

# Edward Thompson, MI5 and the *Reasoner* Controversy: Negotiating ‘Communist Principle’ in the Crisis of 1956<sup>1</sup>

Madeleine Davis

## Abstract

The sixtieth anniversary of the 1956 crisis in international communism provoked a fresh wave of comment on its British dimensions and coincided with the declassification of MI5 files on party historians Edward Thompson and Rodney Hilton. This article approaches the question of communist commitment through a reinterpretation of the *Reasoner* controversy in which Thompson and Hilton were to different degrees involved. First, it uses the MI5 material alongside existing sources to illuminate tactical and political aspects of the engagement between the *Reasoner* editors and the party leadership, placing emphasis on the *Reasoner*'s role as bridgehead of an attempt to reform the party from within rather than as simply a precursor to the New Left. Next, interrogating Thompson's claim to ‘communist principle’, it compares his developing interpretation of what this meant and required with the views of a selection of other intellectuals. Far from representing a straightforward assertion of moral conscience against monolithic party bureaucracy, the *Reasoner* controversy reveals an extremely complex picture of the tensions and constraints involved in communist commitment.

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I know very well that the knots tied by Stalinism cannot be untied in a day. But the first step on the road back to Communist principle is that we tell the truth and show confidence in the judgement of the people.<sup>2</sup>

Release in September 2016 of a new tranche of files on ‘communists and suspected communists’ by the British Security Service (MI5) attracted a modest flurry of publicity. Although the release included files on individuals more central to the Communist Party's British operations, it was Edward Thompson's sharp critique of the CPGB leadership, made some months before his suspension then resignation in November 1956, at the height of the party crisis touched off by the Khrushchev ‘revelations’ about Stalin's leadership, that attracted most notice. ‘It is difficult to argue with his claim’, remarked Professor Christopher Andrew, introducing the files for the National

Archives, ‘that the leaders of the British Communist Party had “been acting as High Priests, interpreting and justifying the Holy Writ as emanating from Stalin, rather than creative Marxists striving to form an independent analysis of the situation on the basis of their examination of the evidence”’.<sup>3</sup> Andrew did not mention that the vehemence of the critique expressed by Thompson in the intercepted letter he quoted (written to Bert Ramelson, Chair of the Yorkshire District Committee on which Thompson also served) led David Haldane Porter, head of MI5’s F branch, to alert John Rennie, chief of the Information Research Department (IRD) to its contents. ‘Most interesting. Some good arguments here for the IRD’, records Haldane Porter’s handwritten note on the file cover sheet, and he duly passed on excerpts, cautioning that the ‘secret and delicate means’ by which the information had been obtained restricted its use to paraphrase only.<sup>4</sup>

The IRD was a covert unit set up to disseminate anti-communist propaganda through the mainstream media.<sup>5</sup> Recipient of Orwell’s famous ‘list’, its officials knew the value of an intellectual prepared to denounce communism. Their interest in Thompson is a reminder that the Cold War remains an indispensable context for understanding the CPGB’s 1956 crisis, both as it was experienced and as it has been interpreted since. If there are always those for whom the latest anniversary provides an opportunity to indulge the ‘end of history smugness’ that marks much coverage of communism and its British adherents, it is also true that 1956 remains an interpretive battleground for the left.<sup>6</sup> Themes reprised in the latest round of commemoration include the prominence of intellectuals, particularly the party historians’ group, in the revolt that saw the CPGB lose some 9,000 members, and the extent to which pre-existing modes of intellectual critique, especially the development of ‘cultural Marxism’, prepared the ground for dissent.<sup>7</sup> There has also been renewal of a strand of argument pointing to the moral arbitrariness of 1956 as *the* moment when communists located their consciences.<sup>8</sup>

The story of the *Reasoner*, the unauthorised inner-party journal produced by Thompson and John Saville from July–November 1956 as locus for a freer discussion of the implications of the Khrushchev disclosures than the CPGB leadership would allow, is pivotal to these discussions. Usually presented retrospectively as the mouthpiece of a principled moral revolt of party intellectuals and precursor to the early New Left, its role as bridgehead of an attempt to reform the party from within is not always well understood. Thompson, certainly, with his repeated later invocation of 1956 as an historical as well as personal watershed, his insistence on the need regularly to ‘beat the boundaries’ of 1956, and his eventual, unassailable reputation as exemplary public moralist, himself contributed much to support a reading of the *Reasoner* as repository of party conscience and midwife of ‘socialist

humanism'. Thompson and Saville's stance is also often taken as representative of the Communist Party historians' group to which they both belonged, conferring a retrospective unity on that group and marking it as a centre of dissidence in the tumult of the year, by Hobsbawm's account an immediate 'nucleus of vocal opposition to the Party line'.<sup>9</sup> The most persistent challenge to these predominant interpretations has been made from a perspective broadly sympathetic to a Trotskyist reading of Communist history. In 1980 Perry Anderson countered Thompson's anti-Althusserianism in *The Poverty of Theory* ('Where was Althusser in 1956?') pointing to the wide availability of information about the trials and purges, and of Trotskyist analysis of Stalinism well before 1956. Yet only after confirmation *ex-cathedra* did the dissidents of 1956 take action: 'Is the *official* announcement of Stalin's crimes then to mark the frontier between venial and mortal responsibility?', he pointedly asked.<sup>10</sup> The recent welcome republication of the three issues of *The Reasoner* in book form is accompanied by a set of critical essays in broadly similar vein. Recognising their 'exemplary and memorable' role in 1956, John McIlroy and Paul Flewers argue that the *Reasoner* editors nevertheless (and in different ways) achieved only an incomplete break with 'Stalinism' and subsequently failed to provide the Marxist explanation of it that they recognised as a necessity.<sup>11</sup>

This critique is useful, not least for its recognition of some differences in outlook between Thompson and Saville, even at the point of their closest collaboration. It is certainly true too that Stalin's 'knots' (as Thompson said in 1956) would not 'be untied in a day' and his own later presentations would sometimes simplify and abbreviate the attempt. Interrogating the reliability and consistency of first person accounts by Thompson, Hobsbawm and others also prompts useful reflection on the extent to which reliance on retrospective accounts from participants has encouraged an implicit teleology in historical presentations of the crisis, something worthy of fuller reflection.<sup>12</sup> Yet if this strand of argument can help correct overly simplistic readings of the *Reasoner* episode, to the extent that it resolves into a broader argument about the limitations of the later New Left as reparable by fuller and earlier engagement with British Trotskyism, it has its own questionable teleology.<sup>13</sup>

