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Communism in Eastern Europe

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Abstract and Keywords

This article outlines the place of Eastern Europe in global communism. After considering the historical origins of communism, it concentrates on the period of state socialism (1945–89). The communist project was part of East European societies' long-term endeavour to overcome their backwardness and to catch up with the West. It thus found itself between nation-building and Sovietization. The article argues that Eastern European communism was characterized by four major contradictions: between nation and class, state and society, production and consumption, and culture and ideology. The regimes successfully mastered these conflicts for a rather long time, acquiring a considerable degree of legitimacy in the process. Yet eventually these contradictions caused communism's collapse in the late 1980s. Through this prism, the article traces the development of communism from popular democracy through Stalinism and de-Stalinization to 'actually existing socialism'.

Keywords: state socialism, backwardness, nation-building, Sovietization, Eastern European communism, legitimacy, popular democracy, Stalinism, de-Stalinization, actually existing socialism.

any other region embodies 'communism' in global memory to the same extent as Eastern Europe, that large area between Germany and Italy on one side and Russia and Turkey on the other. It was here, in Germany above all, that the idea of communism took root in the early twentieth century. Later, communists here stood at the forefront of the anti-fascist struggle; and following a terrible war, it was between the Elbe and Dnepr that Stalinist rule became established, followed from the mid-1950s by 'actually existing socialism'. Finally, it was in Europe's East that the world witnessed in 1989 the spectacular collapse of communism, both in its 'velvet' and not so 'velvet' forms. The televised execution of Elena and Nicolae Ceauşescu sealed the era of communism, but that act appeared to confirm a dominant narrative that cast Eastern Europe as the

‘backward’ and ‘inferior’ counterpart to a progressive and civilized Western part of the continent, a narrative that can be traced back to the Enlightenment.[1] The rise of communist rule in the late 1940s not only confirmed this image of Europe’s East, but enlarged its area of applicability. Regions that had once been associated with the West, such as Saxony, Bohemia, and Silesia, were now seen as belonging to the East and thus as ‘backward’. This cognitive reconfiguration wiped out the concept of ‘Central Europe’ from political vocabulary, restricting its usage to meteorology, a phenomenon Milan Kundera famously described as the ‘Stolen West’. After 1989, Eastern Europeans proclaimed their ‘return to Europe’, some insisting they had never left it. Yet the dichotomizing narrative of ‘backwardness’ and ‘progress’ continues to shape the European historical and geographical imagination. Today’s ‘Two-Speed Europe’ and ‘New and Old Europe’ are its latest formulation. Given this ideologized narrative—in which Eastern Europe is always found wanting in relation to an idealized ‘West’—we must look to a higher level of historical abstraction if we are to understand the distinctiveness of Eastern Europe, as well as its formative interactions with the rest of Europe. I will merely pinpoint four major aspects.

(p. 204) First, for most of the modern era the region was an object of great power politics. Situated in the boundary zone between the Austro-Hungarian, German, Russian, and Ottoman empires, Eastern Europe was a playground of imperial struggle from the early modern period onwards. This culminated in the late 1930s and early 1940s when it became a ‘battlefield of dictators’ (Dietrich Beyrau) or ‘Bloodlands’ (Timothy Snyder).[2] Changes of borders, the devastation caused by war, genocide, and forced migration were the consequences of this imperial politics. After the Second World War, some of the imperialist principles, especially the notion of national-ethnic purity, were taken over by the revived nation-states and played an essential role in the establishment of communist regimes. Secondly, even if we dismiss Hans Kohn’s dichotomy of Western ‘civic’ and Eastern ‘ethnic’ nationalisms, it is obvious that imperial rule over small national communities generated a peculiar form of nation-building. Miroslav Hroch’s distinction between state nations, such as France, and ‘small nations’ that emerged out of non-dominant ethnic groups captures more accurately a situation in which efforts at national emancipation were directed against dominant nations to the point where they caused the break-up of empires. This fundamental conflict between national emancipation and imperial aspirations remained present in Eastern Europe after 1945. Whenever a small nation-state took an independent political stand, as was the case with Yugoslavia in 1948, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968, conflict with a great power followed. Thirdly, the lack of industrialization and the dominance of agriculture shaped the development of Eastern European societies deep into the twentieth century. However much it was an ideological construct, the idea of ‘backwardness’ and the consequent urge to ‘catch up’ with the West were powerful driving forces behind the construction of

socialism. And since social inequality was greater than in most other parts of Europe, the call for social justice fell on fruitful soil. Indeed, the wide economic cleavages and deep-rooted social hierarchies proved ideal soil for a radical politics from below. Finally, while recognizing the rich contributions to European culture that emanated from the East (one thinks of twentieth-century classical music, for instance), it seems fair to say that for most of the modern era Eastern Europe was on the receiving end in the circulation of cultural goods. This is not to diminish the rich cultural life of small nations and the sense of national belonging that it nurtured. Indeed it was precisely the effort of cultural self-improvement—a strong tradition from the early nineteenth century—that encouraged an engagement of Eastern European intellectuals with the communist project.

