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# WAKING UP

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The day they took down Stalin's picture

by Joel Agee

**M**ODERATELY UNRULY though we were in school, my friend Peter and I always defended the political status quo against "reactionaries" among our peers. Peter usually argued as a good Marxist should, with philosophic patience and an impressive arsenal of scientific information (he had definitely earned that gold Medal for Good Knowledge). I, on the other hand, made use of a sort of Ulbrichtian sledgehammer rhetoric combined with a style of argumentation which my mother sometimes adopted to good effect: it consisted of simply blowing dry facts away with a strong gust of emotion. (I had developed a dogmatic contempt for facts anyway, in the course of four years of resistance to school.) So what if the Soviet Union appropriates X percent of the DDR's gross national product: didn't Germany ransack the Soviet Union and take in human lives alone more than could ever be paid back in saltpeter and soft coal? What? Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, too? Well, I just don't believe that. Why would one socialist country exploit another? That's precisely what socialist countries *don't* do!

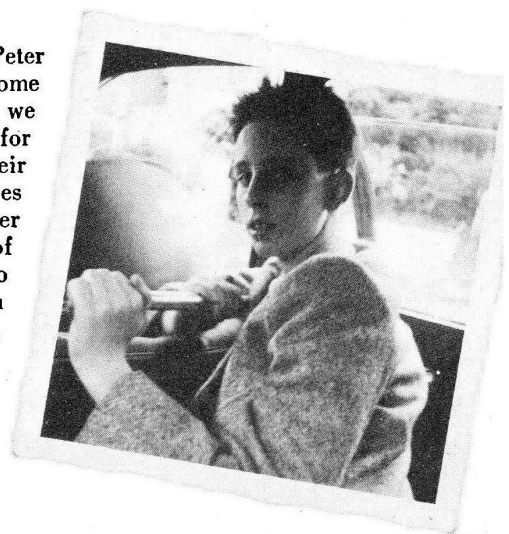
This earnest "progressiveness" of ours had developed in response and in direct proportion to the perceptible faltering of our parents' faith ever since the Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow, earlier that year. We were in a boarding school in Thuringia at the time, so we could only guess how it might be affecting our parents. That something extremely unusual had happened was immediately obvious when we saw the front page of *Neues Deutschland*, the official party newspaper, being read with avidity all over the school; and then there were the rectangular discolorations on various walls where Stalin's portrait had hung until recently.

The spectacular nature of the news itself took a little longer to sink in: Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, "the immortal glorious son of the working class," a mass murderer . . . con-

centration camps in the Soviet Union, the motherland of social justice . . . It was shocking and a little frightening. Just three years ago everyone had been weeping over the death of "the Father of Nations"; five, six weeks of mourning, enough private and official sorrow to make you think no greater tragedy had ever befallen the human race—and now this sordid mess of numbers; numbers of prisoners, numbers of corpses.

The Politbureau must have sent identical directives to teachers and newspaper editors. The discussion of Khrushchev's revelations in classrooms and editorials took the form of self-congratulation: what capitalist government could boast of such candid, courageous self-criticism? Mistakes had been made, grievous, terrible mistakes, but now, thanks to Comrade Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the cult of personality belonged to a bygone era. Most of us, teachers and students alike, were perfectly content to be lulled into security. I don't remember anyone voicing any questions once the official answers had been handed down and repeated with emphatic frequency.

**B**UT WHEN Peter and I came home to Berlin, we found that, for our parents and their friends, Stalin's crimes weren't a settled matter at all. Bodo told me of a good friend, Otto Katz—I had known him, too, in Mexico, when I was little—who was executed in Czechoslovakia, a self-accused imperialist agent. Bodo



*Joel Agee is a contributing editor of Harper's. This article is excerpted from his forthcoming book, Twelve Years: An American Boyhood in East Germany, to be published this month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Copyright © 1975, 1980, 1981 by Joel Agee.*

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Source: Harper's Magazine, May 1981, p. 57 - 60

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had never been quite able to believe Otto's confession, though he recognized his friend's personal style in the words reprinted in *Neues Deutschland*; and he was disturbed, too, by the number of Jews among Otto's alleged co-conspirators. But he had silenced his misgivings. Who was he to criticize the party? Now he was certain Otto had done nothing wrong. I remember Bodo groaning one evening, over his eighth or tenth beer, bent double with contrition, that his life was in ruins, that he had wasted his talent, that he had given over his soul to that bastard, Stalin. Of course he was drunk, and got sober again, but I was shaken; and my response was to grasp hold of what Bodo and Alma had taught me were the essential and incorruptible values of communism—that man is basically good, and his deformations perfectible; that all human beings have an equal birthright to a good life; that it is better to cooperate than to compete, more ennobling to serve others than to enrich oneself; that no one should own what others need for their existence and happiness—and to fashion all these ideas into a poem. Bodo was moved to tears, by its sentiment more than its beauty, I think, because he advised me a little later to stay away from agitprop, it just wasn't the right genre for me.

