The French Left and the Broader European Context, 1944–58

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Q. What was the state of the European Left at the end of the Second World War?

A. The Left in Europe emerged from the Second World War in a general mood of extraordinary expectation, incomparably stronger than before 1939. With the exception of Germany, this was also true across Europe as a whole, from West to East, from the Protestant North to the Catholic South, and from the more industrialized economies to the more agrarian ones. This sense of confidence and anticipation could be seen most clearly in the results of the first post-war national elections, which were held country by country during 1945–46, often in conjunction with the writing of more democratic constitutions. Extending from the Communists and Socialists through smaller radical liberal groupings to a newly emergent left-tending Social Catholicism or Christian Democracy, broad national fronts of the Left consistently polled between two-thirds and three-quarters of the overall popular vote. Popular sentiment had turned overwhelmingly against those 'old gangs' of traditional conservatives previously ruling Europe in the 1930s. Those pre-war conservatives had been hostile to democracy while favouring the privileges of landowning, military, and clerical elites. They had not only been drawn before the war to one kind of coercive dictatorship or another, but also invariably collaborated with the Nazi occupying regimes during the war. In this sense the Left voiced the widespread desire for a new beginning, for a moral and political reckoning with those discredited *ancien régimes*.

In their positive agenda, the new broad Left coalitions now in government were committed to restoring the rule of law, reestablishing democratic institutions, and reclaiming all the classic freedoms associated with democracy since the French Revolution. Most strongly envisaged in the declarations of the various anti-Nazi resistance movements during the later stages of the war and then elaborated through the programmes of the governments in exile, these commitments defined the post-war political moment, providing the philosophical architecture of the new constitutions and driving the post-war legislative agendas. The resulting political settlements not only reinstated civil liberties for the individual, for public bodies such as churches and the press, and for collective organizations such as parties, voluntary associations, and trade unions; they also pushed the boundaries of citizenship in radically new directions, attaching it to strong bundles of social rights and entitlements, while finally recognizing the rights of women. Using this expanding ideal of citizenship, the Left aspired to remake society on the basis of a broadly egalitarian ethos and collectivist ideals, emphasizing universal access to shared public goods. Practically, this translated into Keynesian ideas of public investment, full employment, and economic planning, ambitious designs for social insurance and a welfare state, and basic social reforms across a wide range of fronts, from education to housing and public health. There were also great hopes for new

international understanding, encouraged by the success of the international coalition against Hitler, which had apparently bridged the older antagonisms between the Soviet Union and the capitalist West.

Beyond re-establishing democracy itself in 1945, therefore, the Left was seeking to reshape the state–society relationship in some extremely fundamental ways. Taking Europe as a whole, these ambitions embraced ambitious models of the welfare state, systems of progressive taxation, public ownership, and forms of administrative decentralization, with less concrete openings towards European federalism and workers' co-determination in industry. In sum, there were perhaps three unifying commitments shaping this desire for renewal: (1) the achievement of comprehensive social security, according to principles of solidarity, egalitarianism, and social justice; (2) the abolition of unemployment, via rational management of the economy and its planned modernization; and (3) the moral renewal of society, via the purging of collaborators and the 'old gang' from the civil service, the judiciary, and the commanding positions of ownership and control in the economy. If accompanied by a high degree of popular democratic momentum, organized at the grass roots, this could imply an extremely radical vision of social transformation.

In other words, the Left was carried forward at the end of the war on the widespread popular desire for a new beginning, for creating a new and more just society on the ruins of the old corrupt and discredited pre-war social order. This also reflected a desire to move past the earlier class-ridden divisiveness of the inter-war years, which was so bitterly associated with the mass misery of the Depression, with the failure of the inter-war economic system, and with the rise of fascism. Importantly, these sentiments enlisted not only the labour movements and the Left's traditional working-class supporters, but also broad layers of the professions and the intelligentsia, white-collared and salaried employees, the self-employed, farming populations, and larger numbers of women than before. Roughly between the last eighteen months of the war and early 1947, the momentum behind this desire for radical reform remained extremely strong. During 1945–46, the post-Liberation governments implemented changes which realized many of the goals mentioned above, while laying down a lasting framework of politics for the future. But the radical openness of this post-war conjuncture could not be sustained. By the spring of 1947, the divisions had opened between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Cold War was well under way, and conservatives inside Europe had successfully regrouped. In the decisive crisis, Communist Parties were expelled from the coalition governments in Italy, Belgium, and France; the Marshall Plan was announced by the USA to solidify the political community of the West; and the Soviet Union adopted an aggressively hostile stance in return. While the post-1945 reforms in Western Europe lasted, the post-war political settlement was tightened against any further extensions of democracy, and for the next two decades the Left was forced back to the margins of the national political systems.

