 638) claims in passing, 'politically he existed at

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the autobiography Hobsbawm wrote in 1950 (2003, p. 17): 'Most people have political differences with the Party from time to time. I've argued them out and accepted Party decisions until the line, changed. How else are they to be settled? I've tried to stick to democratic centralism'.

best uneasily in the Communist Party in the 1950s...'. Efstathiou (2015, pp. 54-5) insists, 'Thompson's covert opposition to the Party line persisted until 1956...when it was transformed into an open revisionism.' Others conclude: '[Thompson's] already qualified support for the British Communist Party was shattered in 1956...' (Fieldhouse, Koditschek and Taylor, 2013, p. 8). Winslow (2014, p. 23) portrays Edward and Dorothy Thompson as loyalists: 'Still they were critics; one need not look far for the evidence of this. Thompson's long 1950 poem "A Place Called Choice" concludes, "I declare that man has choice."<sup>5</sup> A line from a poem, rarely clinches matters: 'A Place Called Choice' may just as validly be read as an affirmation of Thompson's choice of Communism against capitalism, Socialism against barbarism, Stalin against Attlee.

Himmelfarb placed Thompson in that mould; her critical stance was dismissed by Kaye who claimed she '...conjured up a shadowy image of "Stalinism"...' (Himmelfarb, 1987, pp. 82-3; Kaye, 1990, p. 257). Writers outside the academy have perceived Thompson's Stalinism as more substantial, although their verdicts are also light on evidence. Fryer celebrated those who had been critics before 1956, '...when anti-Stalinism was not the fashionable pastime it is on the left today...when Comrade Thompson himself was a Stalinist' (Anonymous [Peter Fryer], 1958, p. 35). Anderson (1980, p. 117) inquired: 'Where was Thompson in 1952 (Doctors' Plot) or 1951 (Slansky Trial) for example?' Hallas (1993, pp. 20-2) pronounced Thompson, '...an enthusiastic Stalinist... until 1956 Thompson was an uncritical apologist for Stalinism'. No backing was provided for these claims which were challenged by Challinor (1993): 'In the early 1950s I had a number of long discussions with [Thompson]...he had doubts about the latest Stalinist encyclicals on subjects like Lysenko and linguistics'.

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson, *Collected Poems* (1999). Pp. 80-81 The poem – whose correct title is 'The Place Called Choice' – has also been cited to suggest 'both *The Making* and Thompson's work within the New Left developed a perspective that he had forged well before his break with the CP. Davis, 2014, p. 443.

The question has been inadequately addressed and remains disputed. Yet it is relevant to any reconstruction of Thompson's life. There are wider issues. Lessing (1998, p. 238) noted that recuperating Communism entails confronting the '...incredible and unforgivable fact that some of the most socially concerned, hopeful-for-the future, dedicated souls connived at the crimes in the communist world by refusing to recognise them and, then, refusing to acknowledge them openly'. Addressing similar issues, Martin Kettle (2016) – the son of the Thompsons' party friends Arnold and Margot Kettle – insisted these problems 'must be at the heart of any study of British Communism.

This article assembles the material available to document Thompson's politics during his fourteen years in the CPGB. I review the evidence in order to explore whether significant criticism emerged before Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' legitimated it, whether gestation of the politics Thompson advocated in 1956 can be detected earlier. Scarcity of material has been somewhat ameliorated by the release in 2016 of records of the surveillance of Thompson by MI5. These files provide new material, although their coverage is patchy.<sup>6</sup> Given the state of archival play, judgement has to be provisional. But the exercise may take forward biographical work on Thompson. It may suggest a more contradictory picture which recognises that lives are not linear; that people and circumstances change; that individuals think and act differently at different times; and that support for inhumanity may co-exist with humanity.

### **The Making of A Communist**

Thompson's early years are well-documented. His father, E.J. Thompson, was a liberal critic of imperialism, an expert on India who mixed with nationalist leaders. A former

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<sup>6</sup> National Archives, London, (NA), KV2/4290-4294. They do not cover, for example, Thompson's correspondence with Lessing, Saville, Swingler and other Communist and New Left figures. A few of the letters are also in the CPGB archive at the People's History Museum, Manchester (PHM).

Methodist missionary, he held Fellowships at Oriel College Oxford. Edward's mother Theodosia, was the daughter of American Presbyterian missionaries. With his older brother Frank, Edward was raised among the comfortably-off, socially conscious, liberal intelligentsia, and educated at Oxford's fashionable Dragon School. From there, Frank went to Winchester, Edward to Kingswood, his father's former school founded by Wesley (Palmer, 1993, pp. 11-40; Hamilton, 2011, pp. 11-46; Conradi, 2012, pp. 15-89). The context facilitated their path to Communism. The university remained insulated from the working class cantered on Oxford's car factories. Politics intruded in the shape of the hunger marches, fascism, Spain and appeasement. A small section of the middle class was drawn to the CPGB's popular front policy based on building alliances between Communists, the labour movement and 'progressive' Liberals and Conservatives to combat fascism at home and abroad. It promised a role to intellectuals in defending and extending bourgeois democracy and developing Britain's radical traditions (Fyrth, 1985; Clark, 1979; Claudin, 1975; Branson, 1997, pp. 110-158). Only a minority responded. Thompson wrote:

I recollect at Oxbridge before the war the residential area where I lived largely populated by university staff could find the money to buy a field in memory of Mathew Arnold but not to equip an ambulance unit for Spain; and that on the eve of Munich a well-attended social gathering was held – for the relief of caged birds (Thompson, 1950b, p. 32).

His parents campaigned for the anti-appeasement candidate in the 1938 'Munich' by-election in Oxford but drew the line at Communism. Influenced by the Carritt brothers, family friends who fought in Spain, Frank's interest blossomed at Winchester and New College Oxford where he joined the CPGB in 1939 (Thompson and Thompson, 2000, pp. vii-ix; Thompson, 1997, pp. 48-9; Conradi, 2012, pp. 110, 122-4). At Kingswood, Edward followed. The headmaster, Alfred Sackett, encouraged social awareness and moral purpose. There was a peace group and literary societies: Thompson read Left Book Club editions, Auden and Spender, as well as Blake, Saroyan and Whitman, and wrote poetry. He kicked

against Christianity and pursued his interest in Communism under the wing of an older student, Arnold Rattenbury (Thompson, 1997, p. 52; Walsh, 1979; Ackers. 2011).

Rattenbury's interest had been fanned by the Kingswood music teacher, John Sykes, who moved in CPGB circles. Sykes introduced Rattenbury to the writings of Randall Swingler and subsequently to the poet himself. With Rattenbury and another older pupil, Geoffrey Matthews, later a Shelley scholar, professor at Reading University and CPGB activist, Thompson was disciplined for selling the *Daily Worker* and interviewed by the police for attempting to contact the Young Communist League (YCL) (Lucas, 2007; Croft, 2003, 2007). At Kingswood, he absorbed seminal texts by Communists. Of *Studies in A Dying Culture* he attested: '...Caudwell's insights and Caudwell's confusions were imprinted upon many of my generation...' (Thompson, 1977, p. 270). The book ignited an interest in cultural theory while Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword's compilation, *A Handbook of Freedom* (1939), reinforced a growing fascination with the history of popular resistance (Thompson, 1994, pp. 241-2). *The English Revolution 1640* similarly embodied the ethos of the popular front and intensified Thompson's passion for radical history and literature. The essay by Christopher Hill outlined what became Communist orthodoxy on the development of capitalism, while Rickword's 'Milton and the English Revolution' nurtured germinating ideas about the artist and social change (Abelove, 1983, p. 19).

When Thompson arrived at Corpus Christi College Cambridge in autumn 1941 he was a Communist sympathiser. His attitude to the Hitler-Stalin pact and CPGB support for peace with Germany remain obscure. The Nazi onslaught on the Soviet Union changed everything. He joined the party in early 1942, determined to defeat fascism, defend the Soviet Union, master history and literature and turn them into instruments for the emancipation of the British working class (Palmer, 1993, p. 52). We know little of his first stay at Cambridge which lasted a matter of months. The social anthropologist, Peter



Worsley, who became a Cambridge undergraduate and Communist in autumn 1942 recalled an atmosphere of anti-fascism, pro-Soviet sentiment and euphoria over the defiance of the Red Army (Worsley, 1989).

By that time, Thompson was an officer in the 10<sup>th</sup> Tank Brigade, 17/21<sup>st</sup> Lancers. In North Africa and Italy, he experienced the war as an enactment of his beliefs.<sup>7</sup> He revered the Red Army and the resistance movements:

...What happened was glorious and inspiring. Deserted often by their leaders with traitors in their midst, the common people of the world took up the challenge...on one thing every nation and every individual was in complete unity. And that was that the war was being fought to end this thing fascism (Thompson, 1947d, pp. 5-6).

These years when the Soviet Union's isolation temporarily dissolved were, he repeatedly testified, central to his Communism:

One had this extraordinarily formative moment in which it was possible to be deeply committed even to the point of life itself in support of a particular political struggle that was at the same time a popular struggle; that is one didn't feel a sense of being isolated in any way...I suppose this does affect the way one was formed' (Abelove, 1983, p. 11).

Thompson extended 'that insurgent popular front type movement [which] reached its peak between '43 and '46' backwards to 1936 to constitute 'a decade of heroes' (ibid.). His construction occluded inconvenient features of reality. The 'decade of heroes' was the decade of the consolidation of Stalinism, the Moscow trials, the purges, the Hitler-Stalin pact, Finland and the imperialist war line, Katyn and the brutalities of the Red Army. Romanticised celebration of an ephemeral, expedient unity was bound up with the memory of his brother, executed by the Bulgarian government in 1944 after fighting with the partisans (Thompson and Thompson, 1947). He remembered Frank as an idealist and humanist: '...totally at odds

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<sup>7</sup> NA, KV2/4290, Extract from Personal Papers of 2/Lieut.EP Thompson RAC 30.11.43 When the police asked for his identity documents, Thompson responded: 'I must get out of here and start fighting Fascism abroad and then come back and fight it here.': Report on Marjorie Lynall Clark, Communist...4.11.43.

with the cardboard ideological picture of what Stalinism was. His commitment was to people and above all to the astonishing heroism of the partisan movements' (Abelove, 1983, pp. 11-12). This is reflected in letters which have been published and his questioning of aspects of CPGB doctrine. But commitment to people can co-exist with commitment to Stalinism. On his biographer's account, Frank was:

...inspired by belief in a never-never land USSR, where hunger and unemployment had been banished, all had equal rights and all stories of Stalin's brutality were mere propaganda...It was not that he thought Stalin's crimes mystically mandated by history, he refused to believe that the USSR could be such a corrupt and tyrannical regime as the papers said...The government of the USSR - "whatever we say about its methods" - was uniquely concerned with the welfare of its people.<sup>8</sup>

He learned Russian and joked about the terror: 'Old Bolsheviks never die. They only get bumped off by Stalin' (Conradi, 2012, p. 227). The brothers were generally in accord; there were differences. At the time, Edward accused Frank of 'a lazy all embracing humanism' which glossed over Communist doctrine. When Bill Carritt reproached him with resigning in 1956, Edward replied Frank would have left the CPGB earlier (Conradi, 2012, pp. 225, 359) Later in life he pointed out: '...Frank's adult consciousness commenced to mature in the thirties. By contrast my own consciousness began to mature in the years of war. I was a product of the forties' (Thompson, 1997, pp. 48-9). But Frank's commitment developed in wartime while Edward internalised the left-wing narrative of the 1930s. Experience at one remove, events viewed from the confines of school, sometimes through the prism of Frank and Rattenbury, can prove enduring.

