

**'Cracking the Stalinist Crust' -
The Impact of 1956 on the Communist
Party of Australia**

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Abstract

The contention of this thesis is that previous accounts of 1956 and its impact on the Communist Party of Australia, have afforded insufficient attention to the complexities of this period in the Party's history. The common perception has been that the Party leadership clamped down on attempts by members to generate debate and discussion about the content of Khrushchev's 'secret speech' and the uprising in Hungary. The result of this was that members either concurred with the Party's stance and stayed within its ranks, or they disagreed and resigned or were expelled. This perception is too simplistic and fails to acknowledge the manifold difficulties and uncertainties faced by both the membership and the leadership during this period.

In an attempt to illuminate this chapter in the Party's history, this thesis will argue that 1956 traced a complex path of denial, surprise, limited acceptance and intolerance on the part of the leadership; and shock, disbelief, dismay and, in some instances, indifference on the part of the membership. Chapter 1 introduces the background leading up to 1956 both internationally and domestically. It also surveys the literature that has focussed, either wholly or in part, on this period. Chapter 2 details Khrushchev's 'secret speech' and the events in Hungary and assesses the international reaction to these events.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the CPA and its leadership. Chapter 3 explores its reaction and approach to dealing with the 'fallout' from the speech in the first half of 1956, prior to the Soviet Union releasing its official statement about the speech. Chapter 4 traces the

increasing hard line approach subsequently taken by the CPA leadership and its handling of the internal protests about the Soviet action in Hungary.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the diversity of reactions displayed by members. These ranged from those who were troubled by what they learnt of Stalin's actions but resolved, for a wide variety of reasons, to stay within the Party, to those for whom the revelations proved too divergent from their ideal of communism and either left or were removed from the Party.

Chapter 1: Introduction

What on earth was the matter with us all? Others have tried to diagnose the illness. All I can do is describe the events which were, for some of us, the cure.¹

For this Communist Party member, along with many of her comrades around the world, 1956 was a turning point. The Cold War was at its height and anti communist sentiment was being fuelled by McCarthyism in America and events such as the Petrov affair and Menzies' attempt to ban the Communist Party during the preceding years in Australia. The Suez crisis in October further heightened international tensions but it was a year in which the Communist world was rocked internally by a couple of significant events. The leader of the Communist world, Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin in a speech to a closed session of delegates to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February and this was a trigger for some countries under Soviet dominance to demonstrate their opposition to the suppression experienced under Stalin. Polish workers in Ponzan waged an insurrection on 28-29 June 1956² and then a Hungarian uprising was brutally crushed by Soviet tanks in October.

¹ Alison Macleod, *Death of Uncle Joe*, Merlin Press, Suffolk, 1997, p. 2.

² Joseph Rothschild, *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe since World War II*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, pp. 151-2.

Khrushchev's speech and the uprising in Hungary in October are the specific concern of this thesis.

Background

In the four years following the Second World War tensions between East and West dramatically escalated. The entrenchment of Soviet control, via the occupying Red Army, in the so-called 'Iron Curtain' countries, the formation of the Cominform, the Soviet-assisted communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, the imposition of the Berlin blockade, Russia's acquisition of the atomic bomb, and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, convinced many Western governments that Soviet power under Stalin's leadership was becoming unassailable. Until Stalin's death in 1953, it seemed that a third world war was inevitable. However, his departure created a power vacuum within the Soviet Union. The political manoeuvring that ensued resulted in Khrushchev gaining control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and led, in 1956, to the events that are the focus of this thesis: the 'secret speech' in February and the uprising later that year in Hungary.

Anxieties towards the 'communist menace' within Australia echoed international developments but also had a local dimension. Three examples were the bitter general coal strike in 1949 fought, successfully, by the Chifley Labor Government: the prolonged but ultimately unsuccessful attempt by the conservative Menzies Government to ban the

Communist Party through legislation and referendum (1950-51); and the heated atmosphere surrounding the Petrov defection and the subsequent Royal Commission into Communism. All this, and more, did much to fan the flames of Cold War fears. Correspondingly members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) felt increasingly isolated, suspicious and besieged – a feeling that persisted through to the traumatic year, 1956. As J.D. Blake commented, these conditions ‘led to a defensive spirit among some Party members, linked with a turning inwards for the comfort of being among like-minded people’.³ This response was understandable. In the five years preceding 1956, it was not only the legal existence of the CPA under assault. Its strength in the trade unions was being significantly eroded by the anti-communist Industrial Groups (although to some extent this was retrieved from the mid-1950s); the CPA leadership was involved in a convulsive inner-party struggle, which saw the ascendancy of E.F. Hill to the Central Committee Secretariat; and its ‘front’ organisations, such as the Australian Peace Council, and the Party itself, were deeply penetrated by the security services, which bred intense but justified paranoia.⁴ Diminished morale was echoed by falling commitment: by the end of 1955 Party membership had dropped to fewer than six thousand.⁵ Like many other Western communist parties, the CPA was neither

³ *Communist Review*, September 1956, p. 302.

⁴ For one of the best accounts of this period, see Robin Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communism and the Australian Labour Movement 1920-1955*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1975, pp. 255-84. For the leadership struggle, see Phillip Deery, ‘The Sickle and the Scythe: Jack Blake and Communist Party “Consolidation”, 1949-56’, *Labour History*, No.80, 2001, pp. 215-23.

⁵ Gollan, p. 284.

sufficiently resilient nor confident to confront the cataclysmic challenges emanating from the Soviet Union in 1956.

On 5 March 1953 Joseph Stalin died either from a cerebral haemorrhage or from poison administered by a guard on orders from Beria.⁶ The political climate within the USSR from this date to 25 February 1956, when Khrushchev made his 'secret speech' was dominated by the struggle for power between four individuals: Malenkov, Beria, Molotov and Khrushchev. On the surface there were expressions of loyalty to the policies of Stalin; however, underlying this apparent continuity significant changes were occurring. During 1953, Beria organised an exhibition for Central Committee members, where one of the exhibits was tapes of Stalin's conversations with members of the Secret Police. These tapes clearly demonstrated Stalin's role in arresting innocent Party officials and led to the freeing of the accused professors arrested as part of the 'Doctor's Plot'⁷. Shifts were also occurring publicly. Articles began to appear in *Pravda* that praised the role of the proletariat in making history over that played by individual leaders. They argued that Marxism-Leninism, which favoured collective leadership, was incongruent with the 'cult of the individual'. According to one historian, 'the barely disguised object of such commentary was Stalin'.⁸

⁶ The 'riddles' surrounding Stalin's death are discussed fully in Zhores Medvedev and Roy A. Medvedev, *The Unknown Stalin*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2006, pp. 1-33.

⁷ Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, Penguin, London, 1988, p. 332. See also Louis Rapoport, *Stalin's war against the Jews: the doctors' plot and the Soviet solution*, Free Press, New York, 1990;

⁸ Service, p. 332.

There were also changes on the cultural and social front. Khrushchev slowly began a process of relaxing censorship within the USSR and gradually began encouraging the educated to begin thinking for themselves.⁹ An article by Valdimir Pomerantsev, which called for greater sincerity and honesty in literature, was granted permission for publication and previous deceptions within literature and other propaganda outlets were denounced. A novel that described the problems faced by administrators and intellectuals under Stalin, titled *The Thaw*, was also given permission to be published and reportedly caused a 'sensation' amongst those who read it.¹⁰ A degree of criticism was also tolerated in areas such as inefficiencies, shortages and abuses, although criticism of leaders and the regime was not encouraged.¹¹ Such reforms began in the USSR soon after Stalin's death, and although subtle rather than fundamental, were undoubtedly harbingers of what was to unfold in 1956. The CPA, along with other Western communist parties, either was unaware of these changes, or chose to ignore them.

While these small signs of reform were taking place within the USSR, a more overt struggle for authority was being waged between Khrushchev and Malenkov. Khrushchev proposed a commission to investigate the purges of the 1930's and in particular the Leningrad purge of 1948-49. While the latter was not an especially brutal

⁹ Alec Nove, *Stalinism and After*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1975, p. 129.

¹⁰ Service, p. 335.

¹¹ Nove, p. 129.

purge when placed in the broader context of the 'Great Terror', it was one in which Malenkov had played the role of perpetrator. This commission consolidated Khrushchev's position as First Secretary of the Central Committee and considerably weakened Malenkov's authority.¹² In another sign of the changes taking place, Malenkov's removal from his position as Premier was done peacefully, without the recourse to execution or imprisonment, which would have been standard practice under Stalin, and was allowed to retain his seat on the Politbureau.¹³ However, there was another side to his removal. There was no sign of any disagreement or dissent reported until after the decision was made, Malenkov made no public speech defending himself, giving the impression the decision was unanimous. It was critical that the Party appear monolithic, seamless in its administration. Khrushchev, while encouraging openness in some areas, was not about to allow a return to the Party debates of the 1920s.¹⁴ In 1955, Malenkov formed an alliance with Molotov and Kaganovich against Khrushchev to try and remove him as First Secretary. Their attempts were defeated, however, when Khrushchev convened the full Central Committee with which he had a solid majority.¹⁵ Khrushchev continued his agenda of moderate reform by beginning to release political prisoners and exiles during 1955. As these people returned home, after many years of suffering, and began speaking with their families it became increasingly difficult for the Kremlin to avoid making some sort of statement about the repressions that had occurred

¹² Service, p. 337.

¹³ Nove, ,p. 126.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ralph Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, Red Rooster Press, Australia, 1987, p. 210.

under Stalin's reign. The pressure to provide an explanation suited Khrushchev's objective of diminishing Malenkov's influence.¹⁶

On 3 February 1956, the day before the commencement of the 20th Congress of the CPSU, Khrushchev proposed that a speech be delivered on the consequences of the 'cult of the individual'. He argued that by confronting the truth now members of the Presidium could avoid being forced to tell it at some time in the future, when 'we won't be the speech makers; no, then we'll be the people under investigation'.¹⁷ The other members of the Congress Presidium apparently watched nervously as Khrushchev prepared to deliver his speech. They were acutely aware of the mass repressions and that all – including Khrushchev – had blood on their hands. Thus, they would have been far more comfortable with the speech Molotov had proposed for the Congress: 'Stalin the Continuer of Lenin's work'.¹⁸ But the 'secret speech' – which will be discussed in chapter two - was duly delivered by Khrushchev in the middle of the night of 24-25 February to a closed session of CPSU delegates from which all fraternal delegates of foreign parties were excluded.

There is some speculation over what happened after the speech was delivered. One suggestion is that Khrushchev resolved that the speech not be discussed outside the

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 129.

¹⁷ Service, p. 338.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Party in order that ammunition not be provided to the enemy.¹⁹ In contrast, Service states that Khrushchev gave confidential briefings to activists within local Party Organisations and that he gave transcripts to foreign Communist Party leaders as they departed.²⁰ This claim is verified by Andereth, who asserted that communist leaders from socialist countries were given copies of the speech, and were asked to return them immediately, treating the contents as top secret.²¹ The claim by communist leaders present from the West that they were not informed of the speech or its contents is also supported by Andereth. It seems highly probable that because Khrushchev anticipated that some leaders would censor the contents of the 'speech', he deliberately leaked the text to a Western correspondent through a former KGB official, Kostya Orlov.

Khrushchev's intention in delivering the 'secret speech' was to discredit Stalin without repudiating the policies of the Communist Party. He sought to demonstrate that condemnation of Stalin did not entail denial of communism. He argued that the mass repressions and killings had commenced only after the assassination of Kirov in 1934 and that prior to this Stalin had performed 'great services' to the Soviet Union. This argument conveniently ignored the bloodshed that had occurred during the first Five

¹⁹ N.S. Khrushchev, 'On the Cult of the Personality and its Consequences: Report Delivered to the 20th Congress of the CPSU on 25 February 1956,' in *The Stalin Dictatorship: Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and Other Documents*, ed. T.H. Rigby, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1968, p. 18.

²⁰ Service, p. 341.

²¹ M. Andereth, *The French Communist Party: A Critical History (1920 -1984): from Comintern to 'the colours of France'*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984, p. 228.

Year Plan.²² A second intention of Khrushchev in delivering the 'secret speech' at the 20th Congress was, most likely, to consolidate his hold on power within the CPSU.

Within the Soviet Union, only a brief summary of the speech was published, but even the abbreviated version created a 'furore'.²³ Despite a great many Soviet citizens being affected, directly or indirectly, by the terror, few realised Stalin was the instigator. Thus, Khrushchev's revelation of Stalin's culpability came as a bombshell. But the speech was greeted differently in those Eastern European societies that had been subject to Soviet dominance since the end of the Second World War; they regarded it as an opportunity to challenge the legitimacy of Soviet rule. The first of these challenges came from Poland in the form of an industrial strike in late March 1956. However, compromises were reached with the protestors whilst former Communist Party leader, Wladyslaw Gomulka, arrested in 1949, was released from imprisonment in April, and appointed First Secretary of the Polish United Worker's Party. Such a swift compromise was not possible in Hungary. After the release of the 'secret speech', Hungarian workers began pressuring Imre Nagy for regime change. Nagy conceded to their demands in the hope that the West would support Hungarian sovereignty against the Soviet Union. On 23 October the first of a series of popular uprisings occurred. Nagy remained optimistic that a compromise could be reached, despite visits from a number of Soviet leaders with messages to the contrary. On 4 November Soviet tanks moved into Hungary and

²² Service, p. 340.

²³ Ibid, p. 341.

commenced a savage retribution and repression. Khrushchev denounced the uprising as a counter revolution, inspired by the West while Nagy fled to the Yugoslav Embassy. He was tricked into leaving the Embassy and taken into custody by the Soviets. In a move that suggested Stalin's heirs were still in the saddle, Nagy was executed in 1958 for refusing to repent his actions.²⁴ A Soviet-friendly regime was established in Budapest under Janos Kadar and Eastern bloc countries learnt that, as under Stalin, challenges to Khrushchev's rule would not be tolerated.

The Historiography of 1956

While the international literature on 1956 is becoming increasingly rich,²⁵ scholarly examination on the impact of this year on the Communist Party of Australia is insubstantial.²⁶ Autobiographical accounts provide insights into the personal price paid by members, but normally are deficient in detailed discussion of the actions taken by the leadership. Biographical writings again focus on the events of 1956 within the context of individuals' lives and those closest to them, but fail to consider the broader impact across the CPA membership as a whole. Moreover, scholarly studies of the history of the

²⁴ Service, p. 343.

²⁵ See, for example, Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*, John Murray, London, 1995; John Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict: The CPGB 1951 – 68*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2003. ; McLeod, *The Death of Uncle Joe*, 1997 ; Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause, British Communism 1920-1991*, Pluto Press, London, 1992; Ralph Miliband and John Saville, *The Socialist Register 1976*, Merlin Press, London, 1976.

²⁶ Two exceptions are John McLaren, *Free Radicals*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2003, and Laura Mitchell, Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and its impact on intellectuals in the Communist Party of Australia, unpublished Honours Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2000.

CPA pay cursory attention to the events of 1956 and make only limited attempts to discuss the impact of these events on Australian communists.²⁷

An examination of Australian communists' autobiographies reveals a broad range of personal reactions to Khrushchev's revelations. According to Amirah Inglis, Australian communists were thunderstruck: 'The full horror of Khrushchev's relentless inventory of Stalin's crimes and his portrait of a suspicious tyrant can never be understood by anyone who did not live through those days. We were hit between the eyes...'.²⁸ Inglis focuses more on the impact within the CPA than on her personal feelings, but the difficulty she and many like her had in coming to terms with Khrushchev's revelations is reflected by her comment that 'with our ears filled with the words of wisdom we could not hear anyone who questioned our vision of the Soviet Union'.²⁹ Similarly, McEwan mentions briefly his 'horror and dismay' but then chooses to focus on the subsequent events within the Victorian branch of the CPA.³⁰ Taft's account of the period is more revealing. He highlights the sense of betrayal Communists around the world felt at having defended the CPSU and Russia throughout the Cold War years, only to discover that many of the accusations were true. To a greater extent than much of the other Australian literature, Taft is able to describe the thinking and beliefs that sustained

²⁷ Bob Gould, 'The Communist Party in Australian Life', *Labor Review*, Vol. 34, pp. 20-38.

²⁸ Amirah Inglis, *The Hammer and the Sickle and the Washing Up*, Hyland House, South Melbourne, 1995, p. 139.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 30.

³⁰ Keith McEwan, *Once a Jolly Comrade*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1966.

him through this challenging period.³¹ Other autobiographies, such as those by Gust and Morris,³² bypass any reference to the events of 1956.

Occasionally, Australian communist memoirists discuss the actions taken by the leadership. Their levels of support for the leadership varied. There were those in the Party, like Taft and McEwan, who pushed for open discussion of the revelations but Taft describes how the Party leadership, under E.F.(Ted) Hill, actively discouraged discussion, despite members asking legitimate questions. This approach was not acceptable to many, particularly the intellectuals, and resulted in numerous defections. On the other hand, Aarons³³ reveals a reluctance to discuss the implications of the revelations for the CPA. He focuses on justifying why the contents of the speech should have been kept from the membership and on the importance of emphasising the 'positive' side of the CPSU 20th Congress: the program for building communism into the future. Gibson³⁴ also discusses the new paths possible for socialism arising from the 20th Congress. His discussion of the actions of the CPA leadership at this time is very limited, but he does highlight that the events of 1956 pointed to flaws in the Party leadership's approach to the intellectuals. He comments on his own lack of flexibility and regard for

³¹ Bernie Taft, *Crossing the Party Line: Memoirs of Bernie Taft*, Scribe, Newham, 1994, p. 92.

³² Gust Itzhak, *Such Was Life: A Jumping Narrative from Radom to Melbourne*, Makor Jewish Community Library, Melbourne, 2004; Bernice Morris, *Between the lines*, Sybylla Co-operative Press, Melbourne, 1988.

³³ Eric Aarons, *What's Left*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1993, p. 118.

³⁴ Ralph Gibson, *My Years in the Communist Party*, International Bookshop, Melbourne, 1966, p. 222.

this membership group within the Party, and describes their contribution to achieving the 'socialist objective'.

However in a subsequent publication Gibson is far more expansive about events of 1956 than other communist writers. Although much of his discussion concerns the impact of the 'secret speech' within the Soviet Union, he does refer to the 'unsatisfactory' handling of the calls for discussion and debate within the CPA. He describes how the clamp-down on discussion meant that many opportunities to debate important questions, such as the need to strengthen democracy within the Party, were lost. Gibson cites a feature article contributed to the *Tribune* and the *Guardian* by Ted Hill in April 1956, which extolled the 20th Congress, the Russian people, and all that they were achieving, without mentioning Stalin once. This strategy of denial seemed to soften somewhat in June when a Central Committee meeting acknowledged that the CPA had been 'caught up and influenced by the myth of Stalin's infallibility'.³⁵ At the same meeting the CPA added its voice to the call from the British, French and Italian parties for a full Marxist analysis of the Stalin issues. This, however, did not indicate a willingness to discuss the issues within the CPA itself. Gibson's account is one of the few autobiographical works within the Australian literature to discuss this period in any depth and with any significant level of analysis.

The Australian autobiographical literature concerning the Hungarian uprising is scarce. Whilst several autobiographies refer to the event in passing, few analyse it in any detail.

³⁵ Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, p. 213.

As a result the cumulative effect of Khrushchev's revelations and the uprising on the CPA membership, even from the personal perspectives of those who lived through 1956, has been inadequately and insufficiently analysed in the literature.

The biographical literature discusses 1956 in even less depth than the autobiographical writings. Sedy cited Gibson's response to the 'secret speech':

I believed that if the contents of the secret report became widely known in the Party, a wholesale exodus would result. Therefore I judged that the Khrushchev report should not be circulated throughout the Party. This opinion may not have been brilliant; but elitist and bureaucratic though it was, it was held in good faith.³⁶

Although accepting that the content of the speech was likely to be quite accurate, he did not believe the membership should know this.³⁷ According to Sedy, Gibson supported the CPA leadership line when they endorsed discussion of the theoretical questions raised by the speech but resisted any suggestion that the report itself be discussed. Sedy suggested that Gibson's response was embedded in the belief structure of the Party in regard to criticism. Gibson felt that criticism needed to be positive and constructive, and if one's opinion differed from that of the leadership, it was more than

³⁶ John Sedy, *An Extraordinary Communist*, Ralph Gibson Biography Committee, Melbourne, 1988, p122.

³⁷ Ibid.

likely the leadership was right.³⁸ Gibson went so far as to present his theoretical reaction to the 'secret speech' in the form of thirteen points, to the Victorian CPA secretary, Ted Hill. These thirteen points attempted to justify the actions of the CPSU and Stalin by contextualising them within the greater struggle for a Socialist state. The preparation of a theoretical response to the revelations of crimes against former Communist Party members differs significantly from the more personal reactions of members such as Taft and others. Cook's biography of Ted Laurie reveals that although 'upset' at the revelations, Laurie was able to justify the CPSU's position. Initially he was prepared, with some reservation, for open discussion within the Party on this issue, but when the leadership closed any opportunity for discussion he acquiesced.³⁹

Both before and immediately after they left, a number of the intellectuals in the Party expressed their concerns and dissatisfaction with the direction the CPA had headed. However, the issues surrounding the 'intellectual' response to 1956 in Australia has received scant attention to date. The attention devoted to the uprising in Hungary in the biographical literature in Australia is similarly minimal. Sedy, for example, only mentioned the uprising briefly when describing Gibson's lack of sympathy for communist critics of the events of 1956. Here he referred to the 'difficulties' presented by Hungary and the 'secret speech'. He referred obliquely to the events in Hungary again when he commented that some of the specialist conferences held as part of the Peace

³⁸ Ibid, p. 123.

³⁹ Peter Cook, Peter, *Red Barrister: A Biography of Ted Laurie QC*, La Trobe University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 125.

Congress held in Melbourne in 1959, were overshadowed by the events of 1956.⁴⁰ Brown made no direct reference to how members reacted to the Hungarian crisis. The only comment he did make was in relation to a tendency amongst some Party members to accept the capitalist press reports and to use inner Party discussion to echo the exaggerations being reported.⁴¹

Despite the number of biographies and autobiographies of Australian communists that discuss the 'secret speech', there are some sections of party membership whose voices remained silent. The literature does not give equal representation to the perspectives of rank and file members of the Party. As Cook commented, many rank and file members left the CPA during 1956. He noted that these may have been the majority of those who left, but that they did not express their dissatisfaction in writing. They quietly left 'to reflect on their experience' and as a result the Australian literature on the topic lacks this critical dimension.⁴² While this thesis will document the reactions of a few rank and file members, this is clearly a fundamental flaw in the historiography of this period.

The extant academic literature concerning 1956 and the CPA is slight, often lacking the necessary analytical depth to permit a full understanding of the period. One of the standard histories of the CPA is by Davidson. He made some passing reference to the

⁴⁰ Sendy, *An Extraordinary Communist*, p. 123.

⁴¹ W.J. Brown, *The Communist Movement and Australia*, Australian Labor Movement History Publications, Sydney, 1986, p. 233.

⁴² Cook, p. 123.

revelations, but this was predominately in the context of other issues. Davidson focused on the CPA leadership's interpretation of Khrushchev's recommendations regarding the 'new road to socialism', more than the revelations of Stalin's crimes. These revelations were referred to when Davidson discussed the rise to power of Laurie Aarons within the CPA leadership after 1956, but again he did not engage in any analysis or interpretation of their impact, only how they influenced the power struggle then occurring within the Party. The most extensive discussion Davidson provided on the impact of the 'secret speech' concerns the initial reactions of the leadership and some members, such as Staples and Brown. He commented on the exodus of intellectuals from the Party and how numbers continued to decline through to 1958. He made no mention of the Hungarian uprising.⁴³

Brown provided a summary of the CPA leadership's reaction and the effectiveness of the way in which the revelations were handled. His analysis of the events of 1956 is within a traditional Marxist interpretation. He referred to the contents of the secret speech solely in terms of 'the cult of the individual', without ever referring to Stalin's crimes. The closest he came to doing so is a reference to *Pravda* that commented on the 'mass repressions' and to the fact that innocent Soviet citizens were 'victimised'. He suggested that a negative outcome of this period was that the CPA did not find a satisfactory way to handle the discussions concerning the 'secret speech' along

⁴³ Alistair Davidson, *The Communist Party in Australia: a short history*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford Ca., 1969, p. 120. Similarly the events of 1956 do not feature in Tom O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream: The Decline of Australian Communism*, Stained Wattle Press, Sydney, 1985.

principled lines. Although the Central Committee acknowledged that tendencies toward the 'cult of the individual' had begun to emerge within the CPA, the fact that it held back from discussions concerning this exacerbated the situation.⁴⁴ His lack of consideration of the legitimacy of members' concerns, disappointments and sense of betrayal upon hearing the contents of the 'secret speech' makes his discussion of the events one dimensional and seriously deficient.

Davidson's and Brown's works are amongst the few that attempt an overall history of the CPA,⁴⁵ but their lack of analysis of the impact of 1956 on both the CPA and its individual members is striking. This creates a significant historiographical void. The refusal of the CPA to enter into or permit any significant discussion of the 'secret speech' has been mirrored by the comparatively few attempts to analyse critically the impact on the Party. Very little has been written that attempts to either integrate the experiences of the CPA leadership and the rank and file membership, or provide an overall analysis of the period. The CPA leadership, it seems, was able to silence discussion within the Party rooms as well as in the literature emanating from its ranks. Thus, the Australian literature does not offer any critical analysis of the impact of this stifling of discussion on the Party.

⁴⁴ Brown, p. 233-4.

⁴⁵ Gollan's *Revolutionaries and Reformists* stops at 1955. It is unlikely that Stuart Macintyre's second volume of his history of 'The Reds', which will cover the 1950s, will appear before 2008.

Of those writers who have commented on the effect of 1956 on the CPA, few afford much discussion to the Hungarian uprising. The focus for most is Khrushchev's speech and its implications. Yet it seems plausible that for some members, undecided as to whether to leave the Party after the revelations, the uprising in Hungary and the manner in which both the Russian army and the communist party leaderships reacted, provided the impetus to leave. The literature does not resolve this question – a question that is central to this thesis. While some of the autobiographical and biographical writings discuss the impact of 1956 on individual members, the relevant Australian literature on the topic is generally bereft of any comprehensive analysis of the broader impacts and implications. This lack of analysis undertaken is akin to the level of discussion surrounding 1956 that occurred within the CPA. A more in-depth understanding of the impact of the events of 1956 on the CPA will allow a greater appreciation of the importance this year had for many previously devoted Party members.

Against the backdrop of the Cold War in Europe, a struggle for power within the CPSU and tensions on the political front in Australia, the scene was set for a tumultuous year in 1956. When reports began to surface of an explosive speech being made by Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, the non communist press wasted little time in publishing what details were available. Given the defensive position adopted by the CPA and other Western communist parties around the world in the preceding years, their denial of the reports was to be expected. However, in the face of increasing

evidence to support the claims being made in the daily press, communist party leaderships, including the CPA, chose to dig in and deny the existence of the 'secret speech' until such a time that their hand was forced, not by the tabloid press, but, ironically, by their own members. Their delay, and the Stalinist approach adopted within a number of Parties once the content of the speech was officially acknowledged, created significant changes within the Communist movement, particularly in the West.

Chapter 2: 'The Most Important Document of Our Generation' – The Secret Speech and the Uprising in Hungary.

The Speech

Nikita Khrushchev's 'secret speech', as it became known, was delivered when the world was locked in a bitter Cold War, marked by the escalation of tensions between western nations and the 'Soviet bloc' of countries. The ensuing hostile atmosphere prompted immediate defensive reactions from both sides at a political level. At a local level, this defensiveness was particularly evident amongst communist party members within western countries, those 'behind enemy lines' so to speak. Their immediate reaction to any negative press concerning the Soviet Union was to defend any actions of the CPSU. This reflex response was often blinded by an idealised concept of the CPSU. As a result, when the daily papers first began printing reports of a 'secret speech' being made by Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, western communist parties and their members went into denial. Some, particularly in the Party leaderships, attempted to deny the speech had taken place but, for many members, previously unexplained events began to make sense. After the initial shock, some began to question their previously unquestioning faith in both the Soviet Union and even in communism itself. Then, when in November of the same year, the Soviet Union invaded Hungary, communists in western countries were forced again to consider their commitment to the CPSU. The events in Hungary proved to be a trigger for many to leave the Party but for others it only hardened their resolve.

The denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the CPSU was not something the leaders, nor the members, of western communist parties expected. Most of the reports from the Congress were laudatory and referred to the significant advancements made by the Soviet Union. The Congress discussed the sixth '5 Year Plan' and its promises of an abundance of consumer goods available for the Soviet people; the higher wages being paid to Soviet workers;¹ the numerous infrastructure improvements being made and *Tribune* lauded the reports of the Soviet economy progressing faster than those of the capitalist countries.² The Soviet leadership's message of peace was also an important message arising from the Congress. Molotov, then Khrushchev's deputy and the Foreign Minister, delivered a speech describing how the Soviet Union championed peace and was seeking the capitalist countries to also commit to peace. He reported that the Soviet Union was doing everything in its power to improve relations with the United States of America.³ These positive messages from the Congress were reported *ad nauseum* to communist party members around the world through their parties' papers and theoretical journals.

