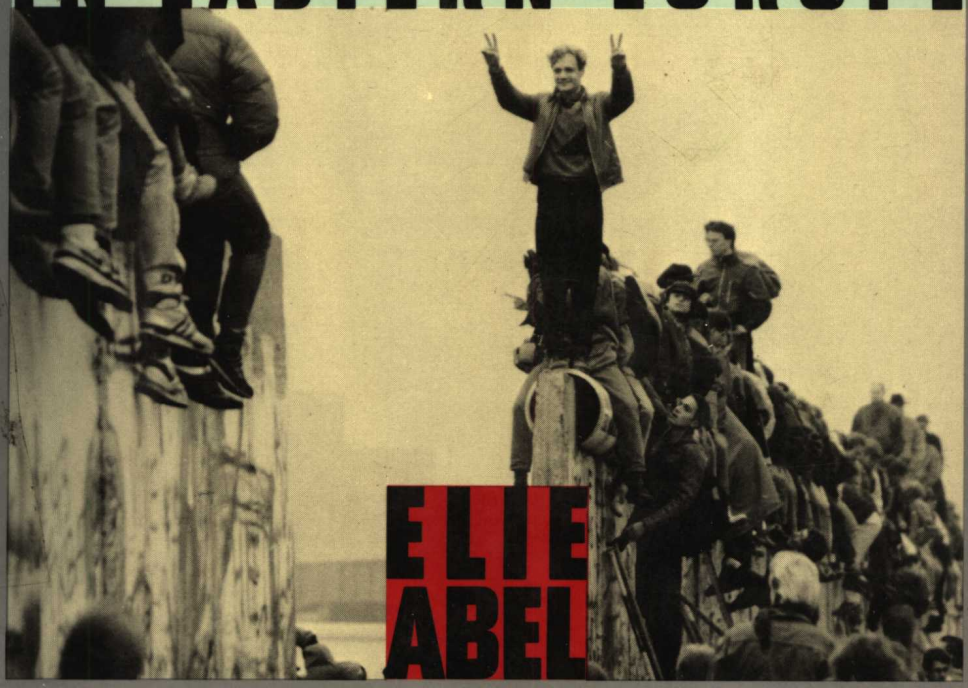
THE SHATTERED BLOC

BEHIND THE UPHEAVAL IN EASTERN EUROPE



ELIE ABEL

THE SHATTERED BLOC

Behind the Upheaval in Eastern Europe

ELIE ABEL

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY · BOSTON
1990

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Abel, Elie.

The shattered bloc : behind the upheaval in Eastern Europe / Elie Abel.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-395-42019-9

1. Europe, Eastern — Politics and government — 1945– 2. Europe, Eastern — Economic conditions — 1945– I. Title.

DJK50.A24 1990 89-26821

947 — dc20 CIP

Printed in the United States of America

BVG 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

PART I

1

An Empire in Dissolution

THE ASTONISHING WAVE of revolutions that swept across Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 pronounced the doom of Joseph Stalin's external empire, raising hopes for a rebirth of democracy and the rule of law. As the Cold War passed into history, Communism was in retreat throughout the region.

In the West the age of empire had ended decades earlier. Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands gave up their overseas possessions in the aftermath of World War II, yielding power to subject peoples clamoring for independence and the right, as India's Jawaharlal Nehru once put it, to make their own mistakes. Now it was the turn of the Soviet Union.

In the impoverished countries ruled by totalitarians of the left for over four decades, incredible things were happening. The wall that disfigured the border between the two Germanys — and sliced the city of Berlin in two — suddenly became irrelevant as the desperate East German regime punched holes in it to allow free passage in both directions. The hard-line Communist leadership collapsed, creating a political vacuum that sooner or later was likely to be filled by unification with the Federal Republic or some form of confederation. The prospect of a united Germany, some

eighty million strong, in the center of Europe rang alarms in Western capitals as well as Moscow.

