Postwar

A HISTORY OF EUROPE SINCE 1945

Tony Judt

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XVIII

The Power of the Powerless

'Marxism is not a philosophy of history, it is *the* philosophy of history, and to renounce it is to dig the grave of Reason in history'.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

'I talk about rights because they alone will enable us to leave this magic lantern show'.
Kazimierz Brandys

'Totalitarian society is the distorted mirror of the whole of modern civilization'.
Václav Havel

'The pressure of the state machine is nothing compared with the pressure of a convincing argument'.
Czesław Miłosz

Behind the long 'Social-Democratic moment' in Western Europe there had lain not just pragmatic faith in the public sector, or allegiance to Keynesian economic principles, but a sense of the shape of the age that influenced and for many decades stifled even its would-be critics. This widely-shared understanding of Europe's recent past blended the memory of Depression, the struggle between Democracy and Fascism, the moral legitimacy of the welfare state, and—for many on both sides of the Iron Curtain—the expectation of social progress. It was the Master Narrative of the twentieth century; and when its core assumptions began to erode and crumble, they took with them not just a handful of public-sector companies but a whole political culture and much else besides.

If one were seeking a symbolic moment when this transformation was accomplished, a hinge on which post-war Europe's self-understanding turned, it came in Paris on December 28th 1973 with the first Western publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. Reviewing the English translation in the *Guardian*, W. L. Webb wrote 'To live now and not to know this work is to be a kind of historical fool, missing a crucial part of the consciousness of the age.' The irony, as Solzhenitsyn himself acknowledged, was that the message of the book—that 'real existing Socialism' was a barbaric fraud, a totalitarian dictatorship resting upon a foundation of slave labour and mass murder—was hardly new.

Solzhenitsyn himself had written about the subject before, and so had numberless victims, survivors, observers and scholars. *The Gulag Archipelago* added hundreds of pages of detail and data to earlier testimonies, but in its moral fervor and emotional impact it was not obviously a greater work of witness than Evgenia Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whirlwind*, published in 1967; Margarete Buber-Neumann's memoir of her experiences in both Soviet and Nazi camps, first published in German in 1957; Wolfgang Leonhard's disabused account of his own misplaced faith, which appeared in 1955; or even earlier demolitions of the Soviet myth by Victor Serge and Boris Souvarine.[1]

But timing was all. Intellectual critics of Communism had never been lacking; however their impact had for many decades been blunted by a widespread desire in Western Europe (and, as we have seen, in Eastern Europe through the 1960s) to find some silver lining, however dim, in the storm cloud of state socialism that had rolled across much of the continent since it first broke upon Russia in 1917. 'Anti-Communism', whatever its real or imputed motives, suffered the grievous handicap of appearing to challenge the shape of History and Progress, to miss the 'bigger picture', to deny the essential contiguity binding the democratic welfare state (however inadequate) to Communism's collectivist project (however tainted).

That is why opponents of the post-war consensus were so marginalized. To suggest, as Hayek and others had done, that market-restraining plans for the common good, albeit well-intentioned, were not just economically inefficient but also and above all the first step on the road to serfdom, was to tear up the road map of the twentieth century. Even opponents of Communist dictatorship like Arthur Koestler, Raymond Aron, Albert Camus or Isaiah Berlin, who tried to insist upon the distinction between social-democratic reforms for the common benefit and party dictatorships established in the name of a collectivist myth, appeared to many of their 'progressive' critics to echo and thus serve partisan political allegiances taken up in the Cold War.

Accordingly, they fell foul of a widespread reluctance, especially on the part of the Sixties generation, to abandon the radical catechism. It was one thing to sneer knowingly at Stalin, now long dead and anyway condemned by his own heirs. It was quite another to acknowledge that the fault lay not in the man but the system. And to go further, to impute responsibility for the crimes and misdemeanors of Leninism to the project of radical utopianism itself was to mine the very buttresses of modern politics. As the British historian E. P. Thompson, something of a cult figure to a younger generation of 'post-Communist Marxists', wrote accusingly to

[1]Evgenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (Harcourt, 1967); Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Von Potsdam nach Moskau: Stationen eines Irrweges* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1957); Wolfgang Leonhard, *Child of the Revolution* (Pathfinder Press, 1979), first published in Cologne in 1955 as *Die Revolution entlässt ihre Kinder*; Victor Serge, *Mémoires d'un révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1951); Boris Souvarine, *Stalin. A Critical Survey of Bolshevism* (first published in English in 1939).

Leszek Kołakowski (after Kołakowski published a damning indictment of Soviet Communism in the wake of 1968): *your* disenchantment is a threat to *our* Socialist faith.

By 1973, however, that faith was under serious assault not just from critics but from events themselves. When *The Gulag Archipelago* was published in French, the Communist daily newspaper *l'Humanité* dismissed it, reminding readers that since 'everyone' already knows all about Stalin, anyone rehashing all *that* could only be motivated by 'anti-Sovietism'. But the accusation of 'anti-Sovietism' was losing its force. In the wake of the Soviet invasion of Prague and its repressive aftermath, and of reports filtering out of China about the Cultural Revolution, Solzhenitsyn's root and branch condemnation of the whole Communist project rang true—even and perhaps especially to erstwhile sympathizers.

Communism, it was becoming clear, had defiled and despoiled its radical heritage. And it was continuing to do so, as the genocide in Cambodia and the widely-publicized trauma of the Vietnamese 'boat people' would soon reveal.[2] Even those in Western Europe—and they were many—who held the United States largely responsible for the disasters in Vietnam and Cambodia, and whose anti-Americanism was further fuelled by the American-engineered killing of Chile's Salvador Allende just three months before the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*, were increasingly reluctant to conclude as they had once done that the Socialist camp had the moral upper hand. American imperialism was indeed bad—but the other side was worse, perhaps far worse.

At this point the traditional 'progressive' insistence on treating attacks on Communism as implicit threats to *all* socially-ameliorative goals—i.e. the claim that Communism, Socialism, Social Democracy, nationalization, central planning and progressive social engineering were part of a common political project—began to work against itself. If Lenin and his heirs had poisoned the well of social justice, the argument ran, we are *all* damaged. In the light of twentieth-century history the state was beginning to look less like the solution than the problem, and not only or even primarily for economic reasons. What begins with centralized planning ends with centralized killing.

That, of course, is a very 'intellectual' sort of conclusion, but then the impact of the retreat from the state was felt most immediately by intellectuals—appropriately enough, since it was intellectuals who had been most zealous in promoting social improvement from above in the first place. As Jiří Gruša, the Czech writer, was to observe in 1984: 'It was we [writers] who glorified the modern state.' By its very nature, modern tyranny—as Ignazio Silone noted—requires the collaboration of intellectuals. It was thus altogether appropriate that it was the disaffec-

[2]Between 1975 and 1981 France alone took in 80,000 refugees from Indo-China.

tion of Europe's intellectuals from the grand narrative of progress that triggered the ensuing avalanche; and somehow fitting that this disaffection was most marked in Paris, where the narrative itself had first taken intellectual and political shape two centuries earlier.

France in the Seventies and Eighties was no longer Arthur Koestler's 'burning lens of Western Civilization', but French thinkers were still unusually predisposed to engage universal questions. Writers and commentators in Spain or West Germany or Italy in these years were much taken up with local challenges—though the terrorist threat that preoccupied them carried implications of its own for the discrediting of radical utopianism. Intellectuals in the UK, never deeply touched by the appeal of Communism, were largely indifferent to its decline and thus kept their distance from the new Continental mood. In France, by contrast, there had been widespread and longstanding local sympathy for the Communist project. As anti-Communism gathered pace in French public discussion, abetted by the steady decline in the Communist Party's vote and influence, it was thus fuelled by local recollection and example. A new generation of French intellectuals transited with striking alacrity out of Marxism, driven by a sometimes unseemly haste to abjure their own previous engagement.

