

SOLIDARITY

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After the Revolution

Some days may be better than others

Hungary 1956

Ten days that shook the left





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The Russian intervention in Hungary sent a tremor through European radical movements, the effects of which are still with us today. In Britain a mass exodus from the Communist Party brought to an end its long domination of left-wing politics. KEN WELLER was among those who left. In an interview with SOLIDARITY, he describes these key moments of post-war politics.

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COVER PICTURE: Rebels with grenades stand guard in the vicinity of an abandoned Soviet tank during the battle for Budapest.

Photo: Erich Lessing / Magnum

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Publishing history. The present Solidarity Journal is the latest in a line of magazines produced by the Solidarity Group and stretching back to the early sixties. Solidarity for Workers Power, first in this sequence, was founded in 1960 and ran to 89 issues. This was succeeded by the nationally produced Solidarity for Social Revolution which ran to 16 issues and was in turn succeeded by the current journal. Our publishing history is complicated further by the existence in the sixties and early seventies of six or seven regional Solidarity magazines, among them those produced by the Scottish, South Wales, and North Western Solidarity groups; and by the publication of the shortlived, nationally produced, Solidarity for Self Management.

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HUNGARY 1956



Cliff Harper

The modest fruits of humbling pragmatism

Thirty years ago the people of Hungary rose against Communist Party rule and Russian domination. Within days their bid for freedom was crushed by Soviet tanks, a development which sent shockwaves through European politics. Starting on page 6, a lengthy interview with an English activist of the time charts the impact these events had on British radicals; while below, contributing anonymously, a participant in the 1956 uprising asks how it is that today Hungary is arguably the most tolerable place to live behind the Iron Curtain.

SITTING ON THE FENCE has been the necessary foreign policy of the independent Hungarian state over several long periods during the past thousand years. Sandwiched between Western (that is, German) and Eastern (Byzantine, Tartar,

Turkish, Russian) imperialist ambitions, Hungarians usually sought a tolerable modus vivendi between East and West. In doing so, they relied, whenever possible, on a kind of North-South axis; that is, good relations with their

How Hungary's hopes were dashed

September–October 1956

Workers demand "workers' self-government" in factories.

6th October

Official reburial of László Rajk, former Communist leader executed as "Stalinist fascist" in October 1949, as gesture to the public.

22nd October

Students form their own independent organisation.

23rd October

Mass demonstration calls for socialism, democratic elections, and equality between USSR and the People's Democracies. Party Secretary Ernest Gero denounces demonstrators as "counter-revolutionaries". Secret police fire on demonstrators at radio station but are overwhelmed.

24th October

Imre Nagy announced as Prime Minister. Soviet forces called in. Street fighting ensues.

25th October

Massacre of demonstrators in Parliament Square. János Kádár replaces Gero.

26th October

Workers' councils spread across Hungary. Army colonel Pál Maleter joins revolutionaries. National Council of Free Trades Unions issues political and economic demands.

27th October

New government contains non-communists.

28th October

Ceasefire promised. Councils' representatives meet at Győr.

29th October

Győr delegates reaffirm demands

northern neighbour Poland and collaboration with the Papacy.

When, in 1849, Hungarian independence was crushed by an outbreak of the sporadic alliance of German and Russian imperialism, Hungary was only saved by the subsequent splits between German princes. When Bismarck brought about German unity without the Hapsburg-ruled German lands, and the majority of the remaining Hapsburg possessions were non-German, it became possible for Hungary to achieve a semi-independent status within the confines of the Hapsburg monarchy.

However, when Russia suppressed the Hungarian freedom movement in 1956, there seemed little prospect of Hungary being saved a second time. Instead, the country's situation became analogous to that of the Transylvanian principality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Transylvania was under Ottoman suzerainty but managed to retain a controlled liberty of action within the sphere of Eastern imperialism. Nothing could give a better description of Transylvanian pragmatism than these words from a letter of the time: "We keep silent, we flatter, we serve humbly, shamefully, but not without profit". The same might also be a description of Hungarian policy during the thirty years since the defeat of '56.