The release of MI5 files on Thompson and Hilton, added to those of prominent party intellectuals already available, provides a fresh set of primary sources and renewed opportunity to consider these issues in their context, while the Thompson material has extra significance given the continued embargo on his papers.<sup>14</sup> These files do though present problems as sources for historians interested in the human subjects of surveillance rather than its techniques and policy contexts. The secret, partial and incomplete nature of the material, retention or redaction of documents, and the difficulty in many cases of cross-checking against other sources limits their usefulness. Although some

triangulation is possible against the CPGB's own archive, awareness among prominent communists of extensive surveillance provoked counter-measures, including selective record keeping, and reinforced a culture of secrecy and mistrust. Thus while the volume of MI5 personal files now available has started to generate a significant literature drawing on both sets of primary sources,<sup>15</sup> investigation of the motives of those involved in the 1956 crisis needs also to draw on a substantial specialist secondary literature. Especially relevant is work emerging from the 'biographical turn' in communist historiography, and work that examines both the CPGB's cultural analysis and the party's internal culture to illuminate the complex and contradictory reality of Zhdanovism's implementation and contestation in the British party.<sup>16</sup>

Within this research context, this article addresses the *Reasoner* controversy not in retrospect but as it unfolded through the months of 1956 amid the larger party crisis, using Thompson's claim to 'communist principle' as a provocation. The first section contextualises the use of the MI5 material and considers what it adds to our sense of the constraints under which British communists operated. The second locates the *Reasoner* episode within the internal politics and culture of the CPGB, using the MI5 material alongside existing sources to illuminate less familiar aspects of a controversy that involved careful manoeuvring on both sides. The final section takes up Thompson's claim to 'communist principle', comparing his view of what this meant and required with that of a selection of other intellectuals also involved in the inner-party debate. This shows significant differences of perspective, even among those who supported publication of the *Reasoner*. The extent to which 'communist principle' entailed the subordination of individual moral conscience and judgement to the perceived interests of the collective was one key issue at stake, but there were also political and tactical dimensions to these differences, as well as different interpretations of party rules and practices. Interestingly, the positions these intellectuals took on this question of 'communist principle' do not map in an obviously predictable way onto decisions about whether to leave or remain within the party, even after events in Hungary polarised opinion. This suggests an exceedingly complex picture of party experience and commitment in which the impact of '1956' was highly differentiated.

### **Subversion and Surveillance**

By 1956 Thompson had been under MI5 surveillance for over a decade. An offhand remark he made about 'fighting fascists at home' on leave during the war in 1943 (a year after he had joined the party) was reported by a Buckinghamshire police officer. By 1956 MI5 had amassed two files on his

activities and those of his wife Dorothy, whom he met in 1945. Their contents are mostly trivial ('Thompson has been seen in Siddal district a lot recently during the daytime, giving the impression that he does not go out to work, owns an Austin 10 two seater car DKX43. People been seen visiting his house in the evenings, some carrying briefcases'),<sup>17</sup> which seems fairly typical of the genre. In a recent study of surveillance of party writers of the 1930s, James Smith evokes the incompetent, philistine and apparently pointless aspects of the British state's monitoring of radical intellectuals, finding little in the files to suggest either subversive activity on the part of those being watched or that those watching grasped the significance of their subjects' intellectual work.<sup>18</sup> Yet we should be wary of dismissing this as a harmless comedy of errors. Smith's wry observation that several of these writers' careers benefited from their communist associations (so long as they were prepared to repudiate them later) raises more troubling questions about the nature of British anti-communism than it answers. Jennifer Luff offers a contrasting perspective. Focusing on the treatment of labour movement communists in the inter-war period, Luff suggests that the anti-communism of the British 'secret state', usually viewed as more benign than US McCarthyism, in its insidiousness and comprehensive penetration of communist networks was in some ways more effective.<sup>19</sup> Though 'open' intellectual party members were handled differently from Luff's subjects, in files on Thompson, Hilton, Randall Swingler, Christopher Hill and others, one nevertheless glimpses more sinister aspects of surveillance amid the trivia. We learn, for instance, that the Thompsons's home in Halifax was broken into and clandestinely searched while they were on holiday; that most, if not all, of these party writers featured on a list of some 3,000 potential subversives to be preventively detained in the event of a breakdown of relations with the USSR; that job offers and invitations to contribute to BBC broadcasts might mysteriously evaporate following a polite intervention from the security services. Thompson's rejection for a post as a civilian lecturer with Army Northern Command in 1949 was one such episode.<sup>20</sup> There is also the fact that the information released is far from complete, and that the procedures for selection of material suitable for public consumption remain opaque.

Responsible use of these records, then, requires some appreciation of their significance within the domestic security regime. A few observations afford some context for the material consulted.<sup>21</sup> First, by the mid-1950s, 'comprehensive and pervasive' monitoring of communists was firmly in place, the success of 1955's Operation Party Piece granting access to full membership records covering both 'open' and covert members.<sup>22</sup> Bugs and telephone taps on the King Street party HQ meant the security services were far better informed than most party members about the views and activities

of the leadership, and MI5 had also benefited from the work of highly placed informers. Second, this surveillance reflected an exceedingly malleable and expansive idea of 'subversion'. If attention to communists before the war had been essentially defensive, the main concerns espionage and sabotage, the Cold War supplemented these with a more offensive propaganda role, more aggressive use of vetting and an expanded role for the IRD. Third, and with specific regard to our group of university dons and writers, comprehensive surveillance of these types was undertaken not to counter any specific perceived threat but mainly in an attempt to map their networks, and more nebulously, to understand the appeal of communism to intellectuals and students the better to counter it.

What impact did this monitoring have for communists like Thompson? Certainly party leaders and many individual members were well aware of being watched and took steps to counter it. The existence of espionage networks on both sides was known, and there had of course been notorious cases. At the same time, most British communists neither engaged in, nor knew much about, the covert side of their own party's activities, and by the 1950s the national and international context for such activities, as well as the Soviet and domestic party policy context, was markedly different from the 1930s. Unless, then, one accedes to the wide and indeterminate notion of subversion employed by the British state, these intellectuals posed no threat to British interests. In fact, by the early 1950s subservience to Moscow was regarded by most intellectuals discussed here as the main obstacle to their party's success in Britain, and MI5 were in a good position to know this. As for 1956, a recent study concludes that though it monitored the unfolding of the internal party crisis, MI5 made little effort to capitalise on it to hasten the party's disintegration, and did not always seem fully to grasp its significance.<sup>23</sup> The impact of British intelligence activity on the crisis seems indirect, and quite possibly undermined the goals of that activity. The practices of the state, the vituperation directed at communists in the mainstream media, (as well as, of course, much of the language and practice of their own party) could hardly fail to reinforce defensive mentalities which, while inimical to many communists' own beliefs and aspirations, were politically (and perhaps psychologically) necessary. Shifting such mentalities was not likely to be easy.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Party and the *Reasoner***

I never mentioned Lenin's will, or how Joe ruled his nation, and wove my way twixt right and left in every deviation. The Party's line I shall maintain until my dying day sir, and whatsoever king may reign, I never will say Nay sir.<sup>25</sup>