Communism in Eastern Europe collapsed mainly due to its internal deficiencies. A quarter of a century after the event, however, it becomes obvious that we cannot read its history as a preordained failure. No doubt, communism suffered from fundamental contradictions—*Hauptwidersprüche*, to speak with Marx—caused by regional and historical peculiarities. Nevertheless, it was a system that lasted for several decades and evolved over time. These contradictions, however paradoxical it may seem, produced a certain stability or, at least, were successfully mastered for a remarkably long period of time. In what follows I concentrate on four areas of fundamental contradiction in East (p. 205) European communism which kept the system alive even as they conditioned its eventual collapse.

Nation and Class

Throughout the history of Eastern European communism there was an uneasy marriage between nation and class, the two key ideas of European modernity. The complex relationship between nation-building and the labour movement reached back into the late imperial period, whether under the Habsburgs or Romanovs. Often in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, social inequality and class struggle were articulated in national terms. Already in Austrian social democracy the nationality issue had arisen to complicate united class-based revolutionary action. After 1918, the split in the working-class movement between reformist social democrats and revolutionary communists, in part, mirrored the national issue. The social democrats accepted new nation-states and became a ‘state-forming’ force, while communists took an anti-nation-state position, considering themselves sections of the new Communist International. With the rising threat of fascism in the mid-1930s, however, communists adopted the strategy of the ‘popular front’ and this allowed for cooperation with socialist and petit-bourgeois parties. ‘Popular frontism’, a nation-based legitimization of social revolution, broadly remained

the framework of communist movements until the rise of Stalinism in the late 1940s. In the immediate post-war years, popular frontism became the platform for ‘people’s democracy’—a short-lived period, yet one that was critical for the subsequent self-understanding of East European communists.[3] However, the political situation had changed radically as a result of the war and the post-war settlement. Some countries that had been multinational states became ethnically homogenous, such as Poland; others significantly reduced their ethnic diversity, such as Czechoslovakia. Some retained their heterogeneity but later suppressed minorities systematically as happened in Romania and Bulgaria after 1956. The ethno-cultural dimension of the nation, moreover, was overdetermined by the ideological category of the ‘working people’, a category that embraced the industrial working class, the smallholding peasantry, and ‘working intelligentsia’, all drawn predominantly from the same ethnicity. People’s democracies were thus a continuation of popular frontism of the 1930s, but one now radicalized along class lines. An ethnically defined plebs stood opposed to the traditional hierarchical social order, against the middle classes and the nobility, and against the Church.[4]

Initially after 1945, Stalin tolerated the politics of ‘national roads to socialism’, and thus of coalitions with non-communist democratic parties, since he still hoped for an agreement with the West.[5] Genuine revolutions from below were not on the agenda. With the onset of the Cold War, however, he reconfigured the symbiotic relationship between nation and class. With the slogan ‘sharpening the class struggle during the construction of socialism’, class came to predominate over nation. As the war receded from memory, (p. 206) nationalistic radicalism—mainly directed against Germans and Hungarians—faded, as East Germany and Hungary were accepted into the family of socialist nations. The focus now shifted from external foes (Germans, Hungarians, Italians, Turks) to ‘class enemies’ within the nation and later within the communist parties themselves. By this stage, the concept of ‘people’ (*Volk, lid, lud*) had become so class-loaded that further exploitation of nationalism seemed unnecessary. Symptomatically, Tito’s greatest crime in this period was that of ‘nationalism’. And attacks on ‘right-wing nationalist deviations’ and ‘bourgeois nationalism’ were key features of Stalinism, especially in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

In countries such as Poland and Hungary, however, Stalinist rule quickly came to be perceived as anti-national, a vehicle of alien Soviet domination. Here anti-communism merged with antisemitism as concepts such as Polish *żydokomuna* (Judaeo-Communism) suggest. Jewish communists, often of German cultural background and with German names, were seen by many as anti-national elements. In Poland where the fusion of antisemitism with anti-Bolshevism had deep roots, popular anger turned against Stalinist politicians of Jewish background such as Jakub Berman and Hilary Minc. The same happened to Mátyás Rákosi in Hungary and to Ana Pauker in Romania. In

Czechoslovakia, antisemitism surfaced with unprecedented brutality in the Slánský process in 1952. The Party's General Secretary Slánský, an exemplary Stalinist, became one of Stalinism's foremost victims, epitomizing the complicated relation of Jews to communism.[6] Jews had joined communist movements on a wide scale before the Second World War since they appeared to offer an antidote to the deepening nationalism of the interwar years. The experience of Nazism and the Holocaust reinforced this attitude, so that the few Jews who survived joined communist parties on a significant scale after 1945. Yet soon the perceived over-representation of Jews, together with the emergence of Israel as one of main imperialist enemies, changed this. Overt campaigns against Jews would cease with Stalin's death, but there were later outbursts of antisemitism in ruling communist parties, notably the 'anti-Zionist' purges in Poland in 1968. In Czechoslovakia the campaign against Charter 77 in the late 1970s also bore signs of antisemitism, directed particularly against František Kriegel, a leading figure of the Prague Spring.

