

Gregory Kent on the birth pains of east Europe

## Voice From Below

The hard realities of post-communism in eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union were marginalised in the media by the madness of the Gulf crisis. While western military-industrial interest constructed what was, in the end a fleeting, unsatisfying Cold War substitute, the countries of east and central Europe grappled with uniquely severe economic and ecological problems.

Thanks for **Europe From Below** (*Verso*, *hbk* £32.95, *pbk* £10.95), edited by Mary Kaldor: a collection of articles, interviews, speeches and essays by people 'engaged in the process of

detente from below' in the 80s. Here we begin a restoration of sanity and humanity. The contributors, who include Havel, Sabata and Dienstbier from the Czech government, and a number of other key figures from West and East like Adam Michnik, EP Thompson and Mary Kaldor, are 'from below' in the sense that their perspective is that of people who see the process of ending the Cold War differently from the one that we are used to in the press. One could say their lowest common values are support for full democracy, disarmament, social justice, cultural pluralism and ecological



restitution.

In the first of the three themes by which the writings are grouped, 'Goodbye To The Cold War' highlights the history of END and clarifies the importance of its cross-Europe collaboration with groups like Charter 77, putting paid to the 'simplistic ideology' of western capital's triumph in the east. In 'Welcome To Europe', Robin Blackburn, John Palmer et al define the state and shape of things now and things to come, and where they feel the Left should play its part. The essential message is that 'a united Europe is a democratic Europe'. With generosity and realism the Left can strengthen European institutions and invite post-communist countries, restructured with our aid, to share equally in the Com-

mon European Home.

We depart with the first meeting, in Prague last October, of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly; a totally new idea, a Europe-wide, issue-based lobbying network of citizens' groups who share a basic aim of furthering the Helsinki process as laid out in the Helsinki Accords of 1975. This ambitious initiative received little media exposure despite backing 'from above' of many prominent east European politicians.

Several of the pieces in this collection have been previously published, and while some gain from the moment at which they were written (during or just before the revolutions) the schismatic effect on groupings of the Gulf crisis and an analysis of that 'from below' might have been instructive.\*

**Lauren Nilne Henderson** on personal politics

## Three Of A Kind

In *The Three Women K* (*Serpent's Tail*, pbk £7.99), Helke Sander, a German filmmaker writing her first novel, presents a series of emotional case-studies, dissecting the power relations between women and men as elegantly and precisely as a brain surgeon wields her scalpel. Sander's *modus operandi* is to take a situation - a couple of acquaintances embarking on a walking hol-

iday, a woman deciding whether or not to reimburse her ex-husband for some dental treatment he's had on their insurance, a request to a member of a research institute to facilitate the granting of some money to an orthodox Jew - focus on it closely enough to show the knotty tangles below its smooth surface, and then tease them out by gradual stages until all the individual

strands lie nakedly exposed to the viewer. She has no mercy.

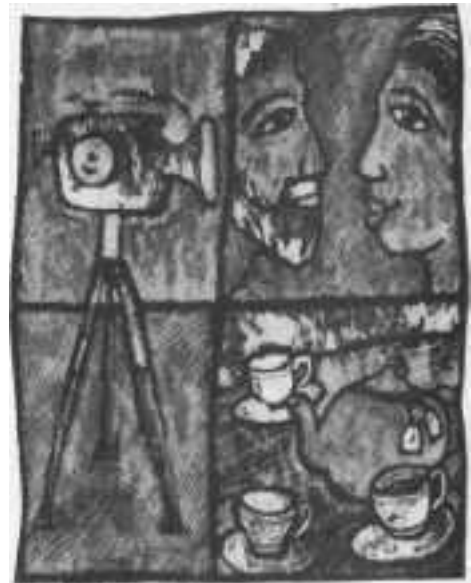
Nor do her three women narrators (who all, in a nice reversal of Kafka's alienated anti-hero Joseph K, have surnames beginning with the same letter; in Sander's hands, this does not indicate loss of identity, bureaucratic or otherwise, but solidarity). Having chosen to maroon themselves for the week before Christmas and New Year in a small Alpine village, they pass the time by telling stories to each other, stories which 'had to be essentially true and should also have a funny side'.

Even when the funny side is upwards, the tales are painful. Sander is blessed and cursed with the kind of analytical skill that won't stop functioning until she has dug right down and bared the raw emotional nerve at the heart of every tale. She paces the book expertly, conversational interludes and lighter vignettes balancing the more serious stories, with each narrative receiving the time and depth necessary to open it up - some are only a couple of pages long.

There are some incidents here which most people will recognise; a party guest who won't leave, an obsession with a lost lover, and a nightmare walking trip when the question of whether or not a brand of sausages should be dried or packed in water

blows up into an international incident. There are more which will generally be familiar to women alone; bizarre phone calls from ex-boyfriends in the middle of the night, the twists and turns required to avoid a lecherous boss without offending him, politically sound men who still reduce women's issues to the status of individual problems. Sander probes the sorest spots, the bruises we would prefer to pretend we don't carry. Her stories throw a bucketful of cold water over the heads of many contemporary young women who espouse the 'I'm all right, Jane' school of political philosophy.

There's an American feminist phrase, the 'glass ceiling'. It means that successful women can see their chosen destination, but encounter an invisible barrier whenever they try and reach it. Helke Sander's collection of par-



ables reminds us of the truth of this metaphor, the headaches and cricked necks caused by staring up through the ceiling, and extends it beyond the sphere of work into that of relationships. But the excellence and courage of her book, its adeptness - surgical but never sterile - offers a lesson which is chastening and encouraging in equal measure. Reading it is like watching an archer hit a series of bulls-eyes; and her first target is hypocrisy.