

Future Of Europe Bloc Busters

Europe has two halves. While 1992 is transforming the West, Gorbachev is revolutionising prospects for the East.

Neal Ascherson discusses the future relationship of the two halves after the cold war, and doesn't like what he sees



In the January issue of *Marxism Today*, I asked a question and passed a comment. The question was about the external dimension of *perestroika*. Did the internal changes in Soviet society imply a similar transformation of the relationship between the USSR and the states of the Warsaw Pact? Nobody in Soviet authority had yet made the crucial distinction between the 'legitimate' security interests of the Soviet Union and the internal political structures of the Pact members. And yet there was a growing hope, a strengthening confidence, that these societies could in fact not only reform but qualitatively alter their political and economic regimes without fearing Soviet military intervention.

The comment was about the changing

nature of opposition in Eastern Europe. I suggested that the old 'dissident' generation - intellectual, internationalist, urban-rooted, sited politically somewhere between social democracy and Christian democracy - might now be waning. In the new, far more open conditions obtaining above all in Hungary and Poland, with plans for pluralism of political parties and, more vaguely, for free elections which might eventually remove a ruling Communist Party from government, 'dissident' politics were being challenged by a different force. This force is traditional nationalism, whose prejudices are rural and populist and whose ideology may turn out to have more to do with authority than with human rights. A revival of a certain past - that of the old peasant parties at its best, and of *Blut und Boden* nationalism at its worst - seemed to me to be possible.

The unfreezing of the cold war is proceeding at bewildering speed, and highly unevenly. Much has happened since that article was written. The Vienna Review Meeting, in the 35-nation European Security process, finished in January with a closing document committing the signatories to an elaborate list of promises of good behaviour, internationally and internally, and also to accepting the right of other signatories to intervene and protest if one of the 35 failed to carry out the Vienna provisions. Shevardnadze and Gorbachev announced further sweeping arms reduction in Europe, and published the first official figures of force levels.

My question received some reply when Oleg Bogomolov, the senior Soviet expert on Eastern Europe, observed that a neutral and bourgeois Hungary on the Austrian or Swedish model would 'present no problem' to the Soviet Union. Shortly before that incredible remark, Eduard Shevardnadze had urged a mainly Western audience at Vienna to tear down what remained of the old iron curtain (although he later evaded the suggestion that he wanted the Berlin wall demolished). Meanwhile, construction of a new plural politics is going rapidly ahead in Poland and Hungary. Roundtable talks have begun in earnest between the Polish authorities and Solidarity, to the accompaniment of unofficial strikes and street turbulence; a Polish dignitary visiting London was heard to say that it was up to Solidarity to choose whether to remain a trade union or to become a political party (this at a moment when Solidarity was still officially banned). In Hungary, the prime minister discussed openly the possibility of the defeat of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party in free multi-party elections.

On the 'populism' front, fierce nationalist confrontation developed again in Kosovo, while in Poland the right-wing KPN (Conference for an Independent Poland) emerged once more on the streets of Krakow during student riots. One result of the Warsaw roundtable talks, incidentally, was to open the way to a re-legalisation of Rural Solidarity, the peasant trade union suppressed in December 1981. Many events in the short

life of Rural Solidarity in 1981 had suggested that it was rapidly becoming a resurrection of the PSL, the huge and radical prewar peasant party. If this project goes through, peasant nationalism will have returned to the political scene of Eastern Europe. And the PSL (if it does emerge from the Rural Solidarity chrysalis) may soon be joined by a revived Agrarian Party in Hungary, at present using the 'Peter Veres Society' as a founding committee.

Beyond these hectic changes and births, the whole continent is altering. If Soviet control is reduced to something like a 'normal' relationship between a superpower and its independent neighbours, if the economic and political reforms keep up their momentum and begin to affect Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), if the arms and conventional forces reductions are accelerated still faster by the new talks in the Helsinki process which have just started in Vienna, then we are entering a new Europe. All we know about it is that our children will use the word 'Europe' in senses, with associations, which we of the cold war generations can't yet imagine.

So much for the *Zukunftsmusik*- the purple passage about the lovely future! There are threatening uncertainties here as well as beautiful ones. Two in particular, both of which hint that this 'new' Europe might simultaneously turn out to be an old Europe - one which its peoples, and the socialist movements in particular, fought for a hundred years to overthrow and to replace. The landscape after the cold war could offer a place to old-fashioned armed conflicts over territory and minorities. It could also divide Europe in a different way, restoring the gulf between the industrialised West and the backward, rural, colonially-exploited East and South-East which yawned before 1914, and was not closed between the two world wars.

It is 14 years since the 'Helsinki Final Act' was signed. It wasn't really final: ever since, the 35 nations of the European Security and Co-operation Conference have continued to extend and to elaborate the Helsinki principles of 1975. But the Final Act did lay down the architects' blueprint for a Europe living at peace, operating a collective security system, applying minima of civil rights internally and exchanging goods, information and travellers of every kind without impediment.