In condemning the distortions of radical utopianism, the young Parisian 'new philosophers' of the mid-Seventies like André Glucksmann or Bernard-Henri Lévy were in most respects unoriginal. There was little in Glucksmann's *Les Maîtres Penseurs*—published to universal acclaim in March 1977—that Raymond Aron had not said better in his *Opium des Intellectuels* twenty two years earlier. And there was nothing in Lévy's *Barbarie à Visage Humain*, which appeared two months after Glucksmann's essay, which French readers could not have found in Albert Camus's *L'Homme révolté*. But whereas Camus's essay was cuttingly dismissed by Jean-Paul Sartre when it came out in 1951, Lévy and Glucksmann were influential bestsellers. Times had changed.

The parricidal quality of this local intellectual earthquake is obvious. Its ostensible target was the calamitous Marxist detour in Western thought; but much of its fire was directed above all at those dominant figures of post-war intellectual life, in France and elsewhere, who had peered across the touchlines of History, cheering on the winners and politely averting their eyes from their victims. Sartre, by far the best known of these fellow-travelers, himself fell from favour in these years, even before his death in 1980, his creative legacy sullied by his apologetics first for Soviet Communism, later for Maoism.[3]

The climate change in Paris extended beyond a settling of scores across a gen-

[3]In 1963, long after he had lost interest in France's own Communists, the author of *Les Mains Sales* could still be heard in Prague enthusing about Socialist Realism to a bemused audience of Czech writers and intellectuals.

eration of engaged intellectuals. In 1978 Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* appeared in French for the first time, the harbinger of a steady absorption into the French mainstream of a whole corpus of 'Anglo-American' scholarship in philosophy and the social sciences of which the local intellectual culture had for decades remained in near ignorance. In the same year the historian François Furet published his path-breaking *Penser la Révolution Française*, in which he systematically dismantled the 'revolutionary catechism' through which the French had for many decades been taught to understand their country and its past.

In this 'catechism' as Furet dissected it, the French Revolution had been the urmoment of modernity: the confrontation that triggered France's division into opposing political cultures of Left and Right, ostensibly determined by the class identities of the antagonists. That story, which rested upon the twin pillars of early-nineteenth century liberal optimism and a Marxist vision of radical social transformation, had now, in Furet's account, run into the ground—not least because Soviet Communism, the revolutionary heir-presumptive in this morality tale of purposeful radical transformation, had retroactively polluted the whole inheritance. The French Revolution, in Furet's words, was 'dead'.

The political implications of Furet's thesis were momentous, as its author well understood. The failings of Marxism as a politics were one thing, which could always be excused under the category of misfortune or circumstance. But if Marxism were discredited as a Grand Narrative—if neither reason nor necessity were at work in History—then all Stalin's crimes, all the lives lost and resources wasted in transforming societies under state direction, all the mistakes and failures of the twentieth century's radical experiments in introducing Utopia by *diktat*, ceased to be 'dialectically' explicable as false moves along a true path. They became instead just what their critics had always said they were: loss, waste, failure and crime.

Furet and his younger contemporaries rejected the resort to History that had so coloured intellectual engagement in Europe since the beginning of the 1930s. There is, they insisted, no 'Master Narrative' governing the course of human actions, and thus no way to justify public policies or actions that cause real suffering today in the name of speculative benefits tomorrow. Broken eggs make good omelettes. But you cannot build a better society on broken men. In retrospect this may appear a rather lame conclusion to decades of intense theoretical and political debate; but for just that reason it illustrates rather well the extent of the change.

In *Ma Nuit Chez Maud*, Eric Rohmer's 1969 *conte moral*, a Communist philosopher and his Catholic colleague argue at considerable length over the competing claims of Pascal's wager on God and the Marxist bet on History. What is striking in retrospect is not the conversation itself, which will be familiar to anyone old enough to remember the Sixties in continental Europe, but the seriousness with which it was taken not just by the on-screen protagonists but by millions of contemporary viewers. Ten years later the topic, if not the film, was already a period

piece. The resort to History in defense of unpalatable political choices had begun to seem morally naïve and even callous. As Camus had noted many years before, 'Responsibility towards History releases one from responsibility towards human beings'.[4]

The new uncertainty about 'History' (and history) inaugurated a disagreeable decade for West European intellectuals, uneasily aware that the disintegration of great historical schemes and master narratives boded ill for the chattering classes who had been most responsible for purveying them, and who were now themselves—as it seemed to many of them—the object of humiliating indifference. In September 1986, in a revealing solipsistic aside to a French journalist, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu bemoaned the fallen condition of the engaged public thinker: 'As for me, I think that if there is a great cause left today it's the defense of the intellectuals'.[5]

Intellectual self-abnegation before History was once described by Isaiah Berlin as 'the horrible German way out of the burden of moral choice'. This is a little hard on Germans, who were hardly the only Europeans to abase themselves on the altar of historical necessity, though it is true that the idea had its roots in German romantic philosophy. But it points to an emerging vacuum in European political ideas: if there was no 'great cause' left; if the progressive legacy had run into the ground; if History, or necessity, could no longer be credibly invoked in defense of an act, a policy or a programme; then how should men decide the great dilemmas of the age?

This was not a problem for Thatcherite radicals, who treated public policy as an extension of private interests and for whom the marketplace was a necessary and sufficient adjudicator of values and outcomes. Nor were the times unusually troubling for Europe's traditional conservatives, for whom the measure of good and evil in human affairs remained anchored in religious norms and social conventions, bruised but not yet altogether displaced by the cultural *tsunami* of the Sixties. It was the progressive *Left*, still the dominant presence in European political and cultural exchanges, which was urgently in need of a different script.

What it found, to its collective surprise, was a new political vernacular—or, rather, a very old one, freshly rediscovered. The language of rights, or liberties, was firmly inscribed in every European constitution, not least those of the Peoples' Democracies. But as a way of thinking about politics, 'rights talk' had been altogether unfashionable in Europe for many years. After the First World War rights—notably the right to self-determination—had played a pivotal role in international debate over a post-war settlement, and most of the interested parties at the Versailles

[4]'La responsabilité envers l'Histoire dispense de la responsabilité envers les êtres humains'.
[5]'Pour ma part, je pense que s'il y a une grande cause aujourd'hui, c'est la défense des intellectuals.' See *Le Nouvel Observateur*, #1140, septembre 1986, 'Les Grandes Causes, ça existe encore?'

Peace Conference had invoked their rights quite vociferously when pressing their case upon the Great Powers. But these were *collective* rights—the rights of nations, peoples, minorities.

Moreover, the record of collectively-asserted rights was an unhappy one. Where the rights of more than one ethnic or religious community had clashed, usually over a conflicting territorial claim, it had been depressingly obvious that force, not law, was the only effective way to establish precedence. Minority rights could not be protected within states, nor the rights of weak states secured against the claims of their more powerful neighbors. The victors of 1945, looking back on the dashed hopes of Versailles, concluded as we have seen that *collective* interests were better served by the painful but effective solution of territorial regrouping (ethnic cleansing as it would later be known). As for stateless persons, they would no longer be treated as a judicial anomaly in a world of states and nations, but as individual victims of persecution or injustice.

Post-1945 rights talk thus concentrated on individuals. This too was a lesson of war. Even though men and women were persecuted in the name of their common identity (Jews, gypsies, Poles, etc) they suffered as individuals; and it was as individuals with individual rights that the new United Nations sought to protect them. The various Conventions on Human Rights, Genocide or Social and Economic Rights that were incorporated into international law and treaties had a cumulative impact upon public sensibilities: they combined an eighteenth-century, Anglo-American concern for individual liberties with a very mid-twentieth-century emphasis upon the obligations of the state to ensure that a growing spectrum of greater and lesser claims were met—from the right to life to the 'right' to 'truth in advertising' and beyond.