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<sup>8</sup> Conradi, 2012, pp. 163, 190. Conradi quotes an intriguing comment by Frank's friend, Peter Reddaway, who described 'an emotional idealist, not like Eric Hobsbawm a theorist nor like E.P. a tough apparatchik'. Ibid, p. 172.

When he returned to Cambridge in 1945 imbued with popular front mythology his making was incomplete. He was 21 and had negligible experience of political work. The next two years consolidated his conversion. He took a 'wartime degree' in history, read widely in poetry and drama and broadened his political understanding. Studying Marx and Vico strengthened his interest in the dialectic between purposive human action and its circumscriptions.(D. Thompson, 2001, p. viii). Dorothy Sale (née Towers) reinforced his commitment to Communism and history. The daughter of musicians who owned shops in London, Dorothy joined the YCL at grammar school in 1939. Conscripted for war service as a trainee draughtswoman, she was completing her degree at Girton College (D. Thompson, 1993, pp. 1-18). The couple lived with two Cambridge Communists, Sam and Pearl Lilley. Sam, a Fellow of St Johns College had joined the party in 1936. A mathematician and physicist, passionate about the history of science, he subsequently worked in university adult education. Pearl, a member since 1934, introduced the Thompsons to local politics: she was a shop steward in a Cambridge factory, a mainstay of the Housewives Association and the Anglo-Soviet Friendship Committee and a candidate in municipal elections (D. Thompson in Cambridge Communists, 2003, pp. 71-4; Stevenson, no date).

Maurice Dobb, whose ideas on the development of capitalism were being debated by the CPGB Historians Group and fleetingly, Eric Hobsbawm, were in Cambridge. The academic who influenced Thompson most was Arnold Kettle, a literary critic who had served in Yugoslavia. Married to Bill Carritt's ex-wife Margot, Kettle supervised returning undergraduates before moving to Leeds University in 1947.<sup>9</sup> Among fellow students Thompson was closest to his future publisher, Martin Eve, reading history at Corpus Christi after demob from the navy and the future poet, critic and former tank officer, David Holbrook, studying at Downing College (Musson, 1998; Storer, 2015). Also active in the Socialist Club,

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<sup>9</sup> From early 1946 to early 1947, Hobsbawm (2002, p. 175) spent several days each week in Cambridge as a research student. For Dobb, see Parker, 2008; Turner, 2009.

where Thompson was elected President and contributed to its *Bulletin*, were Worsley; Anne Seligman and her husband, the aspiring novelist and future screenwriter, Wolf Mankowitz; Dorothy Cole (later Wedderburn) who came from a London working class background; and her husband Max.<sup>10</sup>

Thompson was an admirer of Hamish Henderson back from serving in North Africa and Italy to complete his degree at Downing. Thompson corresponded with the Communist Scot, subsequently celebrated for his contribution to the folksong revival and the popularization of Gramsci and praised his poetry (Hunt, 2011; Neat, 2009; Thompson, 1949b, pp. 756-9). Beyond Cambridge, he was involved with the CPGB-aligned *Our Time* animated by Rickword and Swingler. He renewed his friendship with Rattenbury and became close to Swingler after the CPGB sent him to Cambridge to talk about Stalin's campaign against the Soviet literary intelligentsia (Thompson, 1994, p. 236; Croft, 2003, p. 177). This 'ready made network ... a circle of comrades' (Rowbotham 1993, pp. 90-1; Conradi, 2012, pp. 366-7), cemented Thompson's allegiance to the party, the Soviet Union, and the satellites it was creating across Eastern Europe.

In July 1947, Thompson and Theodosia travelled to Bulgaria to attend commemorations of Frank, and met Georgi Dimitrov, who after flirting with coalitions was imposing Sovietization. Thirty years later Thompson stated: 'I was convinced of the authenticity of the popular front *then*. It was very soon broken and it was broken by the orthodox Russian trained Communists and by Russian pressure' (Abelove, 1983, p. 12; Conradi, 2012, pp. 347-8). By the summer of 1947, Stalin and the Bulgarian Communists agreed that even a 'decorative' opposition was unacceptable. But Thompson's enthusiasm remained unbounded. 'The new democracies', he recorded, were 'the most inspiring

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<sup>10</sup> NA, KV2/4290, B.I.A. Note mentions Thompson's article in the *Bulletin* attacking the US press 'for consistent suppression of the truth.' D. Thompson in *Cambridge Communists*, 2003, pp. 71-74; Calder (1998).

developments in the history of Man...These are revolutionary changes. Human nature itself is being changed by human agency' (Thompson, 1947b, pp. 34-5; Dimitrov, 1996pp. 272-89).

He quoted a Yugoslav leader:

These changes effect a fundamental transformation of things, men and relationships...Our people would be experiencing grim and difficult times had western democracy been imposed upon them...The working people emancipated from class and national oppression have closed their ranks in the struggle for the creation of a better and happier future (Thompson, 1947b, p. 35).

He had, he believed, witnessed socialism in the making. He celebrated the position of the arts and intellectuals in the Soviet bloc and castigated sceptics. Blind to human progress critics had '...built up their own world of myths, Yogis and Commissars' (ibid). Disparaging Arthur Koestler, Cyril Connolly, Raymond Mortimer, VS Pritchett, Stephen Spender, Rebecca West and *Horizon*, he insisted intellectuals in the Soviet Union and its dependencies had voluntarily embraced a people's culture:

The great majority of the active intellectuals are cooperating enthusiastically in tackling the new tasks and problems before them. It is to explain away this fact that the world of myth is invoked...[and] our critics must pass dark reflections on the liberty of the artist in the Soviet Union and the new democracies. It is hinted that the artist lives under a continuous moral terrorism and that if he works for and among the people he has "compromised and submitted" to "The Party". His liberty even his life would be in danger if he were to write about the really poetic things of life such as water rats, gangrene and sexual infirmities (ibid).

Thompson's text teemed with what he later termed "Stalinist pieties": '...we have all become fuddled and only a good dose of the free air of the People's Republics can clear our system...This problem is largely solved by the march of history itself...No climate could be more fertile for the creative imagination...' (ibid. pp. 35, 36, 38). 'There is no capitalist country', he declared, 'where the social position of the cultural worker is so respected...

I was able to ask Georgi Dimitrov this question: “What are the main tasks before writers and cultural workers in Bulgaria today?” He answered: “First, to represent in their art the heroic labour of the people for the Two Year Plan. Second, by constant application and study to increase their mastery of their own art – forms (ibid, p. 35).

For Thompson, the imperative of quality predominated in the ‘Soviet Literary Controversy’ - not the desire of Stalin and Zhdanov to utilise the state’s monopoly of intellectual production to ensure writers conformed: ‘This demand for the sharpening of critical standards and not the Zoschenko business was the really significant aspect of the affair (ibid, p. 36). He also displayed a hardheaded, if sanitized realism: if intellectuals wanted to ‘exhibit the dusty corners of their own personalities...no one will stop them...Only they must expect to come in for some hard criticism and neither the state nor the trade unions and party organisations are going to support them while they do it...’ (ibid, p. 35).

### **Thompson and Cold War Communism**

The literature does not dwell in detail on the politics Thompson practiced during what he subsequently designated ‘the era of high Stalinism’ (Thompson, 1981a, p. 135). What did the term mean? For the later Thompson, Stalinism was the ideology of the rulers of Russia: it equated socialism with the Soviet Union and subordinated the fate of the international working class to the fortunes of the Soviet elite. ‘High Stalinism’ represented the zenith of that ideology. Socialism, it claimed, centred on ownership of the means of production and economic planning by the state. It involved rejection of liberal democracy *and* workers’ self-management; rule by an elite exercised through party control of the state, domination of the party by its leadership and *its* domination by Stalin; subservience of cultural production to state policy; and conviction that socialism could be attained within national boundaries, with the USSR the dynamo and model of world revolution. Capitalist encirclement and internal threats ensured class struggle persisted; that justified the extension, not the withering away,

of the state, terror and the Gulag. The Sovietization of Eastern Europe and revolution in China reinforced the idea that Stalinism was socialism (see Nove, 1993; Tucker, 1999; Hoffman, 2003; Van Ree, 2006).

Its ‘distortions’ included ethnic cleansing, anti-Semitism and cultural clampdown. The *Zhdanovshchina* kicked off with the campaign against the poet, Anna Akhmatova and the satirical writer, Mikhael Zoschenko. Khachaturian, Prokofiev and Shostakovitch were blacklisted; prominent scientists were disciplined; Lysenko was canonized for services to genetics; and Stalin emerged as an expert on linguistics (Gorlizki and Khlevniuk, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2015, pp. 173-223). The campaign against ‘cosmopolitanism’ engulfed the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. The arrest of leading physicians who Stalin branded ‘Jewish nationalists’ ignited a moral panic over ‘the Doctors Plot’. Thousands were dismissed, exiled or executed (Rubinstein, 2001, 2016).

‘High Stalinism’ saw creation of the Cominform and ‘the theory of two camps’: the imperialist nations were pitted against the camp of democracy headed by the Soviet Union (Procacci, 1994; Gori and Pons, 1996; Naimark, 2010; Rajak, 2010). The onset of Cold War demanded a turn to class struggle to pressurize imperialism to recognise Russia’s sphere of influence. Despite ‘class against class’ rhetoric, the line embodied features of the popular front: it required Communists to emphasise the national interest and mobilise ‘progressives’ in alliances for peace and independence from America. Tito’s refusal to accept subordination provoked a witch-hunt. The Rajk trial in Hungary and the Kostov trial in Bulgaria saw leading Communists convicted as agents of fascism, imperialism, Trotskyism and Titoism. Similar events followed across Eastern Europe (Claudin, 1975, pp. 455-479, 576-593; Gibianski, 1996, pp. 222-245.). Stalin’s death provided relaxation in repression; strengthening of ‘peaceful coexistence’; rapprochement with Yugoslavia; and marginalisation

of the Cominform (Rubinstein, 2016; Haslam, 2011, pp.. 133-163).

The CPGB embraced ‘high Stalinism’ without significant opposition.<sup>11</sup> It structured Thompson’s politics: he wrote in 1956 of ‘... our confusion of the true principles of internationalism with a servile attitude to the leadership of the Soviet Union’ (Thompson, 2016a, p. 151). With John Saville he reflected: ‘...the interests of the British working class have been interpreted in such a way that we have identified them with the acceptance of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union...’ (Saville and Thompson, 2016, p. 137). The party passed from critical support of Labour to denunciation of its policies. Britain was reconfigured as an American colony. Excoriating Hollywood, pulp fiction, modernism and TS Eliot, the CPGB supported Zhdanov’s campaign for proletarian culture and socialist realism and justified Lysenkoism (Branson, 1997; Callaghan, 2003; W. Thompson, 2001; Zhdanov, 1950). Members rubberstamped the anathema on Tito and the case against Rajk and Kostov:

The trials revealed that this false and disastrous policy was a deliberate and fully conscious policy on the part of leading Titoites...It was a deliberate policy carried out by Trotskyites and provocateurs who had gained over a whole period commanding positions in the Yugoslav Communist Party and who under the instructions of Anglo-American imperialism were trying to use these positions to restore capitalism in Eastern Europe (Klugmann, 1951, p. 55; see also Kartun, 1949).