The popular perception of Stalinist rule as 'alien to the nation' was a powerful driving force behind the uprisings of 1956. The crises not only led to de-Stalinization, but revived the idea of 'national roads to socialism'. Most spectacular was the Polish October when Władysław Gomułka, excluded from the Party and imprisoned for 'right-wing and nationalist deviation' in 1948, returned to power to the delight of the masses. As a symbol of anti-Stalinist struggle and 'Polish socialism', Gomułka restored the balance between class and nation. Elsewhere in Eastern Europe, as in Poland, the class principle as a discriminatory measure was weakened and collectivization of agriculture, seen as the most striking example of Sovietization, was slowed or halted. But this did not proceed smoothly everywhere. In Romania the shift from internationalism to 'national communism' as the key source of communist legitimization took place without a change of personnel in the political leadership. Moreover, communist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej responded to de-Stalinization with a new wave of terror.[7]

(p. 207) In the post-Stalinist era self-representation through nationalist propaganda became essential to the legitimation strategies of the East European regimes. In Poland in the 1960s, as the regime's legitimacy diminished through its declining performance in economic and social-welfare policies, anti-German tones became stronger appeared in official propaganda. Even more radical nationalism followed the rise to power of Nicolae Ceauşescu in Romania in 1965. In comparison to Gheorghiu-Dej, who cautiously fluctuated between loyalty to the Soviets and national autonomy, Ceauşescu struck an independent stance from the outset, culminating in his 1968 rejection of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. In the course of the 1970s Ceauşescu's imagery turned into a byzantine form of nationalist self-representation that had no comparison except in Albania.[8] Yet 'national communism' was not only associated with increasingly dictatorial rule. In Czechoslovakia Slovak demands for autonomy became a central issue in the

reform agenda during the Prague Spring. Slovak Party members persecuted during Stalinism for ‘bourgeois nationalism’, such as Gustáv Husák, were released and rehabilitated. Although led by the Slovak Alexander Dubček, the Prague Spring was essentially a Czech national project that drew on the traditional self-description of Czechs as a democratic and peaceful nation. Interestingly, however, the only achievement of the Prague Spring that was not withdrawn during ‘normalization’ was the federalization of the country which had been a concession to Slovak national aspirations.

In Yugoslavia the 1963 reformist constitution, amended in 1968, brought in elements that reinforced national differences between the federal republics. The legislative independence of each republic was increased by enhancing the power of the Chamber of Nationalities and by granting Kosovo and Vojvodina the status of provinces within Serbia. The whole of political and economic life, including worker self-management, was increasingly organized along ethnic lines. The Constitution of 1974 promoted decentralization still further, practically transforming Yugoslavia into a confederation. During the 1980s, internationalism and class consciousness, embodied by the Yugoslav slogan ‘Brotherhood and Unity’, gave way to ethnic identification in the working class itself. The more developed republics of Slovenia and Croatia resented the subsidies they had to pay to more backward regions and the spectre surfaced of ‘Serbian centralism’ and ‘Croatian nationalism’.[9] Only Tito’s tactical genius kept these tensions under control, and he was to die in 1980. In Czechoslovakia, similar anxieties about ‘Prago-centrism’ and Slovak particularism grew in the 1970s and 1980s among the ruling bureaucracy.

In the long run, nation and class succeeded in cohabiting, even if this was never easy. It is difficult to come to a clear conclusion on whether national beliefs underpinned or undermined communist rule. There is no doubt that the national idea could bolster communist power, as in the 1960s. Yet we know, too, that the collapse of communism was at least partly provoked by national tensions. It also provoked a flare-up of ethnic conflict that ranged in intensity from the relatively mild ‘hyphen war’ as to whether Czechoslovakia or Czecho-Slovakia was correct, through to the ethnic violence on the streets of Târgu Mureş in Romania—both events that took place in March 1990. Nationality issues would be the most critical legacy of communism.

(p. 208) Power and Society

After 1989, interpretations of Eastern European communism resurrected the classic paradigm of totalitarianism that depicted society as suffering under the yoke of an almighty state. The German political scientist Sigrid Meuschel coined the term ‘shut-

down society' (*stillgelegte Gesellschaft*), according to which societies under state socialism had undergone a process of non-differentiation (*Entdifferenzerung*) whereby group interests and autonomous social subsystems had ceased to exist. Society was swallowed by its antagonist, the state, he argued. In fact, the understanding of state–society relations that had been developed by Eastern European oppositionists from the late 1960s onwards had been rather different. According to them, a 'civil society' had developed beyond the reach of 'power', yet without becoming the dialectical adversary of the latter. Václav Havel's famous essay of 1978 features a greengrocer who hangs a sign in his shop window saying 'Workers of the World Unite'. For Havel this illustrated the interdependence of 'power' and society, in that the grocer was both victim and co-creator of the 'regime'. Whether the grocer was motivated by fear or by a certain identification with official values, such as the notorious right to have the 'peace to work' (*klid k práci*), the message was clear: in order to survive, the regime needed toleration or even support from below. Social historians of Stalinism too tended from the 1970s to complicate the dichotomy of a state clearly opposed to society. Whereas the totalitarian model focused on terror and physical force, 'revisionist' historians of Stalinism, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, looked to 'ordinary life in extraordinary times' in order to understand how state-socialist regimes, while retaining great coercive power, won a degree of public acceptance.