What propelled this legal rhetoric of individual rights into the realm of real politics was the coincidence of the retreat of Marxism with the international Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which had opened in Helsinki the same year that *The Gulag Archipelago* was published in Paris. Until then, talk of 'rights' had long been disfavored among left-leaning European intellectuals, echoing Marx's famous dismissal of 'the so-called rights of man' as egoistic and 'bourgeois'. In progressive circles, terms such as 'Freedoms' or 'Liberty or 'Rights', and other abstractions associated with 'man in general', were taken seriously only when preceded by an adjectival modifier: 'bourgeois', or 'proletarian' or 'Socialist'.

Thus in 1969 a group of intellectuals on the left of the French Parti Socialiste Unifié criticized their own party (led at the time by Michel Rocard and Pierre Mendès-France) for supporting the reformers in Prague. The latter, they declared, had been 'the willing victims of petty-bourgeois ideologies (humanism, freedom, justice, progress, universal secret suffrage, etc).' This was no isolated instance. In the course of the 1960s many left-leaning Western commentators whose politics were otherwise quite moderate avoided mention of 'rights' or 'liberties' for fear of ap-

pearing naïve. In Eastern Europe reform Communists and their supporters had also avoided such language: in their case because of its defilement and devaluation in official rhetoric.

But from the mid-seventies it became increasingly common to find speeches and writings from all across the political spectrum in Western Europe unrestrainedly invoking 'human rights' and 'personal liberties'. As one Italian observer remarked in 1977, the idea and ideal of 'undivided' freedom was being openly discussed on the Left 'without mystification or demagogy' for the first time since the war.[6] This did not necessarily translate immediately into politics—for much of the Eighties West European Labour and Socialist parties floundered quite helplessly, resorting in many cases to the illicit appropriation of their opponents' programmes to cover their own nakedness. But their new openness to the vocabulary of rights and liberties did give Western European scholars and intellectuals access to the changing language of political opposition in *Eastern* Europe and a way of communicating across the divide—just in time, for it was *east* of the Iron Curtain that truly original and significant change was now under way.

In 1975 the Czech reform communist Zdeněk Mlynář wrote an 'Open Letter to the Communists and Socialists of Europe', addressed above all to Eurocommunists and appealing for support against the repression of dissent in Czechoslovakia. The illusions of reform Communism died hard. But Mlynář was already in a minority, his faith in both Socialism and its Western sympathizers already regarded with bemusement by most of Communism's domestic critics in the Soviet bloc.

These critics, not yet called 'dissidents' (a term generally disfavoured by those it described), had for the most part turned away from the regime and the 'Socialist' language it espoused. In the aftermath of 1968 that language, with its wooden embrace of 'peace' and 'equality' and 'fraternal goodwill', rang peculiarly false—especially to the Sixties activists who had taken it seriously. The latter—overwhelmingly students, scholars, journalists, playwrights and writers—had been the chief victims of the repression in Czechoslovakia especially, where the Party leadership under Gustav Husák (the 'President of Forgetting') correctly calculated that its best hope of re-establishing 'order' lay in mollifying popular discontent with material improvements while energetically silencing all dissenting voices and references to the recent past.

Forced underground—quite literally in the Czech case, where many unemployed professors and writers found work as stokers and boilermen—the regime's opponents could hardly engage in a *political* debate with their oppressors. Instead,

[6] Antonino Bruno, *Marxismo e Idealismo Italiano* (1977), pp.99–100.

abandoning Marxist vocabulary and the revisionist debates of earlier decades, they made a virtue of their circumstances and espoused deliberately 'un-political' themes. Of these, thanks to the Helsinki Accords, 'rights' were by far the most accessible.

All Soviet bloc constitutions paid formal attention to the rights and duties of the citizen; the package of additional and quite specific rights agreed to at Helsinki thus furnished Communism's domestic critics with a strategic opening. As the Czech historian Petr Pithart noted, the point was not to demand some rights as yet un-possessed—a sure invitation to further repression—but to claim those that the regime already acknowledged and that were enshrined in law, thus conferring upon the 'opposition' a moderate, almost conservative air, while forcing the Party onto the defensive.

Taking seriously the letter of 'Socialist' law was more than just a tactic, a device for embarrassing Communism's rulers. In closed societies where everything was political—and politics as such were thus precluded—'rights' offered a way forward, a first breach in the curtain of pessimism shrouding Eastern Europe in the 'silent Seventies', an end to the regime's monopoly on language-as-power. Moreover the constitutional rights of persons, by their very nature, bear formal witness to the existence of persons as such, with claims upon one another and upon the community. They describe a space between helpless individuals and the all-powerful state.

The movement for rights ('human rights'), as the young Hungarian theorist Miklós Haraszti conceded, was an acknowledgement that the necessary corrective to Communism's defects was not a better Communism but the constitution—or reconstitution—of civil (i.e. 'bourgeois') society. The irony of inverting Marxism's agenda and seeking to replace the Socialist state with bourgeois society was not lost on intellectuals in Prague or Budapest. But as Haraszti's Hungarian colleague Mihaly Vajda explained, the supremacy of the bourgeois looked decidedly preferable to their country's 'unbearable historical experience of the tyranny of the citizen'.

The significance of efforts to reconstitute civil society—a nebulous phrase describing an uncertain objective but one widely espoused by the intellectual opposition in Eastern Europe from the mid-Seventies onward—was that they recognized the impossibility after 1968 of trying to reform the Party-state. Few seriously expected Husák in Prague, or Honecker in Berlin (much less the Soviets themselves), to concede the logic of 'rights-talk' and take their own constitutions seriously. To speak of rights in theory was precisely to illustrate their absence in practice, to remind observers at home and abroad of just how un-free these societies actually were. Instead of engaging the Communist authorities, the new opposition was deliberately talking past them.

For dissidents like Haraszti, or Adam Michnik in Poland, whose 1976 essay 'A New Evolutionism' laid out much of the strategy of the Polish opposition in com-

ing years, this was a radical departure from their youthful engagement with Marxism and its socio-economic priorities. For those who had never been remotely drawn to Marxist debates, like Václav Havel, the transition was much easier. The son of a wealthy Prague businessman whose family was dispossessed by the Communist government after 1948, Havel evinced none of the youthful revolutionary enthusiasm of his engaged contemporaries, nor did he play a very active part in their reformist efforts before 1968. Havel's relationship with the Communist authorities was always antagonistic, thanks in large part to his bourgeois origins, but it had never been political.

In the course of the Seventies and Eighties, as he was harassed, arrested and ultimately imprisoned for his activities, Havel was to become a supremely political figure. But his 'message' remained resolutely un-political. The point, he insisted, was not to argue with those in power. It was not even primarily to *tell* the truth, though in a regime based on lies this was important. The only thing that made sense in the circumstances of the time, he wrote, was to 'live in truth'. All else was compromise—'The very act of forming a political grouping forces one to start playing a power game, instead of giving truth priority.'

The objective, as Havel explained in a 1984 essay reflecting on the goals and tactics of Czechoslovakia's fragile intellectual opposition, should be to act with autonomy, whatever the regime tries to impose on you; to live *as if* one were truly free. This was hardly a prescription for most people, as Havel well understood: 'These are perhaps impractical methods in today's world and very difficult to apply in daily life. Nevertheless, I know no better alternative.'

Havel's position was not without precedents, even in recent times. Ludvík Vaculík, addressing the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union in June 1967, had recommended a similar 'as if' strategy to his colleagues even then. We should, he told them, 'play at being citizens . . . make speeches as if we were grown-up and legally independent.' But in the more optimistic atmosphere of the Sixties Vaculík and others could still hope for some accommodation and adaptation from those in power. By the time Michnik or Havel were espousing similar arguments, circumstances had changed. The point was no longer to advise the government how to govern, but to suggest to the nation—by example—how it might live.

