

Risings In The East

The nations of Eastern Europe have begun to stir in response to the quickening pace of change in the USSR. Neal Ascherson analyses the momentum of 1988 and where it is likely to lead in '89

At the beginning of 1988, my own question about Eastern Europe was this. So far, all the rhetoric and all the political struggles had raged around *glasnost*, *perestroika* and (least-mentioned, but most urgent and perhaps the end to which the other two are only the means) *uskorenie* - acceleration. But nothing clear had been said about Eastern Europe. So what was Gorbachev's intention for that part of the world?

His aims for the Soviet Union itself had been made clear, not least in Gorbachev's own writings about 'revolution from above' and in less authoritative texts from advisers like Aganbeyan. The aims for international politics had also become recognisable and impressive: the wish to pull out of Brezhnev's distant embroilments, in Afghanistan above all but also in Africa, was more than a rumour and already a matter of preliminary negotiation. So was improvement of relations with China, although there were serious doubts whether the USSR would apply effective pressure upon Vietnam to evacuate Kampuchea. The aims for disarmament and arms control were already written across the sky, and the Reagan administration was floundering in a rising flood of Soviet proposals. Even a year ago, it no longer looked as if the 'Strategic Defence Initiative' (star wars) would be allowed to block further arms control agreements.

It was natural, and correct, for us in the West to ask whether the internal transformation of the socialist system in the Soviet Union also implied a similar transformation in Eastern Europe - or, to put it more cautiously, a transformation in the

relationship between the Soviet Union and the member states of the Warsaw Pact. But there was little evidence either way. On the one hand, the Hungarian reformers were confident that in Moscow their experiments in market socialism were being closely and admiringly watched. On the other hand, opinion was divided on what exactly Gorbachev might think of the state of affairs in Czechoslovakia, where Dr Gustav Husak still ruled a highly repressive and centralised command economy. Some said that he was sick of the neo-stalinists in Prague, and would shortly evict them. Others countered that the undeniable stability of Czechoslovakia, compared to Poland for example, was a source of deep relief and reassurance to the Soviet leader. He had enough problems. The last thing he needed, while he fought for his own political life and that of his programme, was trouble in the 'fraternal countries'.

Evidence for any of these views was scanty, circumstantial. An East-West conference I attended in Budapest in the autumn of 1987 found the Soviet delegates silent on this subject, concerned primarily with relations with the West and the Third World, and with Western failures to understand the historic importance of what was being undertaken in their country. It was suggested to them that far the most convincing and effective demonstration of good faith which the USSR could make to the West, if Western assent was really that important, would be a change in the Soviet power relationship to Eastern Europe which at least pointed in the direction of



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'finlandisation'. But there was no response to this, though some of the Hungarian participants would dearly have liked one. A month or so later, I was in Moscow. The summit was on, admittedly, and many good people were out of town. All the same, the Soviet relationship to Eastern Europe proved to be a closed zone, as far as those I spoke with were concerned. Vivid and heretical as they might be on subjects like corruption or the Stalin legacy, on Eastern Europe they gave the impression that 'we have no instructions in this matter'. In private talk, pressed for a view of the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, two people offered me the old version of a plot against that country by the West Germans and the CIA.

The last year has been one of the most exciting and eventful in Eastern and Central Europe since 1956, although - fortunately - infinitely less violent. It can't quite be said that the question has been answered and that we now possess a 24-carat assurance from Gorbachev that Eastern Europe can develop as it pleases. Nobody on the Soviet side in authority has yet tried to make the crucial distinction: between the security interests of the USSR and the internal political structures of Warsaw Pact regimes. Nonetheless, the relationship has changed. Extraordinary things have happened, and have been treated with calm and restraint by the Soviet Union. If there is still a line beyond which ideological heresy becomes

a security threat to the USSR, that line would seem to have been moved further away.