The formative years of communist regimes—roughly up to 1956—were characterized by mass mobilization and repression on a substantial scale. It was a period when violence was used to reshape social relations. In Hungary in the early 1950s over 1 million citizens were investigated by the prosecuting authorities, which meant that practically every third family was subject to some form of political harassment.[10] Such a huge operation, however, could not be carried out by the repressive organs alone: it relied on the acquiescence or active collaboration of those who benefited—or who hoped to benefit—from the new order. But this was also a period when opportunities for upward social mobility opened up for many workers, peasants, and activists, if not on the same scale as in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. From the mid-1950s the most egregious Stalinist 'excesses' were removed, as party leaderships stopped the fanatical hunt for 'class enemies' and released thousands of political prisoners. Cases of the 'violation of socialist legality' were investigated, which resulted in the rehabilitation of many who had been unjustly persecuted. In the post-Stalinist era, mass mobilization and untrammelled violence ceased, but power and society became even more intertwined, interacting across many spaces of everyday life. In order to survive, communist dictatorships had to be 'normalized' and so they developed a sophisticated system of domination based on mutuality between rulers and ruled. Socialist citizens learned to arrange their 'ordinary lives' in a world permeated with ideology, and to reshape official directives to meet (p. 209) their needs. As historians of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) have argued,

‘power’ was a product of social interaction between rulers and ruled and cannot be understood as the antithesis of society. ‘Power’ could arrest people and send them to labour camps, but coercion alone could not persuade people to become village mayor, the leader of work brigade, or a local police assistant.[11] These pursuits presupposed that citizens accepted existing arrangements, and that there was some overlap between the interests of citizens and the state. This was not so much about citizens’ explicit approval of communism, rather it was an effect of the way in which power was materialized in the banal world of the ‘everyday’, how it was reproduced through quotidian interests, practices, and beliefs. This is not to doubt the uneven distribution of power, it is simply to question the idea that the dominated were utterly powerless. A small illustration can be seen in the efforts of the authorities to encourage working people to take up opportunities to improve their professional qualifications.[12] This was a campaign aimed at improving skill levels in the workplace, but for many citizens the opportunity to study at evening class was the first step that would take them out of the workplace. People, in other words, acted out of self-interest, even when they were positively oriented to the goals of the regime. The effect was to establish a form of co-creation of power ‘from below’ on which the regime came to rely.

A crucial feature of the Stalinist period was that the party had been violated by the state apparatus, manifest in the dominance of the security organs. The post-Stalinist period saw the revival of the party as the central organ of power. The centrality of the ‘democratic’ party was stressed anew in official ideology, underscoring its superiority over the state. In some countries this led to the party regaining popular support. In Poland Gomułka almost acquired the status of national hero following 1956, and in Hungary, following the suppression of the Budapest uprising, János Kádár came to be seen more as a national saviour than a national traitor. However, the ‘leading role’ of the party continued to be unchallengeable dogma. Even in relatively liberal Yugoslavia, when Milovan Djilas questioned this dogma in 1953, he was promptly expelled. In like manner, when Imre Nagy called in 1956 for a plural party system and for ‘democratic cooperation between the coalition parties, reborn in 1945’, he was ruthlessly quashed by the Soviets.[13] In 1968 the issue proved to be a major stumbling block in the Prague Spring, which advocated democratic pluralism while seeking to preserve the leading role of the Party. In the end, it was the spectre of a multi-party system that caused the Warsaw Pact to intervene. If parties regained full control in the wake of Stalinism, they could not be monolithic, since they were the only forum in which political debate could be articulated. This became evident in the sharp debates that took place in most parties following Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1956 denouncing the ‘cult of personality’. In most countries, too, there was a significant divide between the apparat of the parties and the rank-and-file membership.

