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The Anarchist Spectre in Eastern Europe

As Old Regimes Collapse

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Winter, 1990-91

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Sidebar quote

“Politicians with imagination, like our acquaintance Vera Krena, have been very agile, not only in keeping themselves from being dislodged, but at increasing their power. Krena has very successfully used an anti-political movement, a movement which is undermining the power of bureaucrats, to increase her own status and power....

“[Manuel] had been with people who had temporarily defeated the forces that repressed them, had shared with them the experience of projecting a world that would be for human beings, and had watched most of those people reimpose on themselves the very forces they had defeated the day before because someone had told them industrialization was for them. He saw workers reshackle themselves to a process over which they had no control because someone convinced them their desire for their own life and their own project constituted sabotage and hooliganism. Manuel and Jan taught me that if we don’t destroy the old life, whether we call it capital or progress or industrialization, and if we don’t project and begin to create a new life, then we’re only going to reenact our slavery on the graves of our fallen comrades, some of us managing and most of us managed, some of us repressing and all of us repressed.” (*Letters of Insurgents*, 1976. Sophia Nachalo and Yarostan Vocheck)

Rarely is an entire region of the world so caught up in the collapse of hierarchical politics as Eastern Europe of a year ago. The infamous “spectre of anarchy” astonished and horrified Communist, dissident and Western politicians alike as millions suddenly demanded control of their own lives.¹

Tragically, but predictably, politicians of all sides—Party members and bureaucrats of the old regime, oppositional leaders and Western “advisors”—moved rapidly to protect their interests. Thus, Polish General Czeslaw Kiszczak, Interior Minister of the Jaruzelski regime, began talks in February 1989 to restore Solidarity’s legality in order to prevent the “anarchy and destruction” of its original phase (1980-81).²

In turn, Lech Walesa reassured the Party by denouncing Solidarity opponents to the accord as anarchists without a program, according to the Dec. 1989 East European News. In Rumania, the new governing National Salvation Front council opened a minority of seats for opposition groups rather than dissolve as demanded, since “dissolution would have meant a void in state power” instead of ensuring necessary “stability” (Middletown, N.Y. *Record*, Feb. 4, 1990).

New East German Communist Party chief Gregor Gysi told a party congress on December 17th that “whether our ship of state can steer clear of the reefs of anarchy and annexation by West Germany” depended on the “reformist” Communist-led new government (*New York Times*, Dec. 18, 1989). Reform Communists in the Soviet Union argued a similar line.

¹ Czechoslovakia’s Communist Party General Secretary Milos Jakes pointedly accused Prague protest-march organizers of “seeking to create chaos and anarchy.” (*New York Times*, 11/21/89). Likewise, Vladimir Brovikov, Soviet ambassador to Poland, argued that perestroika reforms to date had thrown the Soviet Union “into the vortex of crisis and led it to the line where we have come face to face with an orgy of anarchy.” (NYT, 2/7/90).

² NYT, 2/7/89, Though Poland’s evolution from Communist Party domination began in 1980, thus extending much longer than in most of the rest of the region, the patterns were similar.

Paranoia Not Manufactured

Though politicians used the anarchist spectre to rationalize their own power, to some extent their paranoia was not manufactured. Many aspects of an anarchist vision were indeed expressed during those few weeks and months from the rapid collapse of the old regime until the new hierarchy established its hold.³ Overnight, in many cases, thousands, hundreds of thousands, and millions gained the courage to confront Party and state officials, police and the army in the streets, with their own massive numbers and revolutionary will.

Grassroots demonstrations far beyond the intent or capability of any organizers to produce or control⁴ were followed by festivals in the streets as old political facades crumbled in the face of self-confident communities. Workers councils, strike committees affinity groups, a wide network of interwoven anti-hierarchical organizational forms suddenly blossomed. Large numbers throughout the region rejected vanguard parties, political parties-in general, political leaders, elections, military service, meaningless work and official culture in favor of direct action, alternative culture, consensual decision making, free expression and non-hierarchical mutual assistance.