Friends of our family suffered crises similar to Bodo's. A neighbor who had written one of the most famous of the many heroic odes to Stalin declared in a fit of self-loathing that what he wished to be more than anything else now was a lumberjack in some remote country like Norway. Very shortly after that, he was introduced to a Norwegian lumberjack who wanted nothing more than to leave his backwoods existence and be a poet engaged in the battles of the day. It must have been a relief, at least for the moment, to see one's despair reflected in the distorting mirror of a comical coincidence.

Bodo had always been of delicate and somewhat morbid temperament, easily unsettled; but this time he seemed to have lost all assurance of there being any solid ground beneath his feet. He listened more than he talked when his friends were over, often with a pessimistic look on his face. From time to time he'd sink into a morose depression, the corners of his mouth pulled down, a strand of hair falling over his eyes, nursing a beer and a tall glass of vodka. Gradually, though, as all the others made their adjustments, he made his. I heard of a new kind of hero—from Bodo's lips more than from anyone else's: a victim of Stalinism, a communist, unjustly imprisoned for years, is reprieved, returns to society, and humbly, without bitterness or recrimina-

tion, devotes himself to the party work he was forced to abandon long ago. These weren't just inspirational tales (though they did serve that purpose); there really were such saints, and not just in the Soviet Union but in our neighborhood. I regarded them with a respect approaching awe. How contemptible, in comparison, seemed Alfred Kantorowicz, our one-time neighbor in Gross-Glienicke, who was now hurling diatribes against us from West Germany, in books, articles, and on the radio. What had *he* suffered? Just disgust and frustration; no jail, no exile. What a venomous, small-minded man—how could he forget, beneath the merely human errors of well-meaning bureaucrats, politicians, judges, and journalists, the noble foundations of a new and more humane society? How could he, a Jew, join forces with former Nazis, unpunished and still in power in West Germany? Why didn't he keep his mouth shut, or at least say what he had to say in Switzerland or somewhere like that? These were the judgments generally made of him by people I knew, and I saw no reason to contradict them. Especially not after the revolution (or counterrevolution, as the case may be) broke out in Hungary.