The way the *Reasoner* episode unfolded within the CPGB involved considerations of political tactics as well as political and moral principle, and occurred against a backdrop more complex than standard evocations of the ‘shock’ of the Khrushchev ‘revelations’ can convey. ‘Stalinism’, as Thompson wrote immediately after the Soviet intervention in Hungary in early November, was not ‘wrong things’ about which ‘we could not know’ but ‘distorted theories and degenerate practices about which we knew something, in which to some degree we shared, and which our leadership supports today’.<sup>26</sup> He and Saville resigned only after Hungary convinced them that the fight to shift the balance of forces and transform the party from within through persuasion and carefully calibrated disobedience was futile. Prior to 1956 they were loyal party members, and though there were instances of both expressing misgivings to the leadership on specifics, they were active in their branches and in party cultural and educational work, and not thought in any way politically unreliable.<sup>27</sup> While there were certainly influences and emphases, mainly deriving from the popular front period, that could nurture a critical and humanist outlook implicitly at odds with party orthodoxy, the possibilities of organised opposition within the party prior to 1956 were limited. Party cultural groups, to a degree always distrusted by the leadership as ‘crucibles of factionalism’<sup>28</sup> may have functioned at certain times and to some extent as, in Thompson’s words, ‘centres of premature revisionism’,<sup>29</sup> pressing the boundaries of orthodoxy and (in the case of some members of the writers’ and historians’ groups) developing a more outward-looking and creative approach to culture.<sup>30</sup> There were, however, well-understood limits, and miscreants were usually forced to recant or marginalised.<sup>31</sup> Jack Lindsay, guilty of perceived deviation in his 1949 *Marxism and Contemporary Science*, admitted ‘errors’ due to ‘petty bourgeois conditioning’; ‘I have now published the main lines of my self-criticism.’<sup>32</sup> Thompson’s recollection of standing by as the editors of *Our Time*, Randall Swingler and Edgell Rickword, accepted humiliation at the hands of cultural secretary Emile Burns is indicative of this ritualised culture of anti-individualism and ‘self-critique’, as are Doris Lessing’s fictionalised accounts of writers’ group meetings in *The Golden Notebook*.<sup>33</sup>

The historians, apparently better organised administratively, seem to have negotiated the demands of self-censorship with less mishap than the writers, but the same ‘psychological structure’ prevailed.<sup>34</sup> Party intellectuals, though valued and to some extent indulged, were also regarded as especially prone to ‘bourgeois deviations’ of individualism and ‘moral idealism’. The ‘spineless intellectual’ ‘parading his conscience’ in ‘objective’ opposition to the interests of the working class, the renegade recruited to the ranks of the enemy – these were well-worn tropes that left few in doubt that agonies of conscience were a weakness to be negotiated in private. Black humour and bitter in-jokes were

one release. A particularly telling example is Randall Swingler's (private) parody of the tortuous 'self-criticism' of the party:

what we need today is courageous rethinking. But we must not empty out the acid-bath with the baby. We must have 'new' thinking along the 'old' lines. There are two kinds of truth, relative truth and creative truth. And we stand for creative truth, or making it up as we go along ... We have made serious mistakes in the past which must now be corrected. One of the most serious was leaving any poets, artists, musicians and such people alive at all.<sup>35</sup>

There was, however, a gap between what could be said publicly and what could be privately argued between intellectuals and party officials. Letters on MI5 files of the early to mid-1950s show intellectuals associated with both groups expressing a good deal of criticism of party policy and practice, sometimes quite forthright, but this tended to be hedged with protestations of loyalty and admissions of self-doubt. Thompson, for example, criticising as 'disastrous' party efforts to exert more control over literary and cultural coverage in 1952, at the same time referred to himself as 'just being Jeremiah' and hoped to be proved wrong.<sup>36</sup> Hilton, in a 1955 letter to a local official, lambasted the party leadership's subjection to the dictates of the CPSU, the 'appalling sectarianism we indulged in from 1946–50 ... when I think of the eminent persons (including present members of the EC) who discovered, on looking back in their memories, that Tito must have been an agent of imperialism during the war, I really wonder if I am standing on my arse or my elbow'. Still, he put these views 'diffidently', confessing himself 'disoriented politically for the above reasons'. There was nothing disoriented in his irate demand 'are we going to do our own thinking, and if so, how are we going to show that we are doing our own thinking?', but habits of euphemism and self-censorship were difficult to break.<sup>37</sup>

Yet change was afoot. The Khrushchev disclosures happened against a backdrop of disorientation in the British party about the meaning and extent of de-Stalinisation. Though reaction to Stalin's death in 1953 was carefully orchestrated, the 'rehabilitation' of Tito, well-substantiated rumours about anti-Semitism, the execution of Lavrenti Beria, amongst other developments, spoke of a CPSU in great flux. Used to being told what to think, the leadership reacted slowly and confusedly to the new situation. The *Daily Worker* did its best to carry on as normal—at precisely the same time as readers were writing in numbers to ask when there would be any accounting of the Khrushchev speech it ran extensive upbeat coverage of his diplomatic visit to England with Bulganin (itself indicative of a changed context). But the readers' forum page

told of grave concern from all sections of the party (not just intellectuals), not only about events in the Soviet Union but about British party practices and structures that had produced a loyalty to the CPSU so complete as to collude in cover-up and falsification over many years. A partial debate on the basis of incomplete information about the content of the speech through March was prematurely closed, just before the full text was leaked.<sup>38</sup> Failure to discuss the issues in open session at the 24th Congress at the end of March intensified demands for an explanation, but the leadership equivocated. It accepted the threadbare excuse of the 'cult of personality', declared full confidence in the CPSU courageously to correct past 'mistakes', asserted that 'full collective leadership' had been restored and that an 'exceptionally healthy situation' now existed.<sup>39</sup> As disquiet mounted, General Secretary Harry Pollitt's account of the implications of the 20th Congress, published in late April, stolid but in a limited way reflective, was followed in May by Palme Dutt's notorious comparison of Stalin's abuses to 'spots on the sun' and portentous reminder to 'ivory tower dwellers in fairyland' that the 'thorny path of human advance' involved both 'unexampled heroism', and 'baseness, tears and blood'.<sup>40</sup> Dutt's crassness provoked an outcry and promise of a 'more helpful' rejoinder.<sup>41</sup>

Unable to react flexibly and intelligently enough to the different demands on it or to bring into clear focus the implications of fast-moving events, the leadership could neither contain debate nor get control of it. This demonstration of weakness enabled those who saw the Khrushchev speech as an opportunity for party renewal and reform to seize the initiative. Already through March, Thompson had been writing in increasingly provocative terms to Bert Ramelson and James Klugmann (a member of the party executive committee and author of *From Trotsky to Tito*, an abject justification of Soviet policy withdrawn in 1956) both of whom he was on friendly terms with and who he hoped might shift their positions to alter the complexion of the leadership.<sup>42</sup> Describing the leadership as 'opportunist and lacking in socialist principle', and questioning Klugmann's own record, Thompson admitted he was moving into a position of opposition within the party, and suggested those 'most responsible for selling the Stalin lines' should resign or temporarily retire at the congress, making way for comrades 'known and trusted in the districts', as a first step toward a deeper process of renewal.<sup>43</sup> On 22 March he wrote to Harry Pollitt suggesting the 24th congress be followed within a year by a 25th or emergency congress.<sup>44</sup> In early April, a day after having sent Saville a savagely parodic 'official letter' mocking the style of party discussion, he wrote Pollitt that he was 'desperately disappointed at what I have learned so far of our Congress'.<sup>45</sup> Saville addressed John Gollan, soon to replace the under-pressure Pollitt as general secretary, in stronger terms, describing the congress as a 'fiasco': 'I now find it impossible to stand up in public and defend party