Pockets of explicitly anarchist groups and publications had already emerged in the region before these large-scale defiant cries of self-determination. But, for the most part, the unraveling of the Eastern police state was spontaneous anarchy—produced through broad political, economic, ecological and cultural collapse in the face of deeper human resistance, rather

³ Of course, not every Communist regime in the region has completely collapsed. Nevertheless, the overall pattern described here is much the same, whether or not all phases have yet been played out.

⁴ Said Sebastian Pflugbeil, for example, one of the founding Members of East Germany's New Forum, "We don't have any means of asking people to behave peacefully, We have no access to media, we don't have any organization, we have no group that could manage a demonstration." (NYT, 10/16/89)

Power Corrupts

In *Temptation*, one of Vaclav Havel's portentous plays, every attempt by protagonist Dr. Foustka to evade the strict limitations for Party-approved "scientific investigation" leaves more innocent victims in his path and further compromises the integrity of Foustka himself. There seems no escape from sophisticated repression, from intellectual and psychological entrapments of the regime.

How ironic it is (which hopefully Havel the playwright now president of Czechoslovakia would appreciate) that he and others like him courageously sought to emancipate Eastern Europe from the short leash of Communist regimes, only to then contribute so decisively to imposing the somewhat longer leash of market capitalism and democracy. Despite intentions for intellectual freedom and devastating critiques of the old regime, the Havels of the region (like Foustka) now find themselves playing into the larger entrapments of the state, capitalism and "progress" more generally, of which the Communist period was only one phase.

Economic and ecological chaos will likely persist, despite supposedly "emancipating" integration into the Western capitalist sphere. The predictions that most of the economies of the region will soon resemble those of Latin America and authoritarian states will return seem probable.

However, the fragility of the new regimes, a disillusionment with the degradation of market capitalism, and a persevering memory of the anarchic Fall of 1989 (and similar episodes in the 1950s and 1960s) held by recently formed grassroots groups may yet produce new anarchic explosions and creations of great significance.

ate their separation from the Soviet Union in order to pursue a “stable” transition. Such caution, of course, did not apply when it came to the West German regime’s voracious political and economic appetite for the prize plum of East Germany and the new dominant position this would present to a newly unified Germany on the European continent.

Given these factors, it was predictable that the massive grassroots self-initiatives headily experienced in late 1989 would be crushed by the onslaught of new parties (often funded and organized with Western aid) and by newly popular “democratic” forms of the old opportunistic demagoguery. Poland provided a clear model for the rest of the region. In spite of pre-martial law Solidarity’s partially defiant decentralism and Poland’s diverse cultural underground of the 1980s, Solidarity engineered the 1989 imposition of anew parliamentary, “realistic” and “shock capitalist” order.

In this context, to see the old Communist bureaucrats and secret police rushing to preserve privilege by creating new parties and capitalist firms overnight was not surprising. But the haste in which public appeals were made to nationalism, racism, 19th century capitalist ideology (with its acceptance of hyperinflation and mass unemployment) and American-style manipulative electoral themes was a bit of a shock.

The calls by some of the Polish politicians for a “Pinochet-type” capitalist revival of the economy, the rush to establish ties with South Africa, and a Russian “democratic” reformer’s praise for Reagan’s model of crushing the air controllers’ strike undoubtedly foreshadow more degradation. Even if exaggerated, the press reports of ex-U.S. president Reagan’s joyous 1989 welcome by some Gdansk shipyard workers as “our President” were quite believable.

than a model explicitly initiated or promoted by actual anarchists themselves.

There were beautiful moments to savor: the televised denouement when the hated Rumanian dictator Ceaucescu confusedly halted his balcony harangue in the face of jeers from the street crowd in Bucharest, the widespread desertions and refusals of East German soldiers to follow officers’ commands, angry crowds storming secret police archives in Rumania and East Germany, and the spontaneous emergence of workers councils among striking coal miners in Russia and the Ukraine.

