

COMMUNIST LEADERS in the Chamber of Deputies, at left. In the center is Maurice Thorez, secretary general of the party. Jacques Duclos is at his left and standing before him is his wife, Jeannette Vermeersch. Below, a Right-Wing gibe at "de-Thorezization." Thorez is saying, "I'd rather kick my own personality cult—it's less painful."



## French Communism Shrugs Off Stalin

With remarkable sang-froid, the party has switched from Stalinism to Khrushchevism. Now its aim is to capture the Left via a Popular Front.

By SUZANNE LABIN

PARIS. IF history were logical, de-Stalinization should be a terrible embarrassment to the French Communist party. For this impressive machine—with its half-million adherents, its twelve thousand full-time salaried employes, its one hundred daily, weekly and monthly papers, its one hundred and thirty associated organizations, including the Confédération Générale du Travail with a membership of more than two million workers—constituted the most Stalinized Communist movement in the world outside the U.S.S.R. The following cenotaph occupied the entire front page of *France Nouvelle*, the party's leading weekly, on March 14, 1953: "Stalin's heart has ceased to beat . . . but Stalin lives on; he is immortal. The sublime name of the master-genius of world communism will shine with dazzling brilliance down the centuries and will forever be pronounced with love by a grateful hu-

manity. To the very last, we shall remain faithful to Stalin. Communists strive to merit the honorable title of Stalinist. Eternal glory to the great Stalin, whose masterly scientific works are imperishable \* \* \*."

In the days that followed, artists, writers and professors like Picasso, Aragon, Paul Eluard, Florimond Bonte, Roger Garaudy—who noisily claim kinship with rationalism and pretend to incarnate the revolutionary tradition for which there is "no supreme Savior, no God, no Caesar, no tribune"—lauded Stalin in such terms as these: "the legendary strategist," "the prodigious architect," "the most gigantic Titan of all time," "the brilliant sage." Never since the Pharaohs has there been baser flattery. Yet even the toadies of Ramses II had the excuse of living under the rule of a despot. It wrings one's heart to think that such specimens of Byzantine sycophancy were written in the twentieth century by free men in a country as traditionally irreverent as France.

The French Communist luminaries did not confine themselves to swinging

the censer in Stalin's honor, however. Of all the Communist parties outside Russia, the French had become—in the "gigantic Titan's" own image—the most monolithic in its action, the most primitive in its dogmas, the most shameless in its falsehoods, the most vulgar in its abuse. It went so far as to dose itself with the indigestible ingredients of Stalinist orthodoxy. This could no more be forced on French stomachs than the sedulous "Soviet realism" in art (a fact embarrassingly brought out when the portrait Picasso sent to *L'Humanité* in homage to the departed Stalin was refused because there was no sign of the coat-hanger moustache or Marshal's badges required by official iconography in the U.S.S.R.).

**B**UT the distinguishing feature in the mimicry of the Stalinist model—the one which set off the French Communist party from its Italian, Belgian and German opposite numbers—was its creation of an exact copy of the Stalinist personality cult to surround the national vice-god, Maurice Thorez.

Though Thorez is not lacking in the qualities of an organizer and a tribune, there are foreign Communist leaders, like Togliatti, who are his intellectual superiors. Yet none of them ever heard such delirious psalms of praise rising about his person as Thorez did on his fiftieth birthday. Twenty thousand presents, three hundred odes, twenty processions and a luxurious Hotchkiss automobile were showered on him. For the chief of the proletarian party does not disdain material possessions. He lives at a rate of a million francs (\$2,800) a month, while the average monthly wage of the French proletarian is 50,000 francs (\$140).

It would appear logical, then, that the de-canonizing of Stalin must have dealt the most Stalinist party in the world a damaging blow. Yet all reports agree that the Communist rank and file in France has hardly been shaken by the iconoclasts who smashed their god. Their usual reaction may be summed up as follows: "Whew! Well, we're delivered from a taboo; no one can taunt us any more with our servitude." To understand (Continued on Page 56)

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# French Communism

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this reaction, one must make a closer study of the physiology of the French Communist party.