In addition, there are a few suggestive, if cloudy, Soviet pronouncements. They seem to mean two things. First, that the revaluation of recent history which has been underway for several years (for example, the joint Soviet-Polish commission of historians) is now beginning to licence a much more rueful view of how the Soviet Union has behaved to the nations of the *glacis* in the last 40 years. The time when unofficial Soviet spokesmen - and there always was such a category - can say that August 1968 was an error is now arriving. Secondly, that the community in Moscow which thinks and advises about policy now recognises that *perestroika* has released social and political energies abroad, and that rapid and radical changes must be expected within the nations of the Warsaw Pact. The view of these changes seems to be this: 'We will not intervene, but will allow each country to develop in a way that suits it best.'

What, though, if Hungary not only develops a multi-party system but decides by democratic process to end the leading role of the Hungarian Workers Party and consign it to the opposition benches of a freely-elected parliament? There, the answer grows Delphic and misty. 'One must assume that these nations will choose to retain socialism, in a quite new form perhaps...' Unsatisfactory. But unthinkable mental steps have been taken in the last year, all the same.

My guess is that Gorbachev has now banned the resort to armed intervention in the 'socialist commonwealth', a term which he in fact rejects, except in utterly apocalyptic circumstances (say: a Romanian invasion of Hungary, or a national insurrection in one of the USSR's own republics). He has accepted that some states in the Pact are going to twist 'socialism' out of all recogni-

tion, while others will laager themselves in against change for as long as possible. However, he has not yet faced directly the idea that - sooner rather than later - one of these states is going to attempt the non-violent removal of a ruling Communist Party from power. At the beginning of December, I heard his adviser Vadim Zagladin reply to a Western questioner in these words: 'You ask if the Soviet system is in flux. I say: the system stays, but the regime changes. You ask diplomatically but in effect, if the Soviet Union would hinder friends in Eastern Europe from making their own changes. I tell you No! Is that clear?'

Even in the insularity of England, the tumult of change in Eastern Europe has been audible for the last 12 months. Change with exceptions, of course. The German Democratic Republic has held to its conservative course without apparent lack of self-confidence. Czechoslovakia went through a puzzling series of face replacements. Dr Husak, who was seen to have lost the confidence of Moscow early in the year, resigned as party leader, but his successor, Milos Jakes, attempted no 'opening'. Instead, Lubomir Strougal, for so long associated with a hankering after economic reform, finally lost his job as prime minister: the Prague regime looks superficially harder than it was a year ago.

In Romania, President Ceausescu's isolated dictatorship showed no real signs of internal breakdown. The people remained hungry and wretched, and international loathing of his system grew more intense. Hungarian outrage at Romania's treatment of the Magyar minority increased, and the Budapest regime permitted genuinely spontaneous demonstrations. The West was horrified by 'systematisation', the demolition of villages, and by the monstrous vandalising of Bucharest by the president's building mania. A Gorbachev visit

appeared to solve nothing.

In Poland, two waves of strikes brought the situation back to the boil. Solidarity, which was beginning to be dismissed as an effective force, proved to have retained a strong pull on the working class in a crisis, and the ambiguous attempts to get a 'roundtable' discussion going between Lech Walesa, the government and other social forces will probably continue through 1989. The rhetoric on all sides is about pluralism and dialogue, and about how economic reform cannot be made to work without social consensus - or at least, consent. The reality is that the new premier, Mieczyslaw Rakowski, is also fighting a political battle, aimed at discrediting and disabling Solidarity before the impact of the reforms on working-class living standards leads to another explosion.

In Hungary, Janos Kadar finally left the stage; under his successor as party leader, Karoly Grosz, a desperately rapid political liberalisation has been attempted in order - as it seems - to offer deeply discontented sections of society political influence as a substitute for economic security. However, the standard of living went on falling, and will fall further in 1989. There is a nasty feeling among Hungarians that this combination of ineffective civil liberty and disappointed expectations could prove explosive.

This next year may bring about what could be called 'the privatisation of *raison d'etat*'. In most East European countries, *raison d'etat* means the defence of what qualified independence the state may enjoy. In cruder terms, it's the statement that if we are too heretical, or if there is too much disorder, the Soviet tanks will arrive.