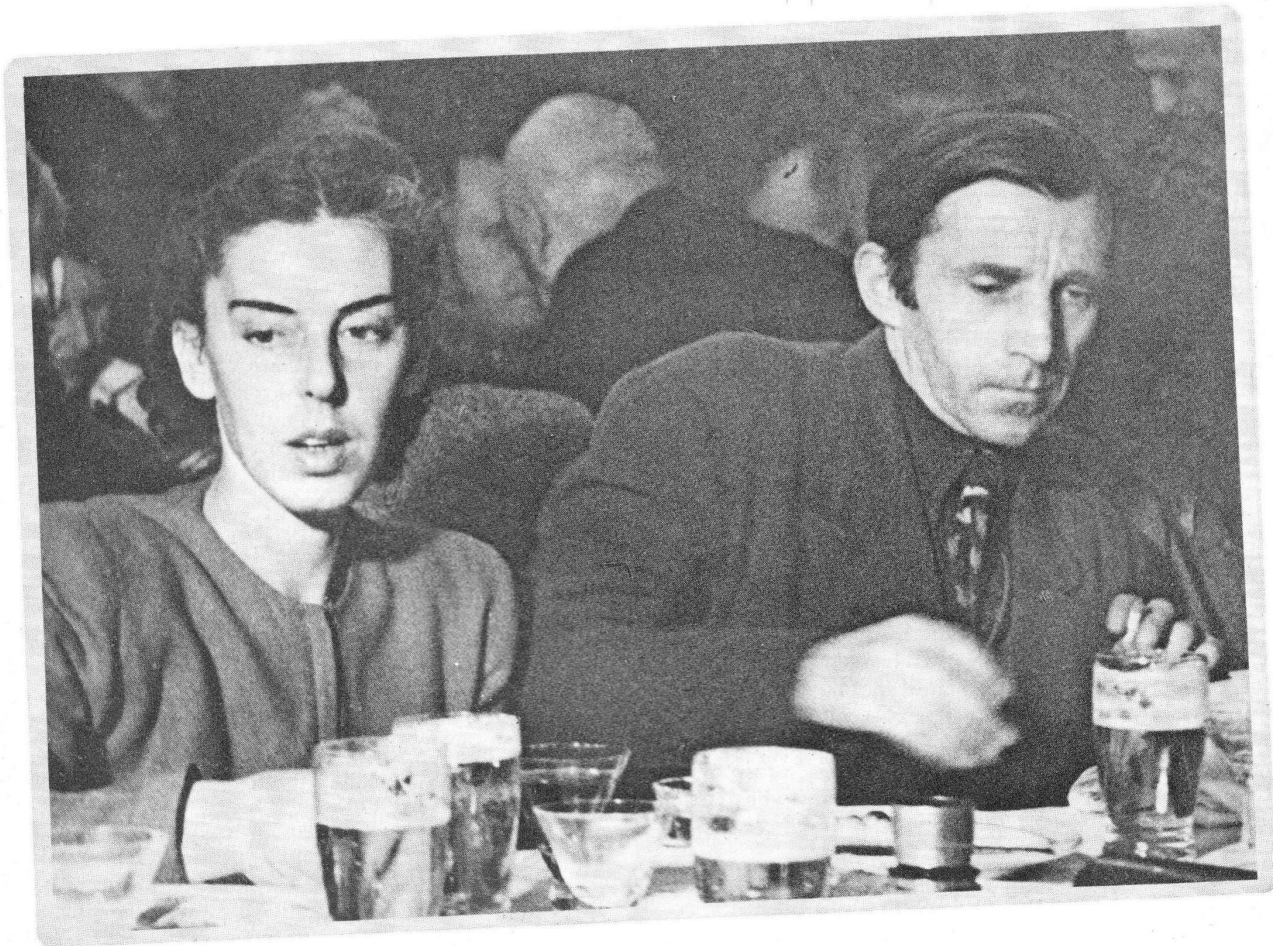
ON NOVEMBER 4, 1956, the handwriting in my journal grew jagged and agitated: "For days now I've been making notes on almost exclusively trivial and personal happenings—at a time when bombs are falling on Cairo, when statesmen forged terrible plans in deliberate disregard of the danger of a new world war, just for the sake of profit. Yesterday fascist terror was still raging in Hungary. Twenty-one men who were keeping watch before the CP building in Budapest were hanged from lampposts. Communists are being beaten to death, or drenched with gasoline and set on fire. *It could happen here!* Everything seemed about to topple in Hungary, everything new . . . the state that wanted to build socialism, that strove toward this noble and glorious goal, the government that had made so many mistakes along the way, and had made so many enemies that the return of the aristocrats and great landowners seemed imminent. This evening the Soviet Union made an armed attack on Budapest, after Kadar formed a counter-government contesting the government of Imre Nagy. How sad Chancellor Adenauer was about that, what crocodile tears he wept for the poor Hungarian people. He didn't waste a word about the Egyptian people, who experienced a trial at least as heavy in recent days. But at least in the West, the news about Cairo came prompt-

ly. Our own radio stations attempted, idiotically, to pretend all was well and peacefully progressing as usual in the socialist camp, till the Western radio forced them out of their silence. And they're still keeping their reports five hours late, presumably because the truth has to first pass muster with the Central Committee or the Politbureau. Meanwhile, the West broadcasts dramatic and, I suspect, invented appeals from alleged rebel radio stations in Hungary. Who to believe in? One side lies, the other keeps silent. *Is our silence not deception as well?* This evening at 10:00 P.M. the UN General Assembly will convene to vote on the appeal of Imre Nagy for an armed defense of his government. Bodo and Ludwig Renn don't believe there will be a UN intervention, but I'm not so sure. I'm afraid the West might see its chance here to deliver a decisive blow against the suddenly vulnerable Soviet Union. But that would mean a world war. God protect us!"