What followed after this tragedy of 1956 will probably be known to history as the Kádár era. Indeed, whether or not we consider Kádár a traitor – and in 1956 he was undoubtedly considered one by the overwhelming majority of Hungarians – today it is quite clear that but for his sober pragmatism Hungary would never have become what it undoubtedly is today: all things considered, the most tolerable place to live behind the Iron Curtain. For, even if the standard of living is rather better in East Germany – though nowhere else in Eastern Europe – this is balanced

by such essential advantages as the freedom to travel and apparent freedom of expression. As regards the latter, several literary works have been published lately giving a true and in no sense distorted picture of the '56 events, even though these remain officially labelled as 'counter-revolution'. Even if the so-called second economy - that is, free enterprise within narrow limits - is more like the Soviet Russian New Economic Policy of Lenin's era than genuine socialism, it is certainly better than the incompetent state capitalism of the present Soviet system. Indeed, whereas following the Soviet model used to be a tenet of all Eastern Bloc regimes, today Big Brother Russia is inclined to follow the example of Little Brother Hungary in order to readjust its ailing economy. All this is thanks to the pragmatic policy of keeping silent, flattering, serving humbly, but not without profit; the policy initiated after 1956 by the traitor Kadar.

But was Kadar really a traitor? There were already in November and December '56 some objective-minded Hungarians who estimated Kadar's role as follows: that he was in October a genuine, sincere adherent of the Hungarian people's revolt, but when no help whatsoever came from the West, he saw, as a clear-sighted pragmatic politician, no other possibility for his country and people than submitting to the overwhelming power of Moscow and making the best of things. In addition, it is likely that he was warned by Krushchev that unless he were willing to collaborate, Rakosi and Gero, the former ruthlessly stalinist Party Secretaries, would be reinstated as Soviet-sponsored leaders of Hungary.

However, under any analysis, it seems clear today, after thirty years, that for us in 1956 it was decidedly better to stake our all on an uncertain revolt than on no revolt at all.

for industry and political democracy.

30th October

Soviet troops begin to withdraw from Budapest. One-party system abolished.

31st October

News of fresh Soviet troop movements into Hungary.

1st November

Councils threaten action against Red Army unless it withdraws. Maleter and others negotiate with Soviet officials. Nagy announces neutrality of Hungary.

2nd November

A UN Soviet deny Soviet forces are moving into Hungary.

3rd November

Kadar and other ministers at Soviet embassy. Nagy appeals to UN. Maleter arrested by Russians.

4th November

Red Army attacks Budapest. Nagy flees to Yugoslav embassy. Kadar forms new government and requests Soviet help against "counter-revolutionaries". Fierce fighting continues until 14th November.

21st November

Soviet troops prevent Budapest Central Workers' Council meeting.

23rd November

Nagy leaves Yugoslav embassy with promise of safe conduct and is arrested. He is later executed.

9th December

Government declares martial law and dissolves all regional and central workers' councils.

11-14th December

48-hour general strike following arrest of leaders of Budapest Central Worker's Council.

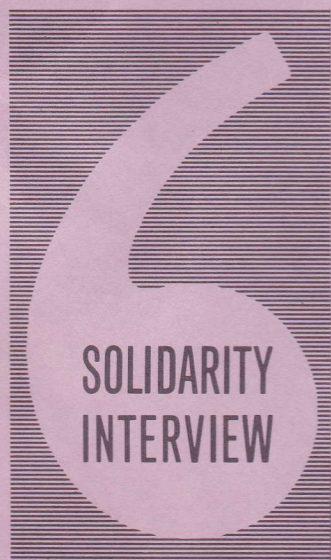
17th November 1957

Abolition of remaining councils.

HUNGARY 1956

Moments of mass apostasy

The Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 marked a turning point in post-war revolutionary politics across Europe. Nowhere was this more true than Britain, which saw the collapse of the Communist Party's long domination of 'left-wing' politics. Suddenly, whether one supported the programme of the Hungarian Workers' Councils became, as it remains, the litmus-test for genuinely libertarian socialists. SOLIDARITY asked KEN WELLER, then a member of the Young Communist League, to recount the effects of the events in Hungary on the socialist movement here, and on himself.