policy, and unless I and those who think like me can effect some measure of change, I for one shall be forced to resign.<sup>46</sup> The two now began to coordinate their activities closely. Both were members of the party historians' group, chaired by Eric Hobsbawm, though Saville was more active within it. On 8 April he attended an extended meeting of the group's committee that debated the implications of the 20th Congress in a discussion opened by Klugmann, whose own compromised position was clear to all. Resolutions were passed expressing 'profound dissatisfaction' with the British party congress, calling on the leadership to make 'a public statement of regret for the British party's past uncritical endorsement of all Soviet policies and views' and to initiate the 'widest possible public discussion of all the problems involved for the British party in the present situation'.<sup>47</sup> At the same time Thompson resigned from the Yorkshire District committee, declaring himself opposed on a number of fundamental points to the theory and general line of the party.<sup>48</sup> A long resolution drafted by him and passed by the Halifax branch made similar demands to the historians' group resolution.<sup>49</sup>

By mid-April it was becoming clear that the Yorkshire comrades were laying down a challenge to the leadership. Although couched at this point mainly in terms of 'opposition rights' to express opinion freely in the party press, both sides understood that the stakes were higher. Anxious to head off a wider revolt, the leadership tried to placate the ringleaders. In an (intercepted) phone call Gollan asked Ramelson to do all he could to persuade Thompson to 'stay where he was' and withdraw his resignation from the District Committee.<sup>50</sup> Ramelson's efforts through May extended to inviting Thompson to make proposals for pieces for publication. Thompson sent in a draft of a 'minimum statement' to be published by the Executive Committee.<sup>51</sup> Though the resolution actually published fell far short of Thompson's suggestions (it admitted a 'certain dogmatism, rigidity and sectarianism' in party work in the British labour movement, hived off questions of reform to a 'special commission' that would eventually exonerate the leadership and, while acknowledging 'abuses and grave injustices' in the USSR, dodged the question of its own responsibility, blaming 'false information') he and Saville now secured space in the party press.<sup>52</sup> Saville's pithy contribution took aim at Dutt: 'if the crimes we now know of were historically necessary, the man in the street is entitled to say "Not for me brother!" and I would agree with him.' With 'our political honesty as a political party' at stake, nothing less than a full accounting would suffice.<sup>53</sup> Thompson meanwhile was at work on a longer contribution, having pushed via Ramelson and Arnold Kettle the idea of a 'polemical article on the moral issue' that would appear in *World News* at the end of June as 'Winter Wheat in Omsk'.<sup>54</sup> By late May the leadership expected a cessation of hostilities; a bugged conversation between assistant

general secretary George Matthews and Klugmann has Matthews reporting that Thompson had been asked 'to write down quite logically and clearly what it was that he wanted, and it had not been too bad. He also said that he thought Savill [sic] would quieten down now his letter had been published'.<sup>55</sup> Ramelson could have told them differently a few days later, having received the letter that sparked MI5 interest. In it Thompson recognised 'definite concessions to our point of view' in the EC resolution, but saw no commitment to genuine change, only a 'safety valve' opened by a 'bureaucracy in whose interest it is to prevent too close an examination of their past actions'.

Now you inform me that W[orld] N[ews] is closing down on real controversy in a week or two, and the predetermined discussion is starting, on unity. All I can say is, Thank God there is no chance of this EC ever having power in Britain: it would destroy in a month every liberty of thought, conscience and expression which it has taken the British people 300 odd years to win. And it would do it all with benevolent safety valves and in a smug and supremely self-righteous belief that it was acting in the interests of the working class, whose interests it was divinely inspired to interpret.<sup>56</sup>

Throwing in personal criticism of Ramelson, as a disingenuous philistine susceptible to the 'bloody awful tradition of dogma and the priesthood', Thompson could hardly expect a positive response to his demand for 'full controversy in a discussion journal' under editorship including oppositional elements. 'If the EC wishes to close up World News etc, I and others will in time find the means to circulate or publish our ideas.' He was also explicit that his points of disagreement were now so fundamental as to 'lead on to a demand for change in policy and personnel so far-reaching that at the moment they are quite impracticable'. Through June and early July he and Saville planned the first *Reasoner* and canvassed support among a network of contacts which included rank-and-file party members and regional officials as well as intellectuals. 'I don't think our party has got a chance unless we have a public fight to change the leadership at once', wrote Thompson to Howard Hill, District Secretary for Sheffield, and a party official whom he respected.<sup>57</sup> And to another comrade: 'We feel it is now or never, and that our position is fairly strong at the moment.'<sup>58</sup>

Publication of *The Reasoner* (noted in *Tribune* on 20 July under the heading 'Opposition group start paper in CP') opened a new phase in the party crisis that needed delicate handling on both sides. Since Thompson and Saville's aim was to force a discussion that would shift the balance of forces toward reform, they chose the ground of their challenge carefully to avoid alienating potential supporters and triggering immediate disciplinary sanctions. While publishing

in the non-party press would certainly have been regarded as disloyalty, they judged that the rules around independent party publications were unclear enough to afford a little time.<sup>59</sup> To avoid implicating others, production and distribution of 650 hand-duplicated copies was managed entirely by the editors. Under the motto 'to leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality' the journal was 'written by and addressed to members of the Communist Party'. It contained two editorials, a critique of democratic centralism by Ken Alexander (a close collaborator later on the board of the *New Reasoner*), and documents and correspondence from party contacts abroad, to place the British party's hidebound response to the crisis in broader context. John Gollan (away with other EC members on an – ironically timed – trip to Moscow) was sent a copy with a cordial note from Saville blandly rebutting 'any suggestion of factionalism' and insisting 'we have no aim except to provide an additional forum for discussion'.<sup>60</sup>

The most substantial piece in the first issue was by Thompson, developing the case for rethinking attitudes to morality that 'Winter Wheat in Omsk' first put. 'Winter Wheat' argued that moral concern could no longer be belittled as the preserve of Dutt's fairyland dwellers, nor trumped by expediency: 'we are concerned not with pure consciences, but with honesty and good faith in our actions, not with absolute and ideal integrity but with Communist principle in our methods, socialist integrity on our political relations.' Anticipating themes later developed as 'socialist humanism', Thompson urged the party to rid itself of the 'silly, mechanical view that morality is something to do with idealism', embrace 'conscious struggle for moral principle in our political work' and recognise the value of basic democratic liberties. 'The British people do not understand and will not trust a monolith without a moral tongue.' So incendiary was this critique that it appeared with a reply from George Matthews, reminding Thompson that 'for Marxists every political decision is good or bad according to whether or not it serves the interests of the working people' and mounting a by-now familiar defence of the leadership, whose 'past attitudes' to the SU had resulted not from lack of moral principle but from 'lack of information' or 'wrong information'.<sup>61</sup> Thompson now rejoined the fray to demolish Matthews's case and mount a bolder attack on the habits of sectarianism, the practices of centralism, and the distortion of Marxism. Admitting their own 'share [of] responsibility for the failures which we analyse', the editors restated their commitment to Marxism and communism and urged the leadership to make the full and explicit break with Stalinism the moment demanded.<sup>62</sup>