At the conclusion of the Congress, Nikita Khrushchev made his 'secret speech' to a closed session of CPSU delegates on the evening of 29 February 1956. Fraternal delegates from some other communist parties attending the Congress were not invited to attend

¹ *Tribune*, 7 March 1956, p. 6.

² *Tribune*, 22 February 1956, p. 4.

³ *Tribune*, 29 February 1956, p. 6.

this closed session. During the speech, Khrushchev described Stalin's abuse of power that began in the mid 1930's and continued through until his death in 1953⁴. While acknowledging Stalin's achievements, Khrushchev's account of his reign detailed how Marxist-Leninist principles had been abused. In particular, he described how many party activists were labelled as 'enemies of the people', and were tortured until they confessed to crimes they did not commit⁵. He told delegates that seventy percent of Central Committee members elected at the 17th Congress were arrested and shot; the majority of these members had joined the Party before the Revolution or during the Civil War.⁶ Not only were Central Committee members targeted, over half the delegates to the 17th Congress were arrested. These facts were met with 'indignation in the hall'⁷. Khrushchev also threw new light on Stalin's previously extolled leadership during the Second World War. While Stalin claimed the tragedy of the Second World War was due to the 'unexpected' attack of the Germans, Khrushchev alleged that Churchill had warned Stalin repeatedly that Germany would attack the Soviet Union. He received numerous warnings that the German Army was poised to attack, from many different sources, including the Soviet military attache in Berlin, Captain Vorontsov, the Soviet embassy in London and, on the eve of the invasion, a German citizen, who crossed the Soviet border and told the Soviet army that orders had been received by the German army to commence the offensive at 3am the next morning. Khrushchev accused Stalin of

⁴ Khrushchev, 'On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences: Report delivered to the 20th Congress of the CPSU on 25 February 1956', in *The Stalin Dictatorship: Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and Other Documents*, pp. 23-84.

⁵ Ibid. p. 30.

⁶ Ibid. p. 37.

⁷ Ibid. p. 38.

ordering that German fire not be returned because he believed, despite facts to the contrary, that the war had not yet started.⁸ He argued that a lack of informed military advice was a direct consequence of Stalin's annihilation of military commanders between 1937 and 1941.

From the reactions noted during the delivery of the speech it appears that Khrushchev took the audience from initial disbelief through to acceptance of Stalin's failures and ridicule of his actions. On a number of occasions laughter was observed to break out amongst the audience as Khrushchev taunted Stalin's exaggeration of his importance. He even received 'loud and prolonged' applause for his suggestion that Stalin's name be removed from the national anthem⁹. Khrushchev outlined how Stalin's ever increasing paranoia about traitors' and threats to his leadership had resulted in the deportation, persecution and murder of many former comrades. According to Khrushchev, there were two key reasons why nothing was done to stop Stalin and his excesses. The first was that, in the beginning, many members supported Stalin because he was a strong Marxist and his logic and political will influenced many cadres. The second, and undoubtedly more compelling reason, was that those who attempted to challenge him became themselves victims of the repression. The fact that the Central Committee met increasingly infrequently meant that there was no forum in which members could raise

⁸ Ibid. pp. 55-6.

⁹ Ibid, p. 74.

questions of improper actions and therefore had no feasible way of challenging Stalin.¹⁰ How they allowed the established processes of the Party, such as regular meetings of the Central Committee, to be abolished was not addressed by Khrushchev. The following exchange goes some way to demonstrate how Stalin was able to carry out such violations. When asked by a Congress delegate what he, Khrushchev, was doing while Stalin was committing these crimes against the Russian people, 'Khrushchev snapped, "Who said that?" Silence. "Well," he replied, "that is what I was doing too, keeping silent.'¹¹

Towards the end of the speech, which lasted four hours, Khrushchev used the term 'cult of the individual' to describe Stalin's attempts to exaggerate and glorify his role within the party and described how this resulted in his disregard of fundamental communist principles. He described how Stalin had undermined internal party democracy with thirteen years elapsing between the 18th and 19th Party Congresses. Despite making great contributions to the Soviet nation, Khrushchev concluded that, on balance, the cult of the individual seriously damaged progress within the Soviet Union and undermined Marxist-Leninist teachings. Khrushchev's words had profound effects on those who heard them:

¹⁰ Albert Fried, *Communism in America: A History in Documents*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p. 392-3.

¹¹ Nove, *Stalinism and After*, p. 134.

Some rejoiced. Some wept, for they had sincerely worshipped Stalin. Some, relieved at the end of despotic terror, were alarmed: could the resultant shockwaves be controlled?¹²

Khrushchev's 'secret speech' seemed to herald a new era of Communism. It presented an opportunity to revert to the fundamental principles of Leninism that had been allowed to retreat into the background during Stalin's reign. However, eight months later, Khrushchev was to illustrate how the ties of Stalinism were not easily loosened.

Hungarian Uprising

Despite the anti Stalin rhetoric emanating from the Kremlin, in November 1956 Khrushchev oversaw the invasion by Soviet troops of Hungary. The 'secret speech' had validated what many in those countries conquered by Stalin's Red Army in 1944 and 1945 had known to be true. Polish workers waged an insurrection on 28-29 June 1956¹³ and Khrushchev quickly agreed, albeit reluctantly, to Wladislaw Gomulka being released and installed as First Secretary of the Polish United Worker's Party.¹⁴ Hungarian workers and intellectuals were the next to press for fundamental reforms. Imre Nagy, who had replaced Matyas Rakosi as Prime Minister in 1953, placed allegiance to nation before the Soviet Union, and introduced a 'new course' of milder form political and economic control, and did not thwart the campaign for change being

¹² Ibid, p. 131.

¹³ Rothschild, *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe since World War II*, pp. 151-2.

¹⁴ Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p. 342.

voiced by the Hungarian people via numerous protest rallies. He believed, mistakenly, that the Soviets would not resort to force and that the West would encourage the Soviet Union to respect Hungary's sovereignty.¹⁵ A series of highly-charged public demonstrations from 23 October led to visits by Mikoyan, Malenkov and the Soviet ambassador to Budapest, Yuri Andropov. They failed to convince Nagy to fall into line with the Soviet Union's directives and, consequently, on 4 November 1956 more than a dozen armoured Soviet divisions, including 6000 tanks, brutally crushed the rebellion. Hungarian's resisted but the Soviets were determined to prevent further dissent in eastern Europe. Khrushchev characterised the uprising as a 'counter revolution' encouraged by the West, and Nagy sought refuge at the Yugoslav embassy, was tricked into leaving it, taken into custody and, in 1958, executed. The Soviets replaced Nagy with Janos Kadar. The United States, more preoccupied with the attack by British, French and Israeli forces on the Suez Canal, failed to intervene.¹⁶ While there were casualties in Hungary, Khrushchev also suffered the consequences of the Soviet action in Hungary. He had demonstrated that no challenge to Soviet rule was acceptable, and had dealt with such a challenge in the same way his predecessor had. His message of 'de-Stalinization' from the 20th Congress had been compromised after only nine months and, according to Service, he received significant criticism within the Presidium. He was forced to agree to an official resolution that diluted his previous comments concerning

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 343.

¹⁶ See Charles Gati, 'Come Clean in Hungary: Behind the '56 Revolt', *Washington Post*, 21 June 2006. Gati called on President Bush to recognise US failures in responding to the Hungarian uprising.

the abuses of power by Stalin.¹⁷ Printed copies of his 'secret speech' were destroyed.¹⁸ Although the events in Hungary proved to be a minor setback for Khrushchev, they were a significant turning point for many communists around the world; for many, the use of Soviet force in Budapest proved to be the 'final straw'.

Impact amongst Western Parties

The experience of 1956 prompted several common reactions from western communist parties. In addition to their initial position that the speech had not taken place, they also attempted to severely restrict the amount of debate and discussion concerning the 'speech'. The reactions of their memberships also held similarities, from those for whom the speech confirmed what they had suspected for many years to those who refused to allow the revelations to shake their beliefs. Despite the similarities, however, there were also some differences in approaches taken by the various leaderships. Most notable among these was the stance taken by the leader of the Italian Communist Party in calling for a thorough analysis not only of why these crimes had been committed, but how they had been allowed to occur. Togliatti, as leader of the Italian Party, made his dissatisfaction with the CPSU's explanation of what had occurred under Stalin's rule explicit. He was unwilling to accept the explanation that the 'cult of the individual' was the root cause of the crimes against loyal communists and called for a more fundamental

¹⁷ Service, p. 344. Legal publication of the 'secret speech' did not occur until Gorbachev came to power.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 344.

analysis of how the mass repressions had been allowed to occur.¹⁹ Togliatti's approach, however, was not adopted by the other western leaderships. The Soviet invasion of Hungary in October 1956 further tested the western leaderships' support of the CPSU. Again, they were required to defend actions on which they had conflicting reports and, again, had to convince increasingly sceptical memberships. Before examining the reaction of the CPA to Khrushchev's revelations, an overview of the key similarities in reactions of other western communist parties to the speech, as well as a discussion of some notable differences, will serve to place the Australian reaction in a broader context.

In Denial

For many leaders of western communist parties including Britain, Australia, France and America, Khrushchev's revelations could not be reconciled with what they believed they knew of the Soviet Union. More importantly, they could not be *seen* to be surprised or shocked by the revelations, even if these were their personal reactions. These men were placed in an unenviable position by Khrushchev's speech. They could not admit to knowledge of Stalin's crimes but neither did they wish to be regarded as ignorant of developments behind the 'iron curtain'. Instead, many leaders of western communist parties chose a third option – they denounced the reports of Khrushchev making a 'secret speech' as capitalist lies. Most communist party leaders were able to adopt this approach until the content of the 'secret speech' became known, when it became clear

¹⁹ Sedy, *An Extraordinary Communist*, p. 124.

that they had indeed been kept in the dark about what had been happening in the Soviet Union.

The leaders of the Australian, British, and French Parties consistently denied any knowledge of the 'secret speech.'²⁰ The events of 1956 unfolded slightly differently in the United States and will be discussed below.

When the printed version appeared in the *New York Times*, the French Party refused to accept it as an authoritative document.²¹ The *New York Times* had been supplied a copy by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (not the CIA, as commonly alleged), whose agent, Morris Childs, obtained a copy in Moscow.²² The French Communist Party referred to 'the report attributed to Khrushchev'.²³ This was despite the French delegation to the Congress being given a copy of the speech, in Russian, a few hours before it was made and then being instructed to return it, treating its contents as top secret.²⁴

²⁰ Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Intellectuals and the French Communist Party*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991; Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within. The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*, p130. Indeed, two members of the British delegation, Harry Pollitt and George Matthews, were on a tour of a rubber factory at the time the speech was given. The whereabouts of third member of the delegation, Palme Dutt, is not known, although Beckett has suggested that Dutt was the only British communist who knew what Khrushchev said

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

²² See John Barron, *Operation Solo: the FBI's man in the Kremlin*, Regnery Pub., Washington, 1996., especially pp. 54-5. Childs was a double –agent; he was also a high-ranking member of the CPUSA.

²³ Andereth, *The French Communist Party: A Critical History (1920-84)*, p. 229.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 228.

However, once the text was released by the US State Department, they were sufficiently concerned to send three delegates to Moscow to discuss the issue directly with Khrushchev. At this meeting the Soviet leader reportedly admitted to the existence of the speech and had shown them a copy. However, he told them that, officially, the report did not exist.²⁵ In a similar way to the Australian leadership, the French Party promoted the positive messages of the 20th Congress to its members and was critical of what it saw as an unbalanced attack on Stalin.²⁶ As will be discussed in later chapters, the Australian Party leadership engaged in purporting to discuss the issues arising from the 20th Congress via a number of newspaper articles and public meetings, only to then devote little time to actual discussion. The French Party leadership adopted similar tactics. Maurice Thorez, the Secretary-General, prepared an article for the 27 March 1956 edition of *L' Humanité*, which was titled 'Some Important Questions Posed at the CPSU Twentieth Congress'. Despite the title of the article, Thorez devoted little attention to the question of Stalin's 'errors'.²⁷ Where he did refer to them, he quickly followed up with reasons for Stalin's actions. The summation of his article was that 'Stalin's principle fault was not to have been a good enough Stalinist – and only towards the end of his life!'²⁸ After Togliatti's statement was released, the French Party issued a statement of its own. In this statement it refrained from overtly following the Italian leader's stance, but did express regret at the secrecy that had surrounded the speech and demanded a 'deepened

²⁵ Ibid, p. 229.

²⁶ Francis Fejtö, *The French Communist Party and the Crisis of International Communism*, M.I.T. Press, Massachusetts, 1967, p. 46.

²⁷ Ibid, p49.

²⁸ Ibid.

Marxist analysis' of Stalin's faults, their origins and the conditions that led to them arising.²⁹ The French leadership regarded the Soviet statement in July, which went some way to explaining the reasons for the rise of the 'cult', as one of 'inestimable value for the international working class movement'.³⁰ Despite this comment, they adopted a 'lukewarm' approach to de-Stalinisation³¹, suggesting a reluctance to accept the criticism against Stalin as truly justified.

Contrary to his later response to Khrushchev's speech, Togliatti's initial reaction was reserved. He, Thorez and other European leaders, had been present at the Congress and had been shown a copy of the speech, but were instructed not to disclose its contents.³² Accordingly, two and half weeks after the Congress, Togliatti confined his comments to promoting the positive messages from the Congress, emphasising Khrushchev's comments concerning different roads to socialism and on peaceful coexistence with the West and the non-inevitability of war. Even in early April, after news of the 'secret speech' had leaked to the West, he made little reference to the Stalin issue, continuing to praise him at a meeting of the PCI National Council.³³ However, as will be discussed below, once the text of the speech was printed in the *New York Times* on 4 June, Togliatti 'broke with the pack.'³⁴

²⁹ M. Andereth, p. 229.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 230.

³¹ Hazareesingh, p. 275.

³² Joan Barth Urban, *Moscow and the Italian Communist Party: from Togliatti to Berlinguer*, IB Tauris & Co Ltd, London, 1986, p. 229.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 230.

Callaghan argued that the CPGB leaders present at the 20th Congress must have known something was wrong prior to the closed session. To support this argument, he pointed to the absence of portraits of Stalin in the Congress hall and the whisperings of past purges and rehabilitations, but did acknowledge that there was no evidence that they had seen the full text of the 'secret speech'.³⁵ Whether they knew of Stalin's tyrannical leadership or not, the leadership of the CPGB returned from the Congress determined to press the line that most western communist parties chose to adopt, that the Congress presented positive messages for the communist movement. They played down the significance of any negative messages about Stalin. Pollit reported that 'the outstanding feature of the new world situation is the decisive change in the balance of world forces, owing to the advancement of socialism, colonial liberation and the co-operation of the peoples for peace'.³⁶ Similar to the comments by Sharkey and other Australian leaders, the leaders of the CPGB acknowledged 'past mistakes and weaknesses' but declared that these had been 'frankly and boldly recognised and corrected'.³⁷

Within the CPUSA there was acknowledgement by the leadership, earlier than in other western communist parties, that the reports about the 'secret speech' were correct.

³⁵ Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict: The CPGB 1951-1968*, p. 62. A detailed discussion of the impact of 1956 on the CPGB can be found in British and Irish Communist Association, *The Cult of the Individual (The Controversy Within British Communism 1956-58)*, Belfast, 1975, pp. 3-96. See also John Saville, 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party', *The Socialist Register 1976*, Merlin Press, London, 1976, pp. 1-57.

³⁶Ibid p. 63.

³⁷Ibid.

Indeed, the truth of the 'secret speech' had been known amongst the hierarchy of the CPUSA since 12 March, when Joseph Clark, the American *Daily Worker's* correspondent in the Soviet Union, (and a skilled apologist for the Party)³⁸ wrote a column reporting that the East German Communist Party leader, Walter Ulbricht, had identified Stalin as the source of the 'cult of the individual'.³⁹ By identifying Stalin in this way, Ulbricht was doing something communists never did – criticising the leader of another Communist Party. A copy of the speech was brought to the attention of Party members at a National Committee meeting in New York, towards the end of April.⁴⁰ A member of the CPUSA had returned from England with the text of the speech and read it to the gathered membership at this meeting. Delegates were instructed to remove all notebooks, pens and pencils from the meeting room and were told that no notes were to be taken. While there may not have been any notes from this meeting, the leadership of the American Party was then in no position to deny the existence of the speech as other western leaderships had been able to do.

³⁸ Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left*, New York, Basic Books, 1987, p. 15.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Fried, pp. 393-5

Internal Debate

Despite attempts to deny the existence of the speech, western communist parties were under increasing pressure to discuss at least the possibility that something unexpected had occurred at the 20th Congress. Their next point of defence was to try and control, and ultimately smother, any discussion or debate over the content of the speech. Apart from the CPUSA, where some debate occurred, and the Italian party where the stance taken by Togliatti made any debate virtually redundant, other western communist parties were to set off on a path that was to have significant negative repercussions.

As early as March 1956, when very little was known with any certainty about the contents of Khrushchev's speech, the British *Daily Worker* was 'flooded' with letters, according to its then editor, Malcolm MacEwen. While some correspondence was published, most of it was suppressed. Although the Party's Political Committee agreed to the publications of even the most critical of letters initially, on 12 March, the editor, Johnny Campbell, decided to close the discussion.⁴¹ In contrast, the debate over the 'secret speech' in Australia at this time, as we will see, had barely begun. Pollitt and other CPGB leaders decided the arguments raging over liberty and free press in response to the leadership's handling of the 'secret speech', were of no interest to the workers. They believed it was only the intellectuals who were concerned with these issues. Alison MacLeod, then a journalist on the *Daily Worker*, argued that this was an insulting attitude towards the rank and file membership, as her experience working in

⁴¹ Malcolm MacEwan, *The Greening of a Red*, Pluto Press, London, 1991, p. 181.

the shipyards had shown her that the workers had known more of what was happening in Russia than the leaders were prepared to admit.⁴²

Much of the opposition to the French Party's attempts to smother debate about Khrushchev's revelations came from the Party's intellectuals. The reaction against the leadership came in the form of public protests against what was seen as a 'tepid' response to the process of de-Stalinisation within the ranks of the Party leadership and against the unqualified endorsement of the Soviet invasion of Hungary later in the year.⁴³ However, despite some pockets of defiance, the overall reaction of French communists was muted when compared with the upheavals that occurred within the British and, in particular, American parties. Some members, predominately intellectuals, left the Party, but the leadership's rejection of criticism and the lack of opportunity provided to debate and discuss the issues served to limit the impact of the 20th Congress on the French Party.⁴⁴

Membership reaction

One common element in the reactions of western communist parties to Khrushchev's revelations was the shock and disbelief experienced by members. Many felt a sense of

⁴²MacLeod, *The Death of Uncle Joe*, p115. MacLeod recalled an encounter with a woman when she was shop steward in the shipyards. 'The woman let me know, before slamming the door, "they ain't got no freedom in Russia..."' For a review of this insightful book, see V.G. Kiernan, 'The Unrewarded End', *London Review of Books*, 17 September 1998, pp. 13-15.

⁴³ Hazareesingh, p. 146.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 146. Material published subsequent to the events of 1956 have revealed that the depth of feeling was more significant than the level of outcry would otherwise indicate, with many intellectuals being 'deeply unsettled' by the Party's approach to the events of 1956.

betrayal on learning that not all was as portrayed within the CPSU. Even more disturbing for some was the knowledge that the 'lies' they had denounced the capitalist press for publishing were true. However, there were also some members who refused to allow the revelations about Stalin to dissuade them from the communist cause.

The revelations concerning Stalin came as a shock to many French Communists. Hazareesingh has suggested that they were 'profoundly unsettled' by Khrushchev's secret speech.⁴⁵ However, their reactions ranged from leaving the Party, either noisily or discreetly, to staying on in order to understand why it had happened.⁴⁶ Some members protested publicly against what they believed was the Party's 'feeble' attitude towards the process of de-Stalinisation and to its support of the Soviet invasion of Hungary.⁴⁷ Similar to the response in other western communist parties, the majority of members who protested were considered by the leadership to be 'intellectuals'. In France, nine PCF members signed a motion requesting an extraordinary congress in which the issues arising from the 'secret speech' and the events in Hungary could be discussed. Despite some protests, the extent of actual defiance of the leadership within the PCF was minimal.⁴⁸ However, there were also intellectuals within the PCF for whom the year 1956 was not a significant point in their history with the Party. Andre Wurmser, for

⁴⁵ Hazareesingh, p. 138.

⁴⁶ Andereth, p. 229.

⁴⁷ Hazareesingh, p. 275.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146 One of the nine members who requested an extraordinary congress was Pablo Picasso. While most of the protesting members' concerns were rejected by the leadership, Picasso was permitted to air his objections directly to Party leader, Maurice Thorez. These discussions however, led nowhere.

example, remained a defender of communist principles until his death in 1984.⁴⁹ Although the 'secret speech' reportedly caused him some 'angst' at the time he continued to promote communism. His rationale was that the Party and the proletariat it served were part of a larger historical context and therefore any errors committed in the name of communism were to be seen as 'insignificant jolts'. 'Stalin's crimes', Wurmser contended, 'required no explanation'.⁵⁰

The reaction amongst British members echoed that of the French. For some there had been indications of what was to come for a number of years leading up to the 20th Congress. Beckett maintained that the three years between Stalin's death and the 'secret speech' were ones of 'dawning horror'.⁵¹ Callaghan argued that some Russian communists had begun criticising the 'cult of the personality' since Stalin's death in 1954, while some in the British Party had begun to question Stalin in the wake of Tito's rehabilitation. Stalin's orchestrated campaign against Tito had been declared false without an apology or clear explanation and his redemption certainly raised questions amongst *Daily Worker* journalists, such as Peter Fryer, who had covered and justified the trials of many so called 'Titoists'. As in France and Australia, members suggested that leaders, such as Dutt and Pollitt must have been aware of Stalin's repression.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 231.

⁵⁰ Cited in Ibid, p. 231.

⁵¹ Beckett, p. 124.

⁵² Callaghan, p. 62.

Echoing the reactions of French Communists, members of the CPGB were not willing to accept what they were told by their leaders. Resolutions from some branches expressed members' displeasure with the reporting back by their leaders. John Saville described the Congress as a 'fiasco' and threatened to resign unless the Party addressed the issues raised by Khrushchev's speech.⁵³ Others did not believe self criticism within the Party had gone far enough and called for greater inner party democracy.⁵⁴

Unlike Australian Communist Party members, those in Britain had more direct exposure, often via personal contacts, to communist party members in other European countries. Many knew, for example, that the Dutch leaders had apologised for their complicity and that the Czechs had admitted that many Titoists had been purged because they were Jews.⁵⁵ The Danish Party was openly divided by the end of April. Callaghan argued that exposure to this information meant that party leaders in Britain were no longer in charge of the situation in the eyes of the membership, particularly because their first response had been to emphasise a 'business as usual' approach and to plead ignorance of the contents of the speech and Stalin's alleged crimes.⁵⁶ He also asserted that so much open questioning of the leadership in the CPGB journals was only possible because those responsible were disorientated and had 'lost the intellectual initiative' on the issue of the 20th Congress. Comparing the situation in Britain with that in Australia, it could be argued that the Australian leadership had an advantage over

⁵³ John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, Merlin Press, London, 2003, pp. 103-5.

⁵⁴ Callaghan, p. 63.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 64.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 64.

their British counterparts because distance and lack of membership contact with other communist party members meant that the Australian communists could be 'kept in the dark' for longer than in other countries. The Australian leadership could have observed how other parties dealt with the fallout and adjusted their approach accordingly. However, they did not take advantage of this, instead repeating many of the mistakes made by their international comrades.

For many members of the CPGB, Khrushchev's speech confirmed what they had suspected. Llew Gardner admitted the speech was 'confirmation of what many of us had feared was the truth but had concealed from each other and refused to recognise for ourselves'.⁵⁷ While for some members the debate centred around questions of doctrine and what Stalin's leadership meant for the class struggle, for others it raised questions concerning the CPGB leadership's prior knowledge. Beckett suggested that the impact of the three years leading up to the 'secret speech' was greatest on those of the 'Comintern generation', whom he described as being 'so locked into what happened in Moscow that they must either break with their life's work or rationalise what was happening'.⁵⁸

The extent to which CPGB leaders were aware of the internal debates within the Soviet Union was one source of British communists' disquiet. Full time party worker, Phil Piratin, described the sickening feeling when, at Political Committee meetings, Harry

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 65.

⁵⁸ Beckett, p. 125.

Pollitt would read out names of people who had been ‘rehabilitated’. To have been rehabilitated, Piratin pointed out, ‘you must already have been condemned and shot, probably after being tortured.’⁵⁹ Piratin did not leave the Party but quietly resigned from all his party responsibilities.⁶⁰ Alison McLeod detailed a number of events during her time at the *Daily Worker* that, in hindsight, were indicators as to what was occurring within the Soviet Union, and which the journalists at the paper chose to ignore. She questioned how little fuss was made of the disappearance of communists like Edith Bone, a writer and translator who had written for the *Daily Worker*. Similarly, the disappearance in Prague of two American brothers, Noel and Hermann Field, in May and August 1949 respectively, was not reported by the *Daily Worker*, despite being printed in the *New Statesman* and the *Manchester Guardian*.⁶¹ When Stalin instructed Tito to withdraw his ambassador from Russia because he was a ‘spy’, at the very time Russian troops were massing on the Yugoslavia border, Campbell told the editorial staff at the *Daily Worker* that the Soviet Union had to invade Yugoslavia ‘in defence of its legitimate interests’.⁶² She also recalled that when the communist North Korea invaded South Korea the paper ‘didn’t admit this’; instead, ‘we mentioned that the South had attacked the North’.⁶³ Despite these events, members of the CPGB and their leadership appeared reluctant to see them as indicative of what was actually happening in Russia. The arrest of the nine doctors in January 1953 – the so called ‘Doctor’s Plot’ - pricked at

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.124.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 125.

⁶¹ MacLeod, p. 22.

⁶² Ibid, p. 23.

⁶³Ibid, p. 24. MacLeod reported that ‘Campbell didn’t think this to be true, but he was careful in what company he said it.’

members' consciences. 'Now, at last, we were shaken', MacLeod noted, but 'we went on struggling to keep our illusions.'⁶⁴ Stalin's death two months later prompted the Kremlin to admit there had actually been fifteen doctors who were 'falsely accused' and subject to methods of investigation 'which are inadmissible and most strictly forbidden by Soviet law.'⁶⁵

The emotions of members in the United States upon learning the contents of Khrushchev's speech were highly charged. While the reactions of members in many communist countries was strong, few experienced the 'overflow of despair and pain'⁶⁶ evident amongst members of the CPUSA. The depth of reaction, which ranged from rejection of the Communist system to desperate efforts to save it, has been attributed to the especially pronounced ideological basis of the Party. As a small minority Party in a society infected by McCarthyism, many members of the Party took refuge in the belief that 'they represented the cause of history, of truth, of humanity itself'.⁶⁷ Khrushchev's revelations badly dented that belief and could not be dismissed as criticisms of the Party in the capitalist press had been in the past. Members expressed their reactions by writing letters to party papers and by voicing their anger and disbelief in meetings. Steve

⁶⁴Ibid, p. 37. MacLeod recalled a meal shared with a Jewish writer and his girlfriend, where they attempted to convince MacLeod and Jack that Stalin was anti-semitic. They refused to believe it and 'the girl was almost in tears at our stupidity'.

⁶⁵Ibid, p. 39.

⁶⁶Irving Hare & Lewis Cozer, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History*, Praeger, New York, 1962, p. 491.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 490.

Nelson, a long time party stalwart, captured the reaction of many American communists on hearing the contents of the 'speech' for the first time:

The words of the speech were like bullets, and each found its place in the hearts of veteran communists. Tears streamed down the faces of men and women who had spent forty or more years, their whole adult lives, in the movement... My head was swimming. I thought "All the questions that were raised along the way now require new answers, and there's no longer a seat of wisdom where we can find them. We're on our own."⁶⁸

At the conclusion of a meeting at which the 'speech' was read in its entirety, Nelson expressed his own feelings, but also undoubtedly those of others present: 'I had made my sacrifices voluntarily and never thought of myself as a martyr, but now I felt betrayed. I said simply, "This is not why I joined the Party". The meeting ended in shock'.⁶⁹

Consistent with other western communist parties, there were also members of the American Party for whom the revelations had little or minimal impact. These members were outwardly not as affected as others were and continued to defend Stalin, arguing he should be respected for his achievements, irrespective of his errors.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Fried, p. 394 – 5.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

While the range of reactions expressed by communists in western countries were similar, American Communists' opportunity to express these differed significantly from their French and British comrades. As will be discussed below, within the CPUSA members' views were published and as a consequence, more open debate ensued. Consequently the extent of members' feelings about Stalin's crimes was acknowledged and this, arguably, made ignoring the reactions of the rank and file considerably more difficult.