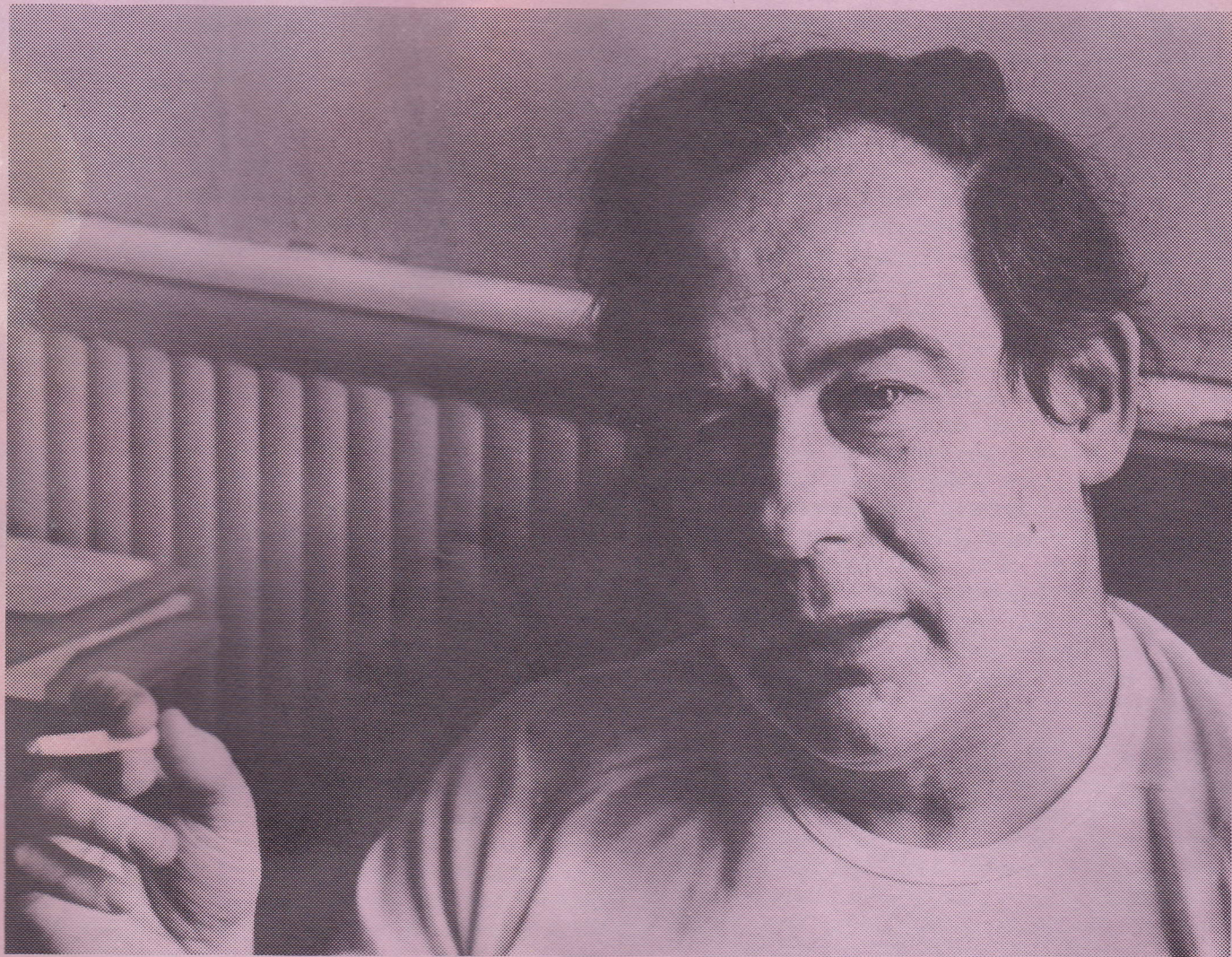
SOLIDARITY: What impact did the Hungarian uprising of 1956 have on the British Communist Party?

KEN WELLER: First of all I think I ought to give you some idea of the political situation, before 1956, and show how different it was from the situation today.

Apart from the Communist Party, which had about 35,000 members, you had a couple of moribund, fossilised groups like the Socialist Party of Great Britain and the Independent Labour Party, which was still in existence, tiny groups of trotskyists buried deep in the Labour Party, and the anarchists. Militant struggle in industry was completely dominated by the CP. They had the Fire Brigades Union, the Foundry Workers Union, they were influential at a district level in many unions; for example there were seven districts of the Amalgamated Engineering Union in London, each with

full-time officials and office staff, and with one exception they were controlled by the CP. Hundreds of people owed their jobs to their Party membership. I couldn't understand, at one time, why an all-aggregate meeting [Editors: one which all members of the Party were entitled to attend] used to vote automatically for the leadership when ninety per cent of the membership were to a greater or lesser extent critical, and then someone said, "Well, it's the people who have the jobs"; and I started counting up people who had jobs in London dependent on CP support that I knew of, and when I reached eight hundred I stopped counting.