But, counting the years of preparatory meetings before 1975, the Helsinki design is now 16 or 17 years old. When it was dreamed up in the late 1950s, in the fertile brain of Adam Rapacki, the Polish foreign minister, the Security Conference idea was a way out of the Potsdam idea. At Potsdam, the Big Three - or Four, when the French came in - decided the shape of Europe while the lesser nations waited outside to hear their fate or fortune. Rapacki had the vision of a quite different forum, in which every nation, neutral or Pact member, vast or

tiny, would have a single and equal voice. There was much talk of demilitarised or denuclearised zones, and great hopes for direct contact at bilateral level between junior members of the two military alliances. But there was also the underlying assumption that Europe would remain divided into two hegemonies, Soviet and American. The two superpowers would abandon all ambitions to roll back each other's frontier of control; instead, with the consent of the lesser European states, they would recognise the existing frontiers of Europe as inviolable - alterable perhaps by general consent, but not unilaterally or by force. This implied the acceptance of the division of Europe, and of the political prerogatives of Moscow and Washington either side of the line. Certainly, the division was to be rendered

Soviet withdrawal from its East European imperium. It's a process which has only just begun, which has not yet been spelt out, which might halt or go into reverse ... but that is what it looks like.

This would leave two very different Europes looking at one another. The West is closely integrated, for the most part, and will be even more effectively fused after 1992. Its major industries are supranational, its currencies are convertible, and the major territorial disputes between its members have long been settled - with the exception of Northern Ireland. There are few violent struggles for autonomy within Western Europe, apart from the Basque problem; the South Tyrol question is not in eruption currently, and the movements for independence or autonomy in Scotland,



harmless and gradually permeable; there would be troop and force reductions, more travel, warmer relations. But the division had to be first recognised, before it could be overcome.

Seventeen years is a long time. The Helsinki design is now out of date, even before it has been completed. Above all, nobody foresaw Gorbachev - an error for which the Europeans can scarcely be blamed. In 1975, the future looked symmetrical: the intensity of superpower presence in the continent would be wound down slowly on both sides at about the same pace. What is happening now, however, is asymmetrical. One superpower is apparently preparing to abandon its positions, without insisting that the rival do the same. The cold war is ending with something like a unilateral

Catalonia, Wales and so on pursue their aims mostly through conventional politics.

The East presents a quite different picture. One of the ironies of Stalinism was its combination of real but unadmitted Soviet control with the semblance of exaggerated national sovereignty - a version of sovereignty which was as old-fashioned and extreme as it was phoney. Economic integration in the Comecon area is minimal, and the currencies are not freely convertible; trade is conducted slowly and painfully by governmental agreements and often in terms of barter; politically, the component Warsaw Pact nations have had no close relationship save that which runs through Moscow. The mutual ignorance of the populations is amazing, for a system whose official

ideology is internationalist. To take an example, the number of Czech or Polish students studying in each other's countries is pathetically small. In these conditions of political and economic autarky, old national prejudices have been preserved in the Stalinist and post-stalinist deep freeze. The heavy official emphasis on history and patriotism, even though it was imported from the Soviet Union and even though much of the history was false or incomplete and known to be so, only reinforced this nationalism. Ancient disputes, whose very mention was forbidden, festered merrily in the popular memory.

So Central and Eastern Europe slowly warms up, and we cannot be sure that certain wounds won't begin to bleed once more. It is worth listing some of them - leaving purely internal tensions aside. There is the justified Romanian claim to Bessarabia, now the Soviet republic of Moldavia, and to the north Bukovina which forms part of the Ukraine. There is the Hungarian-Romanian dispute, which at present is not (thank heaven) about frontiers but about Romania's bullying of the huge Magyar minorities in Transylvania. There is tension, similar but less spectacular, about the Magyar minority in Slovakia, across the Danube. There is the complex but highly explosive tangle of disputes over Macedonia, which involves Yugoslavia, Greece and Bulgaria. There is the Kosovo nightmare, which must in the end involve an Albanian-Yugoslav confrontation if it blazes up uncontrollably. There is still unsettled business between Austria and Yugoslavia about the Slovene minority in Carinthia, who are not happy with the way Austrian politics are moving. Poland is likely, sooner rather than later, to raise openly with the Soviet Union the treatment and rights of the substantial Polish minority in the Western Ukraine (East Galicia), although the new 1945 frontier would not be challenged. The difficulty of finding smooth and discreet disputes procedures in this part of Europe is illustrated by the fairly petty border dispute between Poland and the GDR over the coastal waters off Swinoujscie, in which naval guns have been fired. And that leads to the biggest of all the wounds which may re-open: the division of Germany.

