

Howard Fast and the N. Y. Times

By ALAN MAX

THE MAGAZINE section of last Sunday's New York Times carries a lengthy feature consisting mainly of an exchange of letters between Howard Fast and the Soviet writer Boris Polevoi.

The article is titled "Writers in the Shadow of Communism" and it was written by the former Moscow correspondent Harrison Salisbury to whom Fast made available his correspondence.

There is a reply by Polevoi to an earlier letter from Fast and a new letter from Fast by way of answer. In this answer, Fast raises some very serious questions and does so with what is evidently a genuine sense of anguish.

Fast asks for an explanation of why letters stopped coming to him from the Soviet Union immediately after he left the American Communist Party last winter although, he says, the fact of his leaving was never made public in the Soviet Union. He asks why Polevoi in his letter failed to make any direct reply to Fast's inquiries about the terrible crimes which had been committed against Jewish writers and Jewish culture in the Soviet Union. He charges Polevoi with not telling the truth about the executed Yiddish writer Kvitko when Polevoi met Fast here in 1955, and asks an explanation.

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THERE WOULD be something wrong with Fast if he did not feel such distress over mat-

ters like these. But Fast did not necessarily have to leave the Communist Party to take a critical attitude toward certain Soviet developments. Nor do I take issue with his criticism of censorship if true and the failure of Soviet spokesmen to answer his questions. But why does Fast demean himself by lending the Times his personal correspondence, which the Times uses not to promote the search for truth and for frank and free exchange with the Soviet Union, but for purposes of its cold war crusade against the Soviet Union and socialism?

The recent events and revelations have produced a worldwide debate and discussion of the most searching kind within the Marxist parties everywhere. In this country, Fast published a lengthy statement of his doubts and questions in the pages of the left cultural monthly *Mainstream*. His statement was then subject to democratic discussion on the part of contributors of many different viewpoints. No limitations were placed on the discussion. Fast knows he could have continued to give his views within the ranks of the progressive movement. Evidently he chose otherwise and decided to take his side of the debate to the New York Times.

If anyone has doubts about the intentions of the Times, let him recall how that paper handled the news of the resolution adopted by the recent New York State Convention of the Communist Party on the Jewish question in the Soviet Union.

The convention expressed its horror that "Jewish cultural figures, many of them with worldwide reputations and following, were unjustly and secretly executed."

"Many others were prosecuted and imprisoned," the resolution continued. "We who were incredulous when enemies of socialism rumored such events, were horrified when unimpeachable Communist sources since the 20th Congress corroborated them."

Although in my opinion the resolution could have been stronger in some respects, it did urge the Soviet Government to issue a statement "on what happened to Jewish culture and on how the errors on the Leninist policy are being and would be overcome."

FAST SHOULD ponder the fact that while the Times received the full text of this resolution on April 2, the paper did not see fit to quote a single word from it. But when similar questions are raised by a former Communist, the Times devotes page after page to them.

Clearly, the Times has not the slightest interest in helping rectify errors in the Soviet Union. It is interested only in exploiting these errors to bolster the Cold War.

The Times was not interested in the Communist Party resolution because it did not lend itself to the purpose of the Cold War. This is where the resolution sharply differed from Fast's presentation of the question. The Communist resolution—of which I have only quoted a few sentences—expressed its firm belief in the basic socialist character of the Soviet Union in spite of a whole period of many departures from socialist principles. The resolution also expressed a feeling not only for the horrible revelations made at the 20th Congress, but

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also for the positive advances and perspectives which featured that gathering. The resolution affirmed a confidence, therefore, in the ability of the Soviet Union to rectify the grave errors on the Jewish question.

FAST WAS seriously shaken by the disclosures on the Stalin regime, as who was not? But he should also appreciate the other aspects of the 20th Congress: the new outlook on maintaining world peace and on the possibilities of peaceful transition to socialism; the new attitude on Social-Democracy. There was also the perspective of fully democratizing life in the socialist countries, although this is still far from being achieved and develops unevenly and with many zig-zags.

The unmistakable indications at the Congress of socialist growth, development and maturity seem to have made little if any impression on Fast. Instead, he expresses increasing despair about the Soviet Union, and this seems to be accompanied by increasing illusions about conditions in our own country. It strikes me as ridiculous when in a Times article on freedom of writers under Communism, both Salisbury and Fast avoid mentioning how the book publishers here and the Times itself boycotted Fast's excellent novels during recent years, including the period of his imprisonment for defying the unAmerican committee, which the Times never protested.

(I must mention here the silly attempt in the Times article to make something of the microscopic differences between Polevoi's letter, written in Russian, and the English translation which came with it from Moscow. The translation is attributed to some "censor" who is supposed in this way to have tried to alter Polevoi's intentions. But Fast received not only the "censor's" translation but also the original Russian, so there could not have been any plot—except in the imagination of Salisbury and Fast. This illustrates, at least in Fast's case, to what absurd lengths a one-sided attitude can lead!)

THE TIMES and other reactionaries say we can't stop H-bomb tests or outlaw nuclear weapons because "we can't trust the Russians." And this at a time when the Soviet Union itself is offering a way out from this most deadly peril mankind has ever faced! Doesn't Fast see how the Times is now manipulating him to bolster distrust of the Soviet Union and the case against reaching agreements with that country?

I would urge Howard Fast as strongly as I can to ask himself whether this new collaboration with the New York Times can possibly further any of the noble goals to which he has devoted himself all these years, which he asserts he still cherishes and which just as surely The Times opposes.