Its leaders discovered related problems inside the CPGB:

We have already found and expelled from our ranks agents of British Intelligence as well as provocateurs. In addition factionalist and Titoist elements have endeavoured to carry out political activity in our Party...we will intensify revolutionary vigilance and be greatly aided in uncovering and rooting out from our Party enemy agents disruptionists and bad elements (Quoted in W. Thompson, 2001, p. 117).

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<sup>11</sup> There were complaints around the 1945 CPGB Congress over the wartime policy of class collaboration, opposition from branches in the South East in 1947 over similar issues and the exit of a small group in Glasgow in 1953, all of which emphasised the minor scale of opposition. See, for example, Heffer, 1991; McShane and Smith, 1978, pp. 242-251.



‘High Stalinism’ cannot be dismissed as a shadowy, peripheral, presence, a crude backcloth to the really significant domestic business of the CPGB; its policies and practice permeated the party. Its programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, was approved by Stalin. Sam Aaronovitch extolled Stalin as an economist; Maunce Cornforth expanded on his abilities as a philosopher; J. D. Bernal lauded his virtues as a scientist; and Christopher Hill commended him as a historian (Aaronovitch, 1949; Cornforth, 1949; Bernal, 1953; Hill, 1953). Ewan MacColl composed ‘The Ballad of Joe Stalin.’<sup>12</sup> Harry Pollitt ‘with tear-blinded eyes and a grief we have not the language at our command to describe’ mourned ‘Stalin-loved as no other man in world history has ever been loved by working people...Stalin who has written golden pages in world history whose lustre time can never efface’ (*Daily Worker*, 6 March 1953.). The CPGB endorsed every aspect of Russian policy from the Berlin Blockade, through the Korean war, to the rehabilitation of Tito.

Headed by Emile Burns and Aaronovitch, its cultural committee launched ‘The Battle of Ideas’ and propagated socialist realism which according to Kettle ‘...like socialism itself opens out potentialities hitherto unknown to man’ (Kettle, 1952, p. 42; Aaronovitch, 2016). Aaronovitch (1952, p. 42) insisted writers represent the conflict between capitalism and the working class, evoke the potential in struggle and develop the British radical tradition to emphasise the necessity of socialism, remembering always ‘it is the people who create’.<sup>13</sup> Despite the Historians’ Group’s dedication to historiographical innovation, its leading lights shared these perspectives without exception and ‘uncritically defended the Soviet Union and

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<sup>12</sup> This pearl of socialist realism began:

Joe Stalin was a mighty man, a mighty man was he.  
He led the Soviet People on the road to victory  
All through the revolution he fought at Lenin’s side  
And they made a combination till the day that Lenin died  
Quoted in Samuel, 1985, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Hobday recalled ‘I once referred to Zhdanov as “the Soviet Sam Aaronovitch” and Charles Poulsen replied, “Do you think he’s really as awful as that?”’ quoted, Croft, 2003, p. 277, note 2.

Stalin' (Dworkin, 1997, p. 21).<sup>14</sup> In the face of mild McCarthyism, the CPGB preserved much of its trade union base. Its electoral performance was dismal: in the 1950 general election it lost its two MPs and in 1955 polled poorly. Membership declined to 33,000 by 1955. The crudity of some aspects of policy, including Zhdanovism, was blunted but isolation was not substantially ameliorated by 'the thaw' in 1954-1955 (Stevens, 1999; Branson, 1997, pp. 205-09; Callaghan, 2003, p. 184; Parson, 1995).<sup>15</sup> One historian considered that by 1953:

the party [had] acquired the character of an insulated religious sect blindly convinced of its own messianistic mission and revelling in the insults and hatred of the infidel. The internal party culture differed in detail according to locality but the framework of political beliefs and assumptions was paramount and was essentially the same everywhere from Aberdeen to Southampton (W. Thompson, 2001, p. 119).

This was Thompson's party and the record discloses no significant dissent on his part. After leaving Bulgaria he travelled to Yugoslavia and worked for a month as 'Commandant' of the British Brigade of Volunteers building a railway to further industrialisation. Initiated by the People's Youth to support the Five Year Plan, the project attracted volunteers across Europe. Communist students and academics took the leading role under the auspices of the party-sponsored British-Yugoslav Association. They included Dorothy Thompson, who acted as 'secretary' of the brigade; Bill Francis, 'Works Foreman'; Worsley, 'Leader of the British Working-Group'; Dr Mary Barrow, 'Brigade Medical Officer'; Steve Mason, 'Cultural Officer'; Eve, 'Brigade Choirmaster'; and 'Fred' Klingender, who supervised artists such as Paul Hogarth and Ronald Searle associated with *Our Time* (Thompson, 1948a).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hobsbawm (1978, p. 26): 'We were as loyal, active and committed a group of Communists as any.'

<sup>15</sup> As the Russians began to criticise 'misunderstandings' of Zhdanovism, Burns changed tack. It was wrong, he explained, 'for any comrade in discussing such scientific and cultural questions to take a rigid line of trying to impose some particular views on his colleagues': quoted in Russell, 1954, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Klingender who lectured in sociology at Hull was the art editor of *Our Time*; Mason was a lecturer at Oxford; Barrow was a Birmingham GP. Among others involved were the Thompsons' Cambridge friend, Sam Shepperson, later a professor of History at Edinburgh University, the Communist factory worker, Jeff Skelley and the London Labour councillor, Lalage Sharp.

This brief experiment in democracy was for Thompson a prefiguration of how social relations can be transformed and people ‘within the context of certain institutions and culture can conceptualise in terms of “our” rather than “my” or “their”...’ (Thompson, 1981b, p.

370). He wrote at the time:

...there can be heroism in labour equal to that in war. Its fruition and recognition appear to arise only in a society whose values are strange to those who have learnt the code of capitalism. It springs from the pride of ownership by the ordinary man of his own country, its sources of wealth and its means of production...The values of a growing socialism are new values, those bound up in a cooperative ethic and in a new emphasis on man’s obligations to his neighbours and to society (Thompson, 1948b, pp. 2-3).

It was the first heady days of Communism, a year before the break with Stalin.

Unlike the other satellites, the Yugoslavs had made their own revolution. It was soon apparent Thompson’s experience could not be generalised. It became clear to most observers that the ordinary worker neither controlled the means of production nor ‘owned the country’.

The pamphlet Thompson edited celebrating the experience was headed by an epigraph from Tito and the rhetoric of military discipline, Stalinist construction and Stakhanovism was never far away:

Keen, competitive, friendly rivalry was fostered by a system of awarding a banner to the best brigades and *Udarnik* badges to the best individual workers. Brigades became honoured as “Shock-Brigades” if they exceeded their norm by 30 per cent over a period of three weeks. Points were given not only for the work on the line but for the care of tools...The Albanians achieved 400 per cent of their norm on one shift and were four times proclaimed “Shock-workers” (Francis, 1948, p. 36).

At the end of the month, Thompson told the Yugoslav press:

...the Fascists must be wiped off the face of the earth...In these critical times the British people are looking more and more to Eastern Europe, seeking inspiration and hope...they will be frantic when they discover that false propaganda and instigation to war have divided them so long from their real friends...the progressive youth of Britain has left an undertaking of friendship...forged in British sweat which has mingled with the sweat of the Yugoslav Youth on the soil of your railway...<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> NA, KV2/4290, Spotted Dog Report...7.10.47. Extract and translation of article in *Politika* 14.9.47.

MI5 noted: ‘Thompson spoke completely in Communist style’; it was concerned at the use the Yugoslav Embassy might make of his statements.<sup>18</sup> The Thompsons reported to the party’s East European experts, Klugmann and Derek Kartun and prepared a memo for Jimmy Shields – who liaised with the Soviet bloc from King Street – on the need to extend the project.<sup>19</sup> Some were less inspired. One volunteer found it:

...rather like service life without the food. One did a six hour navying shift on nothing more nourishing than cucumber sandwiches made of rye bread that was invariably sour. Nobody was surprised or aggrieved; this was a poor country...Far more disagreeable was the rapid translation of our posturing and giggling cynics of the journey, now suddenly emerging as sober faced Communists, into camp officials and functionaries of various kinds...we were about the only Labour supporters in the British Brigade led by E.P. Thompson...Everywhere was evidence of an intense nationalist fervour which gripped much of the country and this, combined with the experience of travelling with a group whose members shared a quasi-religious faith, gave me useful insight into what it would be like to live as an odd-man out in a society of passionate believers...for this reason alone the Yugoslav experience was valuable (Fox, 1990, pp. 196-7).<sup>20</sup>

Thompson’s commitment pushed him into apologetics. The Petkov Affair signalled the suppression of opposition to the Sovietization of Eastern Europe. Petkov, a leader of the Bulgarian Agrarian Party, had opposed the pre-1944 governments and collaborated with the Communists. Disillusioned, he refused to join the Fatherland Front and demanded America guarantee free elections. He was tried and executed (Dimitrov, 1996, pp. 272-289). In a letter to the *New Statesman*, Thompson echoed the Cominform line relayed in Klugmann’s

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<sup>18</sup> NA, KV2/4290, Spotted Dog Report. It was recommended that members of the brigade should be ‘closely watched’. Returning from Yugoslavia, the Thompsons were attacked by Italians protesting against the ‘Free State of Trieste’. According to the *Daily Mirror*, Dorothy was stripped to the waist by ‘a gang headed by a platinum blonde wearing knuckle dusters...The gang ignored her shouts of “I’m British” – press cutting in Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> NA, KV2/4290, Intercept of telephone conversation between Dorothy Sale and James Klugmann, 19.9.1947; Edward Thompson to Comrade Shields, 25.10.47. Thompson stressed the brigade should be selected through the British-Yugoslav Association Youth Committee with finance from ‘progressive trade unions’. There was a need for a collective identity and dedication to disciplined work. The brigade committee should be empowered to send back to England anyone ‘guilty of irresponsible behaviour if their decision was endorsed by an agreed majority of the Brigade.’

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Thompson (Thompson, 1948a, p. 34) claimed of the British Brigade ‘About thirty to forty per cent were Communists, ten per cent were Labour...’.

apologia in the CPGB press a week earlier (Klugmann, 1947; Andrews, 2015, pp. 163-5). Petkov's party had 'attracted all the pro-Fascist and extreme reactionary elements who came to dominate its counsels' and been encouraged by the Americans. He had been executed '... for directing and inspiring sabotage and military conspiracy' and 'the Supreme Court of Cassation confirmed both the procedure and the sentence.' (Thompson, 1947c). Against those who claimed the affair was part of an evil pattern, Thompson responded: 'Part of a pattern, it certainly is, the pattern of history' (ibid).