In the circumstances of the Seventies, the idea that Eastern European intellectuals could 'suggest to the nation' how it should comport itself might appear more than a little ambitious—most intellectuals were in no position to suggest much of anything even to one another, far less to their fellow citizens at large. The intelligentsia in Hungary and Poland especially was largely ignorant of conditions and opinion in the industrial centers, and even more cut off from the world of the peasantry. Indeed it might be said that thanks to Communism—a political system which, in the words of the Hungarian dissidents Ivan Szelenyi and George Konrád, put 'intellectuals on the road to class power'—the old Central-European distinction between 'intelligentsia' and 'people' (more applicable in aristocratic societies like Hungary and Poland than in plebeian ones like Czechoslovakia, but artificially instituted even there after 1948) had resurfaced in an acute form.

The first to bridge this gap were the Poles. In 1976, following a series of strikes protesting at sharp increases in the price of food, the regime struck back hard, beating and arresting workers in the industrial towns of Ursus and Radom. In a response that broke quite deliberately with the mutual indifference of worker and intellectual protests a few years before, Jacek Kuroń and a few colleagues announced the formation in September 1976 of KOR, an acronym for the Committee for the Defense of Workers. The object of KOR, and a Committee for the Defense of Human and Civil Rights (ROPCiO) founded a few months later, was to publicize the assault on workers' civil liberties, assist in their legal defense, and form a common front. Three years later, in December 1979, the intellectual leaders of KOR—some Jewish, some Catholic, some former Communists, others not—would be responsible for the framing and publication of a 'Charter of Workers' Rights'.

The creation—or, rather, the assertion—of an autonomous civil sphere in Poland thus grew out of a social confrontation. Across the border in Czechoslovakia, in even less promising political circumstances, it was born of a legal opportunity. In January 1977 a group of Czechoslovak citizens signed a document (initially published as a manifesto in a West German newspaper) criticizing their government for its failure to implement the human rights provisions of the Czechoslovak Constitution, the Final Act of the 1975 Helsinki Accords, and United Nations covenants on political, civil, economic, and cultural rights, all of which Prague had signed—and, in the case of Helsinki Decree 120, formally incorporated into the Czech Legal Code.[7]

The signatories of this document ('Charter 77' as it became known) described themselves as a 'loose, informal, and open association of people . . . united by the will to strive individually and collectively for respect for human and civil rights in our country and throughout the world.' They took care to emphasize that Charter 77 was not an organization, had no statutes or permanent organs, and 'does not form the basis for any oppositional political activity,' a stipulation intended to keep their act within the bounds of Czechoslovak law.

Charter 77 was always the work of a tiny network of courageous indivuduals who represented no-one but themselves: 243 people signed the original document, and they were joined by just 1,621 others (in a population of 15 million) in the course of the next decade. The Charter's first spokesmen were Havel, Jiří Hájek (the country's foreign minister under Dubček) and the elderly Jan Patočka, Czechoslovakia's leading philosopher, all of them isolated intellectuals without public standing or

[7] Curiously, it was the Czechoslovak government's decision to ratify the UN human rights Covenants in 1976—the 35th state to do so—that made those Covenants binding under international law.

influence; but this did not stop the authorities reacting furiously to their manifesto, 'an antistate, antisocialist, demagogic, abusive piece of writing'. Individual signatories were variously described—in language drawn verbatim from the show trials of the Fifties—as 'traitors and renegades,' 'a loyal servant and agent of imperialism', 'a bankrupt politician' and 'an international adventurer'. Retaliation and intimidation were deployed against the signatories, including dismissal from work, denial of schooling for their children, suspension of drivers' licenses, forced exile and loss of citizenship, detention, trial, and imprisonment.

The harsh treatment of the signatories of Charter 77 and the Czechoslovak government's vindictive persecution of a new generation of young musicians (notably the rock group The Plastic People of the Universe) prompted the formation in April 1978 of a support group, the 'Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted' (VONS), with goals similar to those of KOR. The response of the Prague regime to this latest development was to arrest six of the leading figures in VONS, including Havel, and try them for subversion the following year. In October 1979 they were sentenced to prison terms of up to five years.

In the wake of 1968 the Communist regimes had all (with the exception of Ceaușescu's Romania) adopted in practice the approach of Kádár's Hungary. They no longer even pretended to seek the genuine allegiance of their subjects, asking only that people proffer the outward symbols of public conformity. One goal of the Charter, like VONS—or KOR—was to overcome the resulting cynical indifference to public affairs among their fellow citizens. Havel in particular laid stress on the need to deprive governments of the satisfaction of seeing people heedlessly abase themselves in order to pass unnoticed. Otherwise, he wrote, the regime can count upon an 'outpost in every citizen'—a theme illustrated in his classic essay 'The Power of the Powerless' by the example of the greengrocer who ritually hangs in his shop-window the sign 'Workers of the World, Unite!'.

Some of the concerns of the dissenting intelligentsia were better adapted than others to this effort to overcome public apathy and fear. The emerging environmental catastrophe, already mentioned in Chapter 15, was one. In Slovakia, according to the regime's own figures, 45 percent of the 3,500 miles of rivers in Slovakia were 'dangerously' polluted in 1982. Four-fifths of the well water in the eastern part of the republic was unusable for human consumption. This was largely due to the over-use of fertilizer on the collective farms of the area, leading to soil-poisoning and crop failures like those experienced in the black soil areas of the Soviet Union.

By the early Eighties northern Bohemia had the worst air pollution in Europe, thanks to the use of (cheap) brown coal in industrial and energy production there. Of 73.5 billion kwh of power generated in the region, 64 billion came from plants burning this high-sulphur fuel. As a result, by 1983 some 35 percent of all Czech forests were dead or dying, and one-third of all Czech watercourses were too polluted even for industrial use. In Prague itself the government was forced to set up a special hospital service dealing with the respiratory ailments of children. Ivan Klíma, in a short story called '*A Christmas Conspiracy*', described stepping out into the streets of the Czech capital: 'The dark, cold mist smelled of smoke, sulphur and irritability.'

Under Socialism it was the state that polluted. But it was society that suffered, and pollution was thus a subject about which everyone cared. It was also implicitly political: the reason that it was so hard to protect the environment was that no-one had an interest in taking preventive measures. Only effective and consistently applied official sanctions could have enforced improvements, and these would have had to come from the same authority which was encouraging the wastage in the first place. Any factory or farm manager imprudent enough to risk his 'quotas' by applying pollution-control measures on his own initiative would have been in serious trouble. The Communist economic system was inherently prejudicial to its environment, as more and more people came to appreciate.[8]

Writers and scholars, reasonably enough, were preoccupied with censorship. The impediments to publication, or performance, varied considerably from one Communist country to another. In Czechoslovakia, since 1969, the authorities were unabashedly repressive: not only were thousands of men and women excluded from print or public appearance, but a very broad swathe of themes, persons and events could not even be mentioned. In Poland, by contrast, the Catholic Church and its institutions and newspapers provided a sort of semi-protected space in which a degree of literary and intellectual freedom could be practiced, albeit cautiously.

Here, as in Hungary, the problem was often one of *self*-censorship. In order to secure access to an audience, intellectuals, artists or scholars were always tempted to adapt their work, to trim or hedge an argument in anticipation of likely official objections. The professional and even material benefits of such adjustment were not to be neglected, in societies where culture and the arts were taken very seriously; but the moral cost in self-respect could be considerable. As Heine had written a hundred and fifty years before, in terms many Eastern European intellectuals would immediately have recognized, 'these executioners of thought make criminals of us. For the author . . . frequently commits infanticide: he kills his own thought-child in insane terror of the censor's mind.'

