

END revisited

Tony Simpson

'It is fair to say that the peace movement in the 1980s contributed more to building the idea of Europe as a community than all the European institutions with their Treaties in over half a century.'

Luciana Castellina

◀ In 1982, *The Spokesman* added the title *ENDpapers*, in the 'hope that this will afford a useful service to peace movements in Britain and further afield', and continued in this guise until 1993.

Richard Taylor is an ardent admirer of E P Thompson, and this shines through his discussion of European Nuclear Disarmament (END) in the new book* about Edward which he has edited with Roger Fieldhouse, and is reviewed by Michael Barratt Brown elsewhere in this issue. Richard and Roger were both activists in support of END during the 1980s. In 2013, Richard spent a couple of days at the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in Nottingham, reading through our END files and discussing those times with myself and Ken Fleet. Ken Fleet and I were both active in END, and Ken served for many years as secretary of the international END Liaison Committee, which organised the END Conventions, beginning in Brussels in 1982. I don't recall whether Richard ever met Ken Coates back in the 1980s, or at another time. Naturally enough, among other things, he's interested in the sometimes stormy relationship between Edward and Ken during the early years of END.

What caused the rumpus? Edward and Ken both wrote fluently. Letters and papers flew back and forth. Ken often circulated the correspondence, so that disputes were aired more widely amongst participants in the END Co-ordinating Committee, which was the British-based committee that usually met in London. Ken did much work on the phone, so the letters provide only a partial picture. Perhaps Edward did likewise. I don't know.

Certainly, the pursuit of European Nuclear Disarmament benefited, in different ways, from the considerable work put in by both Edward and Ken. As Richard Taylor says, they were at one in their pursuit of the objectives of END. The disputes seem to me

to have arisen partly because of the intensity of their engagement with the cause. Did these disputes do much damage to the cause of END? No, I don't think so, in the broad scheme. And this can be discussed further.

Where I do take issue with Richard includes several of his comments about Ken and the work we did at the Russell Foundation, over a decade, in pursuit of END. Richard says:

'Ken Coates and the BRPF believed in the Realpolitik of working through the organisations of the Left, in the long struggle in committees, in the formal political arena and in the orthodox political framework.'

Had we believed that, we would have behaved altogether differently. For example, there weren't many committees on the road from Copenhagen to Paris, in summer 1981, marching with the Scandinavian Women for Peace for a nuclear-weapons-free Europe. Edward came for the last, hot drag through the outskirts of Paris, demonstrating his personal solidarity with the marchers and raising our spirits.

As for formal political arenas, Tony Benn debated with Rudolf Bahro, the German environmentalist who had been imprisoned in East Germany, on the fringe of the Brussels END Convention in 1982. A year later, in 1983, we filled a coach from Nottingham to the END Convention in Berlin. Once there, as a Russian speaker I had the job of phoning the dissident Russian historian, Roy Medvedev, in Moscow, to record a message of support for the Convention. Is this the long struggle in committees?

Writing about Ken Coates, Richard Taylor says:

'He believed passionately in the cause of a nuclear-free Europe: on that, he and Thompson were at one. But he saw the main, indeed the only, way to achieve this as being through the orthodox political machine and tactics: hence the centrality, for Coates and the BRPF, of the Convention process.'

Ken was a democrat, and as such he was expelled twice from the Labour Party. Working closely with Bertrand Russell had reinforced his syndicalist instincts. Yes, he sought agency for change, and engaged with those politicians who thought and acted somewhat independently, such as Bruno Kreisky in Austria, Alva Myrdal in Sweden, or Enrico Berlinguer in Italy to help secure the rehabilitation of Nicolai Bukharin. Real change was altogether more likely with a mass movement demanding it. That's what happened in the early 1980s, in part thanks to Edward, Ken and others. Gorbachev noticed what was happening, long before he got anywhere near the General Secretaryship of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In the US, Ronald Reagan set about establishing the British-American Committee for the Successor Generation to counter such large

movements and wayward opinions in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament in the UK.

The END Conventions were about bringing people together, which was an abiding enthusiasm of Ken's. In the late 1950s, he did it with the Labour students. During the '60s and '70s, he convened conferences through the Institute for Workers' Control. After END and its Conventions, when he was in the European Parliament during the 1990s, he convened the Pensioners' Parliaments, the Disabled Peoples' Parliaments, and the Full Employment Conventions. Colleagues in the European Parliament remarked on his patience and how he worked by consensus, including some who fell out with him politically. After Ken left the Parliament, in 1999, we returned several more times for meetings of the European Network for Peace and Human Rights.