Differences between Parties

As we have seen, the reactions of the British and French leaders contrasted strongly with the reactions of the Italian and the American leaderships. Contrary to the stifling of discussion of the 'secret speech' in Britain, France, and - as we will see in later chapters, Australia - in the United States the debate over the 'revelations' was extensive and intense.⁷¹ The leadership initially made few attempts to thwart the flow of self criticism and self-castigation that occurred during the months immediately following the text of Khrushchev's speech being made public. Once the doors were opened there was little hope of stemming the flow of emotion that accompanied the criticism. The debate extended to fundamental questions about the nature of Soviet society, the history of the CPUSA and its future and continued for over twelve months.⁷² It also opened discussion about decisions and policies adopted by the Party during its history, such as its stance

⁷¹ Hare and Coser, p. 492.

⁷² Isserman, p. 16.

on the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the failure to defend Trotskyist leaders indicted under the Smith Act in 1941.⁷³

Contrary to the attempts to restrict debate in many western parties, the American leadership faced a different situation. Once the content of the speech was known, the flood gates opened. CPUSA members were also encouraged to send in their responses to the revelations by the *Daily Worker's* managing editor, Alan Max. He admitted that violations of civil liberties in the USSR had been glossed over by the CPUSA leadership and vowed that it would not happen again.⁷⁴ The *Daily Worker* printed at least one thousand letters, whose tone ranged from questioning through to deploring and castigating.⁷⁵ It may have been that the leadership thought it productive to allow members a catharsis or possibly they believed it impossible to stop.⁷⁶ Although some sections of the CPUSA leadership made some attempts to stem the debate, they had little impact. An article by William Foster, General Secretary, appeared in the *Daily Worker*, three days after Max's column was published. Foster acknowledged serious errors by Stalin but insisted that the 're-evaluation of the Stalin years can be done most authoritatively by those leaders who have worked closely with him in the Soviet Union'.⁷⁷ Despite a second article a week later in which he used the traditional threats of loyalty to the Soviet Union, Bolshevik discipline and fear of providing the capitalists

⁷³ Ibid, p. 20.

⁷⁴ Isserman, p. 16.

⁷⁵ Hare & Cozer, p. 492.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 493.

⁷⁷ Cited in Isserman, p. 16.

with ammunition, he was unsuccessful in stemming the flow of correspondence being printed in the *Daily Worker*.⁷⁸ Unlike the Communist Party leaderships of Britain, France and Australia, the Party paper was used as a medium for raising questions and airing grievances for members of the CPUSA. The debate continued throughout the spring and summer of 1956.⁷⁹ After the initial surge of emotion by members, a split in the approach taken by various parts of the leadership began to emerge. William Foster and his adherents believed the Soviet Union was handling the causes of the 'cult of the individual' and that it was important for the CPUSA to address deviation from the Marxist-Leninist path that had emerged within their own party.⁸⁰ Others, saw the 'secret speech' as an opportunity for reform.⁸¹

Hare and Croser argued that the depth of reaction in America was due to the greater importance placed on ideological issues, as opposed to Communist Parties in France and Italy, where more importance was placed on practical, day to day issues, and that ideology was the concerns of a minority of intellectuals.⁸² However, a few months on, two approaches emerged within the leadership. William Foster and his supporters took the stance, similar to leaders of other communist parties in western countries, that as little as possible should be made of the revelations, particularly as the causes were being

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Hare & Cozer, p. 493.

⁸¹ Fried, p. 396.

⁸² Hare and Coser, p. 491.

dealt with by the Soviet Union.⁸³ In direct opposition, John Gates, editor of the *Daily Worker*, and his supporters proposed significant changes within the Party including inner democratisation, open criticism of the Soviet leadership, revisions of Marxism-Leninism and a possible merger with other socialist organisations. However, they were not totally disillusioned with the Party, and remained communists until at least 1957.

The PCI's reaction to the 'secret speech' while similar to other western communist parties initially, differed once the text appeared in the *New York Times* on 4 June.⁸⁴ The Italian leadership called for a more thorough analysis than the Soviets had been able, or willing, to produce. Togliatti argued that it was not sufficient to simply denounce what Stalin had done, without also explaining why he had been able to get away with doing what he did. He pointed to the 'degeneration' of the Soviet system that had occurred as a result of Stalin's abuse of power. Togliatti contended that 'Stalin's errors...were the result of the progressive imposition of personal power...'⁸⁵ Togliatti went further and highlighted the co-responsibility of members of the present Soviet leadership, implying that more than just a denunciation of Stalin needed to occur for the effects of the 'cult of the individual' to be truly overcome. The reasons for Togliatti's dissent from other communist party leaders lay in the Party's history and his desire for an 'Italian Road to Socialism.'⁸⁶ The Italian leader advocated 'polycentrism' where there would be as many

⁸³ Ibid, p. 493.

⁸⁴ Barth Urban, p. 230.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ John A. Baker, *Italian Communism: The Road to Legitimacy and Autonomy*, National Defense University Press, Washington DC, 1989, p. 33.

centres of power as there were communist parties⁸⁷; in effect, for communist parties to become self determining and not beholden to the Soviet Union. The revelations of the 20th Congress provided the impetus within the Italian Party to distance itself from Moscow and pursue strategies it had been coveting since the end of the Second World War. Not surprisingly, Togliatti's comments were not welcomed by the CPSU and, consequently, leaders of communist parties in the West who were unwilling to attract Moscow's disapproval, also condemned his comments.

Callaghan suggested that within the CPGB Pollitt took some steps towards following Togliatti's lead in April, when articles by him appeared in *World News*. Although he avoided detailing Stalin's crimes he did hint at the need for a full public debate by 'withdrawing the CPGB's previous attacks on Tito'.⁸⁸ However, it seems Pollitt was under considerable pressure at this time. On 25 April he experienced a haemorrhage behind his eyes which temporarily impaired his vision. He resigned as General Secretary at this time, although was elected as Chairman of the Party with Political Committee membership.⁸⁹ As a result, his calls for more thorough debate were not taken up by the Party.

The reasons behind Togliatti's willingness to speak out against the Soviet leaders and their attempts at de-Stalinisation were embedded in the Italian Party's history and its

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 33.

⁸⁸ Callaghan, p. 65.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 65.

long held desire to forge a more autonomous road to socialism.⁹⁰ Unlike members in some other western parties, according to Urban, many of the rank and file members of the PCI had very little idea of the mass repression and terror imposed on the Soviets by Stalin and thus were 'bewildered' by Khrushchev's revelations.⁹¹ Togliatti's position on the Soviet revelations may have served to refocus members' attention on their own party and its future, a distraction not as immediate for members of other parties, whose leaders chose to follow the Soviet line. Certainly, the mass outpouring of emotion seen in the United States was not repeated within the Italian Party.

A Similar Line on Hungary

While the 'secret speech' produced a number of similarities and some key differences between western communist parties, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November of 1956 seemed to consolidate the pro Soviet position adopted by most of them. Even Togliatti, by this stage in the year had fallen into line with the Soviet Union. The exception to this was the CPUSA, which at first denounced the Soviet action and then recanted to some extent.

The events in Hungary in October and November 1956, while disastrous for Hungarian communists, served as merely a catalyst for many western communists. Some members who had been unsettled by the events in February, but decided to stay in the Party,

⁹⁰ Baker, p. 33.

⁹¹ Urban, p. 230.

regarded the Soviet invasion of Hungary as evidence of a lack of commitment to de-Stalinisation and decided to leave their party. For the leaders of western communist parties, Hungary could have proved a significant hurdle to overcome, but by that stage many had adopted a strong line on dissent within their ranks. Interestingly, Togliatti chose to defend the Soviet action in Hungary, possibly to ensure Khrushchev's position within the Kremlin⁹², which had been under some pressure following the 'secret speech'.

MacLeod recalled that when the tanks entered Budapest, there was one obvious difference between the intellectuals and the workers. The intellectuals left the party slowly, arguing all the way, whereas the workers just left. Many of the rank and file who left were trade union members and their unions followed them out of the Party.⁹³ The difference amongst the CPGB membership in their reactions to the events in Hungary was stark. MacLeod began attending her local branch meetings in the hope of instigating some change within the Party over the Russians' advance into Hungary. What she found in the branches shocked her. The attitude adopted by many within the branches was that the Hungarian crisis was no more than another example of anti Soviet hysteria. This attitude was particularly difficult for her to understand, as many of the traditionally hardline members at the *Daily Worker* office were beginning to admit that terrible things had happened and innocent people had been murdered.⁹⁴ However, sections of the CPGB membership who chose to deny what was happening in Hungary were not alone.

⁹² Baker, p. 43.

⁹³ MacLeod, p. 159.

⁹⁴Ibid, p. 162.

The leadership went to great lengths to ensure reports of the fighting did not appear in the Party press. The *Daily Worker* journalist, Peter Fryer, was sent to report on the events in Hungary. When he eventually found a phone and filed his report, the story was not printed.⁹⁵ Instead, it was reported that the Soviet tanks had pulled out of Budapest and ‘gangs of reactionaries began beating Communists to death in the streets...’⁹⁶ MacLeod went to the Communist Party library to read the New York *Daily Worker’s* report on events. She discovered that, under Campbell’s instructions, it was no longer available. She started reading the capitalist press in order to find out what was going on.⁹⁷ Historians and communist party members, John Saville and E.P. Thompson began producing *The Reasoner* in defiance of the Party leadership’s attempts to censor what the CPGB membership learnt of events in Hungary. When *Daily Worker* editor, Campbell attacked them for undermining party discipline, the paper’s cartoonist, Gabriel, told him:

The executive committee is as much to blame for *The Reasoner* as Thompson and Saville. It had censored so much material that someone had to publish it. Stalin got away with it because there was no free press.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Beckett, p. 133.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 133.

⁹⁷ MacLeod, p. 169.

⁹⁸ Cited in Beckett, p. 135.

While many communists left the Party as a result of the CPGB position taken on the events in Hungary, including many Trade Unionists, a number stayed in the hope that the Party Congress the following year would yield a new leadership.⁹⁹

The French leadership defended the Soviet actions in Hungary, partly as a demonstration of support for the Soviet leadership but also because it believed, based on its own interpretation of the reported events in Hungary, that the country was in danger from counter-revolutionary forces and that the 'Hungarian working class... was not strong enough to bar the road to fascism without outside help'.¹⁰⁰ However, the Hungarian crisis resulted in many French Party members tearing up their membership cards and leaving the Party for good. The wider French community was also affected and the wave of anti- communism that followed resulted in PCF members and property being attacked by armed gangs.¹⁰¹ Thorez later told Khrushchev that the PCF lost half its members over the events in Hungary, and while this may have been an exaggeration, it was true that a great many communists left the Party at this time.¹⁰²

The reaction of the CPUSA to the events in Hungary was initially to condemn the Soviet intervention. According to the *Daily Worker*, 'the actions of the Soviet troops in Hungary does not advance but retards the development of socialism because socialism cannot be

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 135.

¹⁰⁰ Andereth, p. 234.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 234. Jean Paul Sartre, who by 1956 was a 'fellow traveller', severed all ties with the PCF, saying it had become 'le parti des fusilleurs'.

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 234.

imposed on a country by force....'.¹⁰³ However, such a position was considered too extreme and two weeks later the National Committee released a compromise statement which attempted to straddle both positions: 'We do not seek to justify the use of Soviet troops in Hungary's internal crisis on November 4. Neither do we join in the condemnation of these actions...'. Supporting the Soviet action was justified by saying that the Nagy government had to be overthrown in order 'to head off the White Terror and the danger of an anti Soviet, Horthy-like regime'.¹⁰⁴ However, this statement also acknowledged that there were significant differences of opinion within both the National Committee and the Party on the issue. The two factions that had begun to emerge after the 20th Congress, while attempting some form of compromise, were unable to mask their fundamental differences, with Foster's camp describing the Soviet action as a 'painful necessity' while Gates' supporters continued to criticise it. At this time, a third faction emerged, under the direction of the Party's National Secretary, Eugene Dennis. Although this group did not represent a different viewpoint, it attempted to provide some balance between Gates and Foster whilst adhering to an 'orthodox Khrushchevite line'.¹⁰⁵ The events in Hungary proved to be yet another blow to a party that was in its almost final death throes. Soon after the CPUSA disintegrated into little more than a few hundred hard core believers.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Howe and Coser, p. 496.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 497.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 499.

The events that unfolded in 1956 were tumultuous for communists around the world, both at rank and file and leadership levels. While the reactions of party leaders in western countries included denial and attempting to smother discussion and debate, their members experienced emotions ranging from repudiation, despair and devastation. Some parties weathered the fall out from the 'secret speech' better than others. For the CPUSA, the events of 1956 were the trigger for its eventual demise. For the Italian Party they provided a foundation from which it could refocus members on the need for an 'Italian Road to Socialism'. The French and British Parties suffered significant losses in terms of members, managed to survive relatively unscathed, but carried the scars of 1956 for many years. The Australian experience approximated that of the British and French Parties, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 3: 'It will Split the Party from Top to Bottom' - The CPA Leadership

before June 1956

Historians have traditionally assessed 1956 as a period of significant doubt and questioning amongst communist parties throughout the world and in particular within the ranks of parties in capitalist countries such as Australia. As discussed in Chapter 2, the reactions of the French, British and American Communist Parties - although differing in terms of intensity of debate - all displayed as a common reaction the questioning and doubt amongst sections of their parties. The accepted view has been that the Australian Party leadership actively discouraged discussion and debate of the content of Khrushchev's 'secret speech'.¹ Recently, Terry Irving commented that 'Denying the authenticity of the speech, the Australian party's Stalinist leadership had resisted demands for open discussion and sharing of knowledge in the Party.'² A re-examination of the period reveals that the *eventual* reaction of the CPA was, indeed, to prevent discussion of the 'secret speech' or of its implications for the Communist movement. However, the *initial* reaction of the leaders was less decisive. It is incorrect to suggest they had maintained a consistent and vigorous campaign against open discussion from the outset. What emerges from a close reading of sources is a leadership response that was confused. There existed some fundamental contradictions between what approach was being recommended

¹ Alan Barcan, *The Socialist Left In Australia: 1949-1959*, Australian Political Studies Association, Sydney, 1960, p. 11.

² Terry Irving, 'ASIO and the Labour History Society: An incident in 1964', *The Hummer*, 4:1 (Summer 2003 - 2004), p 31.

by the leadership and the actions they took themselves; between what was being argued at the different levels in the organisation; and between the approaches and attitudes of various members of the Party leadership. Up until the middle of the year, the CPA leadership made some attempts to engage members in discussion. However, this was short-lived. Until the CPSU released its official statement concerning Khrushchev's revelations in June and the Secretary of the Victorian Branch, E.F. Hill, returned from overseas in October, the leadership response can best be characterised as 'directionless'. The following discussion explores these contradictions up until the release of the CPSU statement in June and seeks to present an alternative view of how the CPA leadership attempted to address the membership's concerns regarding Khrushchev's revelations. It will be argued that the lack of specific information concerning the content of the 'secret speech' was a key determining factor in how the CPA leadership responded to the revelations. After the CPSU released its statement concerning Khrushchev's speech, the leadership was then in a stronger position to determine its approach.³

A Focus on the Positive Messages

The early reporting on, and discussion of, the 20th Congress of the CPSU attempted to draw members' attention away from the revelations concerning Stalin and encouraged them to celebrate the positive achievements of the Soviet Union. In one of the early reports on the Congress, Sharkey mentioned only briefly the 'secret

³ This interpretation was confirmed by Eric Aarons, interview 30 May 2002, Sydney.

speech'⁴. The article, sub headed 'Trying to Confuse,' discussed the positive messages emerging from the Congress, one of which was the Soviet message of peace, which Sharkey introduced as a 'theoretical proposition of the first importance'⁵. Attributing such a description to the issue of peace clearly identified it as the key message he wanted readers to focus on and remember. While he made reference to the term 'cult of the individual', defining it as being a cult which made a particular leader a hero while belittling the role of collective leadership in the Party,⁶ he emphasised to readers that Khrushchev had not attributed the emergence of the cult solely to Stalin, and pointed out that the cult of the individual was presented as a party mistake, one of a number criticised at the Congress.⁷ However, this was the extent of his discussion on the topic.

In early March 1956 an unnamed spokesperson from the CPA spoke on radio about the 'secret speech', undoubtedly in an attempt to quell rumours about its content.

Part of the transcript of the broadcast reads:

After a very careful study of the reports, I have no hesitation in saying the daily press reports of this conference (20th Congress CPSU) were complete fantasies, wishful thinking and downright distortions of the truth. Only people bent on deliberately attempting to hide the truth could draw such conclusions as these published in the daily press.⁸

⁴ *Tribune*, 29 February 1956, p. 2

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ 'CPA Radio Broadcasts – Soviet Union and Socialism', on Voice of the Countryside, Talk No. 10, 13 March 1956, ML MSS 5021 93 (155).

The speaker was clearly intent on dispelling any rumours of negative comments being made in reference to Stalin at the Congress. Consistent with these comments, Sharkey adopted a more direct approach concerning the 'capitalist lies' about Stalin one week later. He argued that because the Soviet Union was making so many great advances in so many areas, the capitalist world felt threatened. This was the reason for the capitalist press attempting to concentrate on the lies about Stalin and not on what else the new Soviet leadership had been saying at the Congress⁹. One of the 'lies' Sharkey referred to was Mikoyan's allegation that Stalin was a 'tyrant'. His discussion of the capitalist approach was contained within an editorial titled 'Khrushchev on the Need for Worker Unity', which would have been unlikely to attract *Tribune* readers looking for further discussion on the 'cult of the individual'.

While reference to the 20th Congress in the Party press at this time attempted to deflect attention away from discussing the 'secret speech', one of the first public discussions conducted by the CPA leadership concerning Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin suggested a more open approach. A meeting was held at the New Theatre in Melbourne on 26 March 1956. Although there was no report of the meeting in the *Guardian*,² the *Tribune*, or the *Communist Review*, thus denying the rank and file membership the opportunity to inform themselves of the issues and implications of the speech on the Party, the proceedings were reported by an Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) source. The audience consisted

⁹ *Tribune* 21 March 1956, p. 2.

of cadres and other influential party members.¹⁰ Sharkey addressed the meeting and focused initially on the positive messages arising from the 20th Congress. He then moved on to discussing the attacks being made against Stalin.

It was true that prior to the Nineteenth Congress of the CPSU, there had arisen in the Soviet Union a cult of individualism. The cult had evil effects on the progress of the Soviet Union and communism in general. It caused harm in the organisation of the party as it tended to stifle criticism and veered to hero worship.¹¹

Sharkey stated that the cult led to a lack of collective leadership and to Stalin making decisions instead of the Central Committee. Unlike his editorials and discussions in the Party press, his comments specifically linked Stalin to the cult and were relatively direct in terms of the negative effects of the cult. However, despite acknowledging that there had been an un-Marxist leadership regime within the CPSU, Sharkey then attempted to diminish the importance of this. He commented that 'we all make mistakes' and that Stalin's greatest mistakes were not heeding warnings at the start of World War Two, insisting that Germany would not invade the Soviet Union.¹² Sharkey made no attempt to detail the accusations contained in the 'secret speech', choosing instead to issue a warning to members regarding discussion of the topic. He stated that the questions being asked by some members concerning how the cult had

¹⁰ Notes from meeting at New Theatre, Melbourne, 26 March 1956, National Archives of Australia, (hereafter NAA), A6119, Item 316.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

been allowed to develop in the CPSU were dangerous. He equated members' questions with those being asked by the daily press, and emphasised that such an approach would not be tolerated by the Party. This sort of questioning, he stated, would be stamped out ruthlessly. At the end of the session Sharkey refused to answer any questions from the audience¹³. Sharkey's somewhat contradictory attitude towards discussing the 'secret speech' can be explained in part by the lack of certainty amongst the leadership regarding how to best present the issue to the party membership. As a report compiled by ASIO in April 1956 noted, 'The Party... is striving desperately to get clarity to the rank and file on the line they should present to the public.'¹⁴

Leadership Inconsistencies

Over the following three weeks, inconsistencies in approach between members of the leadership became evident. Eric Aarons, a member of the Central Committee of the CPA, responded to a question on whether the political line of the Party had ever been incorrect in the *Tribune's* "Question Box" segment¹⁵. His response referred to several instances, such as the attitude towards World War Two in 1939, and the stance adopted by right opportunists for a number of years up until 1929. He described how both these errors had been corrected, the first after only a few weeks and the second due to members such as Sharkey, Miles and Dixon re-establishing the correct line. He also highlighted a number of instances where wrong ideas had exerted a powerful

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ 'New South Wales Communist Party Twentieth Congress – Stalin', 14 April, 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344.

¹⁵ *Tribune*, 27 March 1956.

influence on the Party. These included the idea to dissolve the Party and join Labor in 1926; the struggle against Jack Lang in the 1930s; and the left sectarian approach taken between 1949 and 1951 that was remedied by the Party Consolidation statement. He also suggested that mistakes had been made by individuals, including himself, although he did not specify these errors. He pointed out that the more important thing was to focus on the attitude taken towards these mistakes, rather than the mistakes themselves¹⁶. He described two possible reactions. The first was that some, whose attachment to the Party was not strong, used the occurrence of these mistakes as an excuse to leave, instead of staying and trying to rectify the problem. The other extreme was taken by those whose view of the Party was so idealistic that they could not accept that the Party could actually make mistakes. Such members often would become despondent and confused when mistakes are revealed¹⁷. He then described the Party's attitude towards these mistakes. He portrayed a conscientious approach whereby the Party realised the impact of its actions on members and therefore would take a very responsible attitude to everything it did and said. When mistakes did occur they would set about trying to correct them. This was referred to as adopting a 'self critical approach', where errors were disclosed, the causes identified and action taken to ensure they are not repeated. This approach was the tried and true method of ensuring progress for the Party¹⁸. Aarons' response to this simple question, at this stage of the unfurling of the revelations about Stalin, could be interpreted as providing readers with a way of

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

understanding or interpreting other members' reactions to Khrushchev's revelations and may have served to reassure them the Party would tackle the issue thoroughly. However, it was published the day after the meeting at the New Theatre, and, when compared with Sharkey's approach to discussing the issue, raises questions as to the extent of agreement or co-ordination amongst the leadership over the line being presented to members.

Sharkey's somewhat ambivalent attitude towards criticism of the Party was clearly demonstrated a few days later in *Tribune*. He supported Aarons' discussion by highlighting the importance of listening to criticism for the further strengthening of the Party¹⁹. He also stated that the repudiation of the 'cult of the individual' was an important outcome of the 20th Congress. Sharkey informed readers that 'despite his great services to communism, as a result of the Cult, Stalin began to place himself above the Party and the Central Committee'. However, in the same article, Sharkey then commented that the terrible things the press were attributing to Stalin were lies. He wrote that the 'great liars of the millionaire press must have gone on a drunken spree for a few days'²⁰ as they misrepresented what Khrushchev had said about Stalin, claiming he was a monster who tortured little children, and that Khrushchev had been in tears while delegates at the Congress had fainted. Sharkey described these accounts as a 'hell's brew from the sewers of the gutter press'.²¹ He claimed that the lies being reported in the daily press were refuted by the fact that the Congress

¹⁹ *Tribune*, 4 April 1956, p. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

had opened with attendees standing in respect for Stalin (and other great leaders of the Soviet Union)²². In an attempt to separate Stalin from the cult of the individual in the readers' minds, Sharkey quoted extensively from a speech made by M. A. Suslov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, describing the impact of the cult of the individual within Russia. He pointed to the fact that changes to minimise the impact of the cult of the individual had begun to be implemented prior to the 19th Congress. He argued that as Stalin was at the 19th Congress, he must have supported these changes and therefore could not have been solely responsible for the phenomenon.²³

Sharkey's approach to the discussion since February had been inconsistent. He had attempted at first to denounce the reporting of the 'secret speech' as lies, but then had conceded that Stalin had made some errors that had been antithetical to the spirit of Marxism-Leninism. Within the same article he then launched a vitriolic attack on the capitalist press for the 'lies' they had been printing. In a subsequent memoir, Gibson characterised Sharkey's attempt to refute the reporting of the daily press at this time as a 'rather deceptive argument'.²⁴ Such an approach may have proved confusing for members, particularly if they were reliant solely on printed material in following the discussion concerning the 20th Congress – as some members living in remote areas of the country were.²⁵ Sharkey's articles were never specific in detailing what he supported and what he was denouncing as 'lies'. From his *Tribune*

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, p. 212.

²⁵ See Chapter 5 of this thesis.

article readers may have assumed Stalin's only crime was that he 'placed himself above the Party and the Central Committee.' The very marked differences between Sharkey's and Aarons' assessments of the 20th Congress would not have served to provide members with a clear understanding of the CPA's position on the issues.

In the 4 April edition of the *Tribune*, the same issue in which Sharkey attempted to minimise the importance of Stalin's actions, Sam Russell of the *Daily Worker* in London quoted an article printed in *Pravda* (the CPSU organ) in which Stalin was accused of violating Communist democracy, of personal glorification and of committing actions which resulted in 'unjustified repression inside the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet Union'.²⁶ While the report did not attempt to distance Stalin from the cult or diminish his role in it, it also acknowledged Stalin's contribution to the Civil War and the struggle to build Socialism. However, it also described how Stalin became so popular that he allowed the successes to be attributed to himself instead of applying a Marxist-Leninist interpretation to the development in the Soviet Union. The *Pravda* report provided a balanced portrayal of the issue, highlighting the positives and the negative aspects of the cult. Sharkey's article also encouraged *Tribune* readers to see the criticism and repudiation of the cult of the individual 'in a balanced way'²⁷ and within a Marxist-Leninist framework. The lesson they must take was to see the outcome of the Congress as a message to strengthen collective leadership within the Australian Party. Unlike the *Pravda* article, Sharkey did not wish his readers to focus excessively on the actions taken by

²⁶ *Tribune*, 4 April, 1956, p. 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 2.

Stalin. He highlighted the importance of criticism and self criticism being further developed within the Party and of members' ideas being listened to. He concluded with the following comment: 'This Party will be strengthened, as Lenin taught, by the merciless criticism of weaknesses and by learning from its past mistakes'.²⁸ Yet Sharkey himself shied away from acknowledging such past mistakes.

In April 1956 E.F. Hill, Party Secretary in Victoria, was still overseas in Russia. He had attended the 20th Congress of the CPSU as the sole Australian delegate. In a *Tribune* report Hill discussed the magnificent progress of the Soviet Union and depicted an environment where people were working together to achieve great things.²⁹ He compared the 'magnificent material' being published by Soviet papers with the 'sordid rubbish that passes as news in our country'. Although he made an oblique reference to the spirit of criticism and self criticism that had run through the entire Congress³⁰, he made no reference to the 'secret speech' or the revelations concerning Stalin. Despite both Russell and Sharkey commenting on the cult of the individual and Khrushchev's revelations regarding Stalin in the same edition, Hill scarcely mentioned these revelations³¹. His exhortation of the CPSU and Soviet achievements was out of step with the discussion being held within the CPA at the time, which may have served to further magnify the differences within the CPA leadership in its approach to the 20th Congress. Interestingly, Gibson cites Giuseppe Boffa, the author of *Inside the Khrushchev Era*, who commented on the front page

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 6.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

design of *Pravda* which had been dedicated to the 20th Congress. The design featured Lenin's head amongst banners and marching columns of soldiers³². This was significant because, for the previous twenty years, pictures of Lenin had always been accompanied by the image of Stalin. Boffa believed that this design gave the clearest indication of the theme of the upcoming congress and was 'more eloquent than the most sensational headline'³³. It is unlikely that Hill would have been unaware of such portents, nor was he unaware that the 'secret speech' had contained information that threatened traditional views of Stalin.³⁴ However, he was unwilling to share this information with Australian communists.

Aarons' and Sharkey's message regarding the importance of criticism and questioning to help strengthen the Party was compromised at a meeting of members from the Balmain and City sections of the CPA in NSW. This meeting was held the same day that the Russell article and Sharkey's editorial were published. Again, we are obliged to rely on an ASIO informant for a record of this event since there was no mention of it in the communist press. The meeting had been called to discuss the charges being made against Stalin and was addressed by Harry Hatfield, then a member of the Central Committee of the CPA. It was only in the last ten minutes of the one and a half hour speech did Hatfield attempt to address the issue of the allegations against Stalin, which was reported to have been causing considerable

³² Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, p. 207.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Undated typed document, JD Blake papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney (hereafter ML MSS) 5971/1/10 Box 1/3, folder titled 'Consolidation etc'.

concern and confusion within the ranks of the Party.³⁵ At the end of the meeting there was no time allowed for members' questions. As part of his address, Hatfield told members that they needed to be guided by the reports from the Central Committee of the CPSU and not by the daily press. He concluded his report by saying that the many questions on Stalin could not be answered at that time. Only the CPSU could answer such questions and that the CPA would take its lead from it.