Rummaging through Bodo's desk one of

those troubled days (I was looking for an eraser), I discovered a large bottle of chloroform and a plastic bag full of cotton. I knew Bodo was unhappy, that was plain to see, but I'd never heard of chloroform being used against this kind of pain. I poured some on a wad of cotton and sniffed it. It made me feel sick. Was it for Stefan? But why would they give him chloroform if he had trouble breathing? And why was the bottle so hidden away? I asked Alma about it. She was as surprised as I was. No doubt she questioned Bodo about it that same day, but she didn't tell me his answer until a few years later. He had bought the chloroform with the idea of painlessly killing us and himself in case of a fascist takeover: he was afraid we would be tortured. Alma's immediate reaction was horrified disbelief, followed by contempt: "Can you really be such a coward? You'd kill your own children—out of fear?" Bodo hung his head low and said nothing. Then Alma proposed the much more sensible plan that we all leave the

**"Who to believe in? One side lies, the other keeps silent."**



country and live in the United States, at least until peace was assured in the DDR. But Bodo wouldn't dream of asking a capitalist country for refuge—not from an uprising against the socialist Germany that had been the passion of his life, however marred and frustrated the dream had become in reality. He would go down with the ship if it sank; but he begged Alma's forgiveness for having been so selfish as to want to take us down with him, and to mistake that for protectiveness. Alma chose to stay then, out of loyalty to Bodo more than for any other reason. He said he needed her. He was afraid. If there was to be a civil war, she would ship Stefan and me off to the West, but she'd stay with Bodo and face whatever came.

AS IS WELL KNOWN, the Soviet Union suppressed the Hungarian revolt, and the UN chose not to intervene, thus obviating any need for drastic decisions on the part of my parents. Radio DDR caught up with its five-hour lag and gave prompt reports on the restoration of order in Budapest. American journalism, more than communist propaganda, convinced me that the Soviet invasion was justified. East German dailies published double-page spreads (in the manner of Western tabloids) of *Life* magazine's horrible photographs of burned, hanged, and shot human beings, and of their murderers dancing around them with expressions of fiendish gaiety and hatred. The question of whether this was revolution or counter-revolution, communist or fascist, dissolved in the face of such inhumanity: let it be stopped by all means and as soon as possible. Thank God for the Soviet tanks.

Bodo, who was floundering in the most anguished irresolution, told his friends—I learned about this decades later—that I had helped him see the light, that he felt so proud of my calm strength and political maturity. That was wishful thinking. No one was showing much political or any other sort of maturity those days. Not much calm strength, either. Who could be calm on the brink of Armageddon? At the end of that hastily scribbled diary entry of November 4, with its measured sentences leaning against the vertiginous pull of hysteria, I copied out the last words of an article by Stefan Hermlin, a poet who was a close friend of Bodo's:

*Hungary and Egypt must be saved so that we will not be struck tomorrow by plagues beside which all the biblical plagues will seem harmless.  
Stop them!*

HARPER'S  
MAY 1981

*Stand together!  
Murderers, murderers, murderers above  
you!*

This was followed by a plaintive and simple statement of my own: "I'm afraid I don't believe in anything anymore."

On November 6, we attended a performance of *Mother Courage* by the Berliner Ensemble, in memory of Bertolt Brecht. "At the end of the last act," I wrote, "waves of shudders went up my back, watching Helene Weigel as the old Courage, skeletal, burned out, dragging her wagon across the desolate land, almost touching the ground with her face, directionless, everything valuable destroyed by war. But still she believes in war, follows it like a lodestar. Then, after the show, as we stepped into the foyer, we saw a woman wandering about among the crowds before the buffet and by the cloakroom, weeping and embracing all kinds of people, including Bodo, including doddering old Arnold Zweig; no one seemed to know who she was. From a loudspeaker mounted on a car that was slowly passing by on the street, a man's voice shouted: 'Citizens of the DDR! Egyptian cities are being carpet bombed at this moment! Help the Egyptians any way you can! Prevent a third world war!' This message was repeated over and over. After that we went to the Presseklub with the L.'s and a fat, long-haired man whom I don't know and who was accompanied by an extremely stupid and conceited woman. The fat man said he wouldn't believe any news from the East, including the report of the carpet bombing in Cairo, until he heard it confirmed by the West, and vice versa. Nothing interesting was said after that. When we got home, I turned on Radio Freies Berlin—it's true, they've been bombing Cairo. But the West isn't worried about a world war, they're paying much more attention to Budapest. Sometimes I get the terrifying feeling everyone, East and West, is being led around by the nose—but by people who themselves don't know where they're going. Like Brueghel's blind men, heading for the ditch."

I prayed a lot during those days, and I believe I was answered in the language of music. Or was it the other way around, that music revealed itself as a language of prayer? The imp of coincidence had arranged, in the planning of the curriculum for eleventh-graders, that we should begin practicing the canon "*Dona Nobis Pacem*" at the same time that war would break out over Cairo and Budapest. Never had the harmonious unison of human voices seemed such a miracle, nor, listening to my records at home, had I ever heard music sound so urgently beautiful. □