

## **Becoming a Communist**

(*Witness*, by Whittaker Chambers, Regnery History, 1952, pages 153-159.)

Sooner or later, one of my good friends is sure to ask me: How did it happen that a man like you became a Communist? Each time I wince, not at the personal question, but at the failure to grasp the fact that a man does not, as a rule, become a Communist because he is attracted to Communism, but because he is driven to despair by the crisis of history through which the world is passing.

I force myself to answer: In the West, all intellectuals become Communists because they are seeking the answer to one of two problems: the problem of war or the problem of economic crises.

This is not to say that personal factors play no part in making a man a Communist. Obviously, they do, if only because every man's character and experience, and therefore his biography, are different from every other man's. No two are ever the same. Hence some men will always be more susceptible to Communism than other men, just as some are less resistant to disease than other men. But whatever factors make one man more susceptible than another to Communism once he is driven to entertain it at all, it will be found that, almost without exception, the intellectuals of the West are driven to entertain it in terms of just two challenges: the problem of war and the problem of economic crisis. This is equally true, even for men of untrained minds or without the habit of reflection; men who find it difficult to explain to themselves or to others the forces that move them to Communism. For while the susceptibility to Communism varies among men, the problem of war and economic crisis do not vary. In this period of history, they are constant, and must be until, in one way or another, they are solved.

Some intellectuals are primarily moved by the problem of war. Others are first moved by the economic problem. Both crises are aspects of a greater crisis of history for which Communism offers a plausible explanation and which it promises to end. When an intellectual joins the Communist Party, he does so primarily because he sees no other way of ending the crisis of history. In effect, his act is an act of despair, regardless of whether or not that is how he thinks of it. And to the degree that it is an act of despair, he will desire the party to use him in overcoming that crisis of history which is at the root of his despair.

There is a widespread notion that men become Communists for reasons of material gain. There are always a certain number of "rice Christians" in any movement that has anything at all to offer them. Of all movements in the world, the Communist Party has the least to offer a man bent on personal advantage. For the intellectual of any ability, it has nothing whatever to offer in the way of gain. In the days when I joined the Communist Party, it could offer those who joined it only the certainty of being poor and pariahs. During the 1930s and 1940s, when Communism became intellectually fashionable, there was a time when Communist Party patronage could dispose of jobs or careers in a number of fields. But the jobs that the Communist Party could give, or the careers it could further, presupposed that the men and women in them must have some ability to hold them at all. Almost without exception such men and women could have made their careers much more

profitably and comfortably outside the Communist Party. For the party must always demand more than it gives. What material advantage, for example, could the Communist Party possibly offer an Alger Hiss, a Noel Field, a Dr. Klaus Fuchs, equal to the demands it made on him? This persistent notion that men become or remain Communists from motives of personal advantage constantly baffles those who hold it with the fact that Communist parties everywhere are filled with talented men and women, often of good family, and that these people are precisely among the most fanatical Communists, those most likely to be found in the party's most hazardous and criminal activities.

Nor do Marxist dialectics or Marxian economic theories have much to do with the reason why men become and remain Communists. I have met few Communists who were more than fiddlers with the dialectic (the intellectual tool whereby Marxist theoreticians probe and gauge history's laws of motion). I have met few Communists whom I thought knew more than the bare rudiments of Marxian economics, or cared to. But I have never known a Communist who was not acutely aware of the crisis of history whose solution he found in Communism's practical program, its vision and its faith.

Few Communists have ever been made simply by reading the works of Marx or Lenin. The crisis of history makes Communists; Marx and Lenin merely offer them an explanation of the crisis and what to do about it. Thus a graph of Communist growth would show that its numbers and its power increased in waves roughly equivalent to each new crest of crisis. The same horror and havoc of the First World War, which made the Russian Revolution possible, recruited the ranks of the first Communist parties of the West. Secondary manifestations of crisis augmented them—the rise of fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, and the Spanish Civil War. The economic crisis which reached the United States in 1929 swept thousands into the Communist Party or under its influence. The military crisis of World War II swept in millions more; for example, a third of the voting population of France and of Italy. The crisis of the Third World War is no doubt holding those millions in place and adding to them. For whatever else the rest of the world may choose to believe, it can be said without reservation that Communists believe World War III inevitable.

Under pressure of the crisis, his decision to become a Communist seems to the man who makes it as a choice between a world that is dying and a world that is coming to birth, as an effort to save by political surgery whatever is sound in the foredoomed body of a civilization which nothing less drastic can save—a civilization foredoomed first of all by its reluctance to face the fact that the crisis exists or to face it with the force and clarity necessary to overcome it.

Thus, the Communist Party presents itself as the one organization of the will to survive the crisis in a civilization where that will is elsewhere divided, wavering, or absent. It is in the name of that will to survive the crisis, which is not theoretical but closes in from all sides, that the Communist first justifies the use of terror and tyranny, which are repugnant to most men by nature and which the whole tradition of the West specifically repudiates.

It is in the name of that will to survive that Communism turns to the working class as a source of unspoiled energy which may salvage the crumbling of the West. For the

revolution is never stronger than the failure of civilization. Communism is never stronger than the failure of other faiths.

It is the crisis that makes men Communists and it is the crisis that keeps men Communists. For the Communist who breaks with Communism must break not only with the power of its vision and its faith. He must break in the full knowledge that he will find himself facing the crisis of history, but this time without even that solution which Communism presents, and crushed by the knowledge that the solution which he sought through Communism is evil against God and man.