After 1968, ‘socialist society’ became a key term in political discourse, as was illustrated by the Action Programme of the Czechoslovak Communist Party of April 1968. Yet it would be an exaggeration to assume that this was a reflection in official ideology of the emergence of a ‘civil society’ that would lead ultimately to the demise of the system. (p. 210) As we have seen, large parts of society accepted the regimes. Indeed, if measured by the number of informers, state surveillance actually expanded in late socialism, although we should not interpret this as arising from the fear that ruling parties had of their citizens. As Jens Gieseke has noted, one of the myths surrounding the Stasi is that it was concerned primarily with monitoring dissidents and an evolving civil society. In fact, its prime targets were the Party and the military and security forces.[14] Rather than terrorizing the masses, the Stasi had a rather patronizing attitude to society, epitomized in the exclamation of Stasi Chief Erich Mielke ‘Ich liebe Euch doch alle!’ (I love you all!) in 1990. Nevertheless, as Katherine Verdery has argued, surveillance ‘created an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion dividing people from one another. One never knew whom one could trust, who might be informing on one to the police about one’s attitudes toward the regime or about one’s having an American to dinner.’[15]

The relationship between regime and society in late socialism is often described as a ‘new social contract’. Citizens were given ‘peace’ in the private sphere, evinced in Czech weekend-houses (*chalupa*) and pubs (*hospoda*), yet were expected to refrain from political activity. This interpretation, however, is shaky, since it does not explain why the contract ceased to function. Havel was right to argue that the greengrocer did not reflect on the meaning of the slogan he hung in his shop window, yet the grocer knew it *made sense* in the given circumstances, since it helped to preserve his ‘peace to work’. The fall of the regime happened when the context changed so that it no longer made sense, i.e. when the common sense of communism was challenged by political alternatives such as perestroika, nationalism, or human rights. At that point, the regimes lost legitimacy very rapidly, evinced in the stunned expression on Ceauşescu’s face as he stood on the balcony overlooking the square in Bucharest in December 1989.

Production and Consumption

Undoubtedly, one of the sources of communism’s collapse was the regimes’ incapacity to satisfy the growing consumption needs of their citizens. In his first address to the nation as the president of Czechoslovakia in 1990, Havel bluntly captured the main problem of the communist economy: ‘We are producing things that no one needs. And we lack those things that we need terribly.’ But again this fails to answer the question of why the system fell at the moment it did, given that the production of consumer goods was

satisfactory in Czechoslovakia or the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and rather good in Yugoslavia and Hungary, certainly compared with Poland and Romania.

As a region perceived to be economically backward, industrial production became a shibboleth of socialist construction after the Second World War. For Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, most parts of Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria, building communism became synonymous with overcoming economic backwardness. Apart from East Germany and the Czech Lands, this was the region's first experience of mass industrialization. Ironically, as Zygmunt Bauman noted, the obsession with industrial growth—the (p. 211) ideology of tons of coal and steel produced—led to the domestication of a capitalist culture of a distinctly nineteenth-century vintage.[16] At the same time, the Eastern European states took up the ideology of planning that was then in vogue, and maintained it long after it fell from fashion in Western Europe. Despite persistent efforts at market reforms, the history of communist economies has been described as a cascade 'from plan to plan', in reference to the GDR.[17] It was in Yugoslavia in April 1947 that the first plan was launched and it was soon followed by other countries. Large enterprises were nationalized immediately, but from the late 1940s the ideological battle concentrated on small businesses and agriculture. The collectivization of agriculture reached its peak around 1950 but slowed down after 1953, especially from 1956. By 1952, the socialized sector of industry ranged from 100 per cent in Bulgaria to 77 per cent in GDR.[18] On the whole, nationalization was supported by the public.

Sooner or later central planning gave rise to grave problems in all countries. The needs of producers and planners diverged, and so plan targets were generally mismatched; and the prioritization of production over consumption meant that the needs of citizens always figured low on the plan agenda. The result was that consumer goods were always in short supply and subject to arbitrary pricing. Queuing became a way of life, paving the way for the growth of the 'second economy' and widespread corruption. Despite these well-known deficiencies, central planning tended to be viewed as a fact of life. Public acceptance of planning was not significantly shaken by the fact that, as Geoffrey and Nigel Swain noted, 'the planning system that had achieved some success in dragging the East European economies out of their peasant backwardness, proved incapable of adapting to the demands of an urban consumer society'.[19] In Czechoslovakia, even during the perestroika debates, the idea of abandoning planning completely met with resistance. During the discussion on the State Enterprise Law in 1987 the proposals for greater marketization were given a chilly reception, not least from the shop floor.[20] This was, in part, because planning had implanted itself as a cultural ideal, assumed to be superior to the anarchy of the capitalist market, even though everyone recognized its imperfect realization in practice. Even the operations of the secret police, as Katherine Verdery observed, were oriented towards the 'production' of files, their direct utilization being of secondary

importance.[21] In response to the global economic downturn after 1973, the Yugoslav, Hungarian, and Polish governments resorted to borrowing and debt, introducing unemployment and inflation into their economies. In contrast, in Honecker's GDR, Husák's Czechoslovakia, and Ceauşescu's Romania planning actually intensified. By the 1980s, however, all communist governments were forced to take reform measures, measures that had come too little and too late.