A More Objective, Analytical Approach

By May one member of the CPA leadership adopted a more analytical and open approach to the revelations from Moscow. In an article for the *Communist Review*, Eric Aarons attempted to place the argument in a slightly broader context. He suggested that the Twentieth Congress had highlighted weaknesses in the ideological work of the Communist movement and it pointed to the need to discuss the significance of this for the CPA.³⁶ Aarons attempted to relate the messages from the Congress to Australian conditions and suggested that there had been a tendency within the Party for dogmatic thinking and an over-zealous application of rules without consideration of some of the broader issues. He suggested that a proper study of the cult meant that its impact must be made real within an Australian context. He exemplified this point by stating that if a particular leader were considered to be a 'fount of wisdom', then their comments on issues would be the solution. This approach removed the need for others to think³⁷. Considering the

³⁵ 'Meeting of comrades from City and Balmain sections of CPA', 4 April 1956, NAA, A6122, Item 596.

³⁶ Eric Aarons, 'The Congress and Ideological Work', *Communist Review*, May 1956, pp. 146-50.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

articles and comments made up until this point by other leaders, such as Hill and Sharkey, Aarons' comments reflected a more critical appraisal of the impact of the cult as it applied to Australia. His attempt to relate the messages from the 20th Congress to the experience of Australian Party members may have helped them understand more clearly the relevance and importance of the 'secret speech' for their work as members of the CPA. However, this approach was not adopted by all members of the CPA leadership.

Aarons also gave a series of lectures on the decisions of the 20th Congress, which were held at the CPA headquarters at 40 Market Street in Sydney. In the notes taken from this lecture by an ASIO agent, it appears Aarons was again comparatively open regarding the impact of the cult and was specific in linking Stalin to the cult and its development. He discussed how the acceptance of the 'great man theory' had meant that there had been no need for meetings of the Central Committee or regular Congresses because Stalin was trusted to make all decisions³⁸. He attempted to answer some members' concerns by explaining how the 'great man theory' had meant that no one could criticise Stalin because it would be taken as a personal affront. Aarons was one of the only CPA leaders to openly discuss examples of Stalin's misuse of power: 'The terrible misuse of power is indicated by the treatment of the Polish Secretary of the Party...'. He then explained how this man had been framed and thrown in jail until after Stalin's death. It was then revealed that there was never any proof against this man. Moreover, Aarons did not steer clear of

³⁸Final lecture on 20th Congress of C.P.S.U.', 11 May 1956, NAA, A6119, Item 331.

criticising Soviet policy. He discussed how the incorrectness of Stalin's theory regarding the intensification of class struggle had resulted in the Soviet Union pursuing approaches that had 'retarded public education.'³⁹ This comment is one of the few made by a member of the CPA leadership that directly criticised Soviet policy and its impact. He discussed the external factors that had intensified the power of Stalin and had consequently made it impossible to expose the cult without the risk of civil war, as well as describing the 'monstrous forms' of justice that had been perpetrated against comrades within the Party. Unlike Hatfield's and Sharkey's meetings to date, after Aarons' lectures there was discussion, which was described as being critical in nature.

Two comrades, Simon Max and Bernie Rosen, were identified as major contributors to this discussion.⁴⁰ It was reported from the discussion that members were 'reluctant to accept as gospel any propositions from the 20th Congress or from any of the current lecturers without searching, critical discussion and questioning.'⁴¹ Rosen referred to the vindication of the Soviet Union's actions in accusing the Jewish doctors of causing Stalin's death. Since the accusations had been shown to be invalid, the CPA had made no attempt to call the Jewish members of the Party together to provide them with an explanation of the incorrect charges.⁴² He also described how he had been expelled from the Party and when it was found his expulsion was unconstitutional, none of the responsible party members had come forward to admit

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

they had been wrong. Rosen suggested that these were two examples that demonstrated the unwillingness of the CPA to admit its errors.⁴³ Simon Max questioned how the glorification of Stalin by itself could have resulted in the 'cult of the individual'.⁴⁴ He pointed out that the Chinese leader, Mao Tse Tseng, was another communist leader who was glorified but that the 'cult' was not considered to have developed in China. He also suggested that the glorification of a leader during times of national crisis or threat was a positive behaviour, as it provided a central focus for patriotism.⁴⁵ The ASIO officer noted that Aarons did not reply to either Rosen or Max's questions. The contribution of these two members to the discussion demonstrates the strength of feeling and depth of analysis the revelations prompted amongst members. They also serve to illustrate the challenging environment the CPA leadership faced and, ultimately, wanted to avoid. While Aarons was one CPA leader who was prepared to address the membership, he did not have answers for all their questions and, in some cases, accusations. He was prepared to allow time for questions and debate on the topic, even if this did not fully satisfy those looking for definitive answers to their questions. It is important to note that the flavour Aarons' contribution to the debate over the 'secret speech', via *Communist Review* and his lectures, was significantly more consistent in the months following the Congress than the contributions of Sharkey, prompting the question about what influenced Sharkey to present such a different approach.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

At this particular time Sharkey appeared more open and generous in his attitude. In *Tribune* at the end of May his message was that the liquidation of the cult was an important result of the 20th Congress.⁴⁶ The approach of his article contrasted to earlier articles where he went to great lengths to point out the positive messages of the Congress before referring to Stalin. In this article he stated that the cult had led to 'arbitrary, one-sided and incorrect decisions',⁴⁷ but that it was important not to 'ignore Stalin's great achievements, despite his grievous errors'.⁴⁸ He also linked the impact of the cult to Australia, where he said there had been an 'unthinking acceptance of views of Party leaders and a timidity in putting forward differing views'. He concluded by asserting that the destruction of the cult was a great service to socialism.

Publication of the Text of the Speech

In early June 1956 the *New York Times* printed a complete transcript of the 'secret speech' made by Khrushchev⁴⁹. *Tribune* responded with a small, page one article 'Still More Speculation About Stalin' where continuing doubts over the authenticity of the speech were raised.⁵⁰ It claimed that while the US State Department could not attest to the truth of the report, it had concluded that the speech, as printed in the *New York Times*, was accurate.⁵¹ A meeting was held in June at the New Theatre in Melbourne soon after the printing of the 'speech' in response to concerns of members over its

⁴⁶ *Tribune*, 30 May, 1956, p. 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁴⁹ *New York Times*, 5 June 1956, p. 6.

⁵⁰ *Tribune*, 13 June 1956, p. 1.

⁵¹ *New York Times*, 5 June 1956, p. 6.

content.⁵² Again, there is no communist party record of this meeting, but Bruce Armstrong, a party member, attended the meeting. Key leaders of the Victorian branch Executive were present including Ralph Gibson, who was the main spokesperson. A particularly outspoken and influential member of the Party, Stephen Murray-Smith, stood up and waved a copy of the report in his hand. He said that he believed the report was authentic and requested Ralph Gibson to explain it. Gibson's response was to remain seated, displaying no reaction and looking down, hands in pockets, leaning back in his seat. He had nothing to say which was very unusual for him.⁵³ Despite Gibson's lack of response, the printing of the speech provided the detail the CPA leadership had been waiting for.⁵⁴ Aarons recalled reading the speech whilst at a communist party school in Queensland, and remembered being convinced by what he read:

Both of us felt that it had to be true, you know? The way it was put together and the facts that it mentioned... It couldn't have been made up or invented by the CIA. It read true and anyone else also must have realised it was true but then the issue was, how should we respond?⁵⁵

However, in his memoirs Aarons raised the question as to whether the translated text was genuine.⁵⁶ Although acknowledging that there was 'something in it', he stated that there was not enough in it to cause the leadership to accept it unequivocally.

⁵² Interview with Bruce Armstrong, 25 April 2001, Melbourne.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Interview with Eric Aarons, 30 May 2002, Sydney.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Aarons, *What's Left*, p. 116.

Aarons foreshadowed the approach the leadership would take over the next few months by commenting that if they had accepted the *New York Times* version they would have exposed themselves open to attack from 'every quarter'.⁵⁷

As a member of the Central Committee during 1956, J.D. Blake recalled how, during the first half of 1956,

One copy of the speech was circulated to each member of the Political Committee in turn with instructions that it was to be read in the Party headquarters, initialised by each member and then handed in. Political Committee members were informed that a letter from the Australian delegate at the 20th Congress stated that this version of the Khrushchev report was ninety-nine percent correct but that there was no need to take much notice of the report because it was expected that the Molotov – Malenkov group would soon oust Khrushchev from the leadership.⁵⁸

According to Blake, the Australian delegate at the Congress, Central Committee Secretariat member, E.F.Hill, believed that Khrushchev would not hold power in the Soviet Union for long and that once Khrushchev was defeated his revelations concerning Stalin would no longer be relevant or require further discussion.⁵⁹ This

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Undated typed document, JD Blake papers, ML MSS 5971/1/10 Box 1/3, folder titled 'Consolidation etc'.

⁵⁹ 'Some Facts of History' 15 September 1960, JD Blake Papers, ML MSS 5971/1/9 Box 1/3 Folder titled 'Consolidation etc'. The anticipation of Khrushchev being overthrown by the Molotov –Malenkov group amongst some Communist leaders is supported by comments made by the French leader, Thorez, who when presented with a copy of the speech by one of

view was congruent with Hill's view of how the CPSU should be led. Unfortunately there are no records of Blake's speech being circulated to Political Committee members, and thus his recollections cannot be corroborated. However, his recollection provides some basis for understanding Hill's and possibly Sharkey's reluctance to accept Khrushchev's revelations and may explain the approach the leadership took to the issue prior to the release of the CPSU statement. The circulation of the speech and the acceptance, at least privately, by some members of the leadership of its authenticity, also helps to explain the inconsistency in approach between these members.

Despite arguing against detailed discussion - on the basis that the details of the 'secret speech' were not known - the Political Committee of the CPA issued a response to the *New York Times* version in June. It stated that the revelation of the cult was a courageous act and pointed out that no capitalist government had ever revealed its own mistakes.⁶⁰ Following in the same footsteps as Aarons and, to a lesser extent, Sharkey, Political Committee members were quite open in their admissions. They were surprised to learn that Stalin had fostered the cult and had been embroiled in the myth of Stalin's infallibility. They had been unaware that, in the latter part of Stalin's life, contradictions existed between his practice and fundamental Marxist-Leninist principles. The Political Committee then outlined how the cult had affected the Party. They found that there had been tendencies to

his central committee commented, '...just remember one thing. This report doesn't exist. Besides, soon it will never have existed. We must pay no attention to it.' Quoted in MacLeod, *Death of Uncle Joe*, p. 65.

⁶⁰ *Tribune*, 20 June 1956, p. 2.

exaggerate praise of individual party members. Although the leaders had not encouraged this, they had not fully understood the harmful significance of this practice, and so had not corrected it.⁶¹ In addition to this they acknowledged that inflexibility in defending the viewpoint of the Soviet Union had led to the alienation of some members. The Political Committee emphasised that it intended to take steps to remedy this. Importantly, it called on the membership to continue discussion on the 20th Congress and the application of its findings to the CPA. This message was reinforced in the 4 July edition of *Tribune* where details concerning the location of abridged versions of the 'secret speech' and other key speeches made at the Congress were published. Members were encouraged to purchase and read these in order to gain a full understanding of what was stated by Khrushchev and to promote thorough, informed discussions.⁶² While it was prepared to make a full and frank statement on the cult of the individual and encouraged members to discuss it, it was unwilling to admit to members that a capitalist paper, the *New York Times* had printed an accurate version of the speech. It is not clear where the leadership had sourced its copy of the speech from – assuming it was not relying on the *New York Times* version - as the CPSU had not yet made its official statement concerning Khrushchev's revelations. Arguably, the source was the copy that Jack Blake believed was circulated during the first half of the year. Regardless of which source the leadership used, the example it set for the Party membership was inconsistent and vacillative.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, 4 July 1956, p. 10.

Togliatti's analysis

During the same month the Italian Communist leader, Togliatti, issued a statement concerning the revelations made at the 20th Congress. Reports from this statement were included in the Communist press in the week commencing 18 June 1956⁶³. The extracts reported in *Tribune* included Togliatti's call to the Soviet leaders to explain the errors committed during the period of the cult of the individual. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Togliatti argued that the prestige of the Soviet leaders had decreased because they had not opposed the creation of the myth surrounding Stalin while Stalin was still alive.⁶⁴ Togliatti highlighted the need for a Marxist-Leninist analysis of what had happened and commented that the real problem had escaped notice. This problem was the method via which, and the reason why, 'Soviet society could and did stray so far from the democratic path and from the legality which it had traced out for itself...'.⁶⁵ Sharkey's reply to this statement, printed directly below Togliatti's statement, ritualistically supported the call for a Marxist-Leninist analysis. He did not refer to the need for the Soviet leadership to explain how and why the errors occurred and why nothing was done to prevent them. Instead he chose to point out that the enemies of Socialism had never protested against the crimes of capitalism which occurred daily and hourly. This was in contrast with the Communist Party, which welcomed the destruction of the cult and the condemnation of the violations of Soviet democracy.⁶⁶ Sharkey's response to Togliatti's statement,

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 20 June 1956, p. 2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

as with all his articles addressing the 20th Congress, was therefore highly selective. It served to draw attention away from the more contentious issues. However, in this instance, he did acknowledge Togliatti's questioning approach: 'It is fitting that he, as the leader of the largest communist party in the capitalist world, should raise questions that, to say the least, perplexed us following revelations of the role of J.V. Stalin made at the 20th Congress'.⁶⁷ Again, the CPA leadership, as represented by Sharkey, seemed out of step with, not only the debate in Australia, but with that occurring on the international stage.

The inconsistency in approach amongst the CPA leadership was also evidenced at a cadres meeting, held shortly after the publication of Togliatti's speech. Eric Aarons recalled that Dixon addressed the meeting, and spoke in such a way as to indicate the Party should have some discussion about the 'Stalin issue'.⁶⁸ This was consistent with the recent articles published in the Party press, which promoted discussion and even provided a list of documents members should purchase from the Pioneer Bookshop in order to inform their discussion.⁶⁹ Sharkey however, made a speech after Dixon that reflected more of a 'clamping down' approach, which Dixon, according to Aarons, did not like⁷⁰. Aarons did not recall whether Sharkey was at the meeting for Dixon's speech or arrived after he had made it. Regardless of the sequence of events, this very public display of disunity would have been unlikely to inspire confidence in the leadership and the approach it took to managing the issue.

⁶⁷ *Tribune*, 26 June 1956, p. 2.

⁶⁸ Interview with Eric Aarons, 30 May 2002, Sydney.

⁶⁹ *Tribune*, 4 July, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Interview with Eric Aarons, 30 May 2002, Sydney

The approach adopted by the leadership was reactive and changed significantly over the five months between February and June 1956. Sharkey, as a representative of the leadership of the CPA, presented a different approach to the Stalin question every couple of weeks. Initially, he dismissed the denunciation of Stalin as capitalist press lies in late February, admitted there had been a breach of Marxist-Leninist theory within the CPSU leadership in March, then conceded that Stalin had been involved to some extent, but not to the extent reported by the capitalist press, in April. Such a variety of positions adopted within a short space of time is suggestive of a leadership that was uncertain of the direction it should be taking, and that was dealing with situations as they arose in an ad hoc fashion. The Central Committee then appeared to assume authority over the reporting on the issue with the release of its statement in mid-June. Its approach was to admit that the CPA had been misled by Stalin and by encouraging member to discuss the issue. To this extent, it favoured a more 'open' position. It highlighted the importance of criticism and self criticism and gave an example of this by describing how the Party had not discouraged the adulation of individual party members. However, it too was contradictory to some extent in that it was not prepared to acknowledge that the *New York Times'* version of the speech was fundamentally correct. In addition, Sharkey's refutation of Dixon's encouragement of discussion at the cadre's meeting, was further evidence of the CPA's uncertainty. In *The Fight Goes On*, Gibson recalled that, in 1956, the Party leaders prided themselves that they had not overreacted to the revelations from the

20th Congress⁷¹. They believed this was due to the predominance of the working class origins of the Party leadership. However, in retrospect, he considered that 'the handling was very unsatisfactory'⁷². In contrast to the leaders' perspective, as remembered by Gibson, Jim Staples believed the reason the leadership had such difficulty accepting and dealing with this challenge was that it consisted of working class people who, whilst being very clever and capable, were poorly educated.⁷³ Gibson characterised the leadership as having a choice between 'fragmentary, confused, sectional discussions and discussion that was well informed and organised with the view to getting the clearest possible conclusions. I am afraid we chose the former.'⁷⁴ Staples also considered that a key factor that influenced the leadership's approach to the revelations and members' call for openness was the legacy of the attempts by the State to ban the Communist Party in 1950-51. This period had heightened the 'semi secret structure' of the Party.⁷⁵ Open, frank discussions of such sensitive issues as those thrown up by Khrushchev's revelations were unable to be accommodated within this environment. Staples' understanding was that the content of the 'secret speech' was a direct challenge to the inarguable supremacy of the CPSU. Such a challenge went against everything the Party had believed in and supported since the beginning of the 1930s.⁷⁶ Eric Aarons supported this assessment. He recalled that there was a lack of information about the content of the 'secret speech' that the leadership believed could be trusted and this was one of

⁷¹ Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, p. 212.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Interview with Jim Staples, 28 May 2002, Canberra

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

the key issues that determined their approach⁷⁷. Most CPA leaders had invested considerable energy in denouncing stories about prison camps and summary executions. They were not now prepared to accept that these stories had been true without some 'real' information. The lack of 'real' information was certainly evident in the first half of the year.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, the release of the CPSU statement, and the return of Ted Hill from China in October, provided the impetus for a more hard-line approach towards handling the potentially explosive fallout from the speech. The absence of Hill from Australia during this time had some bearing on the less than decisive approach taken by the CPA. Until his return, and the release of the CPSU statement in June 1956, it can be argued the CPA did not have a unified, consistent approach to which all members of the leadership subscribed.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 4: 'We all Make Mistakes' – The CPA Leadership post June 1956

As 1956 progressed the repercussions of Khrushchev's speech for the CPA became more pronounced. To some extent, prior to the CPSU statement being issued, members and leaders of communist parties around the world had relied on conjecture and word of mouth about what the speech actually contained and its implications for the communist world. Once the CPSU released its statement and the version printed by the *New York Times* was verified as being authentic, the facts were known. Yet, in Australia, debate still persisted about its fundamental questions. In particular, the question of what constituted legitimate criticism seemed to pervade all aspects of party life. Divisions within the Party began to emerge, particularly between the national body and the branches, but the approach taken by the CPA leaders became more consistent. This was particularly evident after E.F. Hill returned from overseas, when the approach adopted by the CPA leadership became more dogmatic and the calls for discussion were dealt with more severely.

The Statement from the CPSU and its effect

In July 1956, *Tribune* printed the resolution from the CPSU regarding the cult of the individual.¹ It attempted to explain the circumstances that led to the development of the cult and why nothing had been done to stop Stalin or remove him from the leadership. Subsequent to the publication of this resolution, the Political Committee of the CPA gave its interpretation of the CPSU statement.² Consistent with the

¹ *Tribune*, 11 July 1956, p. 3.

² *Ibid*, 25 July 1956, p. 2.

position it adopted in its June statement, following the *New York Times* publication of the 'secret speech', the Political Committee report openly encouraged members to study the resolution and discuss its implications through all levels of the Party. The Political Committee conceded that the Party had mistreated some CPA members because they held dissenting views and invited them to rejoin.³ However, this did not represent the fundamental change of direction it may have initially seemed. The Party admitted it had been too harsh on people who expressed dissenting opinions: apparently an example of the Marxist-Leninist practice of self criticism at work. In support of this approach, notes for a series of lectures contained an alteration of the reading list for an upcoming lesson.⁴ The updated reading list included the CPSU resolution and the statement by the Political Committee, both of which had been reproduced in the *Guardian* and *Tribune*.

However, this seemingly more open approach was laced with the old Stalinist rhetoric: 'Freedom to criticise does not mean factionalism can be tolerated. Nor does it mean freedom to propagate anti Party or disruptive views through the Party or through the press'.⁵ Although the leadership appeared ostensibly more conciliatory, the overriding message was to warn against too free a discussion taking place. The contradictory nature of the CPA approach at this time is confirmed by Gibson's retrospective acknowledgement that by July the CPA was still applying the brake to

³ Ibid.

⁴ 'Lecture Notes – Capitalist Crisis and Socialist Alternative, Material on Ian Turner 1958-1981', 18 October, 1956, Stephen Murray Smith (SMS) Papers, Victoria State Library (hereafter VSL) MS8272 Box 141/1-2.

⁵ *Tribune*, 25 July 1956, p. 2.

any wide ranging critical discussion in the Stalin issue.⁶ He highlighted a number of quotes from the Political Committee statement where its confusion was apparent:

“There was grave harm, serious damage to our cause” as a result of the cult of Stalin: but Stalin “still remains an outstanding leader of communism and one of the strongest Marxists in spite of his grievous mistakes”“Collective leadership does not mean that democratic centralism can be flouted, that the authority of the leading Party organs and their decisions can be ignored.”⁷

The lack of direction and specificity in terms of what constituted ‘anti party’ criticism, as distinct from what was ‘legitimate’ criticism was not clearly defined for the membership and most likely this contributed to confusion amongst the membership of the CPA.

In the same edition of *Tribune*, Sharkey described how the enemies of the Party had wished to use revelations about Stalin to discredit the Soviet Union and create confusion and disintegration amongst the membership.⁸ These critics were then said to have been disappointed because the crisis within the Party had not eventuated. The *Tribune* article is interesting for two reasons. First, what Sharkey had referred to as the ‘lies’ about Stalin were now the ‘revelations’; this indicated a degree of acceptance since the CPSU statement. Second, the attempts to rally support for the

⁶ Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, p. 213.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Tribune*, 25 July 1956, p. 2.

CPA in the face of what had been said about the Party had begun. In effect, the article was appealing to members for unity in the face of opposition from the enemy.

Despite the apparently more open approach being reflected in the Communist press and an attempt being made to embrace the principle of self-criticism, Sharkey once again went on the offensive. In the July issue of the *Communist Review*, he again discussed the positives of the Congress, before mentioning the cult. He suggested that those who criticised the mistakes made as a result of the cult were 'reactionary enemies and their unprincipled hirelings'.⁹ He acknowledged that the mistakes made by Stalin had been serious, but urged readers not to view them as the decisive outcome of the Congress. While he expressed the CPA leadership's amazement at what was contained in the speech made by Khrushchev, he also warned that the facts and content of the speech were still not known. It is plausible to suggest that such a warning could have confused members about how legitimate the CPA leadership considered the reports on the speech to be, especially as the CPSU had released its resolution earlier in the same month. Sharkey's remarks were also surprising given the fact that the Political Committee had published its own comments on the CPSU resolution. In addition *Tribune* had printed reports prior to July from international communist party members, such as Sam Russell, who had reported directly from

⁹ Lance Sharkey, 'CPSU 20th Congress – An Epoch Making Event', *Communist Review*, July 1956, pp. 203 – 211.

Moscow on the content of the speech, including Stalin's violations¹⁰ and Togliatti's response, with which Sharkey had generally concurred.¹¹

Instances of the Cult within the CPA

Nevertheless, Sharkey ended his article by turning the focus on the CPA leadership and discussed the extent to which the cult had developed within Australia. He claimed that there had been a tendency toward 'cult' practices in regard to comrades, such as Miles, Dixon and himself, where what they pronounced was accepted without question.¹² He also stated that they had tended to present policy in a very dogmatic, rigid manner without sufficient persuasion. This had resulted in a stifling of initiative amongst the membership. He acknowledged that the CPA needed to address these issues. Although Sharkey maintained that the CPA was prepared to address its tendency to curtail discussion and stifle initiative, his initial description of those who criticised the Party as 'reactionary enemies...' contradicted this. On the one hand, Sharkey was advocating conformity to the correct Marxist-Leninist approach for rectifying errors but, on the other, was adopting an unconciliatory approach.

¹⁰ *Tribune*, 27 March 1956, p. 1. Sam Russell was the *Daily Worker's* correspondent in Moscow during the Congress.

¹¹ *Tribune*, 20 June 1956, p. 2.

¹² Lance Sharkey, 'CPSU 20th Congress – An Epoch Making Event', *Communist Review*, July 1956, pp. 203-211.

Manifestations of the 'cult of the individual' within the CPA were also raised by W.J. Brown.¹³ He referred to ways in which the cult had expressed itself within the CPA, especially the reluctance of members to question the views of leaders and their dogmatic approach to issues that stifled discussion and creative thinking. He also suggested there had been instances where excessive adulation of leaders such as J.B. Miles and Sharkey had gone unchecked.¹⁴ Hill, however, refuted Brown's assertions of excessive adulation of leaders of the CPA. Such assertions, he argued, indicated a 'misunderstanding of the whole problem of the cult'.¹⁵ He also argued that the hesitancy on the part of the members to disagree with views once they had been advanced by someone in the leadership was not indicative of the cult since no single leader had been identified. This pedantic argument, although made six months later, was directly at odds with the admissions made by Sharkey in July. The expression of such contradictory views by members of the leadership over the existence of cult-like tendencies within the CPA highlights the significant extent to which unanimity was absent.

By early August, discussion was still being encouraged within the Branches of the CPA. The annual conference of the City Section of the NSW Branch heard a report from Section Organiser Don Morcom.¹⁶ In this report Morcom stated the importance of all comrades being fully cognisant of the decisions and policy arising from the 20th

¹³ WJ Brown, 'Positive Aspects of the Cult Exposure', *Communist Review*, August 1956, pp. 269-272.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ E. F. Hill, 'An Incorrect View of Party Democracy', *Communist Review*, December 1956, pp. 396-402.

¹⁶ Annual Conference of the CPA City Section, 9 August 1956, NAA A6122, Item 596.

Congress so they could answer members' questions. While he conceded that Stalin's leadership had curtailed the Soviet Union's development, he encouraged delegates to reflect on the positives of the Congress. In contrast to admissions made by Sharkey and the Central Committee, Morcom then stated that the CPA had not been guilty of anything more than minor examples of bureaucracy. This point was reiterated by Dixon and Hatfield who also presented reports to the conference. Within a week of Sharkey's *Communist Review* article acknowledging existence of 'the cult' within the leadership of the CPA, the message passed down to members of these Branches in NSW appeared to contradict this. It is reasonable to assume that had the CPA leadership had only been guilty of minor shortcomings, Sharkey and the Central Committee would not have raised it as an issue the leadership needed to address. Another ASIO source noted that Dixon stated in his report that the discussion around the cult of the individual had begun to dwindle.¹⁷ His message was that Socialism would prevail and that the cult would retreat as an issue of importance. Such a comment also contradicts the need to address instances of the cult within the CPA. Sharkey and other members of the leadership had acknowledged instances of the cult within the CPA, Morcom had stressed the importance of members being 'fully cognisant' of the issues arising from the Congress, and yet Dixon reported that the issue no longer held the attention of the membership.

¹⁷ CPA City Section Conference, 4 and 5 August, 1956, NAA A6119, Item 1715.

China

It was during August that Laurie Aarons and Frank Johnson met with Ted Hill in China.¹⁸ Hill, as mentioned earlier, had been the CPA's delegate at the 20th Congress of the CPSU and had been overseas since that time. One of the other reasons for his trip to the Soviet Union, according to ASIO sources, was to seek treatment for his eyes.¹⁹ From ASIO interceptions of mail sent to Hill's wife, it appears that Hill was confined to a sanatorium for at least part of his time in the Soviet Union. In a letter dated 11 June 1956 Hill also made reference to the fact he was suffering from a skin complaint due to his nerves being in a 'bad state.'²⁰ After his time in the Soviet Union, Hill travelled to China where he met with Aarons and Johnson who were in China as the CPA delegation to the forthcoming 8th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Laurie Aarons met with Hill on several occasions and, apparently, the two men had some fairly strong disagreements. The issues were over the reports of the 20th Congress and whether there should be discussion of Khrushchev's revelations within the CPA. Aarons supported the concept of open discussion and Hill was opposed²¹. Aarons could not see why there should not be discussion, as there was no specific party line on the issue but Hill did not want discussion that could have raised questions about some of the things he, and the rest of the

¹⁸ Interview with Eric Aarons 30 May 2002, Sydney.

¹⁹ Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 27 May 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344. Reference is also made to Hill, Jack Wilson, the brother of Bernie Heinze and an individual named Sam, arranging to import a serum from Moscow that was 'very effective'.

²⁰ It would be interesting to know whether the state of Hill's nerves had been effected by Khrushchev's speech and the anticipation of the likely repercussions. However, no extant records have made any reference to the cause of his nervous complaint.