This was one kind of partial complicity. Silence—the internal emigration of the 'Ketman' in Czeslaw Milosz's *Captive Mind*—was another. But those who did speak

[8] But even environmentalism had its internal dissidents. Milan Šimečka, the Slovak writer, warned his colleagues (Havel among them) against underestimating the benefits of modernity: 'I am of the opinion that even the pollution that accompanies industrial prosperity is better than the chaos and brutality which plagues those societies in which people are unable to satisfy their basic needs.' Milan Šimečka, 'A World With Utopias or Without Them', *Cross-Currents*, 3 (1984), p. 26.

out, circulating their work in illicit carbon copies, faced the gloomy prospect of near-invisibility, of having their ideas and their art confined to a tiny, closed audience—experiencing at best what one Czech intellectual morosely called the onanistic satisfaction of publishing *samizdat* for the same two thousand intellectuals, all of whom also write it.

Moreover, courage did not in itself ensure quality. The non-conformist, oppositional and frequently dangerous aspect of underground writing conferred on it (especially among its admirers in the West) an aura of romance and a sometimes overstated significance. Original and radical ideas could indeed blossom and thrive in the decaying compost-heap of the Soviet bloc—the writings of Havel and Michnik are the best but by no means the only instances of this, the *Fleurs du Mal* of Communism.[9] But for many others, being unpublished was no guarantee of quality. There is no 'muse of censorship' (George Steiner). Just because the regime didn't like you doesn't mean you were talented.

Thus the reputation of even some of the best known opposition intellectuals was to shrivel and shrink when exposed to a free market in ideas. Hungary's George Konrád—whose rather self-indulgent essays on 'Antipolitics' were widely admired in the Eighties—was one of many who would drop from sight after 1989. Others, like the East German novelist Christa Wolf, understood well that it was the very difficulties of being a writer under Communism that furnished her with both subject matter and a certain energy (and public standing). That is one reason why many intellectuals in Communist societies preferred to forego the opportunity of emigration and exile—better to be persecuted and significant than to be free but irrelevant.

The fear of irrelevance lay behind another consideration in these years, the widespread insistence upon the urgency of 'getting back' to Europe. Like censorship, this was a concern limited to intellectuals—indeed mostly to writers from the western provinces of the former Habsburg Empire, where the backwardness and under-development imposed by Soviet writ had been especially painful. The best-known spokesman for this sentiment was the Czech novelist and screenwriter Milan Kundera, writing from exile in Paris, for whom the tragedy of *Central* Europe (a geographical term revived explicitly to make Kundera's point) was its take-over by an alien, Asian dictatorship.

Kundera himself was not much appreciated in his homeland, where both his exile and his success were resented by those of his peers who had chosen (in their own account) to forego both. But his general thesis was widely shared, particularly in so far as it was addressed to Western readers, accused of neglecting and ignoring the 'other' West to their East—a theme already adumbrated by Milosz back in the 1950s when he remarked that a 'chapter in a hypothetical book on postwar Polish poetry should be dedicated to irony and even derision in the treatment of the Western European and particularly French intellectuals.'

[9] Yugoslavia is the exception that illustrates the rule: 'As there had never been an official culture established in Yugoslavia (which did not prevent the existence of official figures in cultural life), there could never be its natural opposite, an underground, alternative or parallel culture, such as was richly cherished by other socialist countries.' Dubravka Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies* (1998), page 37.

For Kundera, who was skeptical of citizens' initiatives like Charter 77, the Czech condition under Communism was an extension of the older problem of national identity and destiny in Europe's heartland, where small nations and peoples were always at risk of disappearing. The point of intellectual opposition there and abroad, he felt, was to bring *this* concern to international attention, not waste time trying to change Moscow's 'Byzantine' empire. Central Europe, moreover, was the 'destiny of the West, in concentrated form'. Havel concurred: Communism was the dark mirror that history was holding up to the West.

Poles like Michnik did not use the term 'Central Europe', or speak so much of 'returning to Europe': partly because, unlike the Czechs, they were in a position to pursue closer, attainable objectives. This is not to suggest that Poles and others did not dream of one day sharing in the benefits of the new European Community—of exchanging the failed myth of Socialism for the successful fable of 'Europe'. But they had more immediate priorities, as we shall see.

East Germans, too, had concerns of their own. One of the paradoxes of *Ostpolitik*, as practiced by Brandt and his successors, was that by transferring large sums of hard currency into East Germany and showering the GDR with recognition, attention, and support, West German officials unintentionally foreclosed any chance of internal change, including reform of Eastern Germany's polluted, antiquated industrial economy. By 'building bridges', twinning towns, paying their respects, and distancing themselves from Western criticism of East bloc regimes, Bonn's statesmen afforded the leadership of the GDR a false sense of stability and security.

Moreover, by 'buying out' political opponents and prisoners, West Germany deprived the East German opposition of some of its best known dissenters. No other Communist society had a Western *doppelganger*, speaking the same language. The temptation to leave was thus always there and the 'right to movement' typically headed the list of rights that preoccupied writers and artists in the GDR. But many 'internal' critics of the East German regime chose to abandon neither their country nor their old ideas. Indeed, by the end of the Seventies the GDR was the *only* European Communist state that could still boast an informal and even intra-Party Marxist opposition. Its best known dissidents all attacked Communist authority from the *Left*—a stance that rendered them both inaudible and irrelevant elsewhere in Eastern Europe, as the Czech writer Jiří Pelikán tartly observed.

Thus Rudolf Bahro, who after years of persecution was deported west in 1979, was best-known for his essay *The Alternative*, an explicitly Marxist critique of 'real existing Socialism'. Robert Havemann, an older Communist who was prosecuted and fined in these years for his engagement on behalf of the folk singer Wolf Bier-

mann (expelled West in 1976) castigated the ruling party not for abusing rights but for betraying its ideals and encouraging mass consumption and the private ownership of consumer goods. Wolfgang Harich, a leading figure in GDR philosophy circles and a longtime critic of the regime's 'bureaucratic' deviation, was equally vociferous in his opposition to the 'illusions of consumerism', against which he saw it as the task of the ruling party to re-educate the populace.

What opposition there was in the GDR to Communism as such tended to coalesce, as in Poland, around the churches: in Germany the Protestant *Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen*. Here the new language of rights and liberties abutted that of the Christian faith, and (again, as in Poland) was reinforced by association with the only surviving pre-Socialist institution. The influence of the churches also accounts for the prominence of the 'peace' question in East German dissident circles.

Elsewhere in eastern Europe the Western 'peaceniks' and activists for nuclear disarmament were regarded with considerable suspicion. They were seen at best as naïve innocents, more likely the mindless instruments of Soviet manipulation.[10] Václav Havel, for one, regarded the growing west European anti-war movement of the early 1980s as the perfect vehicle for engaging, diverting and *neutralizing* the western intelligentsia. : 'peace', he insisted, is not an option in countries where the state is permanently at war with society. Peace and disarmament under prevailing conditions would leave western Europe free and independent, while maintaining eastern Europe under Soviet control. It was a mistake to separate the 'peace' question from the demand for rights and liberties. Or, as Adam Michnik put it, 'the condition for reducing the danger of war is full respect of human rights'.

But in East Germany the peace movement found a deep local resonance. No doubt this was in part thanks to links with West Germany. But there was something else. The GDR—an accidental state with neither history nor identity—could with some shard of plausibility describe peace, or at least 'peaceful coexistence', as its true *raison d'être*. Yet at the same time it was by far the most militarized and militaristic of the socialist states: from 1977 'Defense Studies' were introduced into East German schools, and the state Youth Movement was unusually para-military even by Soviet standards. The tension generated by this glaring paradox found its outlet in an opposition movement which derived a large part of its support from its concentration on the issue of peace and disarmament.