That the leadership did not do so is a matter of record. Rules were invoked and the comrades requested (initially by the Yorkshire District Committee) to cease publication. Having refused, they were summoned to meet the Political Committee at King Street on 31 August. Here they reiterated their refusal to

close unless guarantees for minority rights and free discussion were given. Guarantees were not forthcoming, although there was still some attempt to conciliate: Thompson recalled that Gollan and Matthews ‘as good as admitted there had been wide suppression in our press, and that this had been a mistake’, and while insisting they put an end to the *Reasoner*, invited the pair to put proposals for continuing the discussion before the EC.<sup>63</sup> The second, September, issue was carefully timed to appear the day before the Executive Committee meeting issued an explicit instruction to close or face disciplinary sanction. Even now, the editors were hopeful of concessions, deciding to pause publication after a third issue, in a holding manoeuvre they hoped might yet pressure the leadership into allowing a full debate, while they appealed their inevitable suspension. The final *Reasoner* included an editorial (dated 31 October) announcing closure in order to give way to a ‘serious socialist journal’ with a larger board, urging the Party leadership to ‘take steps adequate to the political crisis and itself ... initiate the formation of such a journal.’<sup>64</sup>

For its part, the Executive Committee undertook a careful temperature testing of party feeling about the *Reasoner* controversy to inform its next move. A document summarising representations and resolutions made by party branches and groups reveals that disquiet was by no means confined to intellectuals but at the same time indicated partial success for the leadership’s strategy. Thirty-eight representations supported the EC’s instruction to close, though many qualified this by urging space for discussion in the party press, launch of a new party discussion journal or postponement of disciplinary action until matters could be fought out at the next congress. Seventeen representations opposing the EC’s position were received, including from the writers’ group (‘in favour of independent publication, against EC statement, against disciplinary action’). Shawfields branch in Glasgow ‘deplored’ the EC instruction, while a group of Sheffield graduates were recorded as ‘urging T&S to continue publication and offering to help them do so’. Among the ‘non-committals’ were the historians group, who opposed disciplinary action but at the same time asked the editors not to publish a third number.<sup>65</sup>

This game of tactics might have continued for some time longer, although the leadership felt it now had the upper hand. In the event, the *Reasoner* controversy was truncated as events in Hungary showed the limits of ‘de-Stalinisation’. The British party decision to accept – against the eyewitness reports of *Daily Worker* journalist Peter Fryer, whose speaking out resulted in his expulsion – the Soviet line that military intervention was undertaken not to suppress popular revolt but to prevent counter-revolution and fascism polarised the situation. As Soviet tanks moved into Budapest to begin the second, decisive intervention on 4 November, the British leadership, notwithstanding an agonised meeting, passed a resolution that suppressed what they knew

in favour of full support of the Soviet action. 'The socialist system is being saved. The restoration of fascism is being prevented' it declared.<sup>66</sup> Outraged at the suppression of Fryer's reports, many *Daily Worker* staffers joined the next wave of resignees.<sup>67</sup> The *Reasoner* editors' efforts to conciliate and shift the party attitude from within were now redundant. With Saville just duplicating the third issue, including Thompson's 'Through the Smoke of Budapest', a passionate appeal for solidarity with the people of Hungary, there was time only to include a jointly-worded new editorial. This declared that 'the crisis in world communism is now different in kind' and marked 'a crucial turning point for our party'. It demanded the EC dissociate itself from Soviet actions, call for the withdrawal of troops, declare solidarity with the Polish Workers' Party and call immediate district congresses in preparation for a national Congress. With no hope of this occurring, it added 'we urge all those who, like ourselves, will dissociate themselves completely from the leadership of the British Communist Party, not to lose faith in socialism, and to find ways of keeping together'.<sup>68</sup> A few days after the EC moved to suspend Thompson and Saville on 11 November, they resigned. MI5 intercepted the party card that Thompson returned to Ramelson.

### Intellectuals and 'Communist Principle'

We believe that in our attempts to promote a serious discussion of Communist theory, we, and not the Executive Committee, have been defending Communist principle.<sup>69</sup>

Hungary and the British leadership's stance on it turned a stream of resignations into a flood. Yet one should be wary of assuming that the demands of 'communist principle' were self-evident, even in this more polarised situation, or that the decision to leave or to remain within the party betokened a clear dividing line. In making their challenge on grounds of 'communist principle', Thompson and Saville were evoking a range of meanings. 'Communist principle' implied distinction from and rejection of 'bourgeois' notions of abstract, universal moral principle. It entailed in practice, as we have seen, a commitment to self-discipline, the active suppression of individualism in pursuit of the collective interest. As such it could readily be mobilised against doubters, especially intellectuals, and for unity at all costs. Yet it also contained ideas of adherence to methodological principles of collective work, theoretical clarification, discussion and self-criticism. As the *Reasoner* affair proceeded, Thompson became firmer, or at least more forthright, in his view that the suppression of individuality, morality and conscience was an alien importation

with disastrous consequences, reparable however through recovery of homegrown traditions preceding but compatible with Marx. 'Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties', he demanded, via Milton, in 'Winter Wheat in Omsk'. Interestingly, while there is no suggestion that Saville disagreed with such an emphasis, his own invocations of 'communist principle' were almost invariably more pragmatic and tactical.

The positions of other oppositionally-minded intellectuals in the *Reasoner* controversy show a range of perspectives about what 'communist principle' might require, and in many cases these were argued out with the editors, whose correspondence shows ample recognition of the competing imperatives at play for each individual. Randall Swingler, a confidant of Thompson's who had resigned after attending the 24th Congress, was supportive of his friend's efforts but thought by making independent publication rights the issue they were 'narrowing the point of attack' and would be outmanoeuvred by the 'long outdated little clique' in King Street.<sup>70</sup> For him the party was irredeemable, and though he later joined the *New Reasoner* board, he remained aloof from the New Left, a marginal, largely ignored figure among the panoply of ex-communists. Lindsay, already viewed with suspicion in party circles, and like Thompson involved with both the writers' and historians' groups, took a different tack, attempting to act as a 'moderating influence' in the crisis.<sup>71</sup> In April he had urged on Pollitt regarding the Khrushchev revelations the need for 'sensitivity to the full issue and its possibilities', but after the *Reasoner* appeared wrote (jointly with Maurice Cornforth and Jack Beeching) a letter to its editors urging them to respect party discipline. 'Do you honestly expect to find a better party elsewhere?' expressed the nub of the issue as he saw it.<sup>72</sup> Lindsay stayed in, though he argued against suspending Saville and Thompson and strongly protested the EC position on Hungary.<sup>73</sup> His sense of being torn in different directions by the crisis was dramatised with heartfelt acuteness by Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook*. Though her first contribution to the *Reasoner* warned about seeming to become an 'intellectuals' revolt' scapegoating the leadership, she was among the closest to Thompson in putting the question of individual conscience to the forefront. Stalinism resulted not from an 'excess of individualism', but its opposite. 'The safeguard against tyranny, now, as it always has been, is to sharpen individuality, to strengthen individual responsibility, and not to delegate it.'<sup>74</sup> In December she resigned and, enclosing a copy of her resignation letter to Saville, told him she was beginning 'an incredibly witty and ideological novel which I only began inspired by the idea of you people starting a magazine'.<sup>75</sup>