Q. How do you explain the strength of the Communist Parties across Europe?

A. The most striking symptom of the increased strength of the Left across Europe was the unprecedented prominence of the Communist Parties, who seemed now to have moved from the margins of the European polities to the centre. The Yugoslav, Albanian, Greek,

and Czechoslovak Communist Parties had all dramatically flourished from their small pre-war starting-points to become leading and even dominant political forces in their respective countries; the Italian Communist Party (PCI) had been transformed from a hardened and beleaguered underground sect into an imposing mass party for the first time; the French Communist Party (PCF) became the undisputed leading voice of the national working class in that country; and even the smaller Communist Parties like the British or those in Scandinavia and the Low Countries attained their highest levels of popular influence. By participating vigorously in the resistance movements, at enormous sacrifice to their militants and ordinary supporters, the Communists won their admission to the legitimate political nation for the first time. They earned not only popular recognition, but also begrudging acceptance from anti-fascist conservatives, as well as from liberals and the other non-Communist parts of the Left. During the liberation struggles in the final stages of the war, they rose to political leadership by a mixture of organizational effectiveness, ideological clarity, and popular support.

Thus, the various Communist Parties increased their strength after 1941 essentially by making themselves into the most consistent and self-sacrificing advocates of the unifying anti-fascist justifications for the war against Hitler. The dismaying interlude of the Soviet Union's Non-Aggression Pact with Nazi Germany between 1939–41, which confused and demoralized so many on the Left, seems not to have hampered the popular credibility of the Communists in this regard, not least because it made so little difference to the practical anti-fascism of ordinary Communists on the ground. We can say the following more specifically about the reasons for the Communist Parties' strength.

First, the unparalleled brutality of the Nazi occupation, which was both viciously racist and ruthlessly exploitative economically, necessitated an exceptionally disciplined and self-sacrificing type of commitment on the part of the underground resistance, which the Communist Parties were uniquely equipped to provide. In order to operate, the resistance movements also had to make themselves carefully attuned to the sympathies of the surrounding populace, and that made the popular Communisms emerging from the resistance struggles heavily patriotic in complexion. To use the generic term devised for later anti-colonial movements, these Communist-influenced European resistance movements were literally national liberation fronts, in which the Communist Parties were able to share leadership of broadly based coalitions of national forces.

Second, the role of the Red Army during the Liberation was crucial, and not just in the straightforwardly military terms of the advancing eastern front. The political psychology of hope which the Red Army's victories generated for the peoples of the West, whether in occupied Western Europe or in unoccupied Britain, was enormously important. The prestige of those victories, hard-wired to knowledge of the immensity of the sacrifices borne by the Soviet peoples, certainly rubbed off onto the local Communists.

Third, this combination of factors – the impact of a brutal and rapacious foreign military occupation, and the complete dependence of the military struggle against Hitler on the Soviet Union as a state that happened to be Communist – produced a unique identification of the Left (meaning the socialist and Communist traditions of the organized working class) with the nation. To put it another way, the war effected the fusion of *class* with broader *popular* struggles of the nation-in-general, and thereby

enabled the Communists in particular to break out of their working-class isolation to win support from other social groups and claim to be speaking for the nation more generally. This was important everywhere, but perhaps especially in Eastern Europe and Greece, where workers were a relatively small part of the population, and also in Italy, where non-workers also participated in the PCI's massive growth of popularity.