In terms of its impact on society, rapid post-war industrialization brought about a huge increase in the size of the working class. In the 1960s, 55 per cent of the population of the GDR were industrial workers, and in more agrarian Bulgaria the working class grew from 29 to 42 per cent of the population between 1955 and 1965.[22] The demise of a distinct working-class culture was slower in Eastern than Western Europe. While in Western Europe the working class began to decline in the late 1960s, in the East, particularly in the Balkans, it continued to grow. In Yugoslavia (p. 212) workers' self-management, combined with a sort of late popular frontism, kept the working class alive, valorized by its supposed role in combating bureaucracy.[23] Large industrial complexes like Nowa Huta in Poland, Rakovica in Serbia, or Ostrava in Czechoslovakia existed well into the 1980s. Proletarian centres of sociability, such as pubs, clubhouses, and sports associations, also survived, along with a social identity centred on the workplace, and a masculine identity bound up with the performance of physical work.[24] Strikes as a distinct component of working-class culture were, with the singular exception of Poland, sporadic or non-existent.[25] Yet wider social changes did begin to erode this working-class identity—above all, privatization and more individualized forms of consumption and leisure. In most countries, the revolutions of 1989 took place without the involvement of the working class, and since the fall of communism, global capitalism has reinforced the process of deindustrialization and working-class decomposition.

The superiority of production over consumption affected gender relations. Stalinism had been driven by the idea that participation in production and membership of the working class would bring about women's equality. Yet this placed a double burden on women who remained responsible for childcare, housework, and the consumption needs of the family. In Bulgaria, only 6 per cent of children were enrolled in kindergarten in the late 1950s, and the unpaid labour of reproduction of the household and family enabled the state to divert resources out of social welfare into other areas.[26] Late socialist governments did try to decrease the double burden on women, yet generally gender relations and norms remained rather traditional. In the 1970s family policy ranged from the brutal pro-natalism of Ceauşescu to broad maternity assistance in Czechoslovakia. In both cases, however, *motherhood* dominated social policy. As a result, by the 1990s traditional gender roles remained stronger in post-socialist societies than in Western Europe. Moreover, if certain professions, such as teachers or doctors, were more

feminized than their Western counterparts, this was usually a sign that they were poorly paid. Only the sphere of consumption was something of an exception. Here women's centrality to the domestic sphere meant that they dominated consumer aspirations, through demand for washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators and, increasingly, for fashion and cosmetics.[27]

In post-Stalinist Eastern Europe a distinctive socialist consumerism gradually took shape. The official policy of increasing the weight of consumer goods over producer goods opened a Pandora's box of individualized desire. The emergence of free time, the boom in leisure activities, and the increasing centrality of the domestic sphere were developments that were shared with Western consumer society. Yet consumerism under state socialism was overlain by particular difficulties of shortages and poor quality. This extended to areas such as housing, where 'panel houses' were highly desired, yet were generally of shoddy quality. During the 1970s and 1980s, the original ideal of collectivist housing gave way to aspirations for one's own home, a trend masterfully captured in Věra Chytilová's movie *Panelstory*. Communal spaces within the housing blocks were reconfigured, collective laundries (with their alarming mangles) being turned into bicycle storerooms. In spite of this, citizens in most countries did experience some (p. 213) improvement in their consumption standards, especially if they moved from the countryside to the town.

Shopping across the border, first in Yugoslavia and then in Hungary, opened the eyes of many consumers.[28] And exposure to Western standards of living more generally raised awareness of the inferiority of consumption standards in Eastern Europe. Yet a desire to acquire Western consumer goods did not necessarily translate into resentment at communist rule; or more precisely, there was no causal relationship between this awareness and the decline of regime legitimacy. As Krisztina Fehérváry has argued: 'Problems like shortages, poor quality of goods and poverty, alongside perceptions of more abundant lifestyles elsewhere, can plague any nation-state, but in themselves they are incapable of producing a political logic.'[29] Standards of living in the Eastern Bloc increased steadily over decades, and though Czechs, Hungarians, and East Germans compared their conditions with West Germany and Austria, they also drew comparisons with the past and reflected on how much better off they were compared to their counterparts in Romania and Bulgaria where they spent their holidays. Even in the case of the GDR, it is hard to assess the political significance of the comparison with consumption in West Germany. The Politburo of the Socialist Unity Party admitted that most East German citizens watched the West German *Tagesschau* news each evening but it does not appear to have felt deeply threatened by this. With the important exception of Poland, where workers launched protests against increasing food prices, the specific constellation of socialist consumerism does not appear to have posed a direct challenge

to the system until the late 1980s. In 1989 the fall of communism happened across the socialist countries, despite the considerable variety in standards of living.