The historians' group, despite its reputation, had no unanimity of view on the *Reasoner* controversy, although its demand that the leadership facilitate

a 'serious' party history was an obvious provocation.<sup>76</sup> Apart from the Thompsons and Saville, only Hilton contributed to the published *Reasoner*. His contribution, while supportive, warned that discussion should not be confined to intellectuals but must aim at overcoming the mistrust of non-communists in the labour movement. As the affair proceeded, his support intensified, and he more than once urged the editors to continue publishing even at the cost of expulsion.<sup>77</sup> After Hungary, he and Christopher Hill were the main instigators of a letter published in the *New Statesman* on 1 December after *The Daily Worker* refused it. Condemning the British leadership's 'uncritical support' of the Soviet action in Hungary, as the 'undesirable culmination of years of distortion of fact', it is sometimes identified with the historians' group but was in fact signed by a range of party intellectuals, including Hobsbawm, Victor Kiernan, Lindsay and E.A. Thompson, but also Lessing, Chimen Abramsky, Ron Meek and George Houston (who had produced *The Rhyming Reasoner*), Hyman Levy, Paul Hogarth, Robert Browning and Henry Collins.<sup>78</sup> MI5 telechecks on King Street show Matthews summoned from a meeting to speak to *Daily Worker* editor Campbell on 20 November about the letter, and that by 23rd a tortuous justification had been found for refusing it. 'Hitherto controversial letters have either been signed by individuals or by groups of people in the same branch or locality', wrote Campbell to Hill; printing it would therefore establish a new principle. Hill apparently reacted 'coldly' to this news, and warned that it would be sent elsewhere.<sup>79</sup> Hilton resigned soon after, according to a report of an intercepted conversation; 'Saville tells Ralph [Raphael Samuel] that Rodney is resigning, he is joining the Labour Party but is doing so (?resigning) without any fuss.'<sup>80</sup> Hill stayed to complete a critical minority report for the party's commission on inner-party democracy. His position on the *Reasoner* was that Thompson and Saville should have done more to get their views published in the party press, and he declined to subscribe.<sup>81</sup> Thompson, regretting this, surmised to Hilton that Hill's position as a reader of Russian might incline him to a view that 'he should bear as much guilt as anyone, and should stand beside them'.<sup>82</sup> Hill resigned after having tried, and failed, to shift the party at the next congress.

Other group members took a variety of paths; the young Raphael Samuel left in 1956, he and Kiernan (who left in 1959) were both involved with the New Left. Medievalist E.A. Thompson left in 1956. Brian Pearce published a pseudonymous pamphlet under the imprint of the *New Reasoner* in 1957; he soon after joined Gerry Healy and Peter Fryer's Trotskyist *Newsletter* group and was expelled from the CP.<sup>83</sup> Among those who stayed in the party (often earlier recruits than the leavers) were A.L. Morton, Maurice Dobb, Betty Grant and Klugmann. Dona Torr, acknowledged by many on the group as a major influence, died in 1957, having taken no part in the controversy. As for the chair

of the group, Hobsbawm, he was one of the very few intellectuals to remain in the party for the long haul while also establishing a formidable independent reputation. Friendly with Saville, Hobsbawm subscribed to the *Reasoner* despite finding its criticisms insufficiently constructive.<sup>84</sup> Minutes of the historians' group through 1956 show that he did what he could within the bounds of party discipline to support open discussion. A proposal he made in late 1956 to widen the membership and activities of the group beyond party lines was certainly partly designed to make good on his promise to resist any attempt to exclude Thompson and Saville from it (as well perhaps as to provide a more credible base for his own historical work), and he contributed an essay on Marx to the first *New Reasoner*.<sup>85</sup> Hobsbawm signed the *New Statesman* letter, but his individual correspondence was more forgiving of the leadership, describing the Soviet intervention as a 'at best, a tragic necessity' of which he approved 'albeit with a heavy heart'.<sup>86</sup> Such a balancing act irritated both loyalists and leavers, but fell short of provoking expulsion in a weakened party.

A final word goes to an anonymous remainer, a member of the party cultural committee who in late 1957 wrote a document opening discussion on *Declaration*, a collection of essays revitalising a longer-running debate around artistic and intellectual 'commitment'. The book was mocked as sentimental in the *Daily Worker*, but this writer engaged seriously with the argument of contributor Doris Lessing, that communism involved a basic ethical conflict between what is due to the collective and what to the individual. In words that might have passed muster with Thompson, he wrote:

I believe Doris Lessing is right when she says that a writer must speak with his small personal voice ... I believe that if what he wants to say in this personal voice conflicts with the party line then he must still say it. For it is not culture that must serve the party, it is the Party that must serve culture ... This question of the relation between the individual and collective is the deepest problem of the socialist revolution. We have skirted round it, we have never faced it, and so we have shown ourselves indifferent to it. That I believe was the reason why Doris Lessing left the party.<sup>87</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The dissidents of 1956, whether they left or remained, interpreted the demands of 'communist principle' in ways that were highly specific and individualised. This points to a complex picture of experience and commitment, adding weight to established arguments for acute sensitivity to the diversity of biographical and other contexts in party history. The MI5 files on these

figures accord occasional flashes of insight but overall give little indication that the indiscriminately extensive surveillance indulged in brought them much nearer to understanding the reasons for communist allegiance among these intellectuals, nor why some would leave and others remain. For this one needs to engage in ‘imaginative understanding’, ‘thoughtful reflection grounded in historical evidence about the ideologies, cultures and experiences our subjects inhabited’.<sup>88</sup> If Thompson’s appeal to conscience and humanity crystallised doubts for many, there were also those for whom this was politically naïve, and while a decision to leave the party can look obvious in retrospect, it was often not so at the time. As for Thompson himself, the released files add a little to our sense of his biography and confirm some continuities in his thinking, especially his concern with traditions of English moral radicalism. Although doing little to support any view of him as a strong voice of criticism inside the party prior to 1956, they help demonstrate the existence of a critically-minded subculture, a network of incipient dissidence that made the *Reasoner* episode possible. Critical attitudes were by no means confined to party intellectuals, let alone to one particular group, and the *Reasoner* drew support from many ‘ordinary’ party members. Yet the ability of the party partially to tolerate and contain these oppositional tendencies complicates the picture. 1956 for Thompson was life-changing in a way that differed even from his closest contemporaries like Saville and Swingler. His oft-quoted pun that he ‘commenced to reason’ in 1956 referenced the *Reasoner* episode but could not do full justice to the complexity of how it was experienced.