In 1962 the East German regime had introduced a compulsory military service of eighteen months for all men aged 18–50. But two years later it added an escape clause: those who wished to be excused military service on moral grounds could join the *Bausoldaten*, an alternative labor unit. Although membership of the latter could prove a handicap in later life, its mere existence meant the GDR acknowledged the fact and the legitimacy of conscientious objection. By 1980

[10]With good reason. As we have since learned, the British and West German peace movements of the time were thoroughly penetrated by Soviet and East German intelligence.

thousands of East German men had passed through the *Bausoldaten* and represented a substantial potential network for peace activists.

Thus when Lutheran pastors began in 1980 to offer support and protection to the early peace activists, they were able to do so to a considerable extent without incurring state disapproval. The nascent peace movement then spread from the churches to the universities, inevitably raising not only calls for disarmament, but also the demand for the right to articulate these calls without hindrance. In this indirect way dissenting East Germans belatedly found a way to communicate (and catch up) with the opposition elsewhere in the bloc.

Romanians had no such luck. The appearance of Charter 77 prompted a courageous letter of support from the writer Paul Goma and seven other Romanian intellectuals, all of whom were promptly suppressed. But otherwise Romania remained as silent as it had been for three decades. Goma was forced into exile: no-one took his place. For this the West bore a measure of responsibility—even if a Romanian Charter 77 or a local version of Poland's *Solidarity* (see Chapter 19) had arisen, it is unlikely that it would have received much Western support. No US President ever demanded that the dictator Nicolai Ceauşescu 'let Romania be Romania'.

Even the Soviet Union allowed a tightly restricted liberty of action to certain intellectuals—mostly prominent scientists, always a privileged category. The biologist Zhores Medvedev, whose 1960s exposure of Lysenko had long circulated in *samizdat*, was first harrassed and then deprived of his citizenship. He settled in the UK in 1973. But Andrei Sakharov, the country's best-known nuclear physicist and a longstanding critic of the regime, remained at liberty—until his public opposition to the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan rendered his presence intolerable. Sakharov was too embarrassing to ignore (he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975) but too important to send abroad. He and his wife Yelena Bonner were forced instead into (internal) exile in the closed city of Gorky.

But Sakharov always insisted he was calling the Soviet Union to account for its shortcomings and its persecution of critics, rather than seeking its overthrow—a stance that put him somewhere between an older generation of reform Communists and the new Central European dissidents. Others, less prominent and avowedly anti-Soviet, were treated much more harshly. The poet Natalya Gorbanevskaya spent three years in a prison psychiatric hospital, diagnosed along with hundreds of others with 'sluggish schizophrenia'. Vladimir Bukovsky, the best known of the younger radicals, spent twelve years in Soviet prisons, labour camps and psychiatric wards before international outcry at his treatment led to his exchange for Luis Corvalán, a Chilean Communist, in 1976.

Except for such occasional protests on behalf of individuals, and a concerted campaign on behalf of the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate, the West paid remarkably little attention to the *domestic* affairs of the USSR—much less than was, by the early 1980s, being directed towards internal opposition in Poland or even Czecho-

slovakia, for example. It was not until 1983 that the Soviet Union withdrew from the World Psychiatric Association, when the latter—with shameful tardiness—finally began to criticize its abuses.

But with or without external prompting, the overwhelming majority of the Soviet intelligentsia was never going to follow the example being set, however tentatively, elsewhere in Eastern Europe. The fear inspired by Stalin's repression hung like a pall across the moral landscape three decades after his death, even if no-one actually spoke of it, and all but the most outspoken and courageous critics took care to stay within the bounds of legitimate Soviet themes and language. They assumed, reasonably enough, that the Soviet Union was here to stay. Writers like Andrei Amalrik, whose essay 'Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?' first appeared in the West in 1970, and was re-published in expanded form ten years later, were prophetic but atypical. In contrast to the puppet regimes it had installed at its boundaries, the Soviet Union by 1983 had been in place for longer than most of its citizens could remember and appeared fundamentally stable.

The intellectual opposition in Central Europe had little immediate impact. This surprised no-one: the new realism of the Seventies-era dissidents encompassed not just a disabused grasp of Socialism's failure but also a clear-sighted appreciation of the facts of power. There were limits, moreover, on what could be asked of people: in his 'Essay on Bravery' the Czechoslovak writer Ludvík Vaculík argued persuasively that one can ask only so much of ordinary people struggling to get through their daily lives. Most people lived in a sort of moral 'grey zone', a safe if stifling space in which enthusiasm was replaced by acceptance. Active, risk-laden resistance to authority was hard to justify because—again, for most ordinary people—it appeared unnecessary. 'Un-heroic, realistic deeds' were the most one could expect.

The intellectuals were talking for the most part to one another rather than addressing the community at large: in some cases they were offering implicit amends for their earlier enthusiasms. Moreover, they were the heirs (in certain instances quite literally the children) of the ruling class of the first generation of Socialist power—education and privilege having passed reasonably efficiently down the generations, especially in Poland and Hungary. That did not always endear them to the mass of the population. As in the past, when they had spoken *for* the regimes they now opposed, they were a tiny minority of the population and represented only themselves.

Thus when George Konrád wrote somewhat sententiously that 'no thinking person should want to drive others from positions of political power in order to occupy them for himself', he was acknowledging a simple truth—no 'thinking person' was in a position there and then to do any such thing. This same appreciation of the grim facts of life also forms a backdrop to the opposition's insistence on non-

violence: not only in Czechoslovakia, where passivity in the face of authority had a long history; or in the GDR, where the Lutheran Church was increasingly influential in opposition circles; but even in Poland, where it represented for Michnik and others both a pragmatic and an ethical bar to dangerous and pointless 'adventures'.

The achievement of the new opposition lay elsewhere. In the East as in the West, the Seventies and Eighties were a time of cynicism. The energies of the Sixties had dissipated, their political ideals had lost moral credibility, and engagement in the public interest had given way to calculations of private advantage. By forging a conversation about rights, by focusing attention on the rather woolly concept of 'civil society', by insistently talking about the silences of Central Europe's present and its past—by moralizing shamelessly in public, as it were—Havel and others were building a sort of 'virtual' public space to replace the one destroyed by Communism.

One thing the dissident intellectuals did *not* talk about very much was economics. This, too, was a kind of realism. Ever since Stalin, economic—or, more precisely, industrial—growth had been both the goal of Socialism and the main measure of its success. Economics, as we saw in Chapter 13, had been the overriding concern of an earlier generation of reformist intellectuals: reflecting back at the Communist regime its own obsessions and echoing an assumption—shared by Marxists and many non-Marxists alike—that all politics are ultimately *about* economics. Critical discussion couched in the form of recommendations for economic reform had been the nearest thing to a licensed opposition in the revisionist decade between 1956 and 1968.

But by the middle of the 1970s it was hard for any well-informed observer of the Soviet bloc to take seriously the prospect of economic reform from within, and not only because the language of Marxist economics had collapsed after decades of unseemly abuse. From 1973 the economies of Eastern Europe were falling sharply behind even Western Europe's reduced growth rates. Except for a brief blip in the finances of the oil-rich Soviet Union, brought on by the rise in energy prices, the inflation of the Seventies and the 'globalizing' of trade and services in the Eighties put the economies of the Soviet bloc at an insuperable disadvantage. In 1963 the international trade of Comecon countries had been 12 percent of the world total. By 1979 it was down to 9 percent and falling fast.[11]

The countries of the Soviet bloc could not compete on quality with the industrial economies of the West; nor did any of them except the USSR itself have a sustainable supply of raw materials to sell to the West, so they could not even compete with undeveloped countries. The closed Comecon system precluded participation in the new trading networks of Western Europe and GATT, and Com-

[11] During the 1980s Poland and Czechoslovakia both slipped into negative economic growth—their economies actually shrinking. The economy of the USSR itself had probably been shrinking since 1979.

munist states could in any case not adapt their economies to world price levels without risking the fury of domestic consumers (which is what happened in Poland in 1976).