²¹ Interview with Eric Aarons, 30 May 2002, Sydney.

leadership, believed²². Eric Aarons's view was that neither his brother nor Hill had a detailed understanding of the full content of the speech, although it is highly unlikely that Aarons at least would not have seen a copy of the *New York Times* article or the CPSU resolution prior to his departure for China. With the benefit of hindsight, Eric Aarons believes that Hill had discussed the 'secret speech' and its implications with Chinese Party officials, and that his opposition to open discussion would, to some extent, been due to the Chinese having had time 'to work on him, which undoubtedly they would have done...'²³. This view was also advanced by Blake.²⁴ Sharkey informed him that he was going overseas to join Hill at the Chinese Party Congress, 'to get the real drill about the 20th Congress'²⁵, a comment that suggests Hill and Sharkey believed the Chinese were the ones to be believed about the 20th Congress and what it meant for the Communist movement. Blake recalled that both Hill and Sharkey returned from China as 'determined opponents of the 20th Congress and as silent supporters of the Molotov group.'²⁶ The extent to which some members of the CPA leadership had adopted the Chinese view of Khrushchev's revelations and how they should be handled, was further evidenced by Vic Wilcox, at that time the General Secretary of the New Zealand Communist Party, who travelled to Sydney for talks with the leadership of the CPA, who 'conveyed the

²²Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 'Some Facts of History', 15 September, 1960, JD Blake Papers, ML MSS 5971/1/9 Box 1/3, folder titled 'Consolidation etc'.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid.

view of the Chinese Communist Party that too much open discussion had been allowed by the CPNZ leadership.²⁷

After the CPSU statement was published, some meetings were held to discuss the Congress, although it is difficult to determine how many occurred at the Branch level. One meeting, on which there was an ASIO report, was a Party school held on 9 October in Sydney. It was for the members of the Locomotion, Traffic and Carriage Branches of the Party and the main topic discussed was the 'Decisions of the 20th Congress of the CPSU'.²⁸ There was, however, no record of a follow up report from this Party School, despite this being alluded to in the ASIO file. Eric Aarons was reported to have addressed the 22nd Annual State Conference of the West Australian Branch of the Communist Party. In his address he made no reference to the 20th Congress, the 'secret speech' or the 'cult of the individual'. According to the ASIO informant, only local issues were discussed²⁹. These two reports provide some indication of the variation in the extent to which the revelations were discussed amongst the membership. Those branches that called for discussion were where the key discussions took place. If the members did not request that the issues be debated, they were not raised by the leadership. To some extent this undermined the message from the CPSU statement that the revelations concerning Stalin needed to be discussed throughout the Party.

²⁷ Kerry Taylor, 'Wilcox, Victor George 1912-1989', entry in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume Five (1941-1960)*, Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Wellington, 2003.

²⁸ Comment, ASIO Officer, 26 September, 1956, NAA A6122, Item 2025.

²⁹ Comment, ASIO Officer, undated, NAA A6119, Item 331.

Contradictions

The leadership's reaction to the actions taken CPA member, Jim Staples, underline the dichotomous approach being adopted by the party. Staples 'came across' the text of Khrushchev's speech in the *New York Times* weekly supplement he collected from his local train station on his way to work.³⁰ After discussing the report with close Party colleagues, he decided to print the text and distribute copies to members of the Party. While the leadership was making statements encouraging discussion at one level - discussion which would have been aided by Staples' distribution of the speech - they were also taking action to stop him from doing so. In August it was reported by ASIO that 'Jim Staples... is in very bad odour with the Party as he will not accept the Party line on the Cult of the Individual and has printed and distributed material along those lines.'³¹ The leadership sent Adam Ogston, then the Secretary of the Sydney District Committee, to offer Staples a deal. The Party would permit him an inner party discussion and debate, but on the condition that Staples handed over all his materials.³² Ogston told Staples that the leadership was concerned about the material ending up in the hands of the police which could have been damaging to the Party.³³ This occurred during August and September of 1956. Predictably, the discussion and debate never took place and Staples was expelled from the Party at the end of October. Staples now believes that he posed a significant problem to the leadership and it was concerned that he would have created a 'big problem' over the

³⁰ Interview with Jim Staples, 28 May 2002, Canberra.

³¹ Comment, ASIO Officer, 25 August, 1956, NAA A6119, Item 411.

³² Interview with Jim Staples, 28 May 2002, Canberra.

³³ Ibid. It is not clear what the interest the police would have had in this material, as the transcript of the Speech was in the public domain.

actions just taken by the Russians in Hungary.³⁴ 'The quickest way to snuffle discussion was to get me out of the Party immediately'. Soon after this Helen Palmer and Bob Walshe were expelled. Staples believed that 'we eventually, as you say, fell victims of a pre-emptive strike on the grounds of our previous dissonances.'³⁵ Reflecting on the expulsions from the Party during 1956, Blake observed that 'a great many members were "invited" to leave, were told they were "expendable", that the Party would be better and stronger without them, or were otherwise driven out of the Party.'³⁶ Blake believed these members were the victims of a great injustice and that the actions taken against them by the Party were indefensible. While he acknowledged the degree of suffering these people endured on being expelled, he believed the greater injustice was done to the Party itself.³⁷ These expulsions serve to illustrate the most glaring contradiction in the CPA's approach to managing the implications of the 20th Congress. While the leadership had issued a directive in July encouraging members to have full and frank discussions about the 'secret speech' and its relevance for the CPA, it then began dismissing members from the Party for engaging in and encouraging such discussions. Not only had Staples been expelled from the Party in October, but by December the Central Committee Secretariat had sent a directive out to all Districts notifying them of his expulsion and forbidding

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Undated document, JD Blake papers, MLS, MLMSS 5971/1/10 Box 1/3, folder 'Consolidation etc'.

³⁷ Ibid.

members from having contact with him. It warned that Staples would attempt to engage members in activities 'of a factional nature'.³⁸

At the Sydney District Conference, just prior to Staples' expulsion, it was declared that it was vital that discussion on the outcomes of the 20th Congress continue, in order to strengthen the Party.³⁹ It was resolved that discussion on these issues within the Sydney District had hitherto been inadequate and that the retiring District Committee was responsible for this. The Conference called for a thorough Marxist-Leninist analysis of the Australian situation.⁴⁰ Curiously, after endorsing and praising the CPSU for its resolution and stating its agreement with the Political Committee's statements, the Conference went on to endorse the actions of the Central Committee in declining to open public controversy within the Party press before all the facts were available.⁴¹ The statement suggested that to have done so, amidst the 'orgy of anti-Soviet slander and misrepresentation' would have restricted the opportunity for a principled discussion to take place and would have encouraged harmful speculation. It would appear that the limited opportunity for debate and discussion contributed to the speculation, rather than restricted it.

While there were clear discrepancies between the CPA leadership's rhetoric and actions, there also appeared to be contradictions between what was being said at a

³⁸ Letter to all Districts from Central Committee Secretariat, 17 December, 1956, NAA A6119, Item 41.

³⁹ Resolutions carried at the Sydney District Conference, 12-14 October 1956, NAA A6119, Item 575.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

national level and what was being discussed within the Branches. This discrepancy was highlighted by John Malos, a science student at Sydney University and a member of the Sydney University Branch of the CPA. He was reported in August 1956 to have been 'elated' by his election to position of Secretary of the University Branch (Sydney) of the CPA.⁴² In October he was observed to have stated that the Central Committee of the CPA had sent out a directive to the District Committees instructing them to have 'free and full discussion on the cult'.⁴³ Malos believed that the directive report from the Sydney District Committee to the Sections was not the same as that sent by the Central Committee. He contended that four sentences had been omitted, and as a result, the Sections had been given the wrong message. He felt so strongly about this issue that he put forward a resolution concerning the omissions to the District Committee. The ensuing discussion within the Branch then became so heated that Dixon was called in to restore order.⁴⁴ Dixon, according to Malos, then admitted that the version of the speech contained in the *New York Times* was substantially correct. He said there were a few points that were yet to be verified and until this had occurred, there should be no discussion on these points. However, there appeared to be no details given to the members present, as to what these points were. Picking and choosing what points could be discussed without specifying exactly what these points were would have been difficult for members to reconcile with the leadership's call for them to have 'free and full' discussion on the outcomes of the Congress. Malos' claims regarding the omission of some information in a

⁴² Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 'John Paul Malos', 30 August 1956, NAA A6122 Item 1420.

⁴³ Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 'John Paul Malos', 24 October 1956, NAA A6119, Item 2296.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

District Committee directive sent to the Sections was addressed at the Sydney District Conference in October.⁴⁵ The incoming committee was to investigate fully the omission of four paragraphs in the District Committee resolution of the 13 August when it was circulated to the Section Committees. Yet, the Conference decided to reject the resolution submitted by the University Branch, and resolved to provide special assistance to the Branch to discuss the issues.⁴⁶

Internal leadership debate

Absence of agreement between CPA leaders over the accuracy of the *New York Times* version of the 'secret speech' most likely contributed to the differences in approach when addressing the issues arising from it. Despite Dixon's assertion that the *New York Times* version was 'substantially correct', ASIO notes taken at a meeting held by the West Sydney Section of the CPA detailed a heated discussion between Malos and a member of the Central Committee, Adam Ogston,⁴⁷ where Ogston refused to accept that the *New York Times* version of the speech was correct and criticised Malos who claimed to have a copy of the report which he had transmitted to other members in order to initiate discussions. Malos revealed that Ogston had claimed that if the question were discussed too openly it would split the Party from top to bottom, as had been the case in America and Italy.⁴⁸ Malos and Ogston continued to argue over the authenticity of the *New York Times* version of the report, with Malos stating that

⁴⁵ 'Resolutions Carried at the Sydney District Conference', 12-14 October 1956, NAA A6119, Item 575.

⁴⁶ Ibid. The ASIO report did not detail what the resolution from the University Branch contained.

⁴⁷ 'John Paul Malos', 3 October, 1956, NAA A6119, Item 575.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

he had a contact within the New Zealand Party who had been present when the 20th Congress report was given and who had advised Malos that the *New York Times* version was correct.⁴⁹ Malos believed that Ogston's attitude was typical of other CPA leaders who were trying to restrict discussion as they were anxious to suppress their past errors. Ogston's claim about the version of the speech printed in the *New York Times* directly contradicts statements by the CPA leadership, of which Ogston would have been fully aware.

The available historical documents do not shed any definitive light on whether a copy of the 'secret speech' was seen by members of the leadership prior to the *New York Times* text becoming available. The scarcity of CPA records, including minutes of meetings and correspondence, makes it very difficult to ascertain when exactly the leadership learnt of the 'secret speech'. As mentioned in the previous chapter Blake recalled a copy of the speech being circulated amongst the Political Committee of the CPA, with strict instructions as to where it could be read and with members required to sign the document out and in once they had read it. He was told that the authenticity of the document had been verified by Hill, Australia's delegate at the CPSU Congress. However, his notes do not specify precisely when the circulation of the document took place. His claim is supported by Amirah Inglis who recalled that Hill wrote to the Party leadership from Moscow, warning them of the allegations that

⁴⁹ Ibid. It should be noted here that the source is not clear as to whether the New Zealand contact was present at the closed session or just at the Congress. The only way he could verify that the report was accurate would have been if he was at the closed session, from which foreign delegates were said to have been banned.

had been made about Stalin.⁵⁰ Once the *New York Times* text was available in Australia, there was considerable debate as to its authenticity, despite some members of the leadership being convinced by it.⁵¹ However, as indicated above, Ogston refused to accept its accuracy. John Malos claimed to know that the *New York Times* version to be authentic. Bob Gould, who had been in contact with the CPA and its activities during 1956, also believed the document to be accurate. He recalled a cadres' meeting where they were addressed by J.R. Hughes. A member present at the meeting, Peter Hamilton, asked Hughes to confirm that the *New York Times* version was authentic.⁵² Hamilton knew this to be the case as the New Zealand delegate to the Congress, V. Wilcox, had stopped off in Sydney on his way home, and had met with members of the CPA leadership, informing them of the accuracy of the document.⁵³ Wilcox had also met with a colleague of Hamilton's, providing him with the same information.⁵⁴ Hamilton, however, had been sworn to secrecy and so when Hughes responded with a vitriolic attack on the *New York Times* as a purveyor of "filthy" lies about the working class and its struggles, Hamilton was unable to respond to the contrary. Hughes, via a tirade that lasted over ten minutes, used the opportunity to stir up the loyalty of the audience against critics and sceptics of the Party. Eric Aarons recalled discussing the issue of the 20th Congress with leaders from the New Zealand Party in the years following 1956, but had no recollection of

⁵⁰ Ingliss, *The Hammer and the Sickle and the Washing Up*, p. 141.

⁵¹ Aarons, *What's Left? Memoirs of an Australian Communist*, pp. 115 -121.

⁵² Bob Gould, 'The Communist Party in Australian Life', *Labor Review*, 34, 2001, pp. 20-38.

⁵³ See S.W. Scott, *Rebel in a Wrong Cause*, Collins, Auckland, 1960, pp. 206-8. According to Scott, Wilcox acknowledged both the authenticity of Krushchev's report and the United States State Department translation of his speech to Scott personally and to meetings of Party members.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

meeting with one of them in 1956.⁵⁵ Regardless of whether the Party leadership knew of the content of the speech prior to the release of the *New York Times* text, once this was released, its attempts to deny its accuracy served to further alienate members, such as Malos, attempting to understand the issues. Interestingly, Hughes was overheard by an ASIO source later in the year to comment that the 'cult of the individual' had been a source of weakness in the Party, but that members had generally failed to see this and had tended to be inward looking and intent on maintaining a defensive position. This had resulted in the Party being slow to react on a number of important issues. Allegedly, this explanation for the lack of Party action was also referred to by E.W. Campbell.⁵⁶ A more plausible interpretation is that the source of weakness was the *leadership's* tendency to be 'inward looking' and defensive, rather than lay the blame at the feet of the membership.

Clamping down

In the latter half of 1956 the CPA leadership began to take an increasingly tough approach to members calling for, or engaging in discussion about, the 'secret speech'. Hill returned from China at the end of September 1956.⁵⁷ In late October the increasingly vocal John Malos remarked that 'most Party members were in fear of discussing important questions too openly because they feared they would be

⁵⁵ Interview with Eric Aarons, 30 May 2002, Sydney.

⁵⁶ 'New South Wales Communist Party of Australia State Conference', 4 November 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344.

⁵⁷ Notes on E.F. Hill, September 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344. In a letter dated 21 September 1956, received by Hill's wife, Joyce, he indicated that he would be returning home

chopped off.⁵⁸ An ASIO source at a meeting of the NSW Party State Conference reported that it was considered that Hill had made some drastic decisions in removing leading comrades who were not handling the question of the cult properly. This assessment was based on comments made by Campbell when he addressed the meeting on the issue of the 'cult of the individual'. The examples cited were of Hatfield being sent back to industry and the removal of Ogston from all party duties to take the role of National Organiser of the *Tribune*. As Ogston had been a member of the Central Committee, this was considered to be a considerable backward step.⁵⁹ In a further example of the leadership clamping down on discussion, Blake was issued a direct instruction from the Party Secretariat during October, directing him to return all *Tribune* discussion materials to contributors with a covering letter above Blake's signature informing them that, by decision of the Party leadership, the discussion was now closed.⁶⁰ These three examples, occurring within approximately a month of each other, signify a significant hardening of approach by the Party leadership to the question of discussion of Khrushchev's revelations. However, this approach appeared, at least in some sections of the Party, to be met with a corresponding hardening of attitude amongst the membership. Gibson recalled attending two meetings late in 1956, one at the Melbourne University Branch and the second at a conference of art workers, also in Melbourne.⁶¹ He commented that

immediately. A letter dated 25 September indicated he had been delayed due to transport problems but it is likely he returned some time soon after.

⁵⁸ John Paul Malos, 17 October 1956, NAA A6122, Item 575.

⁵⁹ 'New South Wales Communist Party of Australia State Conference', 4 November 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344.

⁶⁰ Untitled, undated document, JD Blake papers, MLS, MLMSS 5971 ADD ON 2087/2.

Document outlines Blake's disagreement over a note written by Ted Bacon.

⁶¹ Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, pp 206-13.

'never did my exhortation have less effect'. Criticism reportedly came at him from all sides, fuelled not only by the 20th Congress but also by the uprising in Hungary. Significantly, Gibson believed that the leadership's attempt to stifle discussion had ultimately proved to be a failure.

Eric Aarons, who had been largely absent from the discussion concerning the cult and its impact since May, wrote an article in the November *Communist Review* where he discussed how the cult promoted the importance of inner party democracy, criticism and collective leadership.⁶² However, he then went on to criticise the actions being taken by those members who were questioning the approach being taken by the leadership. He considered their actions to be a direct challenge to the authority of the Party and had the effect of weakening party unity and effectiveness. He believed that 'it would be ridiculous to think... freedom means freedom to disseminate slanders more appropriate to the capitalist gutter press or to propagate ideas opposed to the basic principles we have voluntarily combined in the Party to give effect to.'⁶³ Sharkey presented a similar argument the following month. He said that members who had 'lost their balance' couldn't see that the measures being taken would strengthen the Party.⁶⁴ He characterised these 'unbalanced members' as wanting to destabilise the Party, introduce 'endless discussion', and encourage the Party to adopt a suspicious and hostile attitude towards the CPSU. The reference to

⁶² Eric Aarons, 'Democratic Centralism', *Communist Review*, November 1956, pp. 367-371. The same point was made by Brown in his August article.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

⁶⁴ Lance Sharkey, 'Report to the Central Committee' *Communist Review*, December 1956, pp. 387-396.

'endless criticism' being against the interests of the Party contrasts directly with the leadership's message in August where it was encouraging discussion. This approach to questioning members' motives was also underscored by Hill who responded to an article by W.J.Brown, which, in Hill's view, criticised the Party leadership.⁶⁵ Hill's comments virtually mirrored those of Sharkey, where Hill suggested that Brown was arguing for Party policy to be viewed with the utmost suspicion and that the approach Brown was suggesting would lead to endless discussion and the Party never taking action on anything. Hill went back to the approach taken by Sharkey earlier in the year where he acknowledged the gravity of Stalin's errors but then argued that they should be considered in the historical perspective 'where their real significance can be seen',⁶⁶ a statement that effectively dismissed their importance.

During November Hill addressed a cadres' meeting in Victoria. He began by outlining the great achievements of the Soviet Union and then discussed the exposure of the cult. He stated that some members wanted to focus on the negative aspects of the cult and that this was not the correct approach. He again reiterated his comments made at the NSW Conference where he warned against attributing all errors to the cult and commented that this was the stance taken by those who had had differences with the Party. He emphasised the importance of criticism for the unity of the Party and stated that such criticism 'must never be stifled.' In his address

⁶⁵ E.F. Hill, 'An Incorrect View of Party Democracy', *Communist Review*, December 1956, pp. 396-402.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

he acknowledged that many comrades had been making a lot of fuss about the cult of the individual and that some members had become emotionally upset over the issue.⁶⁷ This is significant as it was one of the few occasions he acknowledged the reactions of members. During his address he also made reference to rumours that there was a struggle against the rank and file members by the leadership. Hill refuted the rumours and stressed the importance of Party unity. The ASIO source reported that there was a general feeling of unrest and dissension at the meeting and that all issues discussed received some level of criticism, in particular from established Party members such as Dorothy Irwin and Geoff Sharp.⁶⁸

A United Front

By November, the leadership's approach to handling the question of the cult appeared more united. Whilst no document exists that points directly to the role of Hill in this development, it is that arguable his return to Australia and his influence within the Party was the critical factor in the consolidation of the leadership's stance. Prior to his return towards the end of September, the approach taken by the Party leadership varied, as we have seen, significantly. There were still some differences in response to specific questions, in particular the extent to which instances of the 'cult' had emerged within the CPA, but the approach taken by the CPA leadership certainly became more hardline and resolute subsequent to Hill's return. While he may have admitted some years later that he had never fully understood the

⁶⁷ 'Victoria, C.P. of A. Cadres Meeting', 29 November 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344.

⁶⁸ 'Victoria, C.P. of A. Cadres Meeting', 19 November 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344.

significance of Khrushchev's revelations,⁶⁹ the issue did provide him with a platform from which to increase his influence within the Party leadership. An ASIO source believed that Hill had indeed emerged as the 'director of Party operations' within Australia.⁷⁰ It was clear that he had become influential in his role on the Party Secretariat. However, he appeared to carry the responsibility of this heavily. The source observed that Hill appeared worried and was in a serious mood throughout the NSW State Party Conference. Although he attended all sessions, he appeared not to relax at any stage and did not applaud speakers. He was observed to have adopted a 'vicious' attitude during his address.⁷¹

Blake's resignation from the Central Committee illustrates the increasingly hardline approach adopted by the CPA after Hill's return from China. After the uprising in Hungary in late October, Hill, Sharkey and others considered the policy of increased scrutiny and examination of the failings of Stalinism arising from the 20th Congress, to be less important. Hill stated that 'the events in Hungary threw aside any pretence of the 20th Congress approach.'⁷² Blake challenged this statement and was called to a meeting of the Secretariat. Prior to this time he had made few public comments about the 'secret speech'. When the documents of the 20th Congress were made available for study, Blake decided to support its decisions, in particular the condemnation of the

⁶⁹ 'Contribution Pre Congress Discussion, Undated, JD Blake Papers, ML MSS 5971 ADD ON 2087/1, in folder titled 'Articles, Speeches etc on CPA and its Various Activities'.

⁷⁰ 'New South Wales Communist Party of Australia State Conference', 2 November, 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344. Notwithstanding his increased status and influence in the Party, Hill was considered to be 'susceptible to praise and remained vulnerable to liquor and women'.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Undated document 'Some facts of history' 15 September, 1960, JD Blake Papers ML MSS 5971/1/9 Box 1/3, folder 'Consolidation etc'.

Stalin cult and its consequences.⁷³ He was particularly concerned to see the lessons learnt from the revelations about Stalin be applied to the work of the CPA. He had endorsed the CPSU's call for increased discussion within Party ranks in July and had praised the CPSU for being courageous and decisive in admitting the errors that had been made.⁷⁴ He also identified a number of areas where the CPA could examine its own performance in light of the revelations about Stalin.⁷⁵ When the Central Committee had held discussions on the Congress, Blake had again attempted to relate the findings of the Congress to their work in Australia, specifically in relation to the declining frequency of Political Committee meetings over the preceding 12 months.⁷⁶ The questions he put to the Committee were either glossed over or 'smothered in a deal of generalised talk'.⁷⁷ However, by the end of 1956 he felt that he was the only person on the Central Committee that had consistently supported the decisions of the 20th Congress, particularly after the return of Hill. At the meeting of the Secretariat, Blake was told of his removal from the position of Editor of *Tribune* and assigned other duties.⁷⁸ He made it clear to the Secretariat that he did not support its position on the 20th Congress, but undertook to keep his views to himself. Despite this undertaking Sharkey, according to Blake, attempted to influence him to accept the CPA line on the 20th Congress. Part of the argument he used was Hill's belief that 'a powerful group of Soviet leaders, headed by Molotov, was opposed to

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ J.D. Blake, 'United Action for Peace', *Communist Review*, July 1956, pp. 215-19.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Undated document 'Some Facts of History' 15 September, 1960, JD Blake Papers, ML MSS 5971/1/9 Box 1/3, Folder 'Consolidation etc'.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

the line taken at the 20th Congress and the indicators pointed to this group triumphing in the Party, thus leading to the defeat of Khrushchev and the whole of that part of the policy of the 20th Congress relating to the exposure and overcoming of the cult of Stalin.⁷⁹

At the next Central Committee meeting, Sharkey delivered a report which confirmed the anti-Congress position that had been adopted by the CPA leadership. In ritualistic succession, members present stated, 'I agree with Comrade Sharkey.' When Blake gave his address he confined himself to the topic he had been assigned, namely the peace activities undertaken recently. He did not repeat the mantra 'I agree with Comrade Sharkey' because to have done so would have been hypocritical.⁸⁰ He also did not express his disagreement with the report because of his undertaking not to express a dissenting view. Blake recalled that a Central Committee member then mounted the rostrum and said dramatically, 'Everyone here has said they agree with the report, but there was one very important exception – Jack Blake.'⁸¹ In response Blake felt compelled to outline his position and the reasoning for it. As he did so Central Committee members gradually moved away from his vicinity until 'I was left completely alone at the table where I was sitting. The axe was about to fall and who can blame anyone for getting out of the way of a swinging axe?' The remainder of the meeting was taken up with Sharkey's summing up which consisted of a 'savage attack' on Blake, claiming that he had 'politically

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

deteriorated' and that he had become a 'disruptor'. Blake recalled that Sharkey gave a completely 'garbled' account of what Blake had said in the Secretariat meeting but no one objected or attempted to correct him.⁸² The meeting made it clear to Blake that there was no longer a place for him within the CPA leadership, even under the conditions that had been outlined to the Secretariat. Three days later he tendered his resignation from the Central Committee citing ill health. His reasoning was '... to cause the minimum of difficulty for the Party in what were difficult times'.⁸³

From an ASIO report of a Victorian cadres' meeting, it is possible to infer that, as late as April 1957, the issue of the leadership's handling of the revelations was still haunting Hill. The ASIO informant present commented that there was an attempt to pit the rank and file against the leadership and that members of the Executive had 'stood over' members and that they had indulged in 'brainwashing tactics'.⁸⁴ Hill maintained that the leadership had not put itself above the Party but admitted that it had made mistakes. He commented that the leadership had welcomed criticism 'as long as it is sincere.' He then went on to accuse those who were still calling for discussion of the 'cult of the individual' and of Hungary of attempting to destroy the unity of the Party. He warned against the Party press and branches being used for 'anti working class propaganda' and encouraged members to see these events in their correct perspective and not be self conscious. After his address the Chair attempted to conclude the meeting without allowing any further discussion.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ 'Victoria C.P. of A. Cadres Meeting', 2 April, 1957, NAA A6119, Item 345.

However, some members insisted on the right to speak. Both Dave Rubin and Sol Factor spoke, arguing for the need for more open discussion and commenting that the problems of the membership during the past twelve months had been ignored. It was observed by the ASIO source that a number of prominent Party functionaries, including State Committee members, did not attend this meeting. The informant suggested that this indicated a difference of opinion between State Committee members and Hill on the content of Hill's report on the issue of Party unity.⁸⁵ The informant believed that the State members had deliberately avoided the meeting. He observed that Hill and Johnson (Victorian State President of the CPA) were 'very perturbed at the trend in the Party, which, judging from the report, is far greater than had been realised and more widespread'.⁸⁶ He also noted that Hill and Johnson spoke only with Paddy Malone and Bernie Taft, either before or after the meeting. This was apparently unusual as both usually mixed freely. He concluded that Hill was very worried about the issue of party unity and observed that no member of the State Committee who was present made any statement in support of what Hill had said.

Hill's hard-line approach to handling members' ongoing calls for discussion can be better understood by considering his beliefs about criticism in general, and of the Party in particular. Jack Blake identified what he regarded as a recurring theme that became evident in Hill's writings after 1956.⁸⁷ He observed that Hill was consistently

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 5.

⁸⁷ Undated document 'Contribution Pre-Congress Discussion', JD Blake Papers, ML MSS 5971 ADD ON 2087/1, Folder 'Articles, Speeches etc on CPA and its Various Activities'.

hostile to criticism, describing how he would attack ideas of party members as 'evidence of the penetration of enemy ideas into the Party.'⁸⁸ He even went so far as to describe Hill's dislike of criticism as '...a pathological hatred of criticism of himself, his actions or aspects of his politics.'⁸⁹ Hill was strongly opposed to the denunciation of Stalin; as he stated in 1962: 'The attack (on Stalin) at the 20th Congress was very ill-considered, a product of haste and indignation as one of our Chinese comrades put it, and did great harm.'⁹⁰ In a similar vein, Hill believed that intellectuals, such as Steven Murray-Smith, Ian Turner, David Martin and Jim Staples, who had expressed 'anti-soviet' ideas over the events of 1956, did so from the '...failure of these people to secure for themselves leading positions in the Party.'⁹¹ It would appear that his opposition to the Khrushchev revelations, combined with his assumption that there would be a leadership challenge within the CPSU, moulded his belief that the repercussions of the 20th Congress were not important for Australia and therefore not worthy of the debate within in the Party. As a result he attempted to limit discussion by whatever means possible. He did this by developing the argument for 'balanced criticism'. Hill insisted that any party member who wanted to criticise aspects of Party work had to 'perform a delicate balancing act'.⁹² It was Blake's view that this requirement excluded the majority of

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ 'Some facts of History', 15 September 1960, JD Blake papers, ML MSS 5971/1/10, Folder 'Consolidation etc'.