I was one of those drawn to Communism by the problem of war. For me that problem began in 1923. In that year, I went to Europe with Meyer Shapiro who had been my classmate at Columbia College. He had already begun those studies that were later to make him a professor of Fine Arts at Columbia and one of the outstanding art critics in the country. We planned to spend the summer in Europe's galleries and museums.

I saw the galleries and museums. But I also saw something else. I saw for the first time the crisis of history and its dimension. It was not only that Germany was in a state of manic desperation, reeling from inflation, readying for revolution while three Allied armies occupied the Rhineland and refugees flooded back from the occupied area into the shattered country. It was not only the aftermath of the World War, the ruins of northern France or what Bernanos would presently call "those vast cemeteries in the moonlight." What moved me was the evidence that World War II was predictably certain and that it was extremely improbable that civilization could survive it. (In this I was mistaken, though, by the end of the Second World War, civilized Europe would shrink to little more than it had been in the Dark Ages.) It seemed to me that the world had reached a crisis on a scale and of a depth such as had been known only once or twice before in history. (And in that I was not mistaken at all.)

During my years at Columbia College, I had known a number of socialists, including two or three extreme left-wingers. They had devoted a great deal of time, tact, and patience to winning me to their views. They had no effect on me whatever. What their theories could not do, the crisis did. For, in searching for the answer to the crisis, I found none but socialism.

I returned to the United States and plunged into Fabian Socialism, studying as I seldom had before in my life. I abstracted and made mountainous notes on the dull dry works of the Webbs, R.H. Tawney, Hobhouse, and the endless volumes in which G.D.H. Cole urged Guild socialism. There was no life in those books. There were statistics and theories. The reek of life was missing.

I brushed them aside. Socialism was not the answer. It was perfectly clear, too, that if socialism was to stem the crisis and remake the world, socialism involved a violent struggle to get and keep political power. At some point, socialism would have to consolidate its power by force. The Webbs made no provision for getting or keeping power. Moreover, I had a profound antipathy to force. I was glad to shelve the problem.

In that disenchanted period I returned to Columbia College to major in history, attending classes by day and working at night to pay my way. History was medieval history and I rehearsed in the collapse of Rome the crisis of history in our own time.

One day, by sheer chance, there came into my hands a little pamphlet of Lenin's. It was called *A Soviet At Work*. In a simple strong prose, it described a day in the life of a local soviet. The reek of life was on it. This was not theory or statistics. This was socialism in practice. This was the thing itself. This was how it worked.

I quickly passed on to Lenin's *State and Revolution* and the *ABC of Communism* (its three authors were all shot during the Great Purge). Here was no dodging of the problem of getting and keeping power. Here was the simple statement that terror and dictatorship are justified to defend the socialist revolution if socialism is justified. Terror is an instrument of socialist policy if the crisis was to be overcome. It was months before I could accept even in principle the idea of terror.

Once I had done so, I faced the necessity to act.

One day, early in 1925, I sat down on a concrete bench on the Columbia campus, facing a little Greek shrine and the statue of my old political hero, Alexander Hamilton. The sun was shining, but it was chilly, and I sat huddled in my overcoat. I was there to answer once for all two questions: Can a man go on living in a world that is dying? If he can, what should he do in the crisis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

There ran through my mind the only lines I remembered from the history textbook of my second go at college—two lines of Savinus', written in the fifth century when the Goths had been in Rome and the Vandals were in Carthage: "The Roman Empire is filled with misery, but it is luxurious. It is dying, but it laughs."

The dying world of 1925 was without faith, hope, character, understanding of its malady or will to overcome it. It was dying but it laughed. And this laughter was not the defiance of a vigor that refuses to know when it is whipped. It was the loss, by the mind of a whole civilization, of the power to distinguish between reality and unreality, because, ultimately, though I did not know it, it had lost the power to distinguish between good and evil. This failure I, too, shared with the world of which I was a part.

The dying world had no answer at all to the crisis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, when it was mentioned, and every voice in the Western world was shrilling crisis, it cocked an ear of complacent deafness and smiled a smile of blank senility—throughout history, the smile of those for whom the executioner waits.

Only in Communism had I found any practical answer at all to the crisis, and the will to make that answer work. It was not an attractive answer, just as the Communist Party was not an attractive party. Neither was the problem which had called it forth, and which it proposed to solve, attractive. But it had one ultimate appeal. In place of desperation, it set

the word: hope. If it was the outrage, it was also the hope of the world. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seemed impossible to have hope on any other terms.

When I rose from the bench, I had decided to leave college for good, and change the whole direction of my life. I had decided to join the Communist Party. The choice was not so much for a program that promised to end war, economic chaos, and the moral enervation of the West. I had already said to myself what Lenin had already said better: “We do not presume to maintain that Marx or the Marxists can show us the way to socialism in perfectly concrete terms. That would be absurd. We know the direction of this road: we know which class forces lead to it. But in actual practice, only the experience of millions of men and women can show it when they begin the actual work.”

The ultimate choice I made was not for a theory or a party. It was—and I submit that this is true for almost every man and woman who has made it—a choice against death and for life. I asked only the privilege of serving humbly and selflessly that force which from death could evoke life, that might save, as I then supposed, what was savable in a society that had lost the will to save itself. I was willing to accept Communism in whatever terms it presented itself, to follow the logic of its course wherever it might lead me, and to suffer the penalties without which nothing in life can be achieved. For it offered me what nothing else in the dying world had power to offer in the same intensity—faith and a vision, something for which to live and something for which to die. It demanded of me those things which have always stirred what is best in men—courage, poverty, self-sacrifice, discipline, intelligence, my life, and, at need, my death.