**F**OR a long time the lower orders have been drilled to leave all party-line decisions to the top brass. These decisions arrive "ready to wear"; that is to say, complete with all the indispensable phraseology. Nowhere are politics so amorphous as in the inner circles of this party, whose tension from outside seems to be so electric. The news of Stalin's apostasy, which struck the Stalinist cult like lightning, and the thunderbolts of the Kremlin's foreign policy thus are emanations from Olympus for the French rank and file, accepted by them as *necessities which are beyond their comprehension*. The only thing which really interests them is that the party provide them with an efficient machine for the everyday political and social conflict.

For the militants in the ranks, the Stalinization of the French party merely represented a stucco frieze artificially plastered on the party's house. And a number of the small fry among them, who had devoted themselves to class warfare in Moscow's wake without having completely lost the sense of decency instilled in them by the old bourgeois democracy, had in fact been disturbed by the show of idolatry. These people are not displeased that the frieze has now been demolished; the rest allow themselves to be managed by their leaders as before.

**A**S for the lowly adherents who can still think, these—plunged for decades in the conformism of their environment—no longer possess the resilience to pass from anxiety to revolt against their party. At most, they use de-Stalinization as an excuse to loosen their tongues, not on the too dangerous subject of Stalin, but about the petty grievances they harbor against their bureaucrats.

It is only among the professional thinkers that the disarray has been really noticeable. For the intellectuals of the party it has been a rude shock. They avoid each other, even flee from themselves. They preserve absolute silence, which in these thesis-mongers indicates considerable embarrassment. For the last two months none of the Communist cultural reviews has published a word about de-Stalinization. Following the collapse of an idol, it is normal for the priests who have hallowed it to feel themselves more affected than their flock. For three decades, Communist intellectuals were obliged to practice a thousand contortions, at one time denying that Stalin was shedding torrents

of blood, at another trying to prove that this blood was the fertilizer necessary for the growth of the Socialist paradise.

By dint of philosophic acrobatics they succeeded in building an enormous basilica of sophisms to the glory of the Stalin regime. Now they are given to understand by their new Moscow bosses that this very basilica was founded upon the crimes of him who was worshiped therein, and on the bones of the millions of innocent people he sacrificed. In their inmost hearts these dialecticians must hear themselves replying that they knew it all along.

**T**HE anomalous position of the writer Pierre Hervé illustrates the confusion in which Communist intellectuals flounder today. Hervé was noisily excluded from the party some weeks before the Twentieth Congress last winter because he had denounced the human fetishes and ideologists of the party in his book, "*Révolution et les Fétiches*." But as he had tactlessly placed his book under the aegis of the most grotesque of all fetishes, Stalin, he now sees himself repudiated both by the anti- and the pro-fetish factions.

The de-Stalinization issue has served to crystallize a long-standing rivalry between two party groups. One represents the party bureaucracy and includes Maurice Thorez; his wife, Jeannette Vermeersch; Jacques Duclos, the secretary of the party; Jean Servin, head of the clandestine organization, and Laurent Casanova, superintendent of the intellectual branch. The other group is composed of the leaders especially engaged in the action of workmen's and peasants' syndicates, including the Deputy François Billoux, Benoit Frachon, chief of the Confédération Générale du Travail, and the party wheelhorses, Léon Mauvais and Waldeck-Rochet. There is no space to dwell here on all the grievances which split these two factions. Let us say that they have had very little to do with ideology, but reflect the positions and ambitions of these two groups in the party machine.