People can't realise how big an apparatus it was. There were the embassies, the Friendship Societies, the printshops, the front organisations, the unions; 120 were employed by the Electrical Trades Union alone. There were all the agencies of the Soviet government, Tass, the Moscow Narodny Bank, all these sorts of things were full of people; I mean, the Soviet Weekly alone employed a network of people who were distributing agents for the paper, and so on.



KEN WELLER: "A massive change in people's perceptions had taken place".

Looking back at it now, you can see that the '56 events were just the culmination of a process. You didn't have an explosion out of nothing. There were things happening for years before that were relevant. You saw the gradual degeneration of the CP. The ethos and commitment were declining. Politically it was becoming more and more diffuse. In industry there was a situation where it was the only organisation which had any network through which militants could function on the left. It either controlled the shop stewards' organisation in virtually every major engineering plant or was extremely influential: Fords, the Briggs plant in London, down on the docks, in building, the Firth steel plant in Sheffield, which was the largest in the country, place

after place up on the Clyde. They had a huge rank and file presence; I mean they had about two hundred members at Fords, they had the whole site, you know, the five factories, sewn up down there.

At the same time they had a network of officials implanted in the unions, not only in the unions they controlled, but unions in which they weren't in control but had members on the executive; and so on the one hand they had pushes towards militant struggle from their members in industry organised on the shop floor, and on the other hand they had to protect their officials. These officials were used. For example, in the AEU Claude Berridge was the major Executive Committee member of the Communist Party (I mean a member of

the EC of the AEU), and whenever there was a strike on dear old Claude would be sent down to tell them to go back to work! There was a growing lack of confidence. Over and over again this happened. What would happen would be that, say in Cossors or in Fords, where there was an agreement signed by people including CP members or fellow-travellers like Ted Hill of the Boilermakers, they would be pressurised by the Party to give in and not fight against the agreements; and when you look at some of these agreements and these betrayals, you could see that there was within industry a growing tension between the national policy of the Party and its compromises with union leaderships, and what its rank and file members wanted. This was building up, there's no doubt about that, for a very long time before the '56 events.

The same thing was happening outside industry. Although we see the CP as a monolith, in fact there were whole areas and issues where discussion could take place, provided you didn't challenge the Soviet Union and Stalin, and that sort of thing. But there were quasi-discussions going on, people beginning to question various aspects of the CP's policy or lack of policy. I remember they produced a pamphlet on the motor car industry in which the sole policy they put forward as a solution to the problems of the car industry was to increase the import tax on cars. When you've got people actually up against Ford management it's not very helpful, in fact the Ford management would have agreed with them on that particular demand!

I've given all this as a sort of background. Looking to events in '56 itself: first you'd had the death of Stalin in March '53; then you had the events in Berlin and East Germany, which were major, in June '53; then the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in February '56, at which Khrushchev denounced Stalin's murderous purges in a

secret session. I remember the Sunday Times produced a special issue which contained the full text of Khrushchev's speech - it was about an inch thick, it was a joke that someone had spent a whole week reading it and he finishes reading and someone knocks on the door and it's the next issue; and then there were the Polish events where Gomulka came to power and the old guard were thrown out with massive demonstrations in the streets. Then came the Hungary events. You had these regimes which we'd been arguing were supported by ninety-nine per cent of the population in Eastern Europe, collapsing in an absolute shambles. Then you had the Suez events, where the British, French and Israelis invaded Suez; it was a year of shock after shock. I think the impact that Suez had in Britain has been largely forgotten - the demonstrations, there were spontaneous strikes in various places against the Suez adventure. There was a demonstration in Trafalgar Square which was the largest demonstration I have ever been on, followed by riots in Whitehall, a massive punch-up with the police, the first of the big confrontations in Britain.

I remember being in Whitehall when the mounted police came out of the entrance of Downing Street and charged into the crowd as it was forming - in other words you looked up Whitehall and there was just a black mass, but near Downing Street there were just a few people dotted around - and they charged and I saw one knocking over a middle-aged couple who clasped each other in their arms for fear, knocking them flying; and I looked in the gutter and there was a banner pole, like a broom-handle, about five feet long, and I picked it up and the same policeman on a horse came charging at me and I hit him as hard as I could with it, broke the pole, and he turned round and went back into Downing Street, I don't know what happened to him; and then there was a battle in Whitehall which was quite nasty; the police would grab

hold of someone and there would be a battle over their body; in one scuffle I ended up at the back of the crowd with a policeman's epaulette in my hand, minus the policeman; and then there were marches through the streets with linked arms. It was an emotional event, caused by a combination of factors. At the beginning of that demonstration, some CPers turned up with banners, just a few, you almost had to respect them, and they were booed! This was the party which had dominated left-wing politics, effectively the only people who ever had demonstrations apart from the Labour Party; they turned up for the Suez demon-

stration and they were booed into the square. A massive change in people's perceptions and attitudes had taken place over those few months.