⁹⁰ Undated document 'Communist Party of Australia 1945-1963: An Outline – copy of first draft by JD Blake', JD Blake papers, ML MSS 5971/1/9 Box 1/3, Folder titled 'CPA History'.

⁹¹ Cited in Michael Cannon, *That Disreputable Firm: The Inside Story of Slater and Gordon*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998.

⁹² Undated document 'Contribution Pre Congress Discussion', JD Blake Papers, ML MSS 5971 ADD ON 2087/1, Folder 'Articles, Speeches etc on CPA and its Various Activities'

Party members, both rank and file and committee members, from using their right to criticise or question the leadership's actions.

Hill's approach to discussing the revelations and their implications for the CPA introduced levels of complexity to the debate. This level of complexity, while certainly within his intellect to debate convincingly, would have served to alienate many members from the discussion. While he emphasised the importance of examining Stalin's actions and understanding their implications for the CPA, he also attempted to separate the contents of the revelations from discussions about the 'cult of the individual'. During the NSW Party State Conference in November 1956 Hill gave a report on the 20th Congress. He stated that although the CPA could not ignore the tragedy of Stalin's errors, too much emphasis had been placed on the role of the 'cult of the individual' which was incorrect.⁹³ He believed that the discussions within the Party should not have solely been about the 'cult' as this emphasis potentially blinded people to looking for the underlying causes of problems within the Party. He believed that many of the errors were evident in the Party prior to Stalin and stated that there would be more errors made. It was important for Party members to look to the teachings of Lenin in this regard. Prior to Hill introducing these nuances, the argument had been simply about whether Khrushchev had made the reported statements about Stalin, whether his statements were true and what the CPA should have done about this information. The discussions had been framed within the context of the so-called 'cult of the individual', in which Stalin was accused of

⁹³ 'New South Wales Communist Party of Australia State Conference', 2 November, 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344.

indulging. Hill's argument was that Stalin's errors partly reflected flaws in his personality but were also a result of inherent 'short-comings in party work'. He also admitted that the fact that the CPA had relied on statements made by Stalin had been a mistake.⁹⁴ While it is likely that Hill's observation regarding the pre-existing problems within the Party were relevant and insightful, it could be argued that such a complex argument may have served to confuse a membership who were still struggling to come to terms with what was contained in the 'secret speech'. Indeed, while Hill ostensibly encouraged criticism and self criticism, he disliked criticism specifically levelled at himself. An example of this had occurred some years earlier when two members, John Arrowsmith and Clem Burman, criticised Hill's actions over a particular issue. In responding to their comments, Hill indicated that he could understand that some members might criticise him because he was 'so far out in front of other people that they did not understand him.'⁹⁵

Hungary

The uprising in Hungary created another potential source of divisive debate within the CPA. Besieged as they were over the 'secret speech', CPA leaders had no option other than to continue to present a pro-Soviet line over the Russian intervention and try to maintain control over any critical debate that arose. Sharkey attempted to do this by stating the CPA's support for the Hungarian government's request for Soviet assistance to suppress the fascist uprising in order to preserve the gains of the

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ 'NSW – Edward Fowler Hill', February 1956, NAA, A6119, Item 345.

Hungarian working class.⁹⁶ He also reported that a victory for the counter-revolutionary forces could have resulted in a third world war and that it was incorrect leadership by Rakosi that had allowed imperialist forces to gain such a strong hold in Hungary. Interestingly, he equated Rakosi's leadership practices with the worst practices associated with Stalin's cult, which was a significant departure from his attempts to downplay Stalin's action during the first half of 1956. Nevertheless, there were several important issues for the leadership that arose as a result of the Hungarian intervention. One was declining membership numbers. In November a meeting, whose purpose was originally to form a Communist Party faction for wharf workers, was changed to an aggregate meeting to address the Hungarian crisis, some resulting membership discontent and declining membership numbers.⁹⁷ Don Morcom, a member of the Wharfie Branch who had recently been elected as a member of the State Committee, addressed the meeting. He stated that the CPA leadership was not in direct contact with the Hungarian Party and therefore it was impossible for members in Australia to know the full circumstances leading to the Hungarian crisis. As a result, the CPA needed to rely on statements made by other revolutionary leaders who had condemned the counter revolution as an attempt to restore capitalism.⁹⁸ Morcom acknowledged that reports in the daily press had caused confusion and uncertainty within Party ranks, but that members should close ranks in order to present a united front.

⁹⁶ L.L. Sharkey, 'Report to the Central Committee', *Communist Review*, December 1956, pp. 387-396.

⁹⁷ 'Report from Aggregate Meeting of Comrades', November 1956, NAA A6122, Item 596.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Victorian cadres were addressed by Hill in a meeting called in November to address the 'Hungarian question'. Again the argument was put to members present that the uprising was fascist led with the added explanation that it had been initiated by the United States of America.⁹⁹ Hill went on the attack against members who were calling for discussion and explanations, accusing them of diverting the CPA from the important issues such as peace and better living standards. He told them that as long as the concentration on the Hungarian question continued, the only people to suffer would be the members themselves. In a departure from the approach taken by Sharkey over Khrushchev's revelations, Hill took questions from the audience, although, as noted by the ASIO officer present, he was defensive in his responses and it was observed that his answers were not fully accepted by those present.¹⁰⁰ Hill was also recorded as saying that there needed to be frank discussion on the issue of Hungary 'whenever necessary' – again a significant departure from the approach taken earlier in the year.

The events in Hungary fuelled members' concerns over what was happening within the Soviet Union and within their own party. Some branches called for a special national conference to address the issues of Hungary and the 'secret speech', others wanted the Party leadership to admit its errors.¹⁰¹ Neither eventuated and members were left to determine their own actions in relation to these events, as will be discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6. The leadership, however, appeared more

⁹⁹ 'Report of Meeting of Victorian Cadres', 12 November 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ 'Report from Aggregate Meeting of Comrades', November 1956, NAA A6122, Item 596.

confident in its handling of the Hungarian crisis. With the revelations about Stalin, the CPA leadership was caught unaware and spent considerable time trying to reassert its control over the situation. This resulted in the confused and, at times, directionless approach discussed above and in the previous chapter. When the situation in Hungary evolved, the leadership was far quicker and more convincing in its response, and exhibited greater unanimity, when it sought to disseminate the 'Party line'.

The CPA leadership's reaction to the 20th Congress and the uprising in Hungary varied considerably throughout the year. This is contrary to the traditional, accepted consensus that the leadership clamped down on discussion from the outset. This stance is too simplistic as it does not acknowledge the attempts by some members of the leadership to consider the broader implications of the revelations, and does not recognise the variation in approach that occurred throughout the year. This simplistic view also does not allow for the inconsistencies amongst individual members of the leadership concerning their understanding of events occurring within the Soviet Union and what these events meant for Australia. Once the CPSU made its statement, which coincided with the printing of the text of the speech in the *New York Times*, there was a brief period where members of the CPA leadership encouraged members to read the speech and discuss it within their branches. However, at the same time, the Party was moving to expel members who had agitated for discussion or had openly questioned their approach. As the year progressed the leadership began to more consistently clamp down on discussion,

whilst claiming that they welcomed balanced criticism from the membership. The return of Hill in late September coincided with and – most likely - prompted an increasingly hard line approach to members who did not accept the Party line or were still calling for open and thorough discussion.

The CPA leadership's handling of the fallout from the 'secret speech' and the uprising in Hungary played an important role in determining members' reactions. While many members found out about the speech themselves and made up their own minds regarding its legitimacy, the reaction of the leadership, it will be seen, was as much a determinate in their decision to stay in or leave the Party, as was the content of the speech and its implications for communism.

Chapter 5 – ‘A Time to Stand Together to Withstand the Onslaught’ -Members who Stayed

The literature concerning the reaction of the Party membership to the events of 1956 generally cites mass defections and expulsions.¹ When attempts by some of these members to generate discussion and debate within the Party were unsuccessful, the historiographical consensus suggests that they either left of their own volition or were expelled. This was true for a number of prominent members, particularly those whose strength of belief would not allow them to passively accept the explanations being offered. However, many members decided to stay on in the Party, despite the upheavals and questioning that 1956 prompted for them. Their vision of a future socialist world propelled them to swallow the revelations about Stalin and continue their work for the Party. This did not, however, mean they simply accepted what they were being told by the leadership and thought nothing more about the issues. Thus, the conventional portrayal of those who stayed in the Party as being a homogeneous membership group, willing to accept everything they were told by the Party leadership, is misleading. There was significant variation in the range of responses within the membership which has not been adequately represented within the literature to date. This chapter will focus on those who decided, for a wide variety of reasons, to stay with the CPA.

¹ Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, 1987, p. 213; Brown, *The Communist Movement and Australia*, 1986, p. 234; Sendy, *An Extraordinary Communist*, 1988, p. 119; Cook, *Red Barrister*, 1994, p. 123; Ian Turner, ‘The Long Goodbye’, *Outlook*, December, 1970, pp. 3-5.

Fear of life Outside the Party

Working as a lawyer in Brisbane, Ted Laurie's experiences during the Depression had a significant impact on him and he joined the increasing numbers of his peers joining the CPA during the early 1930s.² By the mid 1950's, however, he had become disillusioned with the Party, although his belief in Communism was still strong.³ He was 'upset' by the revelations made by Khrushchev but maintained his association with the Party, believing that 'whatever mistakes the Soviet Union made we should not put ourselves in the position where we're seen to be openly critical... they are the main bulwark of socialism and peace in the world.'⁴ While he agreed with his comrades who called for a more open discussion of the revelations, when the leadership clamped down and refused to allow any meaningful debate, Laurie accepted its decision. For him, commitment to the Party was more important than lending his support for controversial discussion. The threat of expulsion and the experience of fellow comrades such as Ian Turner, was enough to make him keep his reservations to himself.⁵ His wife, Bonnie, however, was considerably unsettled by the revelations. She considered Stalin's actions denied some of the basic tenets of Communism and as a result she became inactive in her Party work, dropping her membership completely within a few years.⁶ Laurie took an active role in defending the Soviet actions in Hungary later that year. He and Gerry O'Day, with the support of some union officials, conducted meetings on the banks of the Yarra River in Melbourne on Sundays. They argued the Soviet line that the uprising had been a

² Cook, *Red Barrister: A Biography of Ted Laurie QC.*, 1994, p. 126.

³ Ibid. p. 121.

⁴ Ibid. p. 125.

⁵ Ibid. p. 123.

⁶ Ibid, p. 124.

counter revolution by the old fascist regime and was assisted by the United States. However, they received little support from any of the Party functionaries. Laurie continued to believe this version of the events for the rest of his life.⁷

John Sendy had no doubt the report of the 'secret speech' was accurate.⁸ He and two colleagues, Jim Moss and Eddie Robertson, took it in turns to read the speech in the *New York Times* at the public library on North Terrace in Adelaide. They all returned 'ashen faced, believing that what we read was authentic'.⁹ For Sendy the report seemed to explain many things that had been difficult to understand, such as the number of old communists that had been found guilty of spying, the 'doctors' plot'- the false accusation by Stalin just before his death that a group of mostly Jewish physicians had medically murdered former Soviet leader Andrei Zhdanov and were preparing to assassinate Stalin himself¹⁰ - some aspects of Soviet literature and the excommunication of Tito and Yugoslavia from the Cominform. While the revelations eroded Sendy's trust in the USSR, they did not affect his underlying belief in the ideals of communism.¹¹ The differences in accounts and explanations arising from the Khrushchev leadership and that of the Polish leader, Gomulka, over the events in Poland during 1956, were of particular concern to him but were not sufficient to

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Sendy, *Comrades Come Rally: Recollections of an Australian Communist*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1978.

⁹ Ibid. p. 100.

¹⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April, 1953, p. 1; I. L. Rapoport, *The Doctors' Plot of 1953*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma., 1991. See also K.S. Khrushchev, *On the Cult of Personality*, p. 66. A female doctor was ordered to write to Stalin informing him that doctors were applying improper methods of medical treatment. Stalin took this to mean they were plotting against him and told the then Minister for State Security, Comrade Ignatiev, that if he did not obtain the necessary confessions, 'we will shorten you by a head'.

¹¹ Sendy, *Comrades Come Rally*, p. 100.

prompt him into a deeper analysis of the events. 'Intellectual indolence, lack of leadership, blind faith and, probably, a fear of the results inhibited for many years any real analysis on my part.'¹² This 'fear of the results' of any in-depth analysis may also partially explain why he agreed with the leadership's decision not to circulate copies of the speech. He believed that if the contents of the speech became widely known there would be 'a wholesale exodus' from the ranks of the CPA.

Consequently he supported the leadership's decision to allow discussion on the theoretical questions raised by Khrushchev's public report to the Congress but not agree to requests to discuss the 'secret speech'.¹³ The reasoning for this was that the authenticity of the 'secret speech' could not be verified as it had not been officially released by the CPSU. Sendy recalled that there was some discussion of the theoretical issues but that the topic of Stalin and his crimes remained taboo.¹⁴ The media barrage, which listed the crimes of Stalin on a daily basis, led to a sense of being besieged by those working for the Party at the time. Sendy recalled the Party's shop windows being smashed and members being abused by work mates and neighbours. In his words 'it was no time for relaxed debate about what had happened... rather it was a time to stand together to withstand the onslaught'.¹⁵

Change from within

Although both remained in the CPA, comrades Sendy and Brown demonstrated the full diversity of responses amongst CPA members following the 'secret speech'.

¹² Ibid. p. 101.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 102.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 101.

After the release of the Soviet statement on the 'secret speech', there was some willingness shown on the part of the leadership to allow discussion of its meaning for the Party, although this was short-lived. W.J. Brown had convinced Ian Turner to join whilst they were both members of the same army unit, serving out part of their war time commitment on the Atherton Tablelands.¹⁶ In August and September 1956, Brown wrote two articles for the *Communist Review*. In the first article, titled 'Positive Aspects of the Cult Exposure', Brown attempted to do what the leadership had been emphasising. He wrote a balanced critical appraisal of the revelations and what they meant for the Australian Party. He acknowledged that while the revelations concerning Stalin had been a great shock to the Party, they also presented it with an opportunity to make positive change. He believed that by revealing what had happened under Stalin, the CPSU had reaffirmed the importance of collective leadership and that it was a source of pride for the communist movement that the cult had been exposed and condemned after only twenty years.¹⁷ However, he then went on to discuss how the 'cult' practices had influenced the Australian Party and although this was what the leadership had been calling for in its rhetoric, it appeared not to appreciate such criticism in reality. Brown acknowledged that there had been some discussions within the Party but that these had not gone far enough and had not been effective in helping workers understand the revelations and what they meant.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ian Turner, *Room for Manoeuvre*, Drummond Publishing, Richmond, 1982, pp105-140. Turner described Brown as being 'one of mine ... for a long time' until Brown 'backed away from a confrontation with Ted Hill over the meaning of the 20th Congress of the CPSU'. p 116

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

He argued another manifestation of the cult in the work of the CPA had been the tendency to treat members who raised questions in a heavy handed way. While this was done with the best intentions, he suggested the approach had the effect of stifling discussion and creative thinking. He stated that although there had been a tendency in the Party towards adulation of leaders such as Sharkey and Miles, eighteen months previously, Sharkey had taken active steps to condemn any attempts to develop a cult around himself as a leader. He concluded his article by stressing that the cult had arisen during difficult times in the Soviet Union and warned readers that the capitalist press was trying to use the revelations as a diversion.¹⁹ Brown's article presented a clear and seemingly balanced approach to the discussion. His message attempted to emphasise the positive outcomes of the speech for both the CPSU and the CPA.

However, his second article the following month was more forthright in its criticism about the way in which the CPA had handled the discussion about the revelations. He highlighted that the two key messages from the CPSU Conference were the importance of permitting 'full and free discussion' and that creative initiative amongst the membership must be encouraged in order to find the best ways to achieve world peace and socialism.²⁰ While there was 'new thinking' amongst the membership, some comrades were attempting to keep a tight control on any discussion that could be construed as criticism. Brown contended that their attempts to protect the Party in this way betrayed a lack of faith in the rank and file

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ W. J. Brown, '20th Congress Lessons on Criticism', *Communist Review*, September, 1956, pp 301-6.

membership.²¹ However, he was also acutely aware of the risk associated with too free a discussion. While Khrushchev had stressed the importance of 'extending criticism and self criticism...without fear or favour', this did not mean freedom to introduce 'bourgeois elements into socialism.'²² Brown cited Sharkey's article in the August 1953 *Communist Review* where the latter had pointed out that by members not coming forward with their comments on wrong actions or policies, non communist agents could more easily disguise their activities. Brown considered that any dissenting ideas should be argued for at branch or at leading committee levels, where they could be considered in an open minded way. He pointed out that one of the problems with Stalinism was its 'harmful readiness to misconstrue honest dissent as conscious dissent or as evidence of incipient factionalism'. While he did not accuse the Party of 'misconstruing honest dissent', his comments provided a timely reminder to the leadership. Brown was also critical of the opportunities provided for discussion of Khrushchev's revelations. He felt there was 'some weakness in regard to ensuring that full opportunities for discussion appeared in Sydney, during the recent period when discussion of the Stalin cult was then proceeding at its peak throughout the world labour movement'. Despite the Political Committee's call for such discussion, no further discussion had taken place after the initial round of Central and Section meetings at the outset of the Stalin revelations.²³ In the absence of this discussion and sufficient reporting to members to explain new developments, such as statements from Togliatti, the CPSU and the Political Committee, Brown alleged that mistaken views had begun to develop and cause confusion amongst the

²¹ Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

membership.²⁴ This point was also made by Rex Mortimer, who suggested that trying to ignore or forget about the cult of the individual would not end the discussion. Instead it would lead to 'unprincipled gossip'.²⁵ Brown held that it was not sufficient to tell members they had the right to criticise; the leadership was responsible for creating the right conditions for this to happen and needed to be seen to be practicing what they were saying. This was where Stalin had failed. He stressed that there was an opportunity to learn from the experience in order that the way in which criticism was handled in the future could be improved. Brown clearly considered the CPA leadership had not provided sufficient incentive or encouragement to ensure members felt safe to offer their views without fear of expulsion. However, this did not propel him to break his ties with the Party.

Paul Mortimer was another member who presented a logical and balanced argument about the importance of the Secret Speech for the CPA. Like Brown, he remained within Party ranks. He also raised the lack of a suitable environment for discussion as a critical issue. He stressed the importance of creating the correct circumstances in which criticism could take place. He acknowledged that while the leadership espoused the importance of criticism, they did not support this in practice.²⁶ He cited an example of members of a committee not being advised of the important issues to be discussed at the next meeting by leading comrades. This had resulted in only the leaders being able to discuss the issues because they were the only ones to have prepared comment and put thought into the issues. The members were not able to

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Paul Mortimer, 'Inner Party Democracy', *Communist Review*, September 1956, pp. 309-311

²⁶ Ibid.

contribute to the meeting because of their lack of preparation. Mortimer also suggested that the 20th Congress revealed the need for some consideration of the functioning of the Party. The CPA had matured as a Party under the influence of Stalinism and therefore its effects on the way the Party operated were significant. Mortimer believed that the CPA had been able to avoid the worst effects of Stalinism by meeting regularly, holding democratic elections, by calling for criticism and engaging in self criticism but that it had been affected by the many influences that 'impelled us to belittle the role of the masses and to exaggerate the role of the leaders.' As a legacy of this approach, the leadership had not sought the views of the rank and file membership on difficult issues, and had tended to mistrust the ideas or solutions of the masses. To illustrate his point, Mortimer cited members in Sydney who had had to confront opposition from leading comrades from various levels in the Party in order to be allowed to discuss the cult of the individual at all.²⁷ They had to overcome the idea held by some that any discussion of the cult was helpful to the class enemy.

The responses by both Brown and Mortimer provide considerable insight into what sections of the Party membership were experiencing. While not intending to leave the Party, Brown critically assessed the actions taken by the leadership whilst acknowledging the positive implications and opportunities that existed for the Communist movement, if they were able to take advantage of these. The leadership, however, was unable to react to his observations and analysis without becoming

²⁷ Ibid.

defensive. Hill launched an attack on Brown in the *Communist Review*,²⁸ and Brown eventually recanted. Brown was equally as thorough in his criticism of himself and describing the errors in his thinking. He thanked Hill for helping him see his errors and for directing him to the 'correct way of thinking'.²⁹ He described how his erroneous views had developed after the 20th Congress, which was a time when the capitalist forces were trying to create confusion amongst the membership of the Party.³⁰ His error had been to take what he thought were instances of 'bureaucracy, dogmatism and sectarianism' and to apply these as generic problems within the Party. He stated that these had never been characteristics of the CPA. He believed it was his lack of a sufficiently deep understanding of Marxism-Leninism that led to him making these erroneous judgements and resulted in him asking questions of secondary importance at the expense of attending to the main issue, namely, the defence of Party unity against the 'penetration of bourgeois, liberal ideas'.³¹ He equated his approach to treating the symptoms and saving the patient before taking sufficient care to correctly diagnose the disease. Continuing the metaphor, he suggested that his approach risked allowing the disease to spread to epidemic proportions because of the liberal treatment applied to one patient.³² Brown drew attention to the fact that some comrades who had also made errors during 1956 were now hesitating to come forward to correct these. Brown said there was no shame in admitting errors, and that the shame was in concealing them or pursuing a

²⁸ E. F. Hill, 'An Incorrect View of Party Democracy', *Communist Review*, December 1956, pp. 396-402.

²⁹ W. J. Brown, 'For Party Unity and Against Revisionism', *Communist Review*, May 1957, pp. 159-163.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 161.

³² *Ibid.*

misguided and incorrect attitude. He pointed out that some revisionists had used his articles to support their argument but that the number of these people was a minority and that they could hold little hope of finding others to support their ideas.³³ He expressed his support for Sharkey and Dixon and praised them for their 'high level of Marxism-Leninism leadership' which, he believed, ensured the CPA had avoided the serious organisational and political difficulties experienced by other communist parties.³⁴ Considering Brown's previous position within the Party as editor of the *Communist Review*, coupled with his obvious intellect and capacity to express his views clearly, his retraction most likely served as a poignant warning to other intellectuals about the consequences of speaking out. Coupled with the expulsions of Palmer, Staples and Walshe around the same time, the leadership was able to use these members to send a powerful message regarding how they intended handling any dissension. We cannot be certain why he decided to recant and not leave the Party as others had done. It is likely that Hill's discussions with Brown served not only to admonish him but went some way to actually convince him of the error of his argument. Brown was possibly another of those who foresaw there would be future opportunities to address issues arising from the 'secret speech' and Hungary from within the Party.

In an article titled 'Lysenko Controversy', the eponymous 'AWR' discussed the breakdown in Marxism that had been revealed by Khrushchev's revelations.³⁵

Although the Lysenko controversy was highlighted in the title, he did not discuss

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ AWR, 'Lysenko Controversy' *Communist Review*, September 1956, pp. 311-312.

this issue until the very end of the article.³⁶ Instead, he argued that it was only those with little understanding of Marxism that would have been surprised at the content of the 'secret speech'. He acknowledged Stalin's achievements and argued that these outweighed his errors, but also warned that it was incorrect to assume Stalin alone was responsible for all the errors and that the cause would therefore have disappeared with his death.³⁷ He attributed the errors to a 'breakdown in Marxist vigilance' within the CPSU and also blamed the Communist Parties around the world for not subjecting instructions from Moscow to sufficient rigorous analysis within 'a true Marxist light'.³⁸ The solution was to increase the level of understanding of Marxism amongst the membership, as those with a limited understanding of Marxism will rely on the importance of the speaker in try to determine the accuracy of statements or information, rather than on their content³⁹. He described how an uneducated membership made it more likely that the leadership would become reliant on a base of 'yes-men' for their support, which could lead to them becoming narrow and dictatorial in their approach. The leadership then would have the justification to dismiss those who disagree as 'deviationists' and remove their responsibility to answer criticism. 'AWR' concluded by stressing the need for more

³⁶ Trofim Lysenko was a Ukrainian agronomist who cast a dark shadow over Soviet biology that lasted, at least, until Stalin's death. Largely discredited outside of Russia, within the Soviet Union he was applauded by Stalin personally and the CPSU generally. In the late 1920s and 1930s he devised a process, termed 'vernalisation', to increase the yield of winter wheat. Any results that did not confirm the efficacy of this method were rejected. An agricultural technique soon became a full-scale biological theory. Lysenko opposed the mainstream geneticists' theories of evolution and promulgated the doctrine of inherited characteristics acquired through environmental influences. See Nils Roll-Hansen, *The Lysenko Effect: The Politics of Science*, Humanity Books, New York, 2004.

³⁷ AWR, 'Lysenko Controversy' *Communist Review*, September 1956, pp. 311-312.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

widespread discussion in order to overcome the narrow perspective of the leadership. It was only at this point that he referred to Lysenko, stating that if there had been more analysis of his theories at the time, Lysenko's weaknesses could have been revealed and understood by the membership much earlier.⁴⁰

As with Brown's comments, 'AWR' demonstrated that there was some significant, if restricted, analysis and critical review of the content of the revelations and their implications for the CPA. However, such contributions were discouraged; indeed Brown, as we have seen, was forced to recant his comments and admit his mistakes.⁴¹

A close reading of various articles, however, reveals thorough, intelligent and reasonably balanced contributions were made to the debate. Nevertheless, they did not spark the two-way discussion or 'horizontal' debate between members that needed to occur.

Members such as Mortimer, 'AWR' and Brown help to illustrate the range of responses members who stayed in the CPA had to the 'secret speech'. Their responses were not to simply accept what the CPA leadership told them and think no more about it. They presented calm, logical discussion of a difficult and emotive issue and were able to see past the calamitous content to highlight the opportunities the 'speech' presented to communist parties around the world. The leadership, however, was indifferent to their message and chose not to pursue their line of argument.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ W. J. Brown, 'For Party Unity and Against Revisionism', *Communist Review*, May 1957, pp. 159 – 163.

Call for Internal Debate

An ASIO report from an aggregate meeting of the NSW City Section of the CPA, held on the 11 November 1956, recorded that for the first time in several years criticism of the Party leadership had developed amongst the ranks of the membership. This was evidenced by resolutions from the Southern District that had been received by the Party, that called for a Special National Congress to address the questions arising from the 'cult of the individual' and Hungary.⁴² A resolution had also been received from the Sydney University Branch that requested the Party leadership admit their errors. The ASIO officer reported that both resolutions had been defeated.⁴³ In Victoria similar action was taken by the Melbourne University Branch which prepared a letter whose purpose was to express the concern of the Branch regarding the events in Hungary and how it believed that the CPSU had acted incorrectly.⁴⁴ The letter was addressed to the Political Committee and referred to the fact that many members were disturbed about the 'current trends in our Party'⁴⁵ and it called for a Special National Congress to discuss where the current leadership had failed to observe some principles of Democratic Centralism. There were a number of issues listed as topics for the Congress, one of these being the 'attacks on Stalin'.⁴⁶ It requested that a copy of this letter be sent to Section, Metropolitan and State committees and that the branches then be informed of the outcome of the Political

⁴² 'City Section of the C.P.A', 11 November, 1956, NAA A6122, Item 596.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Memo, 30 October, 1956, Ken Gott papers, VSL, MS 13047, Box 3768/7.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Another topic for discussion was: 'The real reason why Comrade McDonald was expelled'.

Committee's discussion. The Melbourne University Branch also prepared a statement addressed to the Central Committee.⁴⁷ The statement referred to a number of issues the Branch wished to address. They included the recent decline in membership and an inquest into the reasons for this. It suggested that the decline was in part due to practices adopted by the Party during the period of the 'great man cult'. The statement also mentioned the practice of referring to some members as 'revisionists' and the subsequent division within the Party. The Branch also desired discussion of the proposition that Khrushchev's speech was un-Marxist in its analysis.

Whether members agreed or not with the need for discussion in light of Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin, there appeared to be general acceptance of the content of the revelations amongst the rank and file of the Party. Some argued that the more important issue was to continue to fight for socialism, while others took the view that the crimes Stalin had committed transgressed everything they had believed in and therefore could not continue their association with the Party. However, there was also a group, apparently small, who never accepted what Khrushchev said as true. Tasman Milburn was a member of this minority.⁴⁸ As late as November 1957 he was openly calling for the repudiation of the attack on Stalin and was described by the ASIO informant as one of a group of 'fanatical members who will not accept the cult of the individual'.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, little other historical evidence exists of these

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ 'C.P. of A. Attitude to Hungarian Situation – Resignations from the Party', January 1957, NAA A6122, Item 269.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

members' views, detracting significantly from our understanding of these events on the CPA and its membership.