**O**NE of the most explosive causes of friction lies in the abuse of her influence by Jeannette Vermeersch. *Cherchez la femme*, says the French proverb. Daughter of a docker, after a year's training in the party school at Moscow she became, via a marriage at court, Moscow's special representative in Thorez' bedroom. This 45-year-old sergeant-major, uncultivated but adroit, and devoured by a passion for authority, behaves like a veritable autocrat in the French Communist party. The ex-heroes or heirs to the

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"LITTLE-STALIN"—Before de-Stalinization, Maurice Thorez (left), head of the French Communists, was the center of an exact copy of the Stalinist personality cult.

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throne—André Marty, the famous "mutineer of the Black Sea" in 1917, Charles Tillon "the trainer," Auguste Lecoeur "the militant model"—were expelled from the party during recent years on various pretexts but in fact because they had timidly rebelled against the "patronne" Jeannette.

It was against this background of more or less sordid wrangling that the Central Committee of the French party met last March 22 to ratify de-Stalinization in France. Thorez was conspicuous by his absence. It is an old habit of his to run away whenever there is trouble ahead. He had already done it in 1939, when his country was attacked by the Germans. He entrusted his wife and Jacques Duclos with the draft of a resolution recommending a very prudent de-Stalinization.

**B**UT the opposition—Billoux, Waldeck-Rochet, et al—called for a drastic lancing of the abscess. Feeling that for once the going was good, the group dared to voice its opinions so strongly that Jacques Duclos was obliged to give in. He agreed to a distinctly more anti-Stalin text than that of Thorez. On seeing this, Jeannette Vermeersch had all the copies of Thorez' draft collected and burned so that no one should know that the vice-god's authority had been thwarted.

But for an old campaigner like the French Communist party, trained to negotiate all kinds of corners, even hairpin bends, this is only a minor crisis, which it will surmount without difficulty. Let us remember that the Communists have swallowed many other indignities: the assassination of the October revolutionaries, the pact with Hitler, the trial of the doctors—all crimes which callously made mockery of their earliest ideas.

So they will swallow this latest pill as easily as the others; all the more so because for once the "turning" leads in the right direction—that of wisdom, not of folly. Yesterday, Stalin was downgrading foreign Communist leaders to the rank of flunkies, to whom he gave orders to apply a line of policy on such and such a day and by such and such means. Today, Khrushchev and his colleagues are giving them the rank of major-domos, with the right to use a little common sense. They are

told: "Here are your orders; choose your own means and time, provided you don't put it off too long." Never have the Communist chiefs been given so much latitude.

For all these reasons, there are grounds for supposing that at the next Party Congress, to be held in July, everything will be fixed up with a few adjustments in terminology and in the bureaucracy. Thorez, the Stalinist, will probably not be eliminated, for he is too popular with the workers; but he may find that he has become an ingredient in a borsch soup of Russian type—that is to say, in a kind of secretariat composed of five members on an equal footing, in place of the three whom he dominates today. And the lot of them will continue to owe obedience to the silent partners in Moscow, though in a slightly more supple form.

There is even a chance the shop will run better, since its managers are drawing in their claws and showing their velvet paws. For the main idea governing the policy of the men in the Kremlin at the moment is that they will be able to realize their unalterable ambition of world hegemony by peaceful means, if they manage to gain control of the Socialist parties. The Popular Front is the key to the present relaxed policy; it is a means to an end.

**R**UNNING true to form, they will follow their new course with tireless persistence and a total absence of scruples and self-respect. They will throw on the rubbish heap as many old tribunes and present underlings, as many doctrines, slogans, or set-ups as may be needed to appease the grudges and allay the mistrust of the Socialists. They will not even hesitate to propose organic unity with them.

It is sad to think that now some honest French democrats are willing to join a front with the Communist party—at a time when that party has been proved an ally of a tyranny exposed before the world. These democrats do not yet realize that wherever the non-Communist Left has accepted an alliance with communism, its fate has been sealed in three ways: initially, it acts as a cloak for the Communists; then it hands over power to them; finally, it disappears into the ditch. Such is the danger behind the drive of the de-Stalinized party for a popular front.