These events were followed by an explosion of debate. Everyone perceives it as an explosion within the Communist Party, but it was a lot more than that, although it was related to these events; but because of the centrality of the role of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the Communist Party in left-wing politics, they'd been acting as a sort of iceberg holding everything in stasis - mixed metaphors I know - for twenty



THE SUEZ CRISIS: Thousands filled Trafalgar Square on November 4th 1956 in a protest, held by the Labour Party, against the Eden government's interventions in Egypt.

"I think the impact that the Suez crisis had in Britain has largely been forgotten, there was a demonstration in Trafalgar Square which was the largest I have ever been on, followed by riots in Whitehall... the first of the big confrontations in Britain".

years, and when this started everything came up for grabs. You had within the Communist Party the emergence of a duplicated paper called The New Reasoner, which was produced by Edward Thompson and John Saville. That started the discussion going. When they were expelled they turned it into The Reasoner. At the same time, a group around Raphael Samuels and a lot of other younger Communists produced the Universities and Left Review. Later on these two papers were merged; they were the origin of the New Left Review.

Side by side with that, Peter Fryer, who'd been in Hungary during the struggles, wrote a book, Hungarian Tragedy, which had a profound effect. He also came in contact with Gerry Healy's group of trotskyists, and started producing a paper called Peter Fryer's Newsletter (it was actually called that, not The Newsletter) which was mainly about dissidence with in the Communist Party, and later took a broader political line. There was the quite spontaneous emergence of something called the Forum Movement. In localities up and down the country something over a hundred discussion groups emerged to become the Forum Movement, which had a couple of conferences where people from the Party, trotskyists, Labour Party, and the non-committed, came together to discuss. They used to have weekly meetings organised by the Universities and New Left Review.

The ones I remember most vividly were held in a hotel in Southampton Row. I remember one on working class historiography, a pretty arcane subject, with Thompson speaking, and there were something like eight hundred people. That wasn't exceptional; I mean, it was more than average, but you'd have hundreds, you'd have a hall packed week after week after week, for, oh, two or three years. And that was only one of the things. You had things like the Partisan Club; that was a club, founded by people who had come out in this milieu and

wanted to create a place where people could meet, in Carlyle Street in Soho; they took over a building, and the cellar was a sort of coffee bar and God knows what else, and that was a centre where people over a huge range of political views could meet for the first time. Because of that the left outside the Communist Party began to strike roots, because they'd all had criticisms, and people began to respond to them.

The most effective was Healy's outfit, which didn't have a name at that time. It had had a split a couple of years earlier and was down to forty or sixty people. By '58 or '60 it had probably six to eight hundred members. That was the sort of growth. Many other little groups also grew, not to the same degree; I'm just saying that the situation changed completely. The domination of the CP was destroyed. It was so vulnerable.

I was in the Young Communist League, an active member of the second-largest YCL branch, the Islington branch, and we began to be affected by this dissidence. It wasn't a clear linear process, it was confused, bits here, bits there, and then suddenly, often quite late, in my case in '58, all this dissidence began to fit together in a coherent whole. The YCL was the last political youth organisation in Britain not to be against conscription. All the others, including the Tories, were opposed to conscription, and the YCL had a policy for a cut in the call-up with a view to its speedy abolition! There was a YCL conference about '57 where the dissidents actually won the day on a couple of issues. One was opposition to the death penalty, which would be banal now, and the other was calling for the abolition of conscription. And the leadership said "Look, let's make a compromise. We know we're going to be defeated, but let's have a compromise, we don't want a too-sudden change". They suggested a compromise which was a cut in

conscription with a view to its speedy abolition tagged on. That was accepted, wrongly, of course, and then for the following year Challenge, the paper of the YCL, never had a single reference to the speedy abolition part! I mean, the political bankruptcy of that period! I remember the shock when the Daily Worker had its first criticism of the Soviet Union, and you know what the criticism was about? There was a woman shot-putter in some games in Britain who was arrested for shoplifting in the West End, and the Russians used diplomatic muscle to get her released and back to the Soviet Union. The Daily Worker said she should have stood trial. People don't realise the climate of that time. The Party was frightened of putting forward policies which were different from the Soviet Union. The reason it was not opposed to conscription was that they had it in the Soviet Union, so they couldn't in principle oppose it. The same factor motivated their opposition to unilateralism.