Fourth, a decisive aspect of this last development was the ability of the Communist Parties to win the support of the intellectuals. Again, this already began during the Popular Front campaigns of the 1930s, when the Communist Parties undertook a systematic drive to rally progressive intellectuals in support of humanist and democratic ideals against the rise of fascism, which was thought to be threatening the best achievements of Western culture, even the basis of civilization itself. The Left's ability to mobilize rhetorics of 'civilization versus barbarism' in its own favour was an overriding motif of the time.

Q. What impact did the Cold War have upon the European Left? What impact did it specifically have upon the French Left?

A. The radical openness of Europe's political situation at the end of the war proved to be extremely fleeting. Most of the key changes came in the full flush of the Liberation, before older structures had been recreated, older patterns of allegiance could be reaffirmed, and older-style leaders had returned to reassert themselves. In fact, this was just as the French Socialist André Philip had predicted: 'Everything can be done in the first year following the Liberation . . . What is not done in the first year will never be done, because by then all the old habits will have been resumed.' Indeed, whether in Britain under the reforming Labour Government elected in July 1945, or under the post-war coalitions taking office on the Continent, nearly all the key changes were either implemented or laid down in the first eighteen months. One of the key crossroads in this regard was the Left's option for top-down bureaucratic models of reform relying on parliamentary legitimacy and control of national government, rather than participatory forms of politics stressing grassroots mobilization and local initiative. The energizing potentials of locally based activism were shown by early aspects of the PCI's drive for land reform in the South of Italy, at its height during 1946. Yet at the same time, whether in Italy or in France, the decision has already been taken during 1944–45 to *demobilize* the local resistance committees. A still more telling instance of such demobilizing occurred in liberated Germany, where the military authorities quickly disbanded the so-called *Antifas* (Anti-Fascist Committees), which sprang up in the wake of the Allies' military advance. Formed by re-emerging anti-Nazi Germans, these local bodies were an obvious starting point for the tasks of re-democratizing German society from the ground up. But in the minds of the Allied military authorities – whether in the East or the West – these local initiatives were too threatening.

In other words, rather quickly after the end of the war a conservative regroupment started to occur, encouraged by the patent desire of ordinary people to begin reestablishing a bearable private existence, whether by rebuilding homes or beginning families, by knuckling down to the hard slog of reconstruction, or by generally piecing together the scattered fragments of their battered and interrupted lives. In the midst of this incipient normalizing, the international tensions between the United States and the Soviet

Union began reaching down into the domestic political arenas of European societies, forcing people into new mutually hostile camps, tightening the pressure on political allegiances, and severely narrowing any room for political maneuver. While the pattern varied in the region country by country, for example, this quickly became felt in Eastern Europe, where the Soviet Union began wielding its regional military dominance to establish clearer rules of conformity around the new governing power of the Communist Parties, most directly in Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, more uncertainly at first in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Winston Churchill had already delivered his famous speech in March 1946 at Fulton, Missouri, calling down the 'Iron Curtain' between Eastern and Western Europe, and in October 1946 civil war erupted in Greece. Then during the spring months of 1947, the USA began sharpening its anti-Communist stance. On 12 March President Harry Truman declared his 'containment doctrine', which delivered military aid for the anti-Communist governments in Turkey and Greece, while proclaiming a global struggle of 'freedom' against 'totalitarianism'. In June, Secretary of State George C. Marshall announced the European Recovery Program (Marshall Plan), for the reconstruction of Western Europe. 'Containment' and Marshall Aid quickly turned out to be the twin prongs of a single anti-Communist strategy. In May 1947, accordingly, the two strongest Communist Parties in Western Europe, the PCI and PCF, were summarily purged from the post-war coalition governments.

Thereafter, European polarization proceeded extremely rapidly. In September 1947 Stalin launched the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau), which brought the new ruling Communist Parties of Eastern Europe together with the PCF and PCI beneath a common international umbrella. Henceforth, whether internationally or inside each society, Communist politics asserted the division of the world into 'Two Camps'. This sharpening of political battlelines was emphasized by the Czechoslovak Revolution in February 1948, which signaled the hardening of Eastern European conformities in ever more brutal directions, first via the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform in June 1948 and then by the purging of the Eastern European Communist Parties which began immediately following. Inside Western European societies, the Communist Parties were forced into ever greater isolation, as even their former Socialist and Social Democratic allies chose a home inside the new anti-Communist political community of the West, soon to be solidified in the founding of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 1949. Among Western Communist Parties, the PCF embraced its renewed exclusion from the legitimate political nation with alacrity. Where the PCI sought to keep avenues open to allies in the rest of Italian society, for example, the French Communists aggressively made their isolation into a virtue.