The Poles, for good reasons, see this as two wounds: that of the partition of rump-Germany into two in 1948-9, and the earlier wound inflicted when eastern Germany was annexed by Poland and the USSR in 1945 and its population expelled. I cannot believe that, at more than 40 years' range, anyone will try to challenge Poland's western frontier on the Oder and Neisse. But the future of the two existing German states is now enigmatic. It can be taken as certain that the West do not want German reunification on any terms: they do not even want the GDR to retain after 1992 its peculiar status as the ghostly extra member of the European Community. But things have changed so much now that one can't exclude a scen-

ario like this: the Socialist Unity Party (SED) regime attempts a radical reform but releases forces it cannot control; authority passes to a quite different political group; the inter-German and Berlin frontiers become permeable; a *de facto* German confederation from the Rhine to the Oder appears and the Soviet Union decides that this is a development it can tolerate. We can only guess whether, in fact, the USSR would tolerate it. But as arms and forces reductions and evacuation of all foreign armies proceed, the two pacts are bound to wither - which is a stated Soviet objective. And the withering of the pacts means that nobody will be able to hinder a German coming-together, short of reunification, if the Germans wish it.

The notion of a united, neutral Germany as main European partner has an ancient appeal to Russian diplomacy. All the same, there will have to be some remarkably good reason to persuade the Soviet Union to abandon the secure position in Central Europe which the existence of the GDR provides. The attitudes of the West Europeans, especially Britain and France, are not entirely different. The division of Germany and of Berlin forms a sort of rug on which stands the top table reserved for 'Victor Powers of the Second World War'. If the division ends, the rug is rudely pulled away from under them, and - sprawling on the common ground - they cease to resemble powers.

o sum up: while Western Europe integrates more closely, the rest of Eastern and Central Europe may develop quarrels, some historic but others - perhaps - new. Is the Helsinki security system strong enough to contain such quarrels? That system was built on the tacit assumption that each superpower would wish to police its own half of the continent. Now it seems that the Soviet Union is removing the pressure which kept those quarrels latent. Does that also mean that the Soviet Union no longer feels that it has any duty to intervene and bang heads together if the quarrels - once released - develop into conflict? If that is so, then the security order designed by the Helsinki process has to be revised: some authority not just for building confidence or measuring force levels but for active peace-keeping has to be constructed.

The second cluster of uncertainties is economic - or perhaps 'geopolitical'. What will be the economic relationship between this powerful, unified West and that newly-emancipated, reforming but atomised East? The history of that relationship isn't encouraging, and severely qualifies talk of the 'common European house'. Left to itself - or to 'market forces' - the relationship for much of the past century has been semi-colonial. Around the last decades of the 19th century, the German *Mittleuropa* vision developed and became influential. Roughly, this envisaged an extension of German power to the south-east, into the Balkans, across to Turkey and eventual-

ly by rail-links (the *Bagdad-Bahn*) into Mesopotamia and Arabia. The European part of the vision assigned south-eastern Europe to the role of providers of raw materials and food. Capital and what industry was required on the spot would be German, but these territories would essentially be the backyard and kitchen garden of the industrialised West. In the first world war, *Mittleuropa* became a war aim, enriched by the hope of adding the Ukraine and other spoils to the empire. Hitler's design for a Eurasian land empire whose industrial engine-room lay in the Germanic West was an extension of all this.

Between the wars, with Central and Eastern Europe the site of new 'successor states' to the old empires, the semi-colonial plight of the region was obvious. (Bohemia always excepted: the Czechs, with their high level of industrialisation and tradition of precision engineering, were really part of the West.) Factories were rare, and most private industry was owned by foreigners. Currencies were convertible against those of Britain, France or the United States, with catastrophic results in hyper-inflation. Agriculture was completely defenceless against price and demand fluctuations, and the Europeans who suffered most from the soaring birth rates, plunging prices for grain and acute unemployment, their situation by the end of the 1930s was desperate.

What was authentic about postwar state socialism in those countries was the attempt to repair that damage and ensure that it could never recur. That was the rationale for collectivisation; for the bottleneck industrialisation after 1948 designed to soak up surplus rural population and provide each country with a complete, national industrial economy; for the rupture with the free-trading world outside. We know why that experiment failed - and why some think that it could never have succeeded. What we forget is why it all seemed so necessary in the first place - and whether, in the intervening years, a better answer has been found to Europe's uneven development.

I am not sure that it has. The relations between the United States and the debtor nations of Latin America could find a new parallel in Europe, as 'new model' reforms wash away the remains of socialist protectionism and expose over-staffed, inefficient local industries to market competition with the Brussels super-state. Again, the Helsinki provisions concentrate on economic co-operation and exchanges, which seemed so important 15 years ago. What is required today is a new European plan, a grand social and economic strategy to prevent a reversion to dependency, to guarantee that Europe east of the Community will not be reborn politically only to grow up into a destiny of providing iron ore, fruit and vegetables, and cheap labour. It would be bitter indeed if the landscape after the cold war consisted only of one vast, advanced economy with a periphery of bantustans.

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