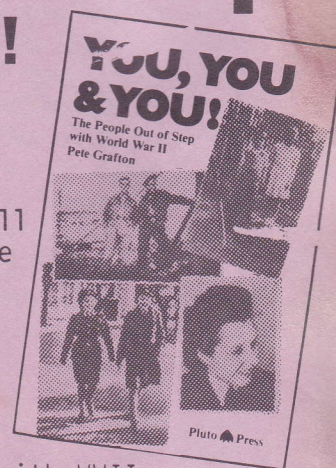
All the movements which emerged in that period declined. They were temporary. People were clarifying their ideas. What I found quite interesting, quite shocking at the time, was that you were in a debate inside the Communist Party, all you dissidents were standing together shoulder to shoulder and fighting, and then you'd go down to the cafe afterwards and have a discussion and realise that many of the other dissidents were going in completely different directions. One group were dissident because they thought the Party wasn't liberal enough and wanted to go into liberalism, whereas others wanted a more coherent line on class questions, if you want to use the jargon.

So the things that emerged in that period, the discussion forums and the papers, of which there were quite a few others as well, were temporary phenomena because people were clearing out their ideas, and these divergences and realignments were taking place. But in fact there were quite a lot of ongoing

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connections. It's often forgotten that the first Aldermaston March was organised by an alliance of pre-existing radical pacifists, coming out of the Pacifist Youth Action Group and the Direct Action Committee on the one hand, and on the other hand dissident ex-CPers like Raphael Samuels and a whole group of people around him. In industry you had the cracking of the wall, the debacle in the ETU where the CP were caught trying to rig the ballots; they were nailed by ex-CPers who'd been involved in previous waves of ballot-rigging and who knew what they were doing. Up until recently the present day the whole leadership of the ETU has been ex-CPers. You see that with a whole lot of trade union leaders who'd been tied to the CP by self-interest. You're a CP member or fellow-traveller, you're in a union which has elections; being a CP member, the CP will turn out votes for you, they're the only people who can really do it, they're the only people who are really organised.

What you had to give them was relatively limited; resolutions at your conference on East-West trade, that sort of thing. A lot of these people used this opportunity to skip the prison and left, some of them for sincere reasons; others just didn't see that it was of any value any more, it was in such disarray that it was of no value to them.

What I'm trying to say is that from then on the movement wasn't the same. The CP wasn't the same. When I went into Fords, the jewel in the crown, if you like, of the CP, in the late sixties, you found that there were probably only about seventy CPers top whack in the place; that they were probably divided into about five or six different factions who didn't have the slightest inhibition about talking to outsiders about their disagreements. It was no longer a homogeneous organisation; and it's true to this day.

SOLIDARITY: Which direction did you move in yourself, out of all the sort of dissident things that there were?

KW: I was fishing for about two years after '56. I was deeply dissident, but not clear in which direction I was going. In fact I was involved in all these things; I used to go to the Forum and the conferences and so on; but I ended up, shall we say in '57, '58, moving towards Healy's trotskyism, and became a member of Healy's group, which later became the Socialist Labour League, and I was in that for a couple of years, two and half years, something like that; and then Solidarity was formed. The staggering thing is, the first conference of Healy's outfit all us dissident ex-CPers went to, I remember how shocked we all were when we saw that many of the organisational and conference methods, you know, like the panel election of conferences, were practised in that organisation as well, to a more extreme extent, because a smaller organisation is much tighter; and in fact under the pressure of all these new people, in a sense they trimmed their sails and moderated things. For a while the SLL was a much looser organisation and grew rapidly. Then when people began to realise what was what, in about 1960, they had about five different splits in about eighteen months.

SOLIDARITY: In an interview with the 'Guardian' of 20th October 1986, Eric Hobsbawm said that a lot of people stayed in the CP who had the same criticisms, but decided they would try and reform it from within. Do you think that's true; and why didn't you decide to stay in, if you think it's true?