For Socialists and Social Democrats, the effect of the rightward pressure accompanying the onset of the Cold War was to scale back and constrain the possibilities for radicalism. With the exception of the Scandinavian countries, Western Socialists seemed powerless against the renewed conservative dominance of government, which condemned the Left to apparently endless opposition – for the British Labour Party from 1951 to 1964, for the West German SPD from 1949 to 1966, for the Italian Left more or less permanently after 1948 with the exception of 1963–69 when the small Socialist Party briefly joined the governing coalition. Only in France did the Socialists keep a foothold in government – participating in 21 of the 27 coalitions during 1944–58 – but at the cost of any remaining popular support and credibility. In the South of Europe, the picture for

the Left was especially bleak. Not only was an increasingly reactionary single-party system effectively institutionalized under the Christian Democrats in Italy, but the dictatorships of Franco and Salazar remained solid down to the early 1970s in Spain and Portugal, and during 1948 the Right triumphed in the Greek Civil War. With the formal splitting of Germany into two separate republics in 1949 and the concomitant creation of NATO, Europe's division became an enduring and accomplished fact. With the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949, the onset of the Korean War during 1950–53, and the West's violent reactions against decolonization, the global dimensions of the Cold War became further dramatized. Europe's resulting remilitarization raised huge obstacles to any possible left-wing resurgence or a radicalizing of domestic reform.

In other words, the Cold War placed post-war politics under massive constraint. Just as the anti-fascist politics of the war years had enabled the Left's acceptance throughout Europe into the legitimate nation, the onset of the Cold War now removed it again, returning Communists and left-wing Socialists to the sidelines. Western foreign policies shaped a mood of conformist repression, now demonizing Communists as the willing tool of the Soviet Union and their allies as dupes, tarring left-wing criticism with national disloyalty, and denouncing radicalism as the source of unfreedom. In Eastern Europe this tightening of hostility was more deadly in its effects, as the new People's Democracies descended into conspiracy paranoias and brutal pathologies of control and terror. On both sides the Cold War exerted a new disciplinary power, limiting what could be said and thought. In these ways, the Cold War decisively shaped Europe's possible political agendas between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, with profound consequences extending right down to the present.

Q. What impact did 1956 have upon the European Left?

A. The year 1956 produced a double watershed for the post-war political order in Europe. On the one hand, the gradually maturing crisis of Stalinist rule in the People's Democracies of Eastern Europe was brought to a dramatic head by popular movements for change in Poland and Hungary. If the Polish crisis was resolved by a workable compromise, through which Vladislav Gomulka's reforming government explicitly acknowledged Soviet military rule, in Hungary it proved harder to apply the brakes: at the end of October the reform Communist government of Imry Nagy re-legalized political parties and withdrew Hungary from the Soviet military alliance; in response, the Red Army invaded on 4 November to restore Soviet control. Simultaneously, on the other hand, the decision of the British, French, and Israeli governments to invade Egypt at the end of October in response to the Egyptian government's nationalization of the Suez Canal threw European colonialism into an extreme moral and political crisis; by the time the invading armies had been forced to withdraw from Egypt on 6 November, the British government's credibility in particular had suffered a severe blow. Thus, if the events in Hungary cast the Communist world into confusion, leading to mass resignations in the Italian and many of the smaller Communist Parties and badly damaging the Soviet Union's prestige, then the Suez Crisis delivered important impetus in Western Europe for the emergence of a New Left, one passionately critical of the governing status quo, yet from beyond the existing framework of Communist and Socialist allegiances.