Culture and Ideology

One of the legacies of the nineteenth-century national movements in the ‘small nations’ was that culture often substituted for politics. The outcome was not so much that culture became political, but rather that politics tended to be articulated in cultural and moral terms. In most countries, the ‘intelligentsia’, as the bearers of high culture, played an essential role in national life. This notion of the ‘intelligentsia’ remained vital in Poland through the communist era, as did the nineteenth-century ideal of the cultural activist in Czechoslovakia. ‘Yugoslavism’, too, rested on cultural foundations, and on both Western and Eastern sides of the border the German notion of *Bildung* lived on well into the second half of the twentieth century. The close interconnectedness of culture and national politics shaped political developments after 1945. Both 1956 and 1968 were high points of cultural history as well as political history, with artists and intellectuals invading the political sphere. But the story was never simply one of independent intellectuals criticizing ‘power’. Indeed it is something of a Central European myth that intellectuals assumed a critical and non-ideological posture vis-à-vis power. In fact, culture and ideology fed off each other in the interwar period, with respect to fascism as much (p. 214) as communism. Indeed already in the aftermath of the First World War, communism began to appeal to intellectuals and artists, Jaroslav Hašek, the author of *Good Soldier Schweik*, being exemplary. And from the 1920s, communist politics and modern art cohabited productively, whether in Bauhaus-influenced architecture or among writers such as Jaroslav Seifert in Prague and Aleksander Wat in Warsaw. For most national literatures, the 1920s was a ‘Golden Age’ that was never to return, with the partial exception of the 1960s. Ideology did not dominate art in this period, but it was a crucial component of it. Revolution and Progress as expressed through art and literature, and the construction of a revolutionary self through avant-garde art, were the order of the day. The rise of Stalin in the Soviet Union led to an attack on this fruitful symbiosis, first politically then aesthetically. Playfulness and innovation in art ceased to be considered appropriate. Communist parties instead turned sectarian in respect of cultural affairs and expelled progressive artists. The Second World War and anti-fascist resistance reversed the trend somewhat, but the scars remained. The Czech Marxist writer Záviš Kalandra chose not to rejoin the party after 1945 and was executed after a show trial in 1950.

After 1945, and with full force after 1948, socialist realism became the official style of artistic creation, albeit only for a short time. There were campaigns against both avant-gardism and ‘nationalism’, the leading Czech Marxist art theoretician, Karel Teige, for instance, being hounded to death in 1951 for being a Trotskyist.[30] Yet the idea of *Gleichschaltung* from above is misplaced. The parties could squeeze culture through an ideological grid, but could not determine what a new socialist art should look like. Typically, when Soviet writers asked Stalin to give them instruction on how to write a truthful socialist novel, Stalin replied: ‘Write the truth’. There was no blueprint for aesthetics, in other words, and directives changed from day to day. ‘Stalinist art’ in Eastern Europe was anything but monolithic, so the influence of socialist realism should not be exaggerated. In Yugoslavia, socialist realism was abandoned already in 1950/1. In Czechoslovakia the campaign to impose Soviet-model socialist realism in the plastic arts was met with embarrassment and its impact was limited. Even during the worst days of Stalinism many artists tended to go their own way.[31]

De-Stalinization after 1956 restored institutional and conceptual plurality at an official level, and this was paralleled by demands for reform from below. Writers and critics called for a new approach to literature to replace the Stalinist ‘construction novel’, demanding an end to ideological simplifications and the return of psychological concerns that would decompose the schematic ‘socialist hero’. The new hero was no longer to be a hollow political-ideological type but was to mirror the diversity and contradictoriness of social reality. As a Czech literary theorist put it in 1963: ‘This heroism can be shown in many environments and under various circumstances, in many specific contexts. If writers saw everywhere the same conditions, it would be senseless to write novels.’[32] Stories and characters thus became more intricate and ambivalent. Partisans fighting against Nazis experienced political and moral ambiguities in a way that was alien to socialist realism. In Aleksandar Petrović’s film *Three* (1965) or Živojin Pavlović’s *The Ambush* (1969), the figure of the partisan is complicated as patriotism (p. 215) and revolutionary fervour give way to recognition of the horrors of war.[33] Perhaps most famously, *Shop on Main Street* (1965) by Ján Kádár and Elmar Klos dealt with the issue of moral ambivalence vis-à-vis the Holocaust, staging fear as a crucial component of war. The effort to render war movies less schematic was also evident in the ‘anti-hero’ that Jiří Menzel brought to perfection in his *Closely Watched Trains* (1966). Pathetically or comically, many of these 1960s movies dwelt on the ambiguous issue of collaboration, reacting against the ideologization and schematic heroism of Stalinism, yet fired by an urge to find the ‘lost meaning’ of socialist revolution. Many post-Stalinist movies commented politically on the present, explicitly as in Andrzej Wajda’s *Man of Marble* or indirectly as in Miloš Forman’s *Fireman’s Ball*. De-Stalinization did not liberate culture from ideology, it restructured their mutual coexistence, undermining the big utopian

narrative of socialist revolution and the formation of the New Man and focusing attention on the complexities of everyday life under socialism. At the level of aesthetics, the shift was manifest in the splitting of the formerly omniscient narrative voice into a plenitude of small storylines. Typically, decentred and fragmented ‘narrated narrations’ became a favourite device, as meticulously conducted in Bohumil Hrabal’s and Ivo Andrić’s stories, set in a Prague beerhouse or a Bosnian divan. What happened after 1956 can be described as a transformation from a ‘programmatic’ to ‘processual’ utopia. The latter rejected any grand design of alternative society, abandoning ideal fantasies and mythical images as forms of expression. Instead, it drew on indeterminacy and the open-endedness of human life, on historical ambiguity and contradictions. To quote Ernst Bloch, the post-Stalinist artistic utopia was a ‘permanent open process of envisioning what is not yet’.[34] From now on, socialist utopia manifested itself in the sphere of everyday life, in a belief in a better future but one that should not be achieved regardless of cost.