A Desire for Socialism

One reason cited for those who chose to stay in the Party, despite their misgivings, was their belief in communism as necessary to achieve socialism in Australia. They held on to the hope that the inevitable movement of the Party would be toward a 'more rational appreciation of the real situation, toward a greater freedom of inquiry and discussion'.⁵⁰ While they made attempts to understand the 'secret speech' and its implications, they differed from other members in their willingness to accept (either immediately or after some protestation) what they were being told by the leadership and their preparedness to put the issues behind them in order to get on with the task of progressing socialist ideals. In addition, the prospect of life on the 'outside' was possibly a greater threat to these members than it was to 'compromise' their values. The effect of leaving the Party was profound: 'Some did die, and some went out of their minds; many "voted with their feet" or abdicated from all politics in angry disgust; others...set about the arduous and anguished work of redefining themselves and creating new meanings for their lives.'⁵¹ Turner's personal experience after being expelled was traumatic.

⁵⁰ Document titled 'Eggheads', undated, SMS papers, VSL, MS8272 Box 14/1-2 material on Ian Turner, p. 6.

⁵¹ Turner, *Room for Manoeuvre*, p. 143.

It was true that I had lost the movement in which I had lived, for fourteen years, as in an extended family, which had provided me with emotional security, intellectual certainty, and what I thought of as a significant role; but so had many others, and we all had the same problems – to find a new base, new convictions, and new roles.⁵²

Similarly, McEwen clearly described the personal cost of splitting from the CPA: 'To be outcast by the Party into a hostile environment, perhaps subject to party reprisals and the hatred of their former comrades is seen as a terrible fate to be avoided at all costs.'⁵³ Such repercussions served as a sufficient incentive for many members to stay in the Party.

Dorothy Hewett found a copy of the 'secret speech' pushed under her back door, which prompted a period of questioning its authenticity and attempting to understand the possible ramifications. Her reaction, once she learnt it was a genuine document was to ask:

What now? Shaken but determined not to 'throw the baby out with the bath water', we will continue the struggle for socialism, but something has happened to us. Some ultimate innocence has been destroyed for ever, some uneasy voice lies at the back of the mind asking interminable questions: What if..? How do we know...? From now on we will never be quite so gullible again, but surely this is

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ McEwen, *Once a Jolly Comrade*, p. 118.

a good thing...Only sometimes we long for the old settled security, the untainted certainty before the Twentieth Congress and the deposition of the man-god Joseph Stalin, floating in fireworks over Moscow with his moustache ends dripping stars. Who now are the heroes and who the villains after the Twentieth Congress?⁵⁴

Clearly, for many members, the need to remain part of the 'communist family' served as a strong force behind their actions. While members such as Brown and Mortimer did not reveal their underlying motivations for remaining in the Party, the prospect of a life outside was a significant deterrent to many.

For members living in more remote locations information about what was happening within the Party ranks was very difficult to obtain. John and Anne Warren had been members of the CPA since 1943 and 1947 respectively. John worked as a soil conservation scientist, first with the Snowy Hydro Electricity scheme and then in Condobolin. Anne spent 13 years at home after completing a teaching degree at University, raising their children. Both were members of the CPA, along with approximately half a dozen or so others around the area. Party activity consisted primarily of raising awareness of local issues with members of parliament, with occasional visits from a party official.⁵⁵ Anne and John heard about the 'secret speech' from their friend, Jim Staples, and read articles in the few copies of *Tribune* and *Communist Review* they received, but were generally out of touch with the debate

⁵⁴ Dorothy Hewett, *Wild Card: An Autobiography 1923-1958*, Penguin, Victoria, 1990, p. 233.

⁵⁵ Interview with Anne and John Warren, 18 November 2003.

being conducted in the city branches. Nevertheless, the content of the speech held a certain resonance for both of them. Anne recalled being concerned but not particularly surprised by Khrushchev's revelations. For her they went some way to explaining certain inconsistencies in Soviet history under Stalin. However, she commented that it was very difficult to know whether they were hearing the full story, as much of the communist literature at the time was shrouded in double meanings and vagueness, making it very difficult to develop an informed view either way about the implications of the speech for the Party. For John, the 'secret speech' was an 'upheaval a long way away'.⁵⁶ It did not dissuade him from the need to pursue socialist objectives but did highlight that the attempt towards a socialist state in the Soviet Union was not the path Australia should follow. Khrushchev's revelations combined with the other events of 1956 contributed towards a sense of things reaching a crisis point in the Party and he hoped they would serve as the impetus for change. They did not and both Anne and John, whilst continuing their work for the communities in which they lived, gradually drifted out of the Party. The lack of contact with the Party meant they received no instruction or formal analysis of what 'secret speech' meant for the CPA, and while they had informal discussions with their friends about where things had gone wrong in the Soviet Union and how something with such high ideals could have become so distorted, there was no support offered to them from their party. The declining level of resources provided for rural Party members left John and Anne with the sense that while they had not formally left the Party; the CPA had left them.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The desire for a socialist Australia persuaded Mervyn Murchie, a Scottish immigrant, to re-join the CPA at a time when many were leaving it. He had been a member of the Sydney University Branch from 1951 but once he completed his teaching degree, he travelled to Scotland as a crew member on a P and O vessel, returning mid way through 1956, after attending the Youth Carnival in Warsaw. Once back in Australia he was too concerned with finding work to think about the CPA, but was aware via the media and friends of the 'secret speech' and its content. Initially he did not believe it, having become so accustomed to discounting anything printed in the mainstream press. However, after hearing of the speech through various, unrelated sources and from people such as Jim Staples, whom he trusted, he concluded it must be true.⁵⁸ Once the Hungarian situation deteriorated he had no hesitation opposing the Soviet action. Like Anne and John Warren, Mervyn found it difficult to determine from the official publications of the CPA what exactly was happening, but discussed the issues informally with friends such as Rupert Lockwood. Unlike many others, however, he decided to rejoin the CPA in 1958. Despite the flaws revealed by the events in 1956, he saw the CPA as the only hope of achieving socialism in Australia at that time. He believed the source of the corruption revealed by Khrushchev was within the Soviet Union but communism was a world wide movement. He continued his membership of the Party until 1974 when he went back to Scotland. On his return to Australia he looked at the CPA with more critical eyes and decided it was

⁵⁸ Interview with Mervyn Murchie, 18 November 2003.

impossible for it to lead Australia towards socialism and consequently did not renew his association.⁵⁹

There has been some tendency in the literature to characterise the reactions of the CPA membership as either leaving the Party because they disagreed with the approach taken over the 'secret speech' or agreeing with the CPA's approach and staying. As exemplified above, however, this is too narrow an explanation. Many who decided to stay in the CPA had their reservations and saw the errors of the way the CPA leadership chose to handle the revelations. Despite this, their belief that the CPA had a significant role to play in progressing Australia towards socialism proved to be stronger than their concerns about Stalin as revealed by Khrushchev.

A Broader Impact

There has also been a perception that the issues raised by the 'secret speech' and the events in Hungary were purely the concern of the so-called 'intellectuals'. Indeed, Davidson attempted to characterise the membership reaction to the 'secret speech' as 'the revolt of the intellectuals.'⁶⁰ However, there is evidence to suggest that the events of 1956 gained the attention of a much broader cross section of members. On 4 April 1956, up to eighty members of the City and Balmain Branches in Sydney gathered at the Waterside Workers Union Hall to listen to Harry Hatfield's report which they thought would address the allegations made against Stalin. However, it was only in the last ten minutes of his one and a half hour report that he mentioned the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia: A Short History*, p. 119.

revelations.⁶¹ Despite the ASIO agent's observation that the issue was causing considerable concern and confusion, time was not made available at the end of the session to permit attendees to ask questions or enter into discussion. Rupert Lockwood requested that a similar meeting be held in order for members to gain a clearer understanding of the issues. On his recommendation the members determined to hold a further meeting on the issue at a date 'in the near future'.⁶² This demonstrates that there was interest in the issue across a range of membership groups and that these members were anxious to discuss the issues and implications. An ASIO note regarding Morris Hughes reported that he had requested a change in agenda for two executive meetings that were to be held in the near future. He proposed that political issues of concern to members be discussed at the first meeting, while organisational issues be discussed at the second. One of the topics was the issue of the 'cult of the individual'.⁶³ Hughes was informed that the changes could not be made because the notices for the meetings had already been sent out. While Hughes' reason for requesting this change were not reported, it is likely they arose from a concern that issues, such as the 'cult of the individual', would be by-passed at these executive meetings.

An ASIO report on the Mosman branch further demonstrates the range of responses within the rank and file to the issues arising from the 'secret speech'. The report

⁶¹ 'New South Wales Meeting of Comrades from the City and Balmain Sections of the CPA', 4 April, 1956, NAA A6122 Item 596.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ 'Morris John Rodwell Hughes', 27 July, 1956, NAA A6122, Item 575. The officer's case notes suggested that the meetings referred to could have been the City Section Conference, held on the 3-5 August or the Sydney District Conference, held on the 11 & 12 August 1956.

concerned a member, Eric Grunseit who, it was alleged, was causing discontent amongst the members at the Branch, in particular with the Secretary, May Woodhouse. The ASIO agent reported that since the 'cult of the individual' had first 'cropped up', Grunseit had claimed he had warned the Section that this would occur.⁶⁴ He based his warnings on a document that he had been circulating throughout the Section for the past two years. Grunseit was told by another member of the Branch that his theory of the 'cult' was 'what can be expected from right wing fascists' and that 'there was no place in the Party for people following this line'.⁶⁵

Blake was aware of the impact of the secret speech on the rank and file membership. He stated that:

A false theory developed that it was only the intellectuals who were concerned about the Stalin cult and its consequences. The fact is that workers were affected, but the position of the Party under EF Hill's influence left them at the mercy of reactionary capitalist press propaganda on this question. The (CPA's) stand that this was mere reactionary propaganda did nothing to solve the matter.⁶⁶

In another document he made similar comment. He remarked how some members had been raised on the Stalinist model and could not bring themselves to break with

⁶⁴ 'NSW-Eric Grunseit', 13 December, 1956, NAA A6122, Item 1420.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Document 'Communist Party of Australia 1945-1963- An Outline', undated, JD Blake papers, ML MSS 5971/1/9 Box 1, Folder 'CPA History'.

these beliefs. 'They clung on desperately to this idol, and this was not only due to the influence of EF Hill, the main body of the Party leadership, of which EF Hill was only one, which impelled these comrades and many others to cling on the (sic) Stalinist model.'⁶⁷

While there was undoubtedly interest in the 'secret speech' beyond the confines of the 'intellectual' group of CPA members, there were also a number of members for whom the events of 1956 had little impact on their daily lives and their Party work. An extensive search of Communist Party Branch newsletters produced during 1956 in Victoria revealed negligible mention of the 'secret speech' or the events in Hungary.⁶⁸ Similarly, Pauline Armstrong, a member of the Communist Party in Victoria, recalled paying little attention to the discussion concerning the 'secret speech'. She had three young children and was very involved in working towards ensuring a library was built in her local area during 1956.⁶⁹ Her recollections of 1956 and the lack of reference to the 'secret speech' in Branch newsletters in Victoria during the same year, again highlights the diversity of response of members to the events of 1956.

The 'secret speech' resonated with a broader range of CPA members than merely the 'intellectuals'. It also prompted a wide range of reactions from its members, challenging the perception that those who stayed *ipso facto* agreed with the approach

⁶⁷ Document 'Notes', undated, JD Blake papers, ML MSS 5971 ADD ON 2087/2. Folder 'Notes for work'.

⁶⁸ Records of Victorian State Committee of the CPA, 1955 – 1956, Melbourne University Archives., Accession Nos: 76/28, 79/82, 91/152.

⁶⁹ Interview with Pauline Armstrong, 25 April 2001.

taken by the Party leadership. For some the consequences of leaving the Party were more significant than having to lower their idealistic view of the Soviet Union and to continue with Party work. For others, it was the dream of a socialist Australia that drove them to swallow their pride and remain within the ranks of the CPA. Yet others were concerned about the implications of Khrushchev's revelations for communism but, because of their position within the rank and file of the Party, they were unable to pressure the CPA to address their concerns. Finally, there was a segment of the Party, traditionally ignored in the relevant literature, for whom the revelations held little significance when compared with their daily struggles and ambitions. On the other hand, there were members for whom the content of the 'secret speech' was completely at odds with everything they believed in. For them, as will be discussed in the next chapter, leaving the party, either voluntarily or not, was the only option.

Chapter 6: 'We'll call it a Day' – Members who Left

While there has never been a definitive profile of those who left the Party as a result of 1956, Cook suggested there was an 'impression' that many were recruits from the period 1941-46, the so called 'best years': those years in which the Party benefited from the inclusion of the Soviet Union on the side of the Allies.¹ It was also commonly held, as we have seen, that the majority of those who left during the mid 1950's were 'intellectuals'. For example, Gibson believed that around 100 people left the Party at that time and that 'most of them were middle class people, largely intellectuals'.² He characterised their reasons for leaving as being questions relating to socialist democracy and the theory and practice of democratic centralism within the CPA. As mentioned, Davidson has characterised 1956 as the 'flight of the intellectuals'.³ Interestingly, Cook noted that there was a tendency in the Party to call those who left 'intellectuals' simply by virtue of the fact they had taken the decision to leave.⁴ Such a view undoubtedly has fed the widespread perception. However, as suggested in the previous chapter, and will be discussed in this chapter, this is a limiting characterisation of a highly variegated membership group.

As discussed in the Chapter 5, many members decided to stay and continue their work as communists. Many of these members had reservations but believed change

¹ Cook, *Red Barrister: A Biography of Ted Laurie QC.*, p. 126.

² Cited in Cook, *Red Barrister*, p. 123.

³ Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia: A Short History*, p. 119.

⁴ *Ibid.*

could be achieved more easily from within the Party. Others, while initially speaking out against the Party leadership, allowed themselves to be convinced that things within the CPA were not as parlous as they once believed. However, there were also members whose reactions to the 'secret speech' and the handling of calls for discussion by the leadership, were so strong that they were unable to remain in the Party. These members were sufficiently vehement about the need for open discussion and debate about the issues the 'secret speech' and the uprising in Hungary raised, that they openly challenged the authority of the Party. As a result, many - such as Jim Staples, Bob Walshe, and Helen Palmer - were dismissed from the Party. While some members' actions led to them being dismissed, many others decided to leave on their own accord.

Determined to Expose the Truth

Jim Staples is an illuminative example of one who refused to accept the CPA's cursory explanations of the 'secret speech'. Soon after the publication of the 'secret speech' in the *New York Times* weekly supplement, the Central Committee received a letter from Staples requesting the publication of a document he had authored, titled 'Statement on the Attitude of the Central Committee, Communist Party of Australia, to the Stalin issue'.⁵ This document, dated 2 July 1956, was a comprehensive discussion of the actions taken by the leadership up until July to handle the repercussions of Khrushchev's revelations; it was highly critical of the leadership's approach.⁶ Specifically, Staples posed two questions in the course of his discussion:

⁵ Untitled document, 2 July 1956, Gott papers, VSL, MS 13047 Box 3768/7.

⁶ Ibid.

first, whether the CPA leadership, via the actions taken to limit discussion on the topic of the revelations, had violated Rule 4(a) of the Party's constitution; second, in light of this violation, whether that should be deleted from the constitution, or whether it should be more rigorously upheld. Staples argued that it was not the role of the leading committees to use their discretion in determining when this rule applied and when it did not. He described Sharkey and the Central Committee as being unwilling to 'probe to the very depths the implications of the 20th Congress, suggesting that they either didn't believe history had anything to teach the Party or that they simply had not grasped the seriousness of the issues Khrushchev's speech had raised'.⁷ His analysis indicated that the latter reason underlay their response. He suggested that the Central Committee was 'taken so completely by surprise by recent developments that they, like the rest of us, were unable to satisfactorily explain how the situation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was able to develop.' He considered that some members of the Central Committee had lost their bearings which was evidenced by their indecision. He wondered whether after such a long period of 'active and prolonged defence of the Soviet Union' they had become 'blessed with a sturdy conviction of their own wisdom'. Staples reasoned that the explanation for the lack of debate that had taken place was due to the limited amount of published documentary material concerning the revelations. He blamed the Central Committee for not challenging the CPSU over this, and its lack of action suggested to him that it did not understand its responsibilities to its members.⁸

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

At this relatively early stage in the discussions over the revelations, Staples identified the leadership's attempt to attribute Stalin's actions to the cult of the individual and to distance Stalin himself from the allegations. The leadership believed that by virtue of admitting what had occurred, Khrushchev had absolved communist parties from having to discuss the issues in any depth. Staples was not convinced of this and contended that attributing Stalin's errors to this cause alone was a 'superficial explanation.'⁹ He raised questions about the role of the current CPSU leaders during Stalin's reign and requested a full description and analysis of the source of the crimes to allow party members not privy to inner party discussions the opportunity to learn from the experience and so better defend democracy in the future.¹⁰ He also pointed out the importance of such discussions being documented to provide a permanent record of the debate. He cited Sharkey's statement in May: 'In our discussion, some of the organisational forms of the Party should be examined, their functioning does seem to stifle criticism and self criticism and hinder the initiative of the Party members.' Despite this view, the Central Committee decided against the publication of material relating to the 20th Congress.¹¹ Staples went on to question why the CPA had not aligned itself with the demands being made by the French, Italian and British parties and to highlight what the Party could have gained from a full discussion. 'As it is,' he observed, 'it has been impossible to glean from the columns of *Tribune* that anyone was in the least concerned with the issues.'¹²

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Not surprisingly, Staples' request for his statement to be published in either the *Communist Review* or *Tribune* was denied.¹³ The reason given for the refusal was that the statement had been based on a 'false premise'. The Central Committee considered that Staples had made incorrect assumptions about what had taken place during Central Committee, Political Committee and Central Secretariat meetings, and that he was not in possession of the facts surrounding the discussions of the publication of the CPA statement. As referred to in Chapter 3, Staples' assertions about what was discussed at the meeting held by the CPA to determine its response, held at the end of May, were supported by a statement released by the Sydney Committee. In it, the Sydney Committee supported the Central Committee's decision to decline to 'open a public controversy in the Party press before all the facts were available.'¹⁴ In its reply to Staples the Central Committee also stated that his assertion that Rule 4(a) of the constitution had been violated by the leadership's actions was also incorrect. Staples was invited by the Central Committee to discuss the issues 'in order that your position be corrected'. It was not until later in the year that the CPA leadership took more overt action to deal with Staples' 'incorrect' position.

Staples' view of the manner in which the leadership dealt with his actions during 1956 reflected a degree of contempt. He believed that the leadership was 'deeply disturbed' by his copying and distributing the version of the 'secret speech' printed in the *New York Times*.¹⁵ The basis for its disturbance was that his actions represented

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Interview with Jim Staples, 28 May 2002, Canberra.

a challenge to the status quo regarding Russia's role in World War II and it went against everything the Party believed in. Staples contended that the CPA leadership was conservative, mostly from Sydney, and made up of predominantly working class people. He considered this Sydney leadership, to be 'very capable, clever but poorly educated people'¹⁶ As a consequence it regarded members with a university education as being very unreliable. He commented that the leadership was unnerved by the appearance of an upsurge of an intellectual petty bourgeois element within the Sydney branch, particularly as it was in response to the Party's attempts to manage questions that were a direct challenge to all that the leadership had defended over many years.¹⁷

Staples believed that the sort of discussion he was demanding was not in character with the 'semi conspiratorial structure, semi secret structure of the Party that hadn't really changed a great deal from the aftermath of the defeat of the anti communist referendum, which, after all, was only four years earlier'.¹⁸ Rumours began to circulate that Staples was an ASIO clerk and that ASIO had paid for the paper on which he had printed the copy of the speech.¹⁹ He believed he presented the Party leadership with a dilemma – either they agreed to public discussion or he would continue conducting his own discussion. The action the leadership took, as discussed earlier, was to send Adam Ogston, Sydney District Committee secretary, to offer

¹⁶ Ibid. Staples's view was that the education level within the CP was stunted relative to what was the norm in European parties. He pointed out that those parties tended to be made up of scholars, theoreticians, philosophers, historians or journalists.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, Staples remembered quipping 'Well will it be alright if I send the bill to ASIO?'

Staples a deal. Staples accepted the deal but the promised discussion and debate never took place and he was expelled from the Party soon after. Interestingly, he was the only lawyer within the Party to argue so strongly against the leadership, as most of them maintained their involvement with the Party for life.²⁰ Staples offered the first and one of the most comprehensive analyses of the response to Khrushchev's revelations by the CPA leaders. The dismissal of his analysis was indicative of the attitude taken by the leadership toward any close examination of the Party's actions, particularly in relation to the 'secret speech' and its implications for the CPA.

Pushing for Discussion

During December 1956 the writer, Helen Palmer, was also expelled over her attitude to the 'Stalin issue and the Hungarian crisis'.²¹ She became instrumental in establishing the publication *Outlook* in 1957, as a forum for discussion of the issues arising from the 'secret speech' and the uprising in Hungary.²² Ian Turner described *Outlook* as providing 'a refuge, a place for many of us to examine and lick our wounds of 1956, to regain our intellectual and emotional health and vigour, to come back fighting'.²³ Palmer had made a number of requests to W.J. Brown, in his role as editor of *Tribune*, to open up the debate on Khrushchev's revelations, claiming 'It was a tremendous opportunity to show how socialism could offer the Australian people democracy.'²⁴ However, as discussed previously, Brown's attempts to debate the

²⁰ Cook, p. 126.

²¹ Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 2 December, 1956, NAA A6119 Item 411.

²² 'Tribute to Helen Palmer on occasion of her funeral Sydney', 10 May, 1979, JD Blake papers, ML MSS 5971 ADD ON 2087/1, Folder 'Articles and Speeches on various Questions'.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mitchell, 'Khrushchev's secret speech and its impact on intellectuals in the Communist Party of Australia'

issue during 1956 were the cause of his admonishment by Hill and subsequent 'self criticism', printed in the *Communist Review*²⁵. At her funeral in 1979, J.D. Blake characterised her as 'one of the most vigorous and steadfast exponents of the need for full, open, democratic discussion of the causes and nature of the sickness which seriously damaged the Socialist movement...'²⁶ In a note which detailed the reasons for her expulsion, mention was also made of R.D. (Bob) Walshe, who, it was claimed, 'was also a member of the hard core who had not completely accepted the Party line on Stalin and Hungary'²⁷ Ken Gott was told of Helen Palmer's expulsion and was invited to read a four page document which had been sent from Sydney.²⁸ The document discussed the differences that had arisen in the Party after the 20th Congress and mentioned that Helen Palmer had been closely associated with 'expellees' Staples and Walshe. It was also alleged that she had been involved in attempts to organise a special National Congress to discuss these issues.²⁹ It seems certain that her actions, along with those of Staples and others, during 1956 constituted a direct challenge to the authority of the CPA leadership and, as a result, she was expelled.

²⁵ Brown, 'For Party Unity and Against Revisionism', *Communist Review*, May 1957, pp. 159 – 163

²⁶ 'Tribute to Helen Palmer on occasion of her funeral Sydney', 10 May, 1979, JD Blake papers, ML MSS 5971 ADD ON 2087/1, Folder 'Articles and Speeches on various Questions'.

²⁷ Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 4 July, 1956, NAA A6119 Item 23. Staples and Walshe were cited as frequently drinking together in the George Hotel in Sydney. Both were reported to 'endeavour to engage members of the CPA, who frequent the hotel, in conversation and influence them to support their attitude on the question of the Cult of the Individual and the Hungarian situation.' Dixon apparently heard of these activities and expressed his annoyance. Staples rejected this assertion outright in an interview with the author, 28 May 2002, Canberra.

²⁸ Letter from Ken Gott to Helen Palmer, 17 July, undated, Ken Gott papers, VSL, MS 13047 Box 3766/1.

²⁹ Ibid. Gott mentioned in the letter that he was surprised at the tone of the document, which he expected to "reflect the 'gutter-style' approach to these things that I have encountered in

Walshe was a high school teacher in 1956 and an active member of the CPA, attending meetings at the Como branch. Late one evening in June, there was a knock at his front door. It was Jim Staples armed with a copy of the International Edition of the *New York Times*, which contained the full transcript of Khrushchev's 'secret speech'.³⁰ 'Jim talked to my wife Pat while I read rapidly for over an hour. When I looked up I said, "I reckon this is fair dinkum". Jim was in no doubt, and we talked through till two in the morning.'³¹ Following this meeting Staples and Walshe spent weeks trying to get the Party leadership to acknowledge the document, but with no success. Walshe was called to a meeting with WJ Brown who assured him that the document was a 'falsification' by the CIA. Considering the articles Brown had written on the topic of the 'secret speech' and the CPA's handling of the emerging discussion, his advice to Walshe is particularly pertinent. Brown urged Walshe to stay away from Staples, describing him as 'erratic and unbalanced'. Brown tried to reassure him by stating:

Look, I've read the document, and it did upset me at first but I took a fortnight off, spent a lot of time at the beach, tossed a ball around, and regained my class perspective. I'm a better Party member for the experience,

verbal discussions." Instead, he described it as 'intelligently prepared and with considerable care over fairness'.

³⁰ Bob Walshe, '1956, That 'Secret Speech', and Reverberations in Sydney', *The Hummer*, Vol 3, No 10, Winter 2003, pp. 1-7.

³¹ *Ibid*

and I strongly recommend you do the same. The Party values you Bob – and keep away from Staples; he’s unstable.³²

Instead of following Brown’s advice, Walshe raised the issue at his local branch. The speech was passed around and it generated keen discussion. He also participated in weekly sessions held at Helen Palmer’s Kirribilli home, where other concerned party members gathered to discuss the speech and its implications.

Walshe was elected to speak at the 1956 Sydney Conference of the CPA and used the fifteen minutes allotted to him to raise the issue of publishing the ‘secret speech’ so that it could be more widely discussed. Dixon was scheduled to follow Walshe, and was given considerably more time, which he used to describe the Party’s ‘principled position’ on the issue which would ‘not give comfort to the class enemy’- a direct rebuttal of Walshe’s speech. Prior to him being verbally admonished by Dixon at the Sydney Conference, Walshe had been elected as a delegate to the NSW State Conference. He considered this a second opportunity to get his message about circulating the speech to the membership. However, on the agenda for the State Conference he was given only five minutes. He decided to use this time to ask why the Party had failed to gain mass support and stressed the importance of the Party becoming more democratic. This time he was followed by Hill, who used his half an hour to demolish Walshe’s points. Again Walshe was given no right of reply.³³ In either late 1956 or early 1957, Bob Walshe received another knock at his door. This

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

time, however, it was Alf Watt, a former editor of *Tribune* but at that time Party organiser, who had been sent to inform Walshe that he had been expelled for 'factionalism', due to his association with the 'anti Party group, *Outlook*'. He felt 'relieved and unburdened' on being expelled.³⁴

Thirty five years later, Bob Walshe received a letter from Alex Elphinston who had been Secretary of the Section Committee for the Sutherland Shire at the time of Walshe's expulsion. In the letter Elphinston said;

I want to apologise to you (and other Como Branch comrades) for my part in the action taken against you by the CPA leadership following the 1956 Hungarian invasion and the publication and dissemination of the *New York Times* exposure article, an action that also wrongly affected Jim Staples. Your actions in fact proved courageous and correct in the light of the present European events.³⁵

For Walshe, Palmer and Staples, their reactions to the 'secret speech' and the consequences were instantaneous. They took action against what they perceived as a lack of acceptance of the meaning of the speech by the CPA leadership. The consequence of their actions was dismissal from the Party. There were others in the Party who reacted strongly to the 'secret speech', but for various reasons were not expelled from the party in the first instance. To some extent these members tried to

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 6.

change the Party from within, or waited to see if the events of 1956 would precipitate a change in attitude. When it did not, they either left of their own accord or were expelled.

Covert Discussion

Ken Gott was a rank and file communist who, while active against the stance taken by the Party leadership, was not expelled immediately. A member of the Melbourne University Branch of the CPA who spoke out against the Party leadership during 1956, it was the Soviet actions in Hungary that were particularly galling for him. He indicated 'in no uncertain terms' that the suppression of the Hungarian revolt was a 'terrible act of oppression'.³⁶ He was asked to suppress his concerns over the 20th Congress and Hungary, but instead organised groups to discuss the important issues.³⁷ It is likely these groups were connected with the publication *Outlook* with which he was very involved. In March 1957 Helen Palmer wrote to Gott and mentioned her plans to begin classes 'called by certain rude people – brainwashing' - which will equally be composed of general statements about which most people are simply not sufficiently informed to argue, or even comprehend'.³⁸ The CPA made a number of attempts to expel Gott in 1957³⁹ and finally succeeded in 1958.⁴⁰ After his expulsion he stated that his disillusionment with the CPA had begun in 1956 with the

³⁶ Untitled document, 11 July, 1968, NAA A6119 Item 2667.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Letter from Helen Palmer to Ken Gott, 25 March 1957, Gott papers, VSL, MS 13047 Box 3766/1.

³⁹ Untitled document, 11 July, 1968, NAA A6119 Item 2667.