## Notes

- 1 This article revises and expands an introduction to re-publication of E.P. Thompson’s ‘Through the Smoke of Budapest’, [https://revistanuestrahistoria.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/nh2\\_2016\\_madeleine.pdf](https://revistanuestrahistoria.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/nh2_2016_madeleine.pdf) (date accessed?). I am grateful to Adrià Llacuna and the editors of *Nuestra Historia* for permission to reprint, and to Kevin Morgan for helpful comments on a draft.
- 2 E.P. Thompson, ‘Through the Smoke of Budapest’, *The Reasoner* 3 (November 1956).
- 3 National Archives podcast, <http://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/security-service-file-release-september-2016/> (date accessed?). Files on Thompson run from KV 2/4290 to KV 2/4294.
- 4 Letter from D. Haldane Porter to John (Jack) Rennie, 15 June 1956, KV 2/4292. The letter excerpted (document 94a) was from Thompson to Bert Ramelson, 28 May 1956 and is also available at the Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC) Manchester, CP/CENT/ORG/18/04.
- 5 An authoritative recent study of the security services’ monitoring of communists is William Styles, ‘British Domestic Security Policy and Communist Subversion 1945–64’ (unpublished DPhil, Cambridge, September 2016).

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- 6 Melissa Benn, review of David Aaronovitch, *Party Animals* (Jonathan Cape, 2016), <https://melissabenn.co.uk/writings/under-the-hammer-and-sickle-david-aaronovitchs-party-animals/> (date accessed?).
- 7 Michal Schatz, 'The Postwar Decade and "The Cage of Party Orthodoxy"', *Socialist History* 51 (2017): 8–28 .
- 8 John McIlroy, 'John Saville and Stalinism: An Exploration', and Paul Flowers, 'EP Thompson and the Soviet Experience' in Paul Flowers and John McIlroy (eds), *1956: John Saville, EP Thompson and The Reasoner* (London: Merlin, 2016).
- 9 Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times* (London: Penguin, 1992), 206.
- 10 Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), 117.
- 11 McIlroy, 'John Saville' takes Saville to task for 'softness' on communism (363); Flowers, 'EP Thompson' argues that Thompson's 'sentimental attachment' to popular front communism precluded a serious engagement with Trotskyism (423).
- 12 First person accounts include John Saville 'The 20th Congress and the British Communist Party', Malcolm MacEwen 'The Day the Party had to Stop', Mervyn Jones 'Days of Tragedy and Farce', all in *Socialist Register*, 1976; John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin, 2003); Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 197–210. David Renton, 'The Communist Party Historians and 1956', in Keith Flett (ed.), *1956 and All That* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 63–78 and Perry Anderson 'The Age of E.J.H.', *London Review of Books*, 3 October 2002, 3–7, both question aspects of Hobsbawm's account.
- 13 See Terry Brotherstone 'History, Truth, Context and Meaning – Two Memories of the 1956–7 Crisis in the CPGB', in Flett, *1956 and All That*, 79–103.
- 14 Files on Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Jack Lindsay, Doris Lessing and Randall Swingler are selectively consulted here. Saville's remains unavailable. Swingler's released files only go up to the start of 1956.
- 15 See John Callaghan and Mark Pythian 'State Surveillance and communist lives: rose Cohen and the Early British Communist Milieu', *Journal of Intelligence History* 12, no. 2 (2013): 134–55; Ben Harker 'Jack Lindsay's Alienation', *History Workshop Journal* 82, no. 1 (2016): 83–103; Geoff Andrews, *Shadow Man: At the Heart of the Cambridge Spy Circle* (I.B.Tauris, 2015).
- 16 See essays in Andy Croft (ed.), *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1998); Kevin Morgan 'Comparative Communist History and the Biographical Turn', *History Compass* 10, no. 6 (June 2012) and *John McIlroy and Alan Campbell Party People, Communist Lives* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2002).
- 17 26 June 1949 report from Chief Constable of Halifax, document 31A, KV 2/4290.
- 18 James Smith, *British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 19 Jennifer Luff, 'Covert and Overt Operations: Interwar Political Policing in the United States and the United Kingdom', *American Historical Review* 122, no. 3 (June 2017): 727–57.
- 20 See document 30a, KV2 4290.
- 21 The observations here draw from Styles, 'British Domestic Security Policy'.
- 22 Styles, 'British Domestic Security Policy', 53–4.
- 23 Styles, 'British Domestic Security Policy'.
- 24 For a summary discussion see John Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict: The CPGB 1951–68* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2004), 50–5.
- 25 'Song of the Permanent Party Man' from *The Rhyming Reasoner*, CP/IND/MISC/19/11, LHASC. *The Rhyming Reasoner* was a satirical songsheet produced by Glasgow economists Ron Meek and George Houston. Authored by 'W.J. McGonagall' from 'the Elysian Fields', its two issues are well worth seeking out.
- 26 Thompson, 'Through the Smoke of Budapest'.

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- 27 Saville joined during student days at LSE in 1934, Thompson in 1942, also as a student.
- 28 Callaghan, *Cold War*, 94.
- 29 E.P. Thompson, 'Edgell Rickword', in *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (New York, New Press, 1994), 236.
- 30 See Schatz 'Post-war Decade' for a renewal of claims about the relatively wide extent of interpretive freedom permitted to intellectuals.
- 31 Thompson, 'Edgell Rickword', 236.
- 32 He made the admission in a 1950 party questionnaire that members or prospective members of national committees had to complete, intercepted by MI5. Lindsay file, KV 2/3255.
- 33 Thompson, 'Edgell Rickword', 234–5.
- 34 Thompson, 'Edgell Rickword', 236.
- 35 Andy Croft, *Comrade Heart: A Life of Randall Swingler* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 226.
- 36 Letter to Emile Burns, document 441, KV 2/4290, and to Margot Heinemann on 4 June 1952, KV 2/4290.
- 37 Hilton, letter to Ken Graves of Midlands District CP (Hilton was in Worcester Branch) 26 September 1955 KV2/4298.
- 38 See MacEwen, 'Day the Party had to Stop', 26.
- 39 See George Matthews, *World News*, 17 March 1956; Harry Pollitt 'The Twentieth Congress of the CPSU – and the Role of Stalin', *World News*, 21 April and 5 May 1956.
- 40 Rajani Palme Dutt, 'Notes of the Month; The Great Debate', *Labour Monthly* (May 1956).
- 41 Rajani Palme Dutt, 'Notes of the Month: New times, New Measures', *Labour Monthly* (June 1956; article dated 16 May 1956).
- 42 For Thompson's relationship with Klugmann and the background to their correspondence see Andrews, *Shadow Man*, 190–1.
- 43 Letter to Klugmann, 22 March 1956 CP/CENT/ORG/18/04, LHASC, also letter to Bert Ramelson 19 March 1956, KV 2/ 4291.
- 44 Letter to Pollitt, 22 March 1956, KV 2/ 4291.
- 45 Letter to Pollitt, 5 April 1956, KV 2/ 4292. Letter to John Saville, 4 April 1956, UDJS 1/68 Saville papers, Hull University Archives.
- 46 Saville to Gollan, 17 April 1956, CP/CENT/SEC/19/02, LHASC.
- 47 Minutes of 80th meeting of the committee of the Historians' Group, 8 April 1956, CP/CENT/CULT/06/01. Hilton had written to the group secretary regretting his absence and remarking that he 'would have enjoyed listening to J Klugmann explain himself ', intercept note 6/4/56 to Edwin Payne, KV 2/4298.
- 48 Letter to Ramelson, 10 April 1956, KV 2/ 4292.
- 49 Resolution from Halifax branch, KV2 /4292.
- 50 13 April telephone intercept Gollan to Ramelson, KV 2/ 4292. Gollan said Thompson had a right to express his views and that he had a 'record of work and activity for which they were thankful'. Ramelson did manage to persuade Thompson to stay on the DC, though he did not moderate his criticisms.
- 51 Letter to Arnold Kettle enclosing suggestions for a minimum statement, n.d but early May 1956, KV 2/ 4292.
- 52 The 'Lessons of the 20th Congress of the CPSU', resolution of the executive committee of the CPGB, adopted 13 May, published in the *Daily Worker*, 16 May and *World News*, 19 May 1956. Thompson continued to press Ramelson on the deficiencies of the resolution, see letter n.d. but postmarked 16 May 1956, KV 2/4292.
- 53 John Saville, 'Problems of the Communist Party', *World News*, 19 May, 1956.