This is an international definition of *raison d'etat*. But now nations like Poland and Hungary are approaching the point at which their internal politics and arrangements are genuinely internal, at which they can have what sort of regime they like without

fearing Soviet intervention. Perhaps they have already reached that point. Nobody can be sure. What now is defined as 'counter-revolution' in the Soviet Union, and what is the way to treat it? Nobody knows that either. It's prudent to assume that a line will be encountered somewhere at which the Soviet Union finds the situation in an allied state intolerable. But where? It is extraordinarily hard to get used to the conduct of political struggle in which everything is no longer judged against that ultimate fear, but Poles and Hungarians will have to get used to it.

This last year has also shown interesting lines of development in opposition. As mentioned, organised working-class opposition in the form of strikes and banned independent trade unions came back with unexpected vigour in Poland. But even in Poland a trade union

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is not primarily a political formation. And the question of what '*post-perestroika*' politics are going to look like in Eastern Europe remains open. There are, however, some hints.

The prospects for Communist parties in anything like a plural contest by free elections are dim and growing dimmer; especially as the old *raison d'etat* argument ('you may hate us, but if you try to get rid of us, they will invade') begins to wane. In Poland, the PZPR is little more than a skeleton of apparatchiks and *nomenclatura* patronage. In Hungary, where the idea of power-sharing with genuinely independent non-Communist elements is far newer than in Poland, the HWP is unpopular: its reforms lag behind the expectations they create. Only in Yugoslavia, racked

by conflicts both social and national, have Communist parties discovered a new source of authenticity: as the carriers of regional or national grievances against a supra-national centre. Once, discontent in the component republics of Yugoslavia was expressed by nationalist movements, suppressed by Communist parties in the name of Yugoslav unity under Tito. Today, much more successfully, that discontent is carried by the regional/national Communist parties themselves, whether in Slovenia against Belgrade, in Kosovo against Serbia, or above all by the Serbian Communist League under Slobodan Milosevic against the 'federal' Yugoslav League of Communists. Only the USSR itself has a structure like that of Yugoslavia, and it's not a coincidence that the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian CPs

have been in the leadership of the national movements there.

But the mention of Milosevic raises another trend, which seemed to be emerging during 1988. For some 20 years, the West has identified with 'dissidents' in Eastern Europe and the USSR; these dissident groups have been typically composed of individuals with rather internationalist, liberal or social-democratic views, possessing a global rather than a national view of politics, interested above all in human rights and personal freedom. Some have been Christians, but many members of these groups have either been party members or children of Communist parents. Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, the Committee for Workers' Defence (KOR) in Poland, the Szeta association in Hungary are past or present

examples.

My impression is that, in more open conditions for political struggle, the prominence of such groups is ending. They are being replaced - as in Hungary in these crucial months - by much more traditional and nationalist centres of opposition. European intellectuals like Miklos Haraszti or Otilia Szolt carried the torch of opposition through long and dark years. Now, in freer conditions for political initiative, they have become less influential than the so-called *narodnik* movement of old-fashioned Hungarian patriots who claim to be close to the land and who fear the cosmopolitan city asphalt, whose prejudices are populist and not free of racialism.

It may well be that in 1989 *Blut-und-Boden* (blood and soil) nationalism is going to revive in Eastern Europe.

Solidarity had essentially social-democratic features, but the strongest purely political formation of 1980-81, growing rapidly by the time that it was suppressed by martial law, was the Confederation for Independent Poland (KPN), a mindlessly right-wing nationalist party whose cult of 'national egoism' recalled the prewar National Democrats. Milosevic has contrived to capture Serbian communism for an ideology of this sort. In a way, it all suggests a revival of the old peasant parties which were so powerful in this region of Europe before 1939. But, however it be analysed, I suspect that *Blut-und-Boden* opposition to ruling Communist parties will show a power, an appeal and a capacity to put down roots which the liberal 'dissidents' could never achieve. It's a disquieting outlook. •



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