⁴⁰ A letter to Gott from 'Bob' dated 21 April 1958, Gott papers, VSL, MS13047 Box 3768/7. In it 'Bob' informed Gott the he had just been informed of Gott's expulsion and wanted to convey the regards of Gott's 'many Sydney friends'. 'Bob' went on to say 'Indeed it is proper, I think to say, congratulations!'

20th Congress, when he 'realised the fabric of the Communist Party was nothing but a system of lies'.⁴¹ He 'became aware that...communism was based on a false political system and that its failure to operate could not be attributed to the personality of a dictator such as Stalin, but simply because the system itself was inherently vicious'.⁴² At the time of the Budapest uprising he sent a letter to Helen Palmer asking how the Polish and French parties were handling the issues.⁴³ He was concerned to learn of the reaction of other communist parties, presumably to better inform his own understanding.

Hanging on for Change

Ian Turner was a full time party functionary during and after the publication of the 'secret speech', in the role of President of the Australasian Book Society.⁴⁴ He recalled buying a copy of the *New York Times* supplement and reading it with 'the sickening conviction, not only that this was an authentic document, but that what Khrushchev had said was in essence true.'⁴⁵ He and some close party associates circulated Staples' copy of the speech as widely as they could and made attempts to have it discussed.⁴⁶ He had engaged in a number of 'bitter' discussions with a member of the Victorian Executive, in which Turner insisted on the Party confronting the truth if it was to survive. The unnamed Executive member – probably Bernie Taft - had argued that

⁴¹ Untitled document, 11 July, 1968, NAA A6119 Item 2667, p. 4.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Letter to Helen Palmer, dated 19 March (57?), Gott papers, VSL, MS 13047 Box 3766/1.

⁴⁴ Turner, *Room for Manoeuvre*, pp. 141-9

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

'the truth must await its opportune time'.⁴⁷ The events in Hungary and Poland towards the end of 1956, turned what Turner described as a 'crack in the Communist monolith' into a 'yawning gulf'.⁴⁸ He initially stayed with the Party in an attempt to engender reassessment and reform in light of the events of 1956. But there was little opportunity or will to do this and in July 1958 Turner was expelled for condemning the execution of Imre Nagy.⁴⁹ During the two years he remained in the Party after 1956, two years of 'torment and bitterness'⁵⁰, as he described them, Turner was subjected to 'malicious rumour...it was said of him that, on a trip to Ayers Rock, he had defaced aboriginal art work, that he was a boozier and womaniser, that he had fiddled Party funds, that he had long been an undercover agent for the ASIO'.⁵¹ Although wounded by these allegations, and by the wrench of losing the connection to a movement that had been an extended family to him,⁵² Turner dealt with the hurt and moved on to building a new career within the University system and joined the Labor Party. His expulsion prompted the resignation of his friend Stephen Murray-Smith.

Although Murray-Smith remained in the Party following the upheaval of 1956, it was not as a passive observer. Once a copy of the 'secret speech' became available he

⁴⁷ Ibid. From a quote cited in McLaren's *Free Radicals*, p.139. According to Bernie Taft (interview with Phillip Deery, 2 March 2004), He was responsible for keeping Turner in the Party throughout 1957, arguing that, despite the influence of Ted Hill, reform from within was possible.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p 143

⁴⁹ Cook, p. 123.

⁵⁰ Turner, *Room for Manoeuvre*, pp. 105-140.

⁵¹ Cook, *Red Barrister*, p. 125. In an attempt to discredit both, Hill even alleged that Turner and Murray-Smith were homosexual lovers.

⁵² Turner, pp. 141-9

actively sought to have it confirmed by the leadership as genuine and then discussed. He described the speech to a CPA cultural meeting, held at the New Theatre in Melbourne during June, as 'the most important document of our generation'.⁵³ Bruce Armstrong recalled being told by a comrade that Murray-Smith had stood up at the New Theatre meeting and waved the document in the air, demanding Dixon to confirm its authenticity.⁵⁴ Despite these outbursts of dissidence, however, he retained his position with the Party as Secretary of the Australian Peace Council (APC), believing that he could make a valued contribution to the broader goals of communism.⁵⁵ This contribution included speaking publicly in support of Soviet foreign and domestic policy in his role as APC Secretary at the Bureau meeting of the World Peace Council in Berlin 1957.⁵⁶ After his return he made regular contributions to the magazine *Soviet Culture*. His October 1957 contribution extolled the success of Sputnik, which was, he wrote, 'a needed reminder to the Australian people of the rapid advances of socialism in the USSR'.⁵⁷ He also used his newsletter contribution to draw attention to what was being achieved by peace workers in Australia.⁵⁸ Over the two years he and Turner remained in the Party after Khrushchev's speech, Murray-Smith's peace work led him towards closer links with the Australian Labor Party (ALP). His archive files contain regular correspondence between Murray-Smith and the Federal Opposition leader, H.V. Evatt.⁵⁹ The thawing of relations between the CPA and the ALP, due to some extent to the expulsion of the

⁵³ SMS Papers, VSL MS 8272, Box 288.

⁵⁴ Interview with Bruce and Pauline Armstrong 25 April 2000.

⁵⁵ SMS papers, VSL, MS 8272, Box 291.

⁵⁶ 'Letter to Vincent', SMS papers, VSL, MS 8272, Box 288.

⁵⁷ Australian Newsletter, 17 October 1957, SMS papers, VSL, MS 8272, Box 288.

⁵⁸ Australian Newsletter, 17 October 1957, SMS papers, VSL, MS 8272, Box 288.

⁵⁹ Letter to Doc Evatt, 18 April 1958, SMS papers, VSL, MS 2872, Box 291.

Groupers from the ALP in 1955 and the ALP's split with anti-communist organisations, undoubtedly made the move from the CPA to the ALP easier for Murray-Smith. Within six months of his resignation from the CPA, he received a letter Jim Cairns, then a federal Labor MP, expressing his wish to 'see you in the ALP very soon'.⁶⁰ While the trigger for Murray-Smith's resignation was the expulsion of Ian Turner, a festering unease with the CPA was the underlying motivation. In a letter to Claude Cockburn, Murray-Smith commented that 'the break wasn't because of Hungary or Nagy. The whole issue started earlier for us, even before the 20th Congress and went even deeper'.⁶¹

Irreconcilable Differences

One of the most public and irrevocable reactions during 1956, was taken by the writer and CPA member, Eric Lambert. Whilst in London he had travelled to Budapest to see for himself what was happening.⁶² He sent home graphic reports of the fighting in reports that presented stories of individuals caught up in the uprising. His reports were printed in the Melbourne *Sun*, to the disgust of his fellow communists, after both the *Tribune* in Australia, and the *Daily Worker* in London, refused his articles.⁶³ He further alienated himself from his comrades by reporting events and actions of the Soviet troops that contradicted the version of events being presented by the CPA leadership. His stories directly challenged the Communist Party line that the uprising was led by counter revolutionary forces and that the

⁶⁰ Letter from J.F. Cairns, 11 December 1958, SMS papers, VSL, MS 8272, Box 291.

⁶¹ Letter to Claud Cockburn, 23 October 1958, SMS papers, VSL, MS 8272, Box 291

⁶² John McLaren, 'The End of the Affair: Intellectuals and the Communist Party, 1956-59', *Journal of Australian Studies*, Issue 78, 2003.

⁶³ ASIO files, J Staples, NAA A6119, Item 411.

Russians were called in by the Hungarian Party to restore order. He recorded an interview with two young men who had been involved in the fighting, and asked them how it had begun.⁶⁴ They described to him the ongoing repression by the Russians for the previous two years and insisted that the revolt had commenced spontaneously. They explained how the rebellion started with students and young workers in Budapest taking a sixteen point program for reform to a local radio station and requested it be broadcast. The program included demands such as free elections, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the abolition of the secret police. They elected a twelve year old girl as their spokesperson. The secret police took her away and shot her through the head.⁶⁵ Lambert's report of troops showing no mercy to the Hungarian people, targeting women and children, and the shelling of a children's clinic in Budapest,⁶⁶ created resentment towards him by some members of the CPA. An ASIO officer overheard a conversation between two unnamed members where one described what Lambert had been reporting. 'He's sold his soul to the Menzies government. He talked a lot of rubbish about kids being shot in Hungary and Red Cross clinics being bombed. It's a lot of bloody propaganda.'⁶⁷ The following day another conversation was reported, again without any identification of the speakers: 'What do you reckon about Lambert's article in the *Mail?*', 'Yes, the bastard.' 'He is a proper bastard. He used to be a Party member

⁶⁴ 'In Hungary The Nation's Youth Dies for Freedom', *Melbourne Sun*, 12 November 1956, NAA A6119 Item 527.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ 'It was Go-or Get a Bullet', *Melbourne Sun*, 13 November, 1956, NAA A6119 Item 527.

⁶⁷ 'Eric Vivian Frank Lambert' 12 November, 1956, NAA A6119 Item 527.

too.⁶⁸ Lambert was expelled for his actions, his reputation thoroughly besmirched by the Party he had supported and believed in.

While not a member of the CPA, Bob Gould was present at a cadres' meeting some time during 1956, although no date was given. The speaker at the meeting was J.R. Hughes,⁶⁹ a member of the Communist Party Central Committee and Federal Secretary of the Clerks' Union.⁷⁰ During the meeting Hughes was questioned whether the *New York Times* version of the 'secret speech' was authentic. Instead of answering the question, Hughes responded with a ten minute 'tirade' denouncing the *New York Times* as liars about all things that were important to the working classes. His response stirred the loyalty of many of those present and successfully turned it against the critics present, which included Gould.⁷¹ Gould recalled the experience as being 'traumatic'. While he admired the working class activists in the East Sydney area, this experience convinced him to sever his connections with them. 'Their extraordinary loyalty... in the face of the obvious truthfulness of Khrushchev's speech, was just too much to stomach, and this experience shook me loose from the influence of the Stalinist movement, which turned out to be a critical development in my political life.'⁷²

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Gould, *The Communist Party in Australian Life*, *Labor Review*, 34, Autumn, 2001, pp. 20-38.

⁷⁰ Turner, *Room for Manoeuvre*, pp. 141-9.

⁷¹ Gould, pp. 20-38.

⁷² Ibid.

Disillusionment

While, for some, the outcome of their actions was dismissal from the Party, others simply became disillusioned and either quietly left or dropped out of party activities. When Elaine Bryant picked up a copy of the *New York Times* and read the report of Khrushchev's 'secret speech', she believed it was authentic.⁷³ However, she wasn't sure her fellow comrades in Brisbane would be so convinced and she feared her husband, George Peterson, would leave her if he found out she believed it to be true. So she didn't tell him for three days. On the evening of the third day she decided to confront him. 'George, have you read K's [sic] report?' 'Yes', he replied. 'Well I believe it', I said. 'So do I. I've always had some doubts'. We went straight into a discussion about what must be done...'. Apparently Peterson had initially hesitated before joining the Communist Party in 1943, concerned about what he had heard about the show trials and purges during the 1930's. However, the Soviet Union's role during the war finally convinced him to join.⁷⁴

Bryant and her husband raised the issue of Khrushchev's speech at their next local Branch meeting. The response from the other members was that it probably a forgery. They did not want it discussed until they received approval from the leadership. Bryant and Petersen decided to raise it at their next section meeting, which was held in the backyard of another party member. She moved that the 'secret speech' be discussed as an agenda item, and was seconded by Petersen. Someone

⁷³ Elaine Bryant, 1956: A Personal Account. *The Hummer*, Vol 3, No 10, Winter, 2003, pp. 7-13.

⁷⁴ Obituary, *The Age*, 19 April 2000.

else moved that the 'motion be put' which was also seconded. The Chairman then asked for a show of hands that the motion be put and twenty-eight people voted. Bryant and Petersen voted against. The vote for her motion was reversed, two for and twenty-eight against. They tried twice more to have the issue addressed but were defeated both times. They then placed their membership cards on the Chairman's table and left the meeting. She recalled that no one commented or made any move to prevent them. When they arrived at the next meeting they were told that their resignations had been accepted by the Party. When Petersen pointed out that they had not written letters of resignation, the Branch had to reverse the process. It seems their branch had very quickly been able to effect their resignations, without even taking the time to check that was what was intended by the couple. Elaine recalled that their involvement in party life continued, although it was 'a bit chilly at times'.⁷⁵ She was told some years later that a rumour was being circulated at the time that she and Petersen were US State Department agents.

When Petersen was transferred to Wollongong in his role as a Special Magistrate with the Commonwealth Department of Social Services, they both applied for a transfer of their CPA membership. When they left Brisbane there was no farewell organised for them, either by their branch of the CPA or by the members of the New Theatre of which Bryant had been an active member. Their membership transfer took almost six months to come through. When it did they were visited by a 'stony faced' couple, to whom Petersen and Bryant made their views on Khrushchev's

⁷⁵ Bryant, 1956: A Personal Account, pp. 7-13.

speech very clear.⁷⁶ The couple dutifully argued the Party line. After five minutes Petersen had come to a conclusion. 'This is pointless. We know no comrades down here. You're obviously forewarned and antagonistic against us. You don't know our party history – mine of fifteen years and Elaine's of fourteen ; we'll call it a day...The couple scurried out, greatly relieved.'⁷⁷ Petersen and Bryant instead joined their local branch of the Australian Labor Party. During their time in Wollongong and during a previous holiday in Sydney, Petersen and Bryant met a number of other 'reformists'.⁷⁸ They were introduced to Jim Staples who in turn introduced them to Pat and Bob Walshe.⁷⁹ They also established a group of contacts through the informal meetings of other 'reformists' held at the flat of Helen Palmer in Kirribilli, including Jack and Audrey Blake. Blake had recently resigned – or was pushed into resignation - from his position on the Central Committee for 'reformist tendencies' and was working as a railway carriage cleaner.⁸⁰

Bryant also recalled the experience of her second husband, Lindsay. He and his wife knew nothing of the 'secret speech' when they left Australia to live overseas in early 1957. On their return, Lindsay was handed one of Staples' copies of the speech. He immediately asked for someone from the leadership to come out to his local branch to discuss it. Whoever came, lectured them and then quickly left without allowing

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Elaine recalled that at the time 'reformist' was used with the same level of condemnation as 'paedophile' is today.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Staples introduced them to the Walshe just days before he was expelled from the Party for distributing copies of the Secret Speech.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

any questions or much discussion.⁸¹ Extremely frustrated by the experience, Lindsay, his wife and two others simply dropped out of Party life.

John Malos was 'upset' about the issue of the 'cult of the individual' and had spoken with another member, expressing his concern that an article in *Tribune* - stating that the issue had been thoroughly discussed at the Section Conference - was incorrect and that it was his intention 'to thrash this matter out with Dixon'.⁸² By October Malos was a member of the West Sydney Section of the CPA and a Section Secretary, as mentioned in Chapter 4.⁸³ In a meeting held on 3 October, Malos engaged in a 'heated argument' with Adam Ogston of the Central Committee over the CPA's reaction to the report on the 20th Congress of the CPSU.⁸⁴ Malos claimed he had a true copy of the 'secret speech' and that he had distributed it amongst the workers in order that discussions could be held on the questions arising from it. Ogston was reported as refusing to accept that the *New York Times* version of the speech was correct and of criticising Malos for discussing it with the membership.⁸⁵ The two men argued over the authenticity of the report, but Malos would not shift from his view, claiming that he was in contact with a member of the New Zealand Communist Party, presumably Victor Wilcox, who had been present when the report was given at the CPSU Congress and had advised Malos that the *New York Times* version was a

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 'John Paul Malos', 30 August 1956, NAA A6122 Item 1420

⁸³ Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 10 December 1956, NAA A6119 Item 2296.

⁸⁴ Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 3 October 1956, NAA A6122 Item 575.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

true version of the Speech.⁸⁶ Malos argued that Ogston's attitude was typical of the other Party leaders who were trying to suppress discussion of the 20th Congress as they were concerned to cover up their own Stalinist errors.⁸⁷ He also believed that the 'inner party circles' were in turmoil over the 20th Congress report, and claimed that Ogston had stated that if the question was discussed too openly it would split the Party from 'top to bottom', as had happened in America. Malos disagreed with this assertion, claiming that he was in contact with party officials in America and they had told him that the Party had not suffered as a result of open discussion.⁸⁸

Malos was passionate in his determination to have the question of the 'secret speech' discussed within the Party membership. He stated at the 3 October meeting that he was determined to get to the bottom of the questions regarding the 20th Congress and would not be suppressed in trying to do so. His aim was to achieve socialism in Australia and he would not be stopped from discussing matters to further this aim.⁸⁹ At a meeting held on the weekend before 17 October 1956, a number of resolutions put forward by the West Sydney Section regarding the 20th Congress were discussed.⁹⁰ While the date and location remain unclear, the meeting was probably the Sydney District Conference of the CPA. Ogston, Dixon and Sharkey were present at the meeting, at which Malos made a number of contributions. In particular, he drew attention to the fact that there were differences within the top levels of the

⁸⁶ Ibid. It seems unlikely that this member was at the 'closed session', but may have been in contact with Communist Party leaders after the Congress who may have informed him of the Speech and its contents.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 17 October 1956, NAA A6122 Item 575.

Party on the question of the 20th Congress. He claimed that the Central Committee had sent out a directive to the Districts, instructing them to have 'free and full' discussions on the 'cult'. As discussed in Chapter 4, Malos believed that the directive sent from the Sydney District Committee to the Sections was not the same as the one sent to it by the Central Committee. Such an openly challenging approach towards the Party leadership may have impacted his rise through the ranks of the Party.

By December 1956 John Malos had resigned from his position as Section Secretary of the West Sydney Section of the CPA.⁹¹ The ASIO agent described Malos as 'a comrade who has not accepted the Party's explanation in respect to the "cult", he has been prepared to ask awkward questions, and has a considerable following in his section'.⁹² However, Malos continued to comment on the issue. In May 1957, in regard to some recent expulsions from the Party over the 'cult of the individual', he stated that 'those at the top of the Party agree that the report of the 20th National Congress which appeared in the *New York Times*, is a truthful report, but they still want to keep the blinkers on you'.⁹³ Malos did not formally resign from the Party at this time, but continued attempts to open up discussion about the issues raised by the 'secret speech', both privately with the CPA leadership and at the limited number of inner party aggregate meetings – though being absolutely careful to do so according to the organisational principles of "Democratic Centralism". He also openly retained friendships with those who had left the Party. During the early

⁹¹ Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 10 December 1956, NAA A6119, Item 2296.

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Comment, ASIO Case Officer, 3 May 1957, NAA A6119, Item 2296.

1960's ASIO officers approached him in the hope he would become a party informant for them. He refused but soon after was offered a twelve month fellowship at Bristol University in the Physics department. On moving to Bristol he joined the Labour Party, and contested a number of elections in the borough of Bristol West. He remained in the United Kingdom until his retirement in 1992.⁹⁴ But developments after the death of Stalin and the 'secret speech' were critical. Although Malos remained a member of the Communist Party he was tireless in attempting to open up issues raised by Stalinism and the secret speech. He also openly retained his friendship with colleagues who had left the Party. In the early sixties he was approached by ASIO officers in the hope that he would cooperate with the security forces but refused to do so.⁹⁵

Max Marginson, a senior tutor and chairman of the Melbourne University Branch of the CPA, was another who left the Party over the events in Hungary⁹⁶, although he did not resign until early 1961. After the execution of Imre Nagy in June 1958 – the catalyst, as we have seen, for Turner's expulsion – Marginson and other Melbourne University academics formed a group called 'The Socialist Forum'. It attracted not only dissidents within the Communist Party but also a range of non-Party people, such as Frank Knopfmacher, who sought more open discussion on the events of 1956. The Victorian State Committee of the CPA attempted to instruct party members to repudiate Socialist Forum, but this was generally ignored.⁹⁷ In any event, Socialist

⁹⁴ Biographical information supplied by his widow, Ellen Malos, May 2006.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ 'Dr Maxwell Arthur Marginson', 4 January, 1961, NAA A6119 Item 1715.

⁹⁷ McLaren, *Free Radicals*, p. 136.

Forum quietly folded once Helen Palmer's Sydney-based *Outlook* began circulating in Melbourne.⁹⁸ According to an ASIO report, Marginson's reason for leaving was that his continuation in the Party made him appear a fool in the eyes of his University colleagues due to the Party's position over the events in Hungary.⁹⁹ It remains unclear why he left it so long after the uprising to leave.

While many writers on the subject of 1956 and the CPA have cited the exodus of the 'intellectuals' from the Party at this time, few have discussed the actions taken by the working class or rank and file members. Cook suggested that possibly the majority of those who left were working class members, but they tended to 'leave quietly, without broadcasting their disillusionment, slipping away to reflect on their experience.'¹⁰⁰ Cook's assessment is, paradoxically, supported by an ASIO report: , 'defections were mostly from the lower strata of the Party'.¹⁰¹ Little mention is made of the fate of the 'fellow travellers', whom, Cook argued, were 'jolted into cutting off their support for the Party.'¹⁰² Cook estimated that the Party could have lost around a quarter of its membership during or immediately after 1956.¹⁰³ This estimate was an overstatement, according to ASIO. It reported that the Party's membership numbers of approximately 6,000 before February 1956, dropped to 5491 by March 1957.

⁹⁸ Interview conducted by Phillip Deery with Max Marginson, Melbourne, 11 October 2001.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Cook, p. 123.

¹⁰¹ 'Interim report on the Communist Party of Australia: Membership, Policy, Influence in Trade Unions and Activities of Front Organisations' 29 April, 1957 NAA A7452, Item A288.

¹⁰² Cook, p. 123.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

However, when membership cards were reissued, the numbers were found to have fallen further, sufficiently for there to be an adjustment of party branches.¹⁰⁴

Les Tanner, a writer and cartoonist and communist for ten years, began questioning the Party as a consequence of the events in Hungary during October 1956.

There we were, the three of us sitting in a small square of cement, two of us on the steps, one hunkered down against the wall rolling a cigarette, trying to find some explanation, anything that would explain what one socialist country was doing to another... I was only beginning to look at the "forces of progress" with a harder eye... For many it was like walking around in a great pool of nothing... Others fled into the arms of cult religions. Many became scientologists. One friend became the lot... Another man, whose basic humanity was insufficiently masked by his real politicking party self, singled me out for a couple of beers at the pub. "Why had I left?" "Because we were wrong and we should say we were wrong and shut up." "Just because you're wrong is no reason to stop." We never saw each other again, which is terrible because he committed suicide.¹⁰⁵

The fact that many who left or were expelled were considered to be intellectuals does not, in itself, explain why the issues of the 'secret speech' and the Budapest Uprising

¹⁰⁴ 'Interim report on the Communist Party of Australia: Membership, Policy, Influence in Trade Unions and Activities of Front Organisations' 29 April, 1957 NAA A7452, Item A288.

¹⁰⁵ Cook, p. 122.

would have prompted these members to resign, or react strongly enough to prompt the CPA to expel them. Indeed, as this chapter has revealed, restricting the discussion concerning those who left the Party as a result of 1956 to the 'intellectuals' severely limits our understanding of this group of members. One explanation as to why some members responded as they did was that the content of the speech assaulted their intellectual integrity. The speech revealed crimes that many had suspected but never questioned any further due to reflexive of what they were told by the Party leadership. Even the limited questioning approach taken by these members in response was interpreted by the leadership as a wavering in their allegiance to the Party and to communism.¹⁰⁶ The CPA characterised those who challenged the Party line as 'intellectuals' and suggested that such members could only be expected to falter in difficult times, due to their middle class origins, which made them susceptible to middle class ideas.¹⁰⁷ However, this argument was refuted by the fact that many of these members had openly supported the Party during the most troubled post war years including the early Cold War, Korea and the anti Communist hysteria of 1949-1953. A more compelling reason that the so-called 'intellectuals' wavered in their allegiance was that their belief in the justice and the moral superiority of the CPA was undermined by the events in 1956.¹⁰⁸

Another explanation for the decision of many members to leave the CPA as a result of the 'secret speech' concerns the degree and type of discussion that occurred within

¹⁰⁶ Undated document, 'Egg heads' SMS papers, VSL, MS8272 Box 14/1-2

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

the CPA.¹⁰⁹ In a document in the Murray-Smith papers it was proposed that the discussions Hill claimed had been taking place were ‘vertical discussions’ between the leading committees and those who held opposing views. What was needed was more ‘horizontal discussion’ which allowed members of the Party to know of the opinions of other members and to express their views amongst their peers. However, it was precisely these ‘horizontal discussions’ that Hill did not want to encourage, because they reflected a ‘desire on the part of the suggesters’ to secure for themselves leading positions in the Party.’¹¹⁰ More importantly, discussions amongst the members may have provided the basis for a broader groundswell of dissent that Hill would have been intent on avoiding.

Ultimately, those members whose values and beliefs were no longer represented by the direction the Party leadership took resigned or were expelled. They either made this decision themselves or it was made for them. Some, such as Gott, Turner and Murray-Smith, remained in the Party for a couple of years after the release of the ‘secret speech’, possibly in the hope that the Party was capable of self reform. When this did not occur, they sought new avenues for their socialist beliefs. However – as we saw in the previous chapter – others chose to stay within the Party, either to try and change things from the inside, or in the belief that the issue had been addressed and that further discussion would serve no purpose. These divergent responses from a supposedly homogenous group of members challenge the accepted appraisals of the impact of 1956.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 4.

Conclusion

The events of 1956 resulted in deep ruptures within communist parties around the world. Khrushchev's revelations challenged the foundations of communism and shone a harsh spotlight on crimes committed by Stalin against the Soviet people. The uprising in Hungary later in the year demonstrated that while Khrushchev had attempted to present a new Soviet face to the world, the ties of Stalinism were pervasive. The leaderships of western communist parties, specifically the British, American and Australian Parties, were caught unaware by the content of the 'secret speech' and were immediately faced with a difficult choice: admit to ignorance of developments in Russia under Stalin and tacitly accept the chorus of outrage being presented in the capitalist press; support Khrushchev's action and therefore undermine the Stalinist structures and practices had been adopted within their own parties over the preceding years; or deny the speech existed. Generally, the Australia, British and American Parties chose the latter, but as the year progressed, ultimately found this position increasingly untenable.

Within the Australian literature on 1956, the prevailing view has been that the leadership attempted to deny the 'secret speech' had taken place, and tried to minimise the repercussions within the Party by suppressing any attempts to discuss or debate its contents. This, however, is an overly simplistic view that does not reflect the indecisiveness that marked the leadership's response, particularly up until the Soviet

Union released an official statement about the speech mid way through the year. This thesis has demonstrated that, contrary to previous interpretations, the leadership of the CPA adopted a vacillating and, at times, duplicitous approach to handling the repercussions of Khrushchev's speech. Once the speech became available and the CPSU's official statement was printed in the Communist Party press, there followed a brief period in which the Party admitted it had made mistakes in the way calls for discussion had been handled and encouraged debate within the Party structures. However, this was short-lived. From the release of the CPSU statement and the return of the CPA Secretary in Victoria, E.F. Hill, in late September, the Party took a more consistent line of stifling discussion and began expelling the more outspoken members.

Members of the western communist parties shared a sense of disbelief and betrayal once the authenticity of Khrushchev's speech was accepted. Previously loyal members began to question their beliefs and allegiance to the communist movement. In Australia, the position adopted by the Party leaders only served, in many cases, to magnify the negative impact and consequently many resigned or quietly left the Party. However, some members chose to stay on to try and bring about change internally. As we have seen, these members were not, as is sometimes assumed, a homogeneous group. Many of them shared the shock and sense of betrayal felt by members who decided to leave the Party, but for a wide variety of reasons, including the fear of not being a part of the 'communist family', the desire for socialism in Australia and the hope that they could bring about change from within, chose to stay within the ranks of the CPA. Similarly,

those who left are often simply characterised as being 'intellectuals'. While not extensive, available records indicate that Khrushchev's speech had a broader impact than simply within the narrow realm of party intellectuals. Indeed, the familiar portrayal of 1956 as the 'flight of the intellectuals' does not adequately characterise the diversity of reactions amongst all types of CPA members.

1956 was a turning point for the CPA and its members. For the leadership it presented an opportunity to take stock, review the way things had been done in the past and rethink how the Party would progress Australia towards socialism in the future. It missed this opportunity. 1956 forced many members to re-evaluate the strength of their belief in communism. They had to decide whether this belief outweighed their sense of betrayal and dismay in what was contained in Khrushchev's 'secret speech' and by Soviet actions in Hungary. It was a significant decision faced by a wider cross section of the Party than previously assumed and a decision, this thesis suggests, that also affected many within the Party leadership. Ultimately, the assessment of J.D. Blake appropriately captures the significance of 1956 for western communist parties in general and the CPA in particular:

One of the significant consequences of the 20th CPSU Congress was the cracking of the Stalinist crust which had been baked onto various communist parties. Re-invigorating processes spread in varying degrees and at different tempos

throughout the world. In Australia the process has been slow and difficult, and there has been a good deal of erosion.¹

¹ Jack Blake, *Arena*, No.11, Summer, 1966, p. 29.

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