Inspired by a revival of Mosleyism in 1947, his pamphlet on fascism asserted party orthodoxy and his continued faith in the popular front. Britain was facing a crisis 'as grave as any crisis in our history' and workers were 'increasingly urging their government to take stern measures against the great bankers and industrialists and to meet the crisis by transferring the means of production into the hands of the people.' Wishful thinking was accompanied by dogma: '...wherever the people have threatened, by democratic means, to expropriate the capitalist class and socialise the means of production, the big property owners and industrialists have called in fascism...' (Thompson, 1947d, pp. 7-8). It rescued capitalism by removing the 'glorious freedoms' fought for by the Chartists. Thompson evoked the wartime struggle: 'We know that we have ourselves to thank... ourselves and the Red Army... Surely we have not forgotten already the days of the great Red Army offensives when we clustered round the wireless to hear Marshal Stalin's Orders of the Day' (ibid, p. 5). Despite an isolated call to 'place our bodies between the fascists and our freedom', he closed with demands for petitions to the Home Secretary, legislation and police action (ibid, p. 16).<sup>21</sup>

He remained active around *Our Time* advocating a popular poetry which explored contemporary experience and awakened resistance, rather than offering escape from an alienated existence; he rejected most modern verse for its obscurity and triviality (Thompson,

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<sup>21</sup> For contemporary criticism of Thompson's pamphlet which posed mobilization of the labour movement as an alternative to state intervention in fighting fascism, see Grant (1948).

1947a). The journal was beset by financial problems and pressures to reflect Russian policy more vigorously. On the account of Charles Hobday, its proprietors, Rickword and Swingler wanted to widen its readership. Thompson, Holbrook and Rattenbury claimed that this would only be possible if *Our Time* adopted a more political approach, spearheaded ‘the Battle of Ideas’ and drafted younger Communists onto the editorial board. The *apparatchiks*, Burns and Douglas Garman, were called upon to mediate: ‘Rattenbury, Holbrook and Thompson faced Burns like schoolboys before their master’ and ‘criticised Rickword’s policy in strong terms (which they afterwards regretted) (Hobday, 1989, p. 242). Eventually, ‘Burns delivered his verdict, finding Rickword and Swingler guilty of every sin in the Stalinist calendar’ (ibid. p. 242).

Thompson recalled: ‘It was a shameful episode and I shared the shame, for however “youthful” I was, I had allowed myself to be made use of as part of a team of uncultured yobboes and musclemen under the command of the elderly Burns’ (Thompson, 1994, p. 237).<sup>22</sup> Holbrook became assistant editor but telephone intercepts show Thompson intriguing against him as ‘a menace’ with left Leavisite ideas and seeking to replace him with Peter Wright, a friend of Klugmann. With Rattenbury he prepared a paper outlining ‘a sort of fighting policy for *Our Time*.’<sup>23</sup> The economic crisis would, they claimed, have repercussions in the cultural field: ‘we are faced with a total collapse of that which has previously been valued among the bourgeois intellectual crowd.’<sup>24</sup> *Our Time* should dissect bourgeois ideology *and* publish revolutionary creative work. From mid-1947 the journal stiffened its stance on American culture, published socialist realist fiction and the poetry of Tom McGrath, which Thompson admired, and devoted an issue to Chartism. It did not

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<sup>22</sup> Thompson (1994, p. 237) reflected: ‘I was sad and puzzled that my heroes had not allowed me to fight on their side’. This statement itself is puzzling as he was on the other side. Thompson concluded: ‘I am sorry that my reconstruction of these events is so imprecise. I may do better one day’.

<sup>23</sup> NA, KV2/4090, Telephone check...3.10.47.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

explicitly endorse Zhdanov but published articles from Russian writers who did, as well as broadcasting Lysenko's theories (Hobday, 1989, p. 243). There is little here to suggest Thompson opposed party policy.

### **'An extremely active and articulate Communist': Thompson and the CPGB, 1948-1955**

Thompson remembered his entry into adult education as a Staff Tutor in the Leeds University Department of Extramural Studies as an attempt to connect with working class life and labour: 'I would learn something about industrial England and teach people who would teach me' (Abelove, 1983, p. 13). Dorothy recalled his intention was to give the job five years to amass sufficient experience to become a full-time writer (D. Thompson, 2001, Introduction). Others have claimed:

Thompson found himself under attack from ex-Communist intellectuals turned Cold Warriors and equally from party bureaucrats who thought that the task of poetry was to increase tractor production...By 1948 Thompson had had enough. He packed up and headed north...The move north was as much a pilgrimage as a flight. Thompson hoped that a job teaching miners and railwaymen in an old stronghold of the Chartists and the Independent Labour Party would remove him from the influence of both Communist Party orthodoxy and Cold War conservatism and put him in direct contact with authentic English socialism (Hamilton, 2011, p. 51).

There is no evidence that when he applied for the post, in March 1948, Thompson was under attack from ex-Communist intellectuals, CPGB bureaucrats or Cold Warriors; or wanted to escape from a party he prized as the best vehicle for achieving 'authentic English socialism'. The CPGB in Yorkshire was no less orthodox than the CPGB in Cambridge - or Thompson himself, commended by Cambridge Communists as 'sound, orthodox, reliable...'<sup>25</sup> Although the Thompsons' decision was their own, it was consonant with party policy – not a bid to escape the party. The CPGB encouraged intellectuals to teach part-time in adult education – as Thompson did in Cambridge – and secure full-time posts.

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<sup>25</sup> NA, KV2/4290, BIA Note stamped 6 June 1952.

Radicalising the extramural departments and their partner, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), was part of a project to develop a mass workers' education infused with Marxism (Fieldhouse, 1985, pp. 10-22, 29-37).<sup>26</sup>

In 1953, Thompson told a party functionary, Bill Wainwright, that the post '...is fairly useful in itself, gives me entrance to a section of the Yorks w.class movement, and gives me time to work for the movement in the summer.'<sup>27</sup> The idea he was teaching miners and railwaymen *en masse* is inaccurate. Thompson taught evening classes for 'the general public' which included manual workers, the salariat and housewives, although manual workers were a declining component of the audience. He did not participate in the courses for miners his department mounted from the mid-1950s (McIlroy, 1990, pp. 218-27). When the CPGB offered to put him forward as education officer of the South Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers, in 1956, he observed: '...it is a job which offers magnificent opportunities for doing really useful work impossible in my present job and an unrivalled opportunity for getting really close to a key section of the working class.'<sup>28</sup>

The CPGB derived its strength from a base in engineering and steel around Sheffield, the clothing industry in Leeds and, from 1953, the Yorkshire coalfields. The Thompsons lived in Halifax, a textile town which retained its historic character and collective memory of centuries of workers' struggle. The town branch, in which they became leading lights, forging a fruitful friendship with the branch secretary, Ron Cocker, was weak on trade union activity, stronger on peace campaigns and building bridges to the Labour Party.<sup>29</sup> There seems to

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<sup>26</sup> Between 1947 and 1950 a CPGB Adult Education Group met intermittently (Fieldhouse, 1985, p. 13).

<sup>27</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Bill Wainwright, 6 July 1953.

<sup>28</sup> NA, KV2/4292, Thompson to Bert Ramelson, 28 May 1956. He declined the offer.

<sup>29</sup> NA, KV2/4292, Resolution and Discussion Statement of Halifax Branch of the Communist Party April 1956. Cocker contributed to *The Reasoner* see 'Needed: A Party of a New Type'. Thompson was particularly committed to organising the annual Ralph Fox Memorial Lectures



have been little coordinated party work in adult education in Yorkshire and after 1948 the CPGB was on the defensive as Cold War pressures mounted. John Rex, a South African sociologist and CPGB sympathiser, worked in Thompson's department; John McLeish, a social psychologist from Glasgow, left the party as 'high Stalinism' unfolded; CPGB members, John Ireland, and Rex Russell, who organised classes with agricultural workers, were WEA tutors; and Ken Alexander, John Hughes, and later, Royden Harrison were developing courses with the miners' union via the Sheffield University Extramural Department.<sup>30</sup>

Inside the university Thompson was closest to Arnold Kettle. He sometimes attended the CPGB branch led by Ron Bellamy, an economist who joined the CPGB at Oxford in the late 1930s. Also prominent were Harry Hanson, another Oxford graduate now a lecturer in public administration and Alfred Dressler, a lecturer in Russian studies. Later arrivals were the fellow travelling philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre and the sociologist, Cliff Slaughter. The CPGB employed full-time organisers in Leeds and Sheffield. Thompson liaised with Mick Bennett in Leeds and after being elected to the District Committee in 1953, with Bennett's successor, Bert Ramelson. Born in the Ukraine and raised in Canada, Ramelson was a lawyer who had fought in Spain and in a tank regiment in World War II. Like his wife, Marion Jessop, a former textile worker, Lenin School graduate and Central Committee (CC) member, he was an enthusiastic Stalinist and an effective and dedicated functionary. The Ramelsons collaborated closely with Jim Roche, another former CC member and longstanding activist in the clothing workers' union, who worked full-time for the party, and

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to commemorate the Halifax-born Communist killed in Spain, attracting speakers such as G.D.H. Cole and Dona Torr.

<sup>30</sup> McLeish (2016); NA, KV2/4292, Thompson to Bert Ramelson, 28 May 1956; McIlroy (1990, pp. 218-27).

his wife, Gertie, an experienced union militant. Thompson was also friendly with the Sheffield organiser, Howard Hill.<sup>31</sup>

Thompson quickly found his feet. Extramural terms ran from September to April leaving the summer free. But he taught on four evenings a week, driving to classes across Yorkshire in an Austin 10 car.<sup>32</sup> Until 1952, he taught literature almost exclusively, switching thereafter to history and back to literature by the end of the decade. He was candid about his beliefs, pronouncing his purpose was to create revolutionaries and challenging conventional credos that adult education was about inculcating ‘university values’, tolerance of competing views, balance and objectivity. Rather, he argued, scholarship should interact with students’ life-experience. Tutors should be conscious of the pervasiveness of dominant ideologies and stimulate consideration of minority perspectives. The purpose was to provide students with the knowledge and understanding to make their own minds up about literature, politics, life and action (Thompson, 1950b; Fieldhouse, 2013, pp. 30-7; Goodway, 2013, pp. 57-64). ). Of course Thompson taught history through literature and vice versa.

He prosecuted CPGB policy. In the WEA journal, *The Highway*, he criticised the condition of the arts in Western Europe: ‘Art has become one more commodity on the market, all human and artistic values equated to money value’ (Thompson, 1949a, p. 137). Yet in the People’s Democracies he had observed ‘...a transformation in the attitude of the people to the arts such as I never would have believed possible. I have seen young peasants and working-men applauding an excellent production of Shakespeare; crowding out exhibitions; listening attentively to public readings of poetry’ (ibid).<sup>33</sup> The WEA should

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<sup>31</sup> The information in this paragraph is based on security files, obituaries and material on 1956: Flowers and McIlroy (2016, passim).

<sup>32</sup> NA, KV2/4290, From Chief Constable Halifax Borough CID, 26 June 1949; Fieldhouse (2013, pp. 25-48).