With some modifications, this relationship between culture and utopian ideology remained in force in late socialism, whether in Husák’s ‘normalization’, Honecker’s ‘developed socialism’, or Kádár’s ‘goulash communism’. Even the most ‘normalized’ years brought critical movies that became rare after 1989. In most socialist countries, the artistic exploration of Stalinism continued, as did the quest for truth and authenticity in confronting problems of everyday life, such as the condition of women or youth. Feminist issues, however, were no longer depicted as graphically as in the movies of Věra Chytilová and Márta Mészáros in the 1960s. Nevertheless, movies such as those by Marie Poledňáková in Czechoslovakia exploring the issue of fatherhood or films that tackled issues of bullying among working-class youth retained a critical yet subtle edge. The productive symbiosis of culture and ideology continued into the 1980s, with glasnost and perestroika enabling artists to touch on uncomfortable subjects such as corruption, drug abuse, and criminality. Krzysztof Kieszlowski’s *Short Film about Killing* (1988) crowned this upswing of critical cinema. Though they exposed deficiencies in the socialist system, the very act of criticism implied that artists took that system seriously. Indeed, it may be argued that in tackling social problems without attacking key values, they reinforced the legitimacy of the system. Only at the end of the 1980s did this relation fall apart as the language of socialism came to be massively questioned on the (p. 216) ‘cultural front’. One could counter that late socialism was more evidently a time when an apolitical popular culture flourished, as in the West, epitomized in pop songs about love and happiness. Yet this was true only to a limited extent: in contrast to the West, for example, the genre of protest songs remained influential through the 1970s and 1980s, with singers like Karel Kryl, Jaromír Nohavica, Wolf Biermann, or Jacek Kaczmarski. Only after 1989 did this genre go into steep decline.

Did ideological constraints produce better art than conditions that are seemingly free of ideology? Let us take the example of cinema before and after 1989. It is hard to claim that movies grew better after the fall of communism. If one examines the work of Wajda or Menzel, one has to conclude that their post-communist work is *worse*. Moreover, attempts by the younger generation to come to terms with the communist past have produced frustrating kitsch such as the German film *Goodbye, Lenin!* or the Czech film *Pelíšky.* Protest singers, creative and challenging under communism, have died or become an embarrassment. In 1989 communism fell decisively, but with it perished also a challenge that had provoked and inspired many artists. With the advent of freedom and the decline of ideology in Eastern Europe, the critical calling of culture was diminished, at least for a time.

Conclusion

With the passage of time, we begin to see the era of communism differently. Writing in 1998, Sabrina Ramet suggested that the defining feature of Eastern European communism was that ‘politics and economics were closely linked’. From the perspective of the mid-2010s, we may ask what has changed, given the huge interpenetration of business and politics and the unprecedented scale of corruption. Corruption actually increased as a result of the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, as subsidies from Brussels poured in. This dismal observation fits Ivan Berend’s observation that the history of Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century may be read as a ‘detour from the periphery to the periphery’. Of course, this assessment is open to debate; and after two decades in which scholarship was dominated by struggles about the memory of communism—whether it was good or bad—it is time to approach the history of Eastern European communism from a Rankean perspective, as an epoch ‘immediate to God’, a period to be understood in its own terms, yet embedded in a wider context of European history. This requires that we give up the conception of Eastern European communism as a ‘deviation’ from an ultimately triumphant direction of historical development. On an analytical level, Eastern European communist experience was not an aberration from ‘modernity’ but a different form of ‘modernity’ that can be used to reflect comparatively on what modernity signifies. Historians should take issue with views that dwell doggedly on the binary division between East and West, dictatorship and democracy, and instead look at capitalism, socialism, and post-colonialism as parts of a global network of mutual interactions and relationships. As Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery (p. 217) have argued: ‘The comprehensive post-Cold War frame we advocate prompts investigation of connections and comparisons across imperial formations past

and present, bringing together European empires of previous centuries, Cold War empires and their Third World client-states, late twentieth-century corporate power, and forms of twenty-first-century capitalism.'[35] In such a perspective, 'Eastern Europe' loses its subordinate status as the 'periphery' and the specific *Hauptwidersprüche* of Eastern European communism that we have examined can be analysed in terms of wider comparative and global networks. The battle for interpretations of Eastern European communism is by no means over. Just as with the French Revolution or National Socialism, communism will never be fully 'explained' and political challenges will constantly pose new questions and offer fresh angles on events that have been investigated a hundred times before. Future students of modern European history should begin by taking note of what Ivan Berend said about his own life under communism: 'It was sometimes quite unbearable and frightening but always extremely interesting.'[36]

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