The crippling defect of Communist economies by this time was endemic; ideologically-induced inefficiency. Because of an unbending insistence upon the importance of primary industrial output for the 'construction of socialism', the Soviet bloc missed the switch from extensive to intensive, high-value production that transformed Western economies in the course of the Sixties and Seventies. Instead it remained reliant upon a much earlier model of economic activity, redolent of Detroit or the Ruhr in the 1920s, or late nineteenth-century Manchester.

Thus Czechoslovakia—a country with very limited resources in iron—was by 1981 the world's third largest (per capita) exporter of steel. To the bitter end, the GDR was planning ever-expanded production of obsolete heavy industrial goods. No-one who had any choice actually wanted to buy Czech steel or East German machines, except at heavily subsidized prices: these goods were thus produced and sold at a loss. In effect, Soviet-style economies were now *subtracting* value—the raw materials they imported or dug out of the ground were worth more than the finished goods into which they were transformed.

Even in areas of comparative advantage the Soviet economy took its toll. Just as Hungary was Comecon's chosen manufacturer of trucks and buses, so the GDR in the 1980s was assigned the task of manufacturing computers. But not only were the machines produced in East Germany unreliable and outdated; the centralized system was simply unable to make enough of them. By 1989, East Germany (with a population of 16 million) was turning out just one-fiftieth the number of computers manufactured in Austria (population: 7.5 million)—and as a producer of computers Austria was a negligible competitor in the international market. 'Comparative advantage' in this case was thus strictly relative—the GDR was spending millions of marks producing unwanted goods that were available at lower cost and in better quality on the world market.

Much of the responsibility for all this lay with the inherent defects of centralized planning. By the late 1970s Gosplan, the Soviet central economic planning agency, had forty departments for different branches of the economy and twenty seven separate economic ministries. The obsession with numerical targets was notorious to the point of self-parody: Timothy Garton Ash cites the example of 'The People's Economy Plan for the Borough of Prenzlauer Berg' (in East Berlin), where it was announced that 'Book-holdings in the libraries are to be increased from 350,000 to 450,000 volumes. The number of borrowings is to be increased by 108.2 percent'.[12]

[12]Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity* (NY, 1989), page 9.

Fixed price systems made it impossible to ascertain real costs, to respond to needs or to adapt to resource constraints. Administrators at every level were frightened of taking risks and innovating, lest they reduce aggregate output in the short term. In any case, they had no incentive: they were secure in their posts no matter how incompetent, thanks to Brezhnev's well-known preference for the 'stability of cadres' (the watchword from 1971 onwards). Meanwhile, in order to make sure that they would meet targets set from above, factory foremen and managers took great pains to *hide* reserves of material and labour from the authorities. Waste and shortage were thus mutually self-sustaining.

The predictable effect of such a system was to encourage not just stagnation and inefficiency but a permanent cycle of corruption. It is one of the paradoxes of the Socialist project that the absence of property tends to generate more corruption, not less. Power, position and privilege cannot be directly bought, but depend instead upon mutually-reinforcing relationships of patronage and clientelism. Legal rights are replaced by sycophancy, which is duly rewarded with job security or advancement. To achieve even modest and legitimate objectives—medical treatments, material necessities, educational opportunities—people are required to bend the law in a variety of minor but corrupting ways.

This accounts in large measure for the marked increase in cynicism in these years. One example can stand for many: Tractor plants, or truck manufacturers, did not bother to make sufficient spare parts because they could more easily meet their 'norms' by building large machines—with the result that when these large machines broke down, there were no replacement parts available. Official data published only the total number of machines of all sorts produced in a given sector; they did not say how many were still in working order. The workers, of course, knew better.

The Socialist social contract was tartly summed up in the popular joke: 'you pretend to work, we pretend to pay you'. Many workers, especially the less-skilled, had a stake in these arrangements, which—in return for political quiescence—offered social security and a low level of pressure at the workplace. As East Germany's official *Small Political Dictionary* put it, with unintended irony, 'in socialism, the contradiction between work and free time, typical of capitalism, is removed.'

The only parts of a typical Communist economy that worked relatively efficiently by 1980 were the high-technology defense industries and the so-called 'second economy'—the black market in goods and services. The importance of this second economy—whose very existence could not be officially acknowledged—was testimony to the sad state of the official one. In Hungary, by the early eighties, it is estimated that a mere 84,000 artisans—operating exclusively in the private sector—were meeting nearly 60 percent of local demand for services, from plumbing to prostitution.

Add to this private peasant production, along with public resources (bricks,

copper wire, typefaces) 'diverted' for use by workers in private enterprise, and it can be seen that Soviet-style Communism—much like Italian capitalism—relied for its survival on a parallel economy.[13] The relationship was symbiotic: the Communist state could sustain its public monopoly only by channeling into the private sphere all activities and needs that it could neither deny nor meet; while the second economy depended upon the official one for resources, but above all for the very inefficiency of the public sector which guaranteed it a market and artificially elevated its value and thereby its profits.

Economic stagnation was in itself a standing rebuke to Communism's claims to superiority over capitalism. And if not a stimulus to opposition, it was certainly a source of disaffection. For most people living under Communism in the Brezhnev era, from the late Sixties through the early Eighties, life was no longer shaped by terror or repression. But it was grey and drab. Adults had fewer and fewer children; they drank more—the per capita annual consumption of alcoholic spirits in the Soviet Union quadrupled in these years—and they died young. Public architecture in Communist societies was not only aesthetically unappealing, it was shoddy and uncomfortable, a faithful mirror of the shabby authoritarianism of the system itself. As a Budapest taxi-driver once remarked to the present author, pointing to the serried ranks of dank, grimy apartment blocks that disfigure the city's outer suburbs: 'We live in those. Typical Communist building—summer is hot, winter very cold.'

Apartments, like much else in the Soviet bloc, were cheap (rent averaged 4 percent of a typical household budget in the USSR), because the economy was regulated not by price but by scarcity. This had its advantages for the authorities—the arbitrary allocation of scarce commodities helped maintain loyalty—but it carried with it a serious risk, which most Communist leaders understood very well. Ever since it had become clear by the end of the Sixties that the future promise of 'Socialism' could no longer be counted upon to bind citizens to the regime, Communist rulers had opted instead to treat their subjects as consumers and replace (socialist) utopia tomorrow with material abundance today.

This choice was made quite consciously. As Vasil Bil'ák, the Czech hardliner who was instrumental in inviting the Soviets to invade his country in 1968, put it to his party's Ideological Commission in October 1970: '[In 1948] we had posters in the shop windows about how socialism is going to look, and people were receptive to it. That was a different kind of excitement and a different historical time, and today we can't put up posters about how socialism is going to look, but today

[13] In agriculture, much of the Soviet Union, Hungary and Romania once again resembled the great nineteenth-century landed estates: poorly-paid, under-performing, inadequately-equipped agricultural labourers did the minimum for their absent employers while saving their energy for the real labour they put into family plots.

shop windows have to be full of goods so that we can document that we are moving to socialism and that we have socialism here'.[14]

Consumerism, then, was to be encouraged as the measure of Socialism's success. This was not the same as Khrushchev's famous 1959 'kitchen debate' with Nixon, when he assured the American Vice-President that Communism would outperform capitalism in the foreseeable future. Bil'ák—like Kádár in Hungary—had no such illusions. He was content for Communism to be a pale imitation of capitalism, so long as the goods on offer kept consumers happy. East Germany's Erich Honecker, who replaced the unmourned Walter Ulbricht as party leader in 1971, likewise set out to offer the citizens of the GDR a modest adaptation of West Germany's 1950's 'miracle'.