Ultimately decisive was the Soviet unwillingness (or inability) to militarily protect the Eastern European regimes. Using socialist and nationalist “legitimizing” facades, these regimes (except for Yugoslavia and Albania) had been utterly dependent upon the Soviet military prop. A vast complex of festering specific local issues, dissident activities, and broader regional factors already had slowly eroded any credible claim to popular support by the ruling regimes. But the suddenness and massiveness of courageous grassroots initiatives proved that a latent and unnamed anarchic consciousness existed beneath heavy layers of daily passivity, compromise and compliance. This manifestation of dual consciousness and its visible social expression are tremendously encouraging and significant. No matter how complete a regime’s political controls, a subterranean desire for freedom finds outlets through the contradictions of the system itself.

Flourishing Counterculture

Well before the events of last Fall, explicitly anarchist organizations and individuals already had emerged throughout the region. After decades of repression and vilification, this appearance in itself was important. Equally notable was East bloc anarchist activism in disarmament, anti-conscription, free speech,

women's, labor and ecological struggles, as well as a flourishing counterculture comparable to the '60s in the West.

Through publishing projects, discussions and demonstrations, groups such as the Movement for An Alternative Society (PSA) and the Anarchist Intercity (MA) in Poland; Autonomia in Hungary; Free Initiative, the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists (KAS) and the Obschina Club in the Soviet Union; the Anarchist Working- and Action-Circle of Mockau, (AAAM) in East Germany and the Czechoslovak Anarchist Union (CAS) revived memories of the historical anarchist movement and began to influence emerging grassroots struggles.⁵ At the same time, numerous other activist movements appeared, some of which had strikingly anarchist-influenced emphasis against hierarchy in their organization and critiques.

Despite restored hierarchies since last Fall and early Spring, anarchist and anarchist-tending grassroots groups continue to flourish, to contact each other and to assess their potentials in the new context of liberal/authoritarian capitalism. A conference in Trieste, Italy in April 1990 brought together anarchists from most East European countries as well as counterparts from Western Europe and North America (see Summer 1990 FE). This is one among many continuing exchanges.

It is encouraging to see the potentials of revolutionary consciousness among millions for even a short time and the emergence of an anarchist movement among smaller numbers. But the latter were too isolated and the hierarchical, compromised cultural legacy too great. This legacy was portrayed by a well known Rumanian columnist Tia Serbanescu in an April 1990 open letter to Rumanian youth who felt betrayed by the co-optation of revolution by the National Salvation Front:

"The courage of certain generations is limited. Those who experienced communism to its fullest extent cannot become free immediately, because they do not know how to do it; while its

existence atrophied their sense of liberty and courage, while their sense of fear has been enhanced...They are the brothers who, without hope, wasted their lives and who do not know their rights, because they never enjoyed them. They are those who can't perceive that life could be different. They are frightened of your courage, a courage which they can neither recognize nor identify with...Try to understand, while you have experienced a stolen revolution, they had their actual lives stolen from them." (*East European Reporter*, Spring/Summer 1990)

No barrier prevented entrepreneurs and politicians of every stripe from rushing into the "vacuum," heavily backed by governments and multinationals of the West and surviving hierarchies of the East (remains of the Party and state apparatus, churches and the like). For most people the possibility of long-range social self-organization from below was only briefly glimpsed, without confidence, then abandoned in the face of consumerist allures, traditional political and technocratic promises and a deep fear of "intellectualized utopian experiments" again being imposed by a few.

Growing "Anarchy"

In 1981, Western governments and bankers preferred "stability" from the martial law regime of Jaruzelski to the growing "anarchy" of a defiant Solidarity movement. In late 1989-early 1990, the same fear brought horrified demands from the West to quickly establish new "ordered" regimes. With Bush and cronies savoring their bloody invasion of Panama in late December, for example, the U.S. Secretary of State invited Soviet troops to fill the unsettling "void" in Rumania.

Similarly, while supporting the legitimacy of their cause, Mitterand and Kohl in April 1990 urged Lithuanians to deceler-

⁵ Best source for E. European activists is On Gogol Blvd, 151 1st Ave

No. 62, New York NY 10003 USA. [See *Fifth Estate* Archive for OGB's contributions to this publication.]