KW: In that interview, he said "The same criticisms as another group of people". History tends to be perceived in terms of the people who actually write things, so in fact the events of '56 will be perceived in terms of magazines like The Reasoner and the



THE SUEZ CRISIS: A mounted policeman charges into the crowd in Whitehall, where some participants of the Trafalgar Square demonstration continued their protest. "They charged and I saw one knocking over a middle-aged couple who clasped each other in their arms for fear".

Universities and Left Review, in other words people who find it easy to write, university, middle-class academics and so on, who become stars, and the other people who were involved - the vast majority - get forgotten. For example, there was a conference at which Andrew Rothstein was speaking about Hungary, and Jimmy McLaughlin, who was a famous CP industrial militant at Fords, was there. Rothstein was talking about the enemies of socialism, meaning the workers in Hungary, and McLaughlin gets up in the middle of the conference and says "You're the enemy, you filthy old swine!". That's the sort of thing which happened. Waves of people in industry went out of the CP, but they didn't write about it. Now Hobsbawm was talking about a particular group of people when he

says "They went out but other people with similar views stayed in"; he's talking about a relatively small layer of people who remain crypto-Stalinists to this day; it doesn't mean the seven or eight thousand people who left the Party, and the destruction of the milieu which the CP controlled, which is far more significant. What he means is that there were some people who left who had very similar views to some people who stayed to change things. What isn't clear, in my view, is what influence Hobsbawm and Monty Johnstone and all those people had on changing things. The changes seem to be forced at every level by the change in the Party rather than any tiny group of people intervening at the top. The reason I didn't stay on is I didn't agree with the Party any more. How can you reform something when you increasingly disagree with every iota of what it is doing? It wasn't a question of disagreeing with this or that, it wasn't liberal enough or it wasn't democratic enough; in every single aspect of its policy I couldn't find any element to agree with, increasingly so as time went on.

SOLIDARITY: In the aftermath of all these people leaving and so on, would you say the CP, what was left of the CP, became more liberal in response to all these criticisms, or became more Stalinist and defensive in reaction?

KW: I think it became more liberal in structure and policy, it's much more liberal now than it was.

SOLIDARITY: It is now, but in the immediate aftermath?

KW: Even over a relatively short period. They set up commissions on inter-party democracy, they democratised slightly; in a sense they were trying to catch up with their members. I remember Harry Pollitt coming back from the Twentieth Congress, at which he was present, and there was an aggregate meeting in the Friends' Meeting

Hall in Euston Road, which was packed - I mean, most people say "Report back, yawn", but this time it was packed (and it's quite a big hall) - and he got up to make his speech, and he says, "I know people have been hearing reports about what's been going on at the Twentieth Congress, and Krushchev's... " - no, he didn't mention that, because it hadn't been admitted, as it hasn't in Russia to this day, that Krushchev's speech was official - "I know what you want to discuss", he says, "but I'm going to discuss the real business of the Twentieth Congress", and then spent an hour telling us about how the agricultural plans had been fulfilled, and so on. People walked out of that meeting absolutely stunned. There were plenty of dissidents who stayed in the party, but what happened wasn't simply people leaving; the underpinning of the Party internally was also crumbling, and of course the liberalisation is just a reflection of that crumbling, in that they really couldn't restrict discussion any more; you couldn't have a statement in World News, which was the official Party inner journal, saying, "The discussion on this question will now cease" - people will just give them two fingers and carry on; and the sort of thing like people getting expelled for discussing political views with people outside the organisation, that doesn't happen much any more; not simply because they've become liberalised... the Party has become liberalised, but it's happened because people are no longer prepared to tolerate the old monolithism any more.

SOLIDARITY: So why were you attracted towards the SLL?

KW: Because they were there, basically. A lot of these things are historical accidents. They were the people I came in contact with. I was involved with a dissident group inside the YCL; we produced our own paper and had a circulation of up to eight hundred, which was