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- 54 Letter to Arnold Kettle, n.d. but early May 1956, KV 2 4292. E.P. Thompson, 'Winter Wheat in Omsk', *World News*, 30 June 1956.
- 55 Lascar extract (Lascar was code for the King Street listening device), 22 May 1956, Document 93b KV 2/ 4292.
- 56 Thompson to Ramelson, 28 May 1956, CP/CENT/ORG/18/04, also KV 2/ 4292.
- 57 Letter to Howard Hill, n.d. but June 1956, KV 2/4292.
- 58 Letter to Gordon Schaffer, 12 June 1956, KV 2 /4292. See also letters to Jim Roche and Jack Cohen in the same file.
- 59 Thompson and Saville disputed the EC's claim that independent publication constituted a breach of party rules, arguing that no such explicit rule existed and that the EC relied on an 'explanation that under Rule 27 the EC is empowered to interpret the other rules as it sees fit, and has found it possible to interpret several rules to mean what in fact they do not say'. 'Statement by the Editors of *The Reasoner*,' *The Reasoner* 3 (November 1956). However, as the EC pointed out, the general principle that democratic centralism entailed control of the party press by the elected committees of the party was well understood.
- 60 Letter from Saville to Gollan 13 July 1956. CP/CENT/ORG/18/04.
- 61 Thompson, 'Winter Wheat in Omsk' and George Matthews 'A Caricature of Our Party' *World News*, 30 June 1956.
- 62 Thompson 'Reply to George Matthews' *The Reasoner* 1 (July 1956).
- 63 Thompson to Howard [Hill], 9 November 1956, CP/CENT/ORG/18/04.
- 64 Editorial, *The Reasoner* 3 (November 1956).
- 65 CP/CENT/SEC 19/02, LHASC. The historians' group position was a tactical one that had been discussed by Saville and Hobsbawm. At a meeting of the group on 30 September, it was noted that some had hoped the group might do something to bring an end to *The Reasoner* impasse, but that the proper route for representations to the editors and party leaders was through branch or individual action. CP/CENT/CULT/06/01.
- 66 EC statement on Hungary, published in the *Daily Worker*, 5 November 1956, p. 1.
- 67 Several contributed to or supported *The Reasoner* including celebrated cartoonist 'Gabriel' (Jimmy Friell).
- 68 Editorial, *The Reasoner* 3 (November 1956).
- 69 Statement by the editors of *The Reasoner*, sent by Thompson to Bert Ramelson with his party card, 13 December 1956, KV 2/4292.
- 70 Croft, *Comrade Heart*, 226, 228.
- 71 Lindsay to Pollitt, 2 April 1956, KV 2/ 3256.
- 72 Cornforth, Beeching and Lindsay to Thompson and Saville, CP/CENT/SEC/18/04.
- 73 Lindsay to Burns, 13 November 1956, KV 2/3256.
- 74 Doris Lessing 'A letter to the editors', *The Reasoner* 2 (September 1956), and 'The Cult of the Individual' 3 (November 1956).
- 75 Lessing to Saville, n.d. but covering a letter to Gollan dated 11 December 1956, UDJS 1/68.
- 76 This was, as Hobsbawm notes, the group's 'only collective intervention' in the crisis, *Interesting Times*, 207. The resulting commission had Brian Pearce and Hobsbawm for the historians, Pollitt and Dutt for the leadership and Klugmann, the eventual writer of an anodyne official history, in the middle.
- 77 Rodney Hilton, 'Labour Communist Relations', *The Reasoner* 2 (September 1956); letter to Saville and Thompson, 30 July 1956, UDJS 1/71, Saville papers, and another on 2 November (a copy of which was provided to me by Richard Saville).

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- 78 *New Statesman*, 1 December 1956. Evan Smith's blog has useful pieces on the letter and the historians' involvement, see <https://hatfulofhistory.wordpress.com/category/historians-group-of-the-cpgeb/> (date accessed?).
- 79 Hill, KV 2 3945.
- 80 Telecheck, 22.1.57, doc 92A KV 2 4299 Hilton.
- 81 Hill to Thompson and Saville, 31 July 1956, CP/CENT/SEC/19/02, LHASC.
- 82 Thompson to Hilton, 13 Aug 1956, UDJS 1/71. Saville papers.
- 83 Joseph Redman 'The Communist Party and the Labour Left, 1925–29', *Reasoner Pamphlet* (1 April 1957). For group members' trajectories see Renton 'The Communist Party Historians'.
- 84 Hobsbawm to 'Stam' 15 July 1956, UDJS 1/71.
- 85 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Dr Marx and the Victorian Critics', *New Reasoner* 1 (Summer 1957). On proposals to reorganize the group see minutes of 93rd (emergency) full committee meeting, 25 November, 1956 and other group minutes on CP/CENT/CULT/05/13.
- 86 Hobsbawm, letter to the *Daily Worker*, 9 November 1956. For a critical view of Hobsbawm's role see Terry Brotherstone, 'Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012): Some Questions from a Never-completed Conversation About History', *Critique* 41, no. 2 (2013): 276.
- 87 'Opening of Discussion on Declaration; Cultural Committee 13/12/57', CP/CENT/CULT/1/2.
- 88 A point well made by Luff, 'Covert and Overt Operations', 755.