The background to the Polish and Hungarian crises was provided by the death of Stalin on 5 March 1953 and the openings it initiated for change in the Communist world. The resulting slow burn of 'de-Stalinization' brought Nikita Khrushchev to power in the Soviet Union between June 1953 and February 1955, amidst continuing discontent across the satellite countries of Eastern Europe, including a full-scale uprising in East Germany on 17 June 1953. At the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February 1956, in closed session from which foreign Communist delegations were barred, Khrushchev then delivered his so-called 'Secret Speech', which denounced the crimes and errors of Stalin going back to the 1930s. As knowledge of the speech circulated, its revelations sent the international movement into crisis and disarray. If Stalin's rule had been so flagrant and arbitrary a dictatorship, if Soviet policy had been so disastrously in error, and if 'violations of socialist legality' had led to so much terror and gross miscarriage of justice, Communists now asked themselves, then what did that say about the loyalty of the foreign Communist Parties and their members during the previous twenty years? In most of those parties, a soul-searching internal discussion soon began. But when Khrushchev sent the Red Army into Hungary, it seemed that nothing had changed in Moscow after all.

The combination of Khrushchev's revelations and the Soviet repression of reform in Hungary tore Communist beliefs open. Ordinary Communists no longer felt able to trust either the Soviet government or their own national leaders. As they gazed on the evidence of public lying, ethical betrayals, and massive self-deceptions which loyalty to Moscow had entailed – 'through the smoke of Budapest', as one British Communist dissident put it – party conformities cracked. By circling the wagons, some parties managed to restore discipline and preserve unity, including most prominently the PCF, which defiantly reaffirmed its Moscow loyalty. But for others the crisis was deeply traumatic: over a two-year period the Italian Party lost 400,000 members, the British a quarter of its 33,000 card-carrying support. On the other hand, many smaller parties then re-emerged with greater independence, usually after losing members and often at the cost of a split, to play a more constructive role on the far Left of their country's political spectrum, as in Scandinavia, Spain, Greece, Switzerland, Britain, Ireland, and the Low Countries. Over the slightly longer term, Soviet prestige and international Communist unity suffered blows from which they never recovered. During the next crisis of Communist rule in Eastern Europe, in the Prague Spring and resulting Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, nearly all the Western European Communist Parties moved decisively away from the Soviet Union into a more clearly defined independence.

For the West, the Suez Crisis spelt a decisive defeat for the old colonial powers, whose inability to obstruct colonial liberation was now clear to see. Resistance to decolonization certainly continued, but mainly where colonial settlers had managed to hijack colonial rule – in Algeria, the Belgian Congo, Portuguese Africa, and British southern Africa. Elsewhere, Suez effectively drew a thick line between two separate periods of decolonization: *before* 1956, when colonial independence was contested via bloody wars of liberation (the Madagascar Rebellion of 1947, the Indonesian war of independence in 1945–49, the division of Vietnam in 1945–54, the Malayan counterinsurgency beginning in 1947, the Kenyan Mau-Mau insurgency in 1952, and the Algerian War beginning in 1954); and *after* Suez, when negotiated independence increasingly prevailed. Cyprus, where the nationalist movement under Archbishop

Makarios had strong Communist sympathies, made this especially dramatic: the British had said Cyprus would never be independent, exiling Makarios to the Seychelles in early 1956; but in March 1957 he was released, leading to independence in three years.

In the domestic politics of Western Europe, the renormalized stabilities imposed so successfully by the conservative turn of the Cold War now began cracking apart. One of the leaders of the British New Left was Stuart Hall, who was a student at Oxford in the early 1950s, freshly arrived from Jamaica. He experienced the double crisis of 1956 as a source of hope. Until then, the Cold War had 'dominated the political horizon, positioning everyone and polarizing every topic by its remorseless binary logic'. It had created a prevailing 'climate of fear and suspicion'. But now the twin tragedies of Hungary and Suez spectacularly exposed the corruption of both dominant ideologies, in East and West, including the main established traditions of the Left, official Communism and mainstream social democracy. For Hall and other new voices, the two crises 'unmasked the underlying violence and aggression latent in the two systems which dominated political life at that time – Western imperialism and Stalinism'. 1956 'symbolized the break-up of the political Ice Age'. It pointed the way forward to a new or 'third' political space, where a 'New Left' might start to form.

Key publications by Geoffrey Eley

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