massive, believe me. A group of us in the YCL all left together, mainly working-class kids, well, we weren't kids, young men and women, I suppose, and we came in contact with Healy's people. My own path was through Peter Fryer, who'd I'd known in the Daily Worker; I'd met him and we'd discussed, and he sort of convinced me that this was the path of the future. Funnily enough he left in '60, and then I left a little bit later. But that's my own particular path. They had a critique of Stalinism, a critique that certainly on the face of it, as presented, looks quite reasonable and feasible - the Stalinist bureaucracy, the degeneration, and all this sort of thing; it's only when you begin to realise Trotsky's own involvement, and the structure of the trotskyist groups themselves, you have questions. It's a learning process. There was nothing around available, no accessible critiques of trotskyism, 'accessible' being the key word. We're dealing with a completely different political scene to today. Accident, that's often the way people join things. I mean, if you asked yourself how you came in contact with Solidarity: it wasn't that you sat down one day and said "Right, there's fifty-six political groups and here's their political programmes, that's the one for me"; it doesn't happen that way. I'm not saying it's entirely luck; there obviously have to be things that respond to what you want; but that was the way I was moving. After about two and a half years in the SLL I realised that in some ways I'd moved backwards from my dissident days in the CP, if you know what I mean; I had a deeper criticism of what was wrong before I went in.

SOLIDARITY INTERVIEW

SCIENCE-FICTION

Everyday life in Utopia

Ursula Le Guin
Always Coming Home
 Gollancz, £10.95

THIS IS A SCRAPBOOK rather than a novel. It contains a central narrative, but this is blurred by a series of anecdotes, poems, mock-anthropological notes, pictures and cryptic messages from 'Pandora', that is, Le Guin. After two readings this book still puzzles me; does it have a didactic

purpose? Is it an attempt to describe a libertarian socialist society, showing its faults as well as its successes? Is it a description of a different, not necessarily better, society? Or is it simply a game, something to amuse and provoke?

Initial impressions are not encouraging. *Always Coming Home* is focused on The Valley: a pastoral, artisanal and spiritually-orientated society, which is described with a laboured Californian hippy tweeness. The Valley is inhabited by people with names like Stone Telling and Lark Rising; we are constantly told that its people, buildings and artefacts are beautiful - a characteristic of utopian writing which Le Guin has



John Watson

HUNGARY 1956

Eye-witness account

Peter Fryer

Hungarian Tragedy

New Park Publications, £2.95

Andy Anderson

Hungary '56

Solidarity/Black & Red, £2.00

hitherto always criticised. As the book develops it becomes clear that this is not, however, another shallow static image of a picture-postcard utopia. Descriptions of life in the Valley build on each other to create a surprisingly rich and disconcertingly realistic image of a society. The characters cry, get lonely and bored, feel anger, lust and despair - feelings which most utopian writers would not be able to admit into their dreams. Within this context the central narrative is often strangely poignant.

The main story echoes that of The Dispossessed, her earlier portrayal of an avowedly anarchist society: an inhabitant of utopia feels alienated from the utopian society, and wishes to communicate with other societies based on antagonistic values. In this case the main character is a teenage girl, and her journey back to her father's militaristic society is used to contrast the mildly matriarchal world of The Valley with the strict patriarchal regime of The Condor.

This book contains much that is interesting, even moving, but it has little express political message. At one point Le Guin gives the following evaluation of her work:

"This is a mere dream dreamed in a bad time, an Up Yours to the people who ride snowmobiles, make nuclear weapons, and run prison camps by a middle-aged housewife, a critique of civilisation possible only to the civilised, an affirmation pretending to be a rejection, a glass of milk for the soul ulcered by acid rain, a piece of pacifist jeanjacquerie, and a cannibal dance among the savages in the ungodly garden of the farthest West."

This is a wonderful description of a book; unfortunately it does not always seem to apply to Always Coming Home.

JOHN COBBETT

IT IS A PLEASURE to welcome this reprint of Peter Fryer's eye-witness account of the 1956 Hungarian uprising. As Fryer makes clear, the Hungarian people's demands were not for a restoration of capitalism, but for a genuine socialism which would be truly democratic; but this programme, overwhelmingly supported by the Hungarian working class, was crushed by Russian tanks. Fryer, at that time correspondent in Hungary for the British Communist Party paper the Daily Worker, reported these facts; his dispatches were savagely cut or simply suppressed. When he tried to tell the truth about Hungary, in meeting and discussions, he was suspended from the CP, and the publication of Hungarian Tragedy resulted in his expulsion. The book, as its author admits, "bears the marks of haste, emotion and disillusionment"; yet at the same time he retained his illusions in the revolutionary potential of the Party. His expressed purpose was to "help bring about the urgently-needed redemption and rebirth of the British Communist Party". In this narrow objective he failed, but he contributed immeasurably to the rebirth of revolutionary politics.

Hungary '56 remains probably the best short account of the Hungarian uprising. First published by Solidarity in 1964, it was reprinted by Black & Red in 1976.

S K FRENCH