The stated purpose of bringing people together was to exchange ideas and experiences and come up with possible solutions. For many participants, it seemed to be an encouraging experience with enduring consequences. Luciana Castellina, an Italian politician who collaborated with Ken Coates and others from the earliest days of END, gives some indication of the impact of such contacts in the quote at the beginning of this article when she talks about 'building the idea of Europe'.

Richard goes on to assert of Ken Coates that

'He had a somewhat controlling personal style ...'

He offers no testimony or evidence to support this personal observation, which does not accord with my own experience of working with Ken Coates for some 30 years. When Ken died, in 2010, what brought a tear to my eye was knowing how light his touch was, and that it was now gone. Ken was often great fun, just as Edward was. Certainly, we knew the direction of travel in the Russell Foundation, but we were never inhibited or discouraged from following our own inclinations.

I don't recognise Ken Coates in the characterisation Richard attempts in his essay; nor does his typology of END as between 'orthodox' political structures in Western Europe (Ken Coates) and developing social movements with counterparts in Eastern Europe (Edward) ring true. It was nowhere near as tidy or straightforward as that, as indicated by Ken's Foreword to the pamphlet *Human Rights and Disarmament: an exchange of letters between E P Thompson & Vaclav Racek*, which is reprinted below. This sets out some of the pre-history of END, which Richard also mentions in his own essay.

Yes, European Nuclear Disarmament was ahead of the times; but that's

another story. Richard Taylor has initiated a debate about those days, and we thank him for that. Meanwhile, Europe still has great need of its peace movements, and there remains much to do to free it of nuclear weapons.

*Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor (editors), *E P Thompson and English Radicalism*, Manchester University Press, 2014, 272 pages, hardback ISBN 9780719088216, £65

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Clearing the Air

Ken Coates

Most of the exchange of letters between Vaclav Racek and Edward Thompson was published in the *New Statesman* on 24th April 1981. In making the complete text available as a pamphlet we hope to encourage the continuation of the discussion which it begins, which seems to us to concern matters of profound importance.

Edward Thompson has asked me to contribute a few lines by way of introduction, and I have agreed, not because the text needs elucidation: it is transparently plain and lucid. Rather, these pages give me the opportunity to explain how both the Russell Foundation and E.P. Thompson have come to be jointly committed to the cause of European Nuclear Disarmament, and to offer a few remarks about the relationship between the struggle for human rights and the effort to avoid world nuclear war, or its proposed modern surrogate, European nuclear war.

Russell himself never ceased to act on behalf of the victims of political discrimination, and the years of his famous agitation for nuclear disarmament were also years of intensive work for political prisoners, East, West and neutral. His public correspondence with Khrushchev concerned such matters as *détente*, nuclear tests, disarmament and related issues. But he also carried on a continuous private dialogue with the Soviet leader on questions of civil rights, the treatment of ‘offenders’ and similar questions. The fall of Khrushchev brought into office people who did not wish to continue his dialogue, and it ceased. But Russell did not relent. He sponsored the first international meeting in support of the defeated Czechoslovakian proponents of the 1968 Prague Spring, in Stockholm in 1969. He never ceased to make representations for persecuted minorities in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and other communist countries. After he died, the Foundation which he established tried to continue his work. With the help of people in many countries, we organised meetings and petitions for Soviet dissidents who were under attack. These included Bukovsky, General

Grigorenko, Plyushch, Moroz, and numerous others with whom none of us shared very many precise political beliefs save the conviction that freedom of expression must be defended. A petition in universities attracted ten thousand signatures. The appeal which we launched with Jiri Pelikan, the editor of the Czechoslovakian opposition journal, *Listy*, and Pavel Litvinov of the Soviet *Chronicle of Current Events* also organised support for Czechoslovak prisoners. In late 1976, the Foundation organised a seminar with four of the Departments of Bradford University on *The Just Society*, to which Roy Medvedev submitted a major paper, which was presented by his brother Zhores and discussed with Tony Benn, Michael Meacher, Stuart Holland, Audrey Wise and other parliamentarians, representatives of Willy Brandt and Chancellor Kreisky of Austria, Lucio Rombardo Radice of the Italian Communist Party, and a number of distinguished scholars, including Eduard Goldstücker, the 'dissident' Czech communist leader. Edward Thompson himself made a passionate contribution to that debate.