This strategy was moderately successful for a while. The standard of living in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland improved through the 1970s, at least when measured by retail consumption. The number of cars and televisions—the iconic consumer durables of the age—rose steadily: in Poland the number of privately-owned cars per head of the population increased fourfold between 1975 and 1989. By the end of the eighties there were four televisions for every ten people in Hungary; the figures for Czechoslovakia were similar. If buyers were willing to accept poor quality, indifferent styling and little choice, they could usually find what they wanted, in official shops or through the 'private' sector. In the Soviet Union, however, such 'optional' goods were harder to find—and relatively more expensive.

The same was true of basic necessities. In March 1979 a shopper in Washington DC would have had to work 12.5 hours to afford a generic 'basket' of basic foods (sausages, milk, eggs, potatoes, vegetables, tea, beer, etc). A similar basket would 'cost' 21.4 work-hours in London, but 42.3 work-hours in Moscow, despite high levels of subsidy.[15] Moreover the Soviet or East European consumer had to spend many more hours finding and purchasing foods and other goods. Measured in time and effort, if not in rubles or crowns or forints, life under Communism was expensive as well as exhausting.

The problem with defining Communism by its success in satisfying private consumers was that the whole economy was geared, as noted above, to the high-volume manufacture of industrial machinery and raw materials. Except for food, Communist economies did not produce the things that consumers wanted (and they were not very efficient at producing food, either—the Soviet Union had long since become a net *importer* of grain, tripling its food imports between 1970 and 1982 alone). The only way around this impediment was to import consumer goods from

[14] I am grateful to Dr Paulina Bren for this reference.

[15] In the Brezhnev years a pound of beef cost three and a half rubles to produce but was sold in shops for two rubles. The European Community subsidized its farmers too, and in approximately the same proportions. The difference, of course, was that Western Europe could afford a Common Agricultural Policy and the Soviet Union could not.

abroad, but these had to be paid for with hard currency. The latter could only be acquired by exports: but except for Soviet oil the world market had little use for Socialist output unless sold at a sharp discount and in many cases not even then. In practice, the only way to stock the shelves in the East was to borrow money from the West.

The West was certainly keen to oblige. The IMF, the World Bank and private bankers were all happy to lend to Soviet bloc countries: the Red Army was a reassuring guarantee of stability, and Communist officials misrepresented their countries' output and resources to convincing effect.[16] In the course of the 1970s alone Czechoslovakia's hard currency debt rose twelve-fold. Poland's hard currency debt increased some 3,000 percent, as First Secretary Gierek and his colleagues sucked in subsidized Western goods, introduced expensive new social insurance programs for peasants and froze food prices at 1965 levels.

Once borrowing at these levels took off it was hard to contain. Gierek's food price increases of 1976 triggered angry riots and were quickly repealed, the regime choosing instead to keep borrowing: between 1977 and 1980 one-third of Poland's external line of credit was used to subsidize domestic consumption. Communist economists in Prague recommended phasing out subsidies and introducing 'real' prices, but their political masters feared the social consequences of such a retreat and preferred to increase their debts instead. As in the inter-war years, the fragile little states of eastern Europe were once again borrowing capital from the West to finance their autarkic economies and avoid hard choices.

Miklós Németh, the last Communist prime minister of Hungary, was to acknowledge as much a few years later. A loan of one billion Deutschmarks from Bonn, granted in October 1987 and portrayed by West German politicians as a contribution to Hungarian economic 'reform', was in reality disbursed thus: 'we spent two thirds of it on interest and the remainder importing consumer goods to ease the impression of economic crisis.' By 1986 Hungary's *official* deficit on current account was $ 1.4 billion per annum. Between 1971 and 1980 Poland's hard currency debt had risen from $1 billion to $20.5 billion, with worse to come. By its own reckoning the GDR in its last years was spending over 60 percent of its yearly export earnings just to cover the (very generously discounted) interest on its Western debts. Yugoslavia, always a favored client (from 1950 through 1964 the US had covered three-fifths of Belgrade's annual deficits) received generous loans and stand-by arrangements on the basis of official data that bore not even a passing relationship to reality.

Taken as a whole, eastern Europe's hard currency debt, which stood at $6.1 billion in 1971, grew to $66.1 billion in 1980. By 1988 it would reach $95.6 billion. These figures did not include Romania, where Ceauşescu had paid off his country's foreign loans on the backs of his long-suffering subjects; and they might well have been even higher but for some latitude on price-setting introduced in Hungary over the course of the Seventies. But their message was clear: the Communist system was living not just on loans but on borrowed time. Sooner or later it would be necessary to make painful and socially disruptive economic adjustments.

[16] Hungary joined the IMF in May 1982, to mutual self-congratulation. Only in 1989 did it emerge that its government had seriously understated its internal and external debt for the previous decade.

In years to come Markus Wolf, the East German spymaster, would claim that by the late 1970s he had already concluded that the GDR 'wouldn't work' and he was certainly not alone. Economists like Hungary's Támás Bauer and his Polish contemporary Leszek Balcerowicz knew perfectly well how fragile the Communist house of cards had become. But so long as the capitalists would underwrite it, Communism could survive. Leonid Brezhnev's 'era of stagnation' (Mikhail Gorbachev) fostered many illusions, and not only at home. In 1978, when a World Bank Report actually determined that the GDR had a higher standard of living than Great Britain, Prince Potemkin must surely have smiled in his far-off grave.

But Communists understood something that the bankers of the West had missed. Economic reform in the Soviet bloc had not merely been postponed. It was out of the question. As Amalrik had predicted in *Will the USSR Survive Until 1984?*, the Communist élite 'look upon the regime as a lesser evil compared with the painful process of changing it.' Economic reforms of even the most localized and micro-efficient kind would have immediate political ramifications. The economic arrangements of socialism were not an autonomous zone; they were thoroughly integrated into the political regime itself.

It was not by chance that the East European satellite states were all run by ageing, conservative time-servers. In a new age of realism Edward Gierek in Warsaw (born 1913), Gustav Husák in Prague (born 1913), Erich Honecker in Berlin (born 1912), János Kádár in Budapest (born 1912) and Todor Zhivkov in Sofia (born 1911)—not to speak of Enver Hoxha in Tirana (born 1908) and Josip Broz Tito in Belgrade (born 1892)—were the most realistic of all. Like Leonid Brezhnev—born 1906, Seven Orders of Lenin, four-time Hero Of The Soviet Union, winner of the Lenin Peace Prize, General Secretary and, since 1977, Head of State—these men had grown old in the old ways. They had little incentive to pull the rug out from under themselves. They had every intention of dying in their beds.[17]

The fact that 'real existing Socialism' was dysfunctional and discredited did not in itself seal its fate. In his 1971 Nobel Prize acceptance speech (delivered in his absence), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had rousingly asserted that 'once the lie has been dispersed, the nakedness of violence will be revealed in all its repulsiveness, and then violence, become decrepit, will come crashing down.' But this was not quite true. The nakedness of Soviet violence had long since been revealed—and would be ex-

[17] Moreover, like Brezhnev himself, they were among the leading consumers of the age. In a Soviet joke from the time, the Soviet leader is showing his mother his *dacha*, his cars and his hunting lodges. 'It's wonderful, Leonid,' she says. 'But what if the Communists come back to power?'

posed again in the disastrous 1979 invasion of Afghanistan—and the lie of Communism was progressively dispersed and dispelled in the course of the years after 1968.

But the system had not yet come crashing down. Lenin's distinctive contribution to European history had been to kidnap the centrifugal political heritage of European radicalism and channel it into power through an innovative system of monopolized control: unhesitatingly gathered and forcefully retained in one place. The Communist system might corrode indefinitely at the periphery; but the initiative for its final collapse could only come from the centre. In the story of Communism's demise, the remarkable flowering in Prague or Warsaw of a new kind of opposition was only the end of the beginning. The emergence of a new kind of leadership in Moscow itself, however, was to be the beginning of the end.