Czechoslovakia witnessed a similar collapse of the old Stalinist regime, brought down without violence by a coalition of dissident intellectuals and students. For the first time since 1948, Communists were no longer in command as a new government started to dismantle the most repressive features of the old order. In Poland the discredited Communist Party grudgingly accepted a back seat in the new coalition government led by Solidarity, following the near-total repudiation of the party by the voters. Hungary ripped out its barbed wire fence along the Austrian border on the west while preparing for its first totally free election, which the Communists were expected to lose, since 1945. Even in Bulgaria, the rigid Stalinist regime of Todor Zhivkov ended in his ouster after thirty-five years in power.

Romania was the last domino to fall as Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship ended in a pre-Christmas spasm of police terror and wholesale bloodshed. It was the only country in the shattered bloc where the pattern of peaceful revolution broke down, as security forces fought the army in the streets of Bucharest, Timisoara, and Arad.

These extraordinary changes exceeded all predictions. The unlikely revolutionaries were no less surprised by their swift successes than the rest of the world. They had started as would-be reformers of a system that was breaking down, though not everywhere or all at once; its failures could no longer be disguised or hidden. The reformers wanted change, the opportunity to increase trade with the West, to restructure their obsolete economies, to restore basic freedoms and, in the words of a Hungarian party member, to "be a part of Europe again." Few expected the totalitarian systems imposed by overwhelming Soviet force in the forties to disintegrate overnight.

That outcome was not preordained. The Soviet Union had

more than enough power, if it came to that, to save Communist rule in the satellite belt. The Kremlin had not flinched at the use of force to crush the East German workers' uprising in 1953. Nikita Khrushchev sent his Red Army tanks roaring into Budapest in 1956, and Leonid Brezhnev did it in Prague in 1968. Mikhail Gorbachev, a reformer himself, understood that the time for a mailed-fist response had passed. He had promised the people of the Soviet Union a new era of democratization, economic efficiency, more openness between rulers and the ruled, and an end of the Cold War by negotiation with the West. He was beset by grave problems at home: an enormous, long-concealed budget deficit, precarious food supplies, low morale, and demands for self-determination in the Baltic republics as well as other regions.

There was also the considerable risk that armed intervention in Eastern Europe would wreck Gorbachev's greatly improved relations with the West, whose help he needed. It would certainly torpedo the arms control negotiations at Geneva and Vienna, nullifying the hope of relief for the overstrained Soviet economy through deep negotiated cuts in military spending. In any event, Gorbachev decided against intervening to slow or stop radical change in Eastern Europe. More than that, he used his influence to speed the process of reform, notably in East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.

The six countries that lie between the Bug River in the east and the Elbe in the west do not bulk very large on the map of Europe, but the Kremlin had long considered them important out of all proportion to their combined area, population, and natural resources. Initially, they provided a buffer zone to guard the frontiers of European Russia against hypothetical attack from the West. No such attack has ever been launched or seriously threatened. But existence of the bloc, and the Warsaw Pact as its military arm, served other

purposes. They kept Germany divided, a major goal of Soviet policy. The permanent presence of 550,000 Soviet troops in the region also served a political purpose, guaranteeing that the subject peoples would not be tempted to break out of the "camp of socialism."

It is not a trivial distinction that Communism came to Central and Eastern Europe by force of alien arms rather than by social revolution. With Hitler's armies in strategic retreat during the final months of World War II, Soviet forces overran, and stayed to occupy, the whole of Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, most of Czechoslovakia, and half of Germany. This was Stalin's way of securing the western borders of the Soviet Union against military threats in the future. But security, to Stalin and his successors, had another dimension. It meant total political control of the region, to be exercised through the installation of Soviet-style regimes whose leaders and policies carried the seal of Kremlin approval. In this process the Red Army played an indispensable role. Its presence gave a certain weight of authority to the actions and pronouncements of the new leaders, who lacked the popular support to carry out revolutionary changes on their own.

In the absence of revolution, as Wladyslaw Gomulka conceded in a 1945 speech, only the presence of the Red Army made it possible to begin what he called the "transformation of Polish society." In a midnight conversation with the Yugoslav leader Milovan