Already at that time it was becoming clear, not only that human rights were being fiercely eroded in many countries, but that the very process of *détente* was itself entering a new phase of crisis. Eastern advocates of the civil freedoms had begun to differ in their estimates of the meaning of this development. Some felt that the relaxation of international tension actually worsened their domestic repression, while others argued that in the long run human rights could only prosper in a climate of expanding cultural, scientific and economic exchanges. The consensus at Bradford was that a new peace initiative was needed, not only for its own sake, but also to foster the renewal and expansion of such contacts. Various exploratory initiatives were made, to try to work out a scheme upon which agreed actions could be based in different European countries.

Meantime, the exacerbation of tension between the superpowers became daily more evident. Slump in the West, partial political crises in the East, made the atmosphere more and more fraught. The doctrine of 'limited' nuclear war took on more deadly meaning with the development of new missile systems, especially designed for combat in the 'European Theatre'. It became evident that survival, as well as civil liberties, was itself under open threat. And so was launched the call for European Nuclear Disarmament, about which a great deal has been written elsewhere. Among its first declared supporters were the brothers Medvedev, Andras Hegedus, Artur London, Rudolf Bahro, and other well-known spokesmen of the democratic opposition in Eastern bloc countries. The promptness of their response was no accident, because the East-West dialogue which aroused END had benefited from their counsel in all the preceding months of consultation.

But these distinguished critics of 'actually existing socialism' were, as we already had become aware in the early 'seventies, by no means the only victims of its ostracism and outright repression. Some of the others were, at the same time as our appeal was published, actively calling for a boycott of the Moscow Olympics, the severance of trade, and other measures of international punishment of the Soviet government for its infringements of basic liberties. Such voices received a wide hearing in the West, and after the invasion of Afghanistan some of the major governments of NATO countries indeed began a campaign of precisely this kind. Those of us who worked simultaneously for better international relations, disarmament and human rights found this a painful episode. Many of those from the East who sought a policy of reprisals had suffered bitterly from repression, and were quite obviously sincere in their conviction that the advocacy of disarmament was a call to appease their persecutors.

Yet a nuclear war would not spare the critics, any more than the supporters, of the established powers, East or West. Some official Eastern spokesmen have shown awareness of this, even while certain of their critics did not. The real issue explains some of the confusion which has surrounded the discussion, in the West, of likely Eastern involvement in the disarmament movement. When Edward Thompson interviewed Roy Medvedev¹, at the beginning of the campaign in 1980, the press frequently ignored the fact that Medvedev was a founding signatory of the END appeal, and emphasised only his cautionary remarks about the difficulties of independent action in the East. Hence, the common complaint that all of us in END 'misunderstand' the political situation in the East. Of course, it would be strange if we did not. The truth is that it is extremely difficult for any of us to comprehend fully the scope and limits of political action in other countries, even those with broadly similar institutions to our own. It would be both immodest and foolish to pretend otherwise. None the less, the 'misunderstandings' we fear are the ones of which we have not yet become conscious; not the ones of which we became aware some time ago. And as defenders of a whole legion of political detainees, we had every reason to know something about the conditions which constrained them. What we have not known is how to overcome these conditions, in order to resume effective working relationships between ordinary people, East and West, about the numerous issues of common concern. We have been quite prepared to begin tentatively, even hesitantly, because the task is not an easy one. What we have been resolute about is the central commitment, that begin we must.

It is for this that we are proud to publish Edward Thompson's discussion with 'Vaclav Racek', his pseudonymous correspondent, and confident that,

however much we all may learn from the ensuing dialogue, this opening exchange will certainly help to clear the air. This, we think, has been the right way to begin a debate of over-riding importance

This is Ken Coates' Foreword to Human Rights and Disarmament: an exchange of letters between E P Thompson & Vaclav Racek (Spokesman Pamphlet no.77, July 1981).

Notes

- 1 See *Eleventh Hour for Europe*, Spokesman 1981, for the full text of this interview. It was originally published in the first issue of the *END Bulletin of Work in Progress* (July 1980).