<sup>33</sup> See also Thompson (1950a, p. 8): ‘...our theatre is falling back under the domination of West End Business...our film is falling victim to Hollywood values and Wall Street finance’ – ibid, 8.

spearhead a similar drive to transform minority culture into popular culture. A critic replied: 'More to the point is the condition of the arts in the USSR...there we see what is plainly the bourgeois spirit along with a social structure different from that of capitalism. The impetus given to the arts by the October Revolution has been replaced by the inertia imposed by a philistine bureaucracy' (Cameron, 1949, p. 138).

He continued to advocate a socialist realist approach in *Our Time*: 'The most significant human experience of our time still remains outside the limits of established verse' (Thompson, 1949b).<sup>34</sup> He responded to a party inquiry in September 1950: 'My main personal interest is in doing some creative work'.<sup>35</sup> He was writing a novel, as well as poetry and had the basis for essays on Keats and Hopkins, a critique of Leavis, and two articles on Morris. Attempts to establish a cultural committee in Yorkshire proved unsuccessful but a series of CPGB forums facilitated discussion of such issues. The party, he asserted, should put its weight behind a magazine which would involve both the Writers' and Historians' Groups and appeal beyond the CPGB's periphery. This would facilitate a 'new progressive front of honest intellectuals in the fight for peace and for carrying forward the best traditions of our cultural inheritance.'<sup>36</sup> Such a journal would publish poetry and literary criticism and address cultural questions on the model of *Left Review* in the 1930s.<sup>37</sup>

He corresponded with Swingler who with Lindsay was under fire in the *Daily Worker* for the conduct of *Our Time*'s successor, *Arena*, and their series 'Key Poets', for catering for

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<sup>34</sup> Thompson told Henderson: 'I hope you have had bad reviews from the cultural boys because their approval today is cause only for shame. Remember always who you are writing for, the people of Glasgow, Halifax, Dublin' (Neat, 2009 pp. 121, 123, 167).

<sup>35</sup> NA, KV2/4290, Thompson to Dear Comrade, 14 September 1950.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. The security files confirm that Thompson renewed his annual membership of both groups. He contributed to CPGB cultural activities but played no organisational role in the Writers' Group. Increasing preoccupation with history led to involvement in party schools and he was aware through Dorothy of the proceedings of the Historians' Group. He was generally considered 'a literary person' and took no active role in the Historians' Group (Saville, 1994, p. 104).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. NA, KV2/4290, Thompson to Dear Comrade, 14 September 1950. See also, 'Yorkshire Cultural Conference', *WNV*, 28 March 1953.

aesthetes. Thompson defended the series and urged Swingler to enlist possible allies such as Margot Heinemann, Klugmann and Dona Torr (Croft, 2003, p. 210).<sup>38</sup> But these were loyal party functionaries, if less rigid than Burns and Aaronovitch. When Burns and Heinemann planned a supplement of *World News and Views* to replace *Arena*, Thompson considered it a retrograde step. The party needed to reach outwards with a journal carrying ‘historical articles, polemic, reportage and human studies of life in socialist countries’. Writing would be included only ‘when it had been completely purged of jargon, no matter if the writer was a member of the Central Committee.’<sup>39</sup> It would cultivate ‘the unconvinced’. Nonetheless, when King Street decided to launch the Zhdanovite *Daylight*, a journal reminiscent of the proletcult of the Third Period, Thompson affirmed his respect for leadership edicts:

A party decision is a party decision, and of course now it must be operated loyally and enthusiastically. On the other hand, one would feel a lot happier if one felt that the decision itself had been less arbitrary and more collective. God knows who or what the NCC represents beyond the academics. Repeatedly in the past five or six years we have been faced with arbitrary decisions, and then expected to cooperate loyally...oh, hell, this is just being Jeremiah. I very much hope this will prove wrong, and that you won’t take much notice of it. Nonetheless, you might consider modifying your plans a little.<sup>40</sup>

He submitted a poem, ‘Trafalgar Square 1951’ and was soon writing: ‘I am very much looking forward to seeing *Daylight* and there seems to be quite a general interest...our own branch has ordered a good few copies...I hope it will be successful. I am sure there is a real turn coming and some new writing stirred up by it.’<sup>41</sup> He was anxious about his role as poetry editor of the *Daily Worker*. He had taken it on to keep out Oscar Thomson and ‘a clique’ who called themselves the ‘London Communist Poets’ Group’, ‘intellectuals who had

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<sup>38</sup> Thompson took no part in ‘the Caudwell Controversy’ in *Modern Quarterly* during 1950-51. He saw it in 1977 as ‘a small purgative exercise in the Zhdanov mode’ (Thompson, 1977, p. 232).

<sup>39</sup> NA, KV2/4290, Thompson to Emile Burns, 27 May 1952; Thompson to Margot Heinemann, 4 June 1952.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Heinemann, 27 September 1952. The poem was published in *Daylight*, Autumn, 1952.

gone terribly self-conscious proletarian and kept on talking about the workers and party duties of writers'<sup>42</sup> – without any evidence they practised what they preached. He accepted the socialist realism paradigm but maintained its mechanical application produced poor poetry.

His own outlook, he told Heinemann, was distorted by his background while teaching the canon deadened his response to 'the real new writing.' He 'loathed and detested' Eliot but felt Yeats generated authentic feeling and worried that his job acclimatised him to 'the wrong kind of poetry.' Communists had to create revolutionary art but this could not be judged purely by the ideas and politics it represented. He objected to criticism premised simply on politics, not the quality of imaginative writing and its ability to evoke feeling. He cited recent reviews of the West Indian Communist poet, Peter Blackman, and the Australian novelist, Frank Hardy by Willie Gallacher who, to Thompson's annoyance, disparaged style as the province of dilettantes.<sup>43</sup>

*Daylight* proved ephemeral, but he kept busy. He read his poems at Marx House and unsuccessfully submitted 'The Place Called Choice' to the 1951 Festival of Britain Competition. From 1950, he was engaged with Morris; he took him as his text when delegated by the District to attend the third 'Battle of Ideas' Conference in 1951 on 'The American Threat to British Culture'. In response to Aaronovitch's introduction savaging cultural imperialism, as well as 'the fifth column' led by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley – the offensive could only be repelled by mobilising 'the genius of the British people' – Thompson claimed: 'Nothing has been more striking about this conference than the strong *positive* note struck in Sam Aaronovitch's report' (Thompson, 1951c, pp. 25-6). 'The

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. For background see Croft (1995).

<sup>43</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Heinemann, 27 September 1952. Blackman's *My Song Is For All Men*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1952 had just been published. As had Hardy's *Power Without Glory*, London: Collets, 1952.

American dream', Thompson reflected in an anecdote about an American professor who regretted lost opportunities to become a millionaire by investing in slaughterhouses, 'really is as childish and debased as this...

its poison can be found in every field of American life. Those who have never been to the United States, and who fool themselves...that Hollywood, the Hearst press and the comics represent only a lunatic fringe of the American bourgeoisie, sometimes suggest that Babbit is an out of date joke on the twenties: unfortunately it only foreshadows the horror of today (ibid, p. 27; see also Thompson, 1951b).

He posed the issues starkly. Man had to choose:

...Life or Death. On the one hand, the spreading stain of corruption and defeat in culture...on the other, the liberation of the creative energies of whole peoples... This is the only choice before man. The defenders of American capitalism have nothing whatsoever to offer to the people but more work and more poverty and, at the end of it Death in a desperate and indiscriminate war. Beneath all the nice quibbles about means and ends, all the clever things which Orwell or Koestler or Eliot or their American counterparts have to say, will be found the same facts: napalm, the Hell Bomb and the butchers of Syngman Rhee (Thompson, 1951c, p. 27).

Thompson's dismissal of 'quibbles' about 'ends and means' and criticism of the Soviet Union, and his choice of Stalin and Kim Il Sung as representing life and liberation mingled with anxiety about imperialism's success in invoking morality:

...since the old lie that Socialism 'can't work' was shattered for good when the Red Army routed the Nazis at Stalingrad it is under cover of the same talk about 'human rights' and so on that they try to turn the minds of the people of Britain and America against the Soviet Union, China and the new democracies...It is the Big Lie technique of Goebbels all over again (ibid, p. 28).

Circumventing problems of human rights, morality and socialism, Thompson identified Morris with Stalinism and advocated propaganda '...to build that vision of socialism over again – not only the understanding of socialism as it exists, over one quarter of the earth, but also the vision of socialism as it will and must come in Britain' (ibid, p. 29). A year later, he again expressed the deterministic faith in radicalisation that characterized the CPGB:

We are about to see one of these astonishing awakenings of British history. When it comes it will surprise even ourselves. Halifax will soon be going up on the ‘moor’ again. There the Chartists and the Radicals and early Socialists held their monster meetings. When this happens it will mean that the plans of the warmongers are finished for once and for all (*Daily Worker*, 19 June 1952).

Pride in his party and his paper is apparent in his 1952 essay on the press. The *Daily Worker*, he claimed, maintained a tradition of veracity which ran from Milton and Lilburne to the *Northern Star*, *Justice* and the *Clarion* while the monopolies debased political discourse and the *Daily Herald* sacrificed ‘its socialist integrity’. Russia was a major target: If ‘you have ever visited the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe you will have had ample opportunity to compare your own experience with the travesties of fact appearing in nearly every national newspaper’ (Thompson, 1952a, p. 6). The *Daily Worker*, in contrast, told the truth and was:

...the only paper to stand between the people and the unprincipled campaign of lies and war propaganda of the capitalist press. So long as the “Daily” exists then in nearly every great workshop or factory, rail depot or mine there are readers who can fight for sanity and truth. Without it our people would grope in total darkness, blind and misled to total disaster (ibid., p. 23).

From 1952, Thompson’s main activity was in the peace movement. He chaired the Halifax Peace Committee, served as secretary of the West Yorkshire Federation of Peace Organisations – which he represented at the umbrella British Peace Committee (BPC) – and edited the *Yorkshire Voice of Peace*. The BPC stood for an alliance of Communists, Labour Party supporters, pacifists, the churches and social and cultural bodies. Serviced by Wainwright, it was a party front: police reports termed it ‘the Peace on Soviet Terms Movement.’<sup>44</sup> When the BPC was proscribed by the Labour Party as working for ‘the destruction of social democracy and the propagation of international Communism’ (Shaw, 1988, p. 315, note 2), Thompson encouraged groups to affiliate to the Yorkshire Federation –

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<sup>44</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Extract from Letter of CC Kingston-upon-Hull. 26.3.54.

and thus indirectly to the BPC – until the Federation itself was blacklisted.<sup>45</sup> Across Europe, Claudin concluded, the peace movement was initiated by Moscow via the Cominform; Hinton observed that in Britain it was ‘too closely identified with the uncritically pro-Soviet politics of the Communist Party to have any significant impact’ (Claudin, 1975, p. 578; Hinton, 1989, p. 151; Egorova, 1996 pp. 197-207).

In Yorkshire, where 221 Labour Party members were expelled for involvement with Moscow-orchestrated conferences or proscribed groups, the CPGGB benefitted from the furore surrounding the 1950 World Peace Congress in Sheffield (Shaw, 1988, p. 60).<sup>46</sup> Responding in 1954 to Communists who undervalued the project Thompson remarked ‘...off(sic) the last five or six recruits to the Party in Halifax, four came through the peace movement’.<sup>47</sup> He organised protests against the call-up and military parades during the Korean War, campaigns against German rearmament and demonstrations at Labour Party conferences. Speakers at Federation events were typically fellow travellers such as the Dean of Canterbury, railway workers’ leader, Jim Figgins, the journalist Gordon Schaffer, and the lawyers, D. N. Pritt and John Platt-Mills.<sup>48</sup> Much of his time was taken up with producing the *Yorkshire Voice*. One scholar judged: ‘The Communist perspective is pervasive: all the fault lies with the USA and its allies and their supporters in the media; and the Soviet Union and China are presented as reasonable and peace-loving’ (Taylor, 2013, p. 182). In 1953, Thompson editorialised:

Nothing has been clearer in the past two months than that it is America, and not Russia, who has got the bit between her teeth and is galloping downhill to war. Look at the evidence: her refusal to stop the H-blasts; her pressure for German rearmament...; her post-haste rejection of the Russian offer to join NATO; the threat to enter the colonial war in Indo-China and extend it to China (*Yorkshire Voice of Peace*, 2 (1), quoted in Bess, 1993, p. 101).

<sup>45</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Wainwright, 5 July 1953; Shaw, 60.

<sup>46</sup> The Sheffield Congress was aborted when the government refused visas to delegates (Moore, 1990).

<sup>47</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Ramelson, 24 August 1954.

<sup>48</sup> NA, KV2/4290, Thompson to Mick Bennett, 3 February 1951; NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Vincent Duncan-Jones, 7 June 1953.



He planned to expand the paper and popularise a Peace Charter in the trade unions.<sup>49</sup> Nothing came of this and he was exasperated at the pressures of the work. He wrote to Wainwright: 'I am doing too much now with the result that I am botching things generally...Botching the Federation; botching my own job; and botching the Morris book...'<sup>50</sup> But he was considered sufficiently 'sound' and reliable to be offered employment with the Soviet-backed World Peace Council. He was not interested, pleading family reasons, lack of languages – he believed 'firmly that in theory all Wogs begin at Calais' – and the need to consult Klugmann about his cultural work. He conceded: 'I am prepared to accept this myself but *only if* very strong reasons were put up to justify it'. Nothing more was heard of the matter.<sup>51</sup>

Historians have claimed: 'Thompson repeatedly found himself clashing with the manipulative tactics of the party leaders in London who wanted to extend their control over broader sections of the non-Communist peace movement' (Bess, 1993, p. 101; Palmer, 1993, p. 56). The nearest we get to this occurred when the District Committee organised a CPGB demonstration against German rearmament in September 1954. Thompson criticised the initiative, arguing the demonstration should have been organised by the Federation and involved non-party members. They would feel that they were being used and discarded as and when the CPGB so decided.<sup>52</sup>

The incident underlined his popular front desire to engage the labour movement and the churches rather than 'show the face of the party'. His rebuke to Ramelson was passionate, and the latter may have felt, over-dramatic:

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<sup>49</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Proposed Peace Charter. Enclosed with Thompson to Ramelson, date blurred 1954.

<sup>50</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Wainwright, 5 July 1953.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. The World Peace Council emerged out of the World Peace Congress orchestrated by Moscow and was proscribed by the Labour Party (Deery, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Ramelson, 24 August 1954.

Bert, where the HELL are we going? I really feel like resigning from the District Committee because either I am crazy or the whole bloody party is crazy and all this about united movements in the end means just nothing.<sup>53</sup>

He balanced things to make the point:

I am not quarrelling with you about the line but about the way the line is to be carried out. I refer you to the old text of Stalin which goes ‘once the line has been decided *everything depends* on the way it is carried out etc’ or words to that effect. You may think it a small matter of emphasis. I think it is a key to failure or success for our whole campaign.<sup>54</sup>

Months later he expressed further concerns: these were ‘small problems’, probably rooted in his ‘temperamental impatience’, frustration at the party’s slow progress and competing demands on his time. He disliked the idea that intellectuals should be treated differently from other members but chafed against his workload. He and Dorothy felt their attempts ‘to be free of excessive commitments in order to carry forward work which is still work for the Party *of a different kind*’ provoked suspicions of flagging enthusiasm, lack of political understanding and disloyalty. Whenever there was a conflict between selling pamphlets or pursuing historical research, Ramelson appeared before him ‘saying: DO MORE!’ Local leaders did not listen and saw criticism as ‘symptoms of deviation’. He was worried that an “inner group”, the Ramelsons and Roaches was emerging and that ‘certain individuals in the District leadership are beyond criticism’. Ramelson exhibited a proprietorial attitude to the party and took too much on himself, rather than encouraging other Communists to give leadership in the National Assembly of Women and the peace movement.<sup>55</sup> Thompson was reluctant to stand for the District Committee in 1955 because of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Bert and Marion Ramelson, 29? November 1954. The National Assembly of Women was established in 1952 with Communist support – Dorothy Thompson and Gertie Roche were active in it. The Assembly was proscribed by the Labour Party.

pressure of work and dissatisfaction with ‘...the weakness of West Yorkshire...when I am myself unable to do anything about it.’<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, he accepted a second term.

Such problems may be viewed as presaging the future; or simply as the inescapable fate of Communist intellectuals, a feature of party life with the clash of competing demands intensified by Thompson’s compulsion to pursue scholarly research and determination to develop as an intellectual, combined with his appetite for activity, and guilt when neglecting it. Dorothy remembered she had ‘...several rows with party officials and had always been uneasy about aspects of discipline and the demands made on members’ (D. Thompson, 1993, p. 12). Saville stated that Edward ‘had a number of expressed disagreements with the full-time officials of the Yorkshire District’ (Saville, 1994, p. 26). The security files amplify these memories. They do not cover all phases of Thompson’s activities. But they disclose no opposition to CPGB policy and no anticipation of the political arguments of 1956.

Thompson fulsomely criticised the Soviet Union after 1956; in 1952 he dismissed such criticism as ‘travesties of fact’. It was only in 1956 that he broke with his past to condemn the British over Suez *and* the Russians over Hungary. Before 1956 he refused to acknowledge the persecution of intellectuals; from 1957, he campaigned against it:

‘Communist intellectuals *above all* should make their voices heard in protest against the exile of Lukacs and the arrest of Haric’ (Thompson, 1952a, p. 6; Thompson, 2014b, quote from p. 97).<sup>57</sup> He espoused socialist realism but believed art could not be reduced to politics and insisted on the centrality of an always elusive revolutionary aesthetic. This did not entail political opposition; rather ‘the political issues of these years were so critical as to make

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<sup>56</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Ramelson, 4 March 1955; Extract from Report re the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Yorkshire District...19<sup>th</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> March 1955. Lack of time was a constant theme – see KV2/4291, Thompson to Klugmann 22 February 1955, regarding his work on Torr’s *Tom Mann*: ‘Bert has a tendency to regard one’s time as limitlessly elastic...it might help me if you had a word in the most friendly manner with Bert and pointed out to him the importance of the job...and also how time-taking it is’.

<sup>57</sup> NA, KV2/4293, Thompson, Letter to *Tribune*, n.d. 1957.

literary or cultural concerns appear as somehow subordinate' (Thompson, 1994, p. 238). It is difficult to disagree with Croft: 'In the late 1940s and early 1950s then there was no evident conflict between Thompson's membership of the Communist Party, his ideas about literature or the teaching through which he expressed them' (Croft, 1995, p. 33).

Thompson's dynamic, restless personality, literary sensibility and forthright approach, his complaints about the pressures of work and application of policy, should not distract us from his political orthodoxy. His enthusiasm for the Soviet Union may have been tempered by events from 1948; if so his writings – and the files - give no inkling of it. However, in 2006, Dorothy informed a researcher that the Thompsons “took the Tito-Dimitrov line” against Stalin' (Hamilton, 2011, p. 87, note 6). This suggests they supported Yugoslavia, although its precise meaning remains unclear. Dimitrov had been close to Tito and initially supported a Balkans Federation, Stalin's *bête-noir*, while some historians claim he attempted to mediate between Belgrade and Moscow. But there was never any question of the Bulgarians siding with Tito against Stalin and the episode quickly concluded with Dimitrov's death in 1949. There is no other evidence that Thompson's earlier admiration for Yugoslavia provoked opposition to Stalin once 'condemning Tito became the litmus test of Communist loyalty' Eley, 2002, p. 309).<sup>58</sup>

His friendship with Klugmann survived the latter's tirades against Tito. It was only in 1956 that Thompson remarked: 'I have been re-reading your own *From Trotsky to Tito* and am alarmed (both personally and politically) as to how you can correct certain statements in the book without loss of intellectual integrity'.<sup>59</sup> Such comments were equally apposite in 1951. Intercepts suggest the Thompsons had some comprehension of competing arguments about Eastern Europe: they received the *Bulgarian Bulletin*, *Free Bulgaria* and *Rumanian*

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<sup>58</sup> See also Haslam (2011), pp. 103-104, 421 note 177 '...the ailing Dimitrov was neither able nor willing to offer sustained resistance and the other Party leaders eagerly jumped on the anti-Titoist bandwagon' – Dimitrov, 287.

<sup>59</sup> PHM, CP/Cent/Org/98/04, Thompson to Klugmann, 22 March 1956.

*News* – as well as material from the Yugoslav Embassy and the Anglo-Yugoslav Friendship Society, the breakaway from the Communist dominated British-Yugoslav Association.<sup>60</sup>

Like others they may have been silent sympathisers.

Nothing on the record indicates the show trials provoked differences with the CPGB. It was only after Kostov's rehabilitation that Thompson, quoting extensively from a transcript of the trial, deplored:

...the Kostov case – which is symptomatic of a thousand other actions is a case of a deliberate, carefully conceived act of injustice...the action corrupts not only all those who take part in the betrayal and the deception: it will result, also, in tendencies towards the corruption of society. Its further purpose is to create a climate of fear...within which the manipulators of power can intimidate opposition (Thompson, 2014a, quote from p. 63).

He was involved with the Committee for Friendship with Bulgaria, and plausibly had access to this material earlier. Yet he never publicly questioned the Russian-Bulgarian-CPGB version until its fabricators themselves disowned it. In 1950, he was informed by a Communist familiar with Bulgaria that Frank's interrogator had been in the pay of British intelligence and that Frank would not have died had the British valued his life.<sup>61</sup> Matters remain opaque but perhaps this incident increased Thompson's distrust of imperialism. That he toed the line over the show trials seems clear from his comments in 1957:

I am not going to spend years crippled by remorse because I was duped by the Rajk and Kostov trials, because I was a casuist here and perhaps an accomplice there. We were Communists, because we had faith in the fundamental humanist content of Communism and during the darkest years of the Cold War it was our duty to speak for this. I do not regret this, although I wish we had spoken more wisely and, therefore, to more effect. Now that the conflict within world Communism has come into the open it is our duty to take sides (Thompson, 2014b, p. 99).

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<sup>60</sup> NA, KV2/4290, E. M. Dawson-Shepherd, Note, 4.1. 1950.

<sup>61</sup> NA, KV2/4290, Special Branch, Report, 11 June 1951. Thompson spoke at a memorial meeting for Frank hosted by the committee that summer – a Bulgarian delegation was in attendance. Peter Tempest, a CPGB member and friend of Edward and Frank whose wife was the London correspondent of a Bulgarian paper, wrote to Edward about this in June 1950 – Conradi (2012), p. 399, note 358. The memory of Frank and his allegiance was very much alive – see NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Pollitt, 21 August 1952 regarding Frank's bequest to the CPGB.

Thompson insists he had a duty to speak out against Stalinism in order to redeem ‘the fundamental humanist content of Communism’. There is no evidence he fulfilled that obligation. At issue is not, as he claims, the wisdom or effectiveness of what he said. The problem is that on the evidence he said nothing critical at all and championed a party which justified the trials. Nor is it clear from the above exactly what it is that he is regretting. The ‘duty to take sides’ was present in the early 1950s as well as in 1956 when Khrushchev, not British Communists, brought matters ‘into the open’. As Thompson declared in 1950, ‘man has choice’; in the same poem he urged: ‘It is time to speak out’. Instead he chose to remain ‘an extremely active and articulate Communist’<sup>62</sup>

Other Communist intellectuals made different choices. Raymond Williams refused to rejoin the party on his return to Cambridge in 1945; the Kingswood graduate, Hugh Clegg, resigned soon after returning to Oxford; McLeish became ‘a premature anti-Stalinist’; Mankowitz drifted away after 1947; Klingender decamped in 1948 over Yugoslavia; so did Holbrook; the closure of *Our Time* was the activist, James Boswell’s tipping point; the novelist, journalist, and New Leftist, Mervyn Jones, disillusioned by subordination to Moscow quit in 1951; the composer, Ben Frankel, resigned in 1952, disgusted by the show trials and the ‘Doctors’ Plot’; the latter wrote *finis* to the Cambridge mathematician, George Barnard’s membership of the CPGB; Hanson left in 1954. A majority of the popular front generation, Saville calculated, had broken with the CPGB before 1956 (Saville, 1991, p. 114).

### **Thompson, Morris and the CPGB**

Anderson commends ‘...the great book that was published in 1955, recovering the figure of Morris as a revolutionary socialist radically incompatible with the orthodox ethos of Stalinism... Thus when the break with the Communist Party came in 1956, the political and

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<sup>62</sup> NA, KV2/4293, Director General to The Chief Constable, City Constabulary Cambridge, 29 November 1957 with enclosure: Edward Palmer Thompson.

theoretical ground for it had already been to a considerable extent prepared.’ (Anderson, 1980, p. 145). For Goodway (2013, p. 56): ‘[Thompson’s] odyssey from Stalinism to libertarian communism had been virtually effected in terms of theory as early as 1955.’ Linebaugh (2011, foreword)) refers to ‘...the questioning of the CPGB represented by *The Reasoner* and less directly by *William Morris*....’ Efstathiou (2015, p. 53) remarks: ‘Thompson’s biography of Morris followed the tradition of pre-war British Marxism but also served the need for an oppositional stream inside the CPGB to answer some crucial questions regarding the development of socialism...His book on Morris offered a dissident theory of transition to socialism....’<sup>63</sup> Before measuring Thompson’s text against such comments, brief contextualisation is necessary.

First, attempts to assimilate Morris to Communism stretched back to the inauguration of the popular front and continued into the 1950s. As early as 1934, Page Arnot discounted reformist readings and reclaimed him for Communism (Page Arnot, 1934a, p. 183; Page Arnot, 1934b; Morton, 1944; Hobsbawm, 1948; Palme Dutt, 1954; Morris, 1954). Second, Morris was influential in adult education, ‘...the inspiration for very many extramural tutors, courses, students and tutors from GDH Cole down. Morris was in the bloodstream of adult education’ (Goldman, 1995, p. 213). Third, we now know that Thompson submitted his work to the CPGB’s *Modern Quarterly* in 1950, although it was published the following year in the quasi-independent *Arena*.<sup>64</sup> It would be rash to surmise delay was a consequence of official suspicion. His conclusions met with approbation at CPGB gatherings: ‘In his lecture on Morris, Edward Thompson spoke truly of the inhibitions which make us tongue-tied when we should be speaking with moral passion because we are suspicious of moral passion’ (West, 1952, p. 79).

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<sup>63</sup> Hamilton (2011, p. 235) records: ‘Many commentators have considered that the book is also a coded reply to Zhdanovist hardliners within the Communist Party.’

<sup>64</sup> NA, KV2/4290, Thompson to Dear Comrade, September 14 1950.

Fourth, these preliminary essays sketched the central ideas of the book. They depicted Morris as a revolutionary thinker who insisted a moral critique of capitalism was *complementary* to Marx's economic and historical critique; that revolution required not simply economic change but the transformation of humanity; and that Communists should begin to change people now by presenting them with the compelling prospect of a new civilisation. 'Morris's criticism of society', Thompson argued in 1951, 'was moral, but its depth and validity sprang from his understanding of society, Marxism. With Morris moral weight and scientific analysis were complementary and inseparable' (Thompson, 1951a, p. 26, note 14). In this, Morris was 'one of the first great forerunners of the British Communist Party', a man who foreshadowed the campaign against American culture, who 'carried on single-handedly the activities of the Writers', Historians', Artists', Architects' and Literature groups all in one...' (Thompson, 1951c, p. 26).

Can we find anything in the book itself which questioned the CPGB, played to an oppositional stream, effected a theoretical journey from Stalinism to libertarian communism or presented a picture of Morris radically incompatible with the ethos of Stalinism? Underlying claims we can, has been an assertion of discordance between ideas expressed in the text and two intertwined aspects of historical materialism. First, the interaction between human agency, structure and circumstance, freedom and constraint, voluntarism and determinism, distilled in Marx's dictum: 'Men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves' (Marx, 1970a, p. 96). Second, the role to be assigned to ideas and culture in motivating purposive action, the part superstructural factors – as against the forces and relations of production – play in shaping human behaviour. The conventional starting point here was Marx's formulation:



The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the so-called life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (Marx, 1970b, p. 181).

The weight placed on agency, ‘conscious human choice, value, action’ was, Anderson notes, ‘the key organising theme of Thompson’s entire work’ (Anderson, 1980, p. 16).

Anderson’s tracking of its origin to *Morris* is more problematic. In the 1955 volume Thompson did not - as he did in his New Left writings and *The Making* – place the emphasis on ‘men make history’; rather he depicted the relationship between agency and constraint, ideas and material conditions in a way consistent with conventional Communism.

Scrutinizing Morris’s account of the dialectic between ‘Desire’ – morality, will, agency – and ‘Necessity’ – the progress of the forces and relations of production – in social transformation, Thompson concluded Morris did not accord undue weight to the former. ‘Morris’, he insisted, ‘did not make the mistake of giving precedence to moral factors as agents of revolutionary change...But, nevertheless he laid the greatest stress upon their agency... “Necessity” alone would impel spontaneous riot and class struggle wasteful and uncertain of success’ (Thompson, 1955, pp. 837-8).

Morris, and morality, were at one with Communism: ‘This unity, in the fight for socialism, of necessity and desire... is central to the thought of Marx and Engels. It is perhaps Morris’s most important contribution to English culture...’ (ibid, p. 837). And again:

Morris’s moral criticism of society is not only entirely compatible with dialectical materialism, and parallel to the criticisms developed in Marx’s early writings and then in *The Communist Manifesto*, *Capital*, *The Origin of the Family* and *Ludwig Feuerbach*; it is also the theme of his most vigorous and original writings within the Marxist tradition (ibid, p. 832).

*Contra* Anderson, Morris is recovered as a figure in harmony with Stalinism. The orthodoxy of Thompson's position is demonstrated in his revision of the text in 1976. In the second edition he deleted the two passages quoted above and disowned the unity between Morris and Marxism he had asserted in 1955:

First, it is more important to understand him as a transformed Romantic than as a (conforming) Marxist. Second, his importance within the Marxist tradition may be seen, today, less in the fact of his adhesion to it than in the Marxist "absences" or failures to meet that adhesion halfway... Morris may be assimilated to Marxism only in the course of a reordering of Marxism (Thompson, 1976, pp. 786, 806).<sup>65</sup>

It is difficult to locate 'muffled revisionism' in the 1955 volume. Goodway does his best, observing that at several points Thompson criticised Morris for underestimating superstructural factors, specifically the agency of art in influencing action, casting economic and social development as 'the master process' on which art is passively dependent (Goodway, 2013, p. 55). The implication is that Morris was following Marx's base-superstructure model; Thompson was revising it. However, beginning with Engels some Marxists took a broader view:

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms the proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic structure is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results...juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophic theories, religious views...also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. There is an interaction of all

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<sup>65</sup> This change was in train by 1959: 'I have tended at certain points to suggest that Morris's moral critique of society is *dependent upon* Marx's economic and historical analysis; that the morality is in some ways secondary, the analysis of power and productive relations primary. That is not the way I look at it now' (Thompson, 2014c, p. 259).

these elements in which, amid all the endless *host* of accidents...the economic movement finally asserts itself.<sup>66</sup>

We are left, at best, with a handful of sentences arguably *within* the Marxist paradigm – an unreliable peg on which to hang a personal passage from Stalinism to libertarian communism. Much Stalinist discourse was, as Thompson argued after 1956, deterministic: it reified the material base and turned it into a thinking, acting, all powerful entity so that political consciousness rigidly reflected economics (see, for example, Thompson, 2014a; 2016b). But not all: as a state ideology Stalinism was functional, eclectic and opportunist. At times, Stalin emphasised agency and ideas in facilitating, accelerating or arresting social change. In 1953, the doyen of the Historians' Group, Christopher Hill, insisted the Russian leader '...stressed the supreme significance of people in the making of history'; Hill quoted Stalin extensively on '...the *tremendous role* of new social ideas, of new political institutions, of a new political power...The times have passed when leaders were regarded as the only creators of history...the destinies of nations and states are now determined not only by leaders but primarily, and mainly, by the working millions' (Hill, 1953, pp. 201, 202, 211; Van Ree, 2006, pp. 268-269).

We can agree that working on Morris opened Thompson's mind to new ideas and directed him towards questions which informed his politics from 1956. It is a further step to characterize him as exhibiting disquiet with, or opposition to, the theory or policy of the CPGB before that date. There is insufficient in *Morris* to suggest that in 1955 Thompson's ideas were incompatible with Stalinism or marked a theoretical turn to libertarian communism. The point is underlined if we accord proper weight to the text's treatment of the Soviet Union and the CPGB. 'In Asiatic Russia, in China, in all Eastern Europe', Thompson enthused the year before Khrushchev turned the Communist world upside down, 'we are

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<sup>66</sup> Engels to J. Bloch in *Marx Engels*, 682.

witnessing a popular art that is cherished by the people, and that is reviving and strengthening its hold alongside of the advance of socialist industry' (Thompson, 1955, p. 760). There was continuity with his earlier celebrations of Stalinism. Morris's new civilisation was being realised in the East:

Twenty years ago even among Socialists and Communists many must have regarded Morris's picture of "A Factory as It Might Be" as an unpractical poet's dream: today visitors return from the Soviet Union with stories of the poet's dream already fulfilled. Yesterday in the Soviet Union the Communists were struggling against every difficulty to build up their industry to the level of the leading capitalist powers: today they have before them Stalin's blueprint of the advance to Communism... Thus have the "claims" of William Morris the "unpractical" poet been promised fulfilment! (ibid, pp. 760-1).<sup>67</sup>

He cited in support an article by the devoted Stalinist, Andrew Rothstein and elaborated his claims with quotation from Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*. Thompson's assimilation of Morris to Stalinism crystallised in his conclusion: 'Were William Morris alive today, he would not look far to find the party of his choice' (Thompson, 1955, p. 795). He read Morris's advocacy of a disciplined revolutionary organisation as prefiguring the monolithic forms adopted by the Bolsheviki in 1920 and hypostasized by Stalin. He endorsed the bureaucratic centralism he would later repudiate, discerning in Morris:

...a first shadowy English forecast of the "party of a new type" of Lenin – a party of militant *cadres* educated in Socialist theory, the vanguard of the working class... He tended to think in terms of a party of *cadres*... Always he stressed the subordination of "individual whims" to the collective decisions of the party... and that the leadership of the party should not be made up of a "government and an opposition", but of those united in their theoretical outlook (ibid).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> One need not endorse one reviewer's antipathy to Thompson to understand the comment: 'When he declares that Morris's 'A Factory as It Might Be' ...has already been fulfilled in the Soviet Union readers of common sense will part company with him for good'. Anonymous (1955)..

<sup>68</sup>For Thompson's changed views on 'democratic centralism' see NMLH, CP/Cent/Org/2/3, Commission on Inner Party Democracy.

There is transparent distance between the Thompson of 1955 and the Thompson of 1956. *Morris* approbated Stalinist politics, identified them with morality and Marxism, and overlooked suppression of human rights and denial of democracy in the Soviet bloc. The absence of heresy was apparent from its reception. Drafts were read by party functionaries, Maurice Cornforth and Douglas Garman and by Torr, Kettle and Alick West. The sole objection that survives was that the text was too long. Kettle, a leading authority in CPGB cultural circles, defended the book in print. Little escaped Page Arnot, twice the CPGB's representative in Moscow, always alert to deviation and a pioneer of the Stalinist take on *Morris*. In an extended review in *Marxist Quarterly*, edited by Burns, Arnot saw nothing amiss. Rather he endorsed:

...a carefully worked-out study with passages of sensitive analysis...which finally and completely smashes the Morris-myth...Edward Thompson has done a service to the whole British working class movement in this book...the book will destroy conceptions of Morris that are wholly erroneous and help to build a true picture of the man.<sup>69</sup>

After publication, Thompson continued to advocate visionary, more revolutionary party propaganda. Invited to speak at CPGB events by Burns and Klugmann, he was accepted as a loyal Communist: into 1956 he was recruiting new members such as the journalist, Tim Enright and his students, Dorothy and Joe Greenald.<sup>70</sup>

### **Thompson Transformed**

Khrushchev's speech on 25 February 1956 provoked a sea change in Thompson's politics. His Manichean world began to dissolve. What emerges most strongly is shock at the conservative response of party leaders and activists and shame at the sacrifice of intellectual

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<sup>69</sup> Page Arnot, 1955, pp. 238, 243, 244-245; Kettle, 1955; PHM, CP/Ind/Torr/01/03, Thompson to Klugmann, 3 January 1956.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Klugmann, 28 September 1955; Thompson to Jack Dunman, 27 January 1956; Thompson to Burns, 5 February 1956; Notice of Writers' Group Meeting 7.9.55; *Daily Worker*, 7 March 1955; Goodway, 2013, p. 61.

integrity subordination to Stalinism had engendered. But he was determined to remain a member, to reform the party and remove its leadership. He wrote to Ramelson:

...I have sufficient historical understanding to evaluate developments in the Soviet Union, keep the distortion of the revolution in perspective, and welcome the present return to the principles of Lenin. I am shocked far more deeply by the complacency with which this is being met by comrades at District and national levels. I was astonished that no other comrade seemed to feel any sense of shame and dishonour brought upon the international movement by these revelations...If feelings are disregarded (which in my case I cannot do) I would have thought that some comrades would have found the intellectual integrity of themselves (myself) and of our leadership called into question. Integrity may not be a word in the Stalinist calendar, but without respect for the truth Marx would never have devoted his life to the cause of Socialism.<sup>71</sup>

Facts must be faced

...the “realistic” security measures in the Soviet Union before the war, justified on the grounds that they strengthened the state and eliminated the potential 5<sup>th</sup> column, in fact weakened the Soviet Union, as did Stalin’s dictatorial position in the war...so far from the Soviet Union being the greatest objective force in the past 20 years for world socialism, these very weaknesses (and the subservience of other parties to them) have been an important contributory cause holding back the development of socialism in Eastern Europe and splitting the international working class...I and other comrades can never again have faith in a British leadership which has misled us so consistently, abandoned its position of leadership and responsibility into other hands, and used casuistic argument to justify this and that false position.<sup>72</sup>

Activists shared responsibility; but party leaders were distinctively culpable.

Thompson campaigned for a Special Congress to install a new leadership and prepare a different future. ‘Gollan, Dutt, Matthews, Burns and Co’, he claimed, ‘have in fact been acting as High Priests interpreting and justifying the Holy Writ, as emanating from Stalin, rather than creative Marxists...’<sup>73</sup> As hierarchical control of the party press stifled debate

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<sup>71</sup> NA, KV2/4291, Thompson to Ramelson, 19 March 1956.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> NA, KV2/4292, Thompson to Ramelson, 28 May 1956.

and pushed Thompson and Saville into publishing *The Reasoner* as a forum for internal discussion, he developed the analogy between Communism and Catholicism:

Holy Church, as we know, was founded upon an apostolic succession, with supreme doctrinal authority vested in the Pope and College of Cardinals. It excommunicated heretics, pronounced anathema on those who sought to smuggle heresies into the Church and sought to establish the truth or falsity of doctrines by referring to a self-consistent system of thought founded upon authority and Biblical texts, rather than by constant reference to the facts (Thompson, 2016a, p. 151).

He abandoned reform with reluctance influenced by the leadership's obduracy, the backing it attracted from the membership and Khrushchev's armed intervention in Hungary (McIlroy, 2016, pp. 23-32). Several reflections are in order. First, taken in context, Thompson's complaints and criticism in the early 1950s demonstrate neither 'proto-revisionism' nor 'resistance to Stalinism'. Second, when disillusion with Stalinism came it was sparked by the hierarchy of 'Holy Church', not by autonomous inquiry: Thompson thought things through *after* Khrushchev spoke. That in itself is testimony to his orthodoxy. Third, his study of Morris predisposed him towards a creative, critical stance, in response to the 'Secret Speech'; the book neither contained nor foreshadowed the views he articulated from 1956. The Thompson of *Morris* was far from writing:

[the CPGB leaders] are guilty of a breach of solidarity with those who are fighting for intellectual liberty in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe... Stalin and Zhdanov were the accredited masters of this "world view" it fell to them to exert a despotic authority upon the nation's intellectual and cultural life... At bottom the Stalinist simply does not understand what the arts are *about*...the Stalinist ideology which reduces the moral consciousness to class relativism or to Pavlovian behaviourism, forgets the creative spark without which man would not be man. (Thompson, 2014b, p. 97; 2014a, pp. 53, 66, 69).

Fourth, the 'Secret Speech' engendered agonising reappraisal of the past, emotional turbulence and intellectual ferment in Thompson. It provoked thinking, reading, writing, discussion which stimulated new insights and extended old ones. Fifth, in that context, the invasion of Hungary, the resistance and the CPGB leaders' support for Soviet tanks

graphically evoked for a Thompson in turmoil the realities of Stalinism – in a fashion the Kostov trial or the suppression of the East German workers' rising of 1953 had not. His faith in the Russian leaders' ability to change disintegrated. His transformed vision demanded a new course.

Kettle's biographer remarked: 'What some have seen as a paradox is that a man so sensitive to the subtleties of literature who could bring new insights to books which nobody had noticed before could also accept or at least remain silent about Stalinism' (Turner, 2009). Kettle, he concluded, considered Marxism was fundamentally correct and the crimes perpetrated in its name, did not destroy its essential truth. Something similar might be hazarded about Thompson. Like other Communist intellectuals, his hostility to capitalism and fascism, stimulated adherence to Soviet policy. Some aspects were sanitised, downplayed or passed over; others tolerated as temporary consequences of capitalist pressure. Doubts were suppressed or sublimated. A cracked moral compass pointed only West; extenuating circumstances applied only to the East. The party formed an embattled community of the elect, reinforcing dogma, assuaging misgivings, encouraging casuistry; Cold War conditions reinforced resolution against renegacy.

Years after, Dorothy evoked the mindset:

There was, however, a strongly religious element in the belief system which underlay party membership. Revealed truth derived from sacred texts...underlay the political actions of most of the members. The essential future of mankind involved the overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement first by a socialist system enforced by the dictatorship of the proletariat and finally, with the withering away of the state, by the classless society of communism... This was the basic outline of the 'dialectical materialism' taught in CP educational courses, and it undoubtedly contributed to the deliberate blindness of many of us to the abuse of state power in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe...the sense that communism embodied historical inevitability that... "truth is what helps forward the class struggle" underlay the political motivation of most party members. (D. Thompson, no date).



Edward's delineation of the mechanisms which elicited orthodoxy on cultural matters underpinned by faith in the party's politics also rings true:

...there was not only a formal structure but also a psychological structure among Communist intellectuals from the mid 1930s to the late 1940s which left us all lacking in self-confidence when confronted by the intrusion of "the Party". The political issues of those years were so critical as to make all literary or cultural concerns appear as somehow subordinate. The practical initiatives of the party...were so ardent, so fraught with significance, and sometimes so heroic...that this imputed a peculiar merit to the Party's leaders and officials: the heroism and significance of the times invested a certain charisma on them...the stream of "apostates" was so full that all of us were apt to recoil...from the brink of any heresy for fear of toppling into the flood...And we had become habituated to the formal rituals of criticism and self-criticism...in which the criticism came always from the Party's senior spokesmen on cultural matters ... and the self criticism was intoned by congregated intellectuals in response (Thompson, 1994, pp. 238-9).

With the passage of time, more may be revealed; the archives may yield fresh findings. As things stand, the record discloses no disquiet about fundamentals on Thompson's part. He was a complex, multi-faceted human being. The available materials provide insufficient evidence to sustain the conviction of admirers of the man, his scholarship and activism that he was a dissident in this period. On the contrary: what we know plausibly points towards the suggestion that during the postwar decade he poured his formidable intellectual abilities, his impressive energies, his passion for humanity and his longing for a better world – the qualities so many appreciated in the later Thompson – into prosecuting the cause of Stalinism which he identified with human progress. He remained 'fascinated by the Soviet Union' (Hamilton, 2011, p. 1).<sup>74</sup> and wrestled with the problem of Stalinism over succeeding decades precisely because he had once been a true believer.

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<sup>74</sup> For Thompson's lengthy wrestling match with Stalinism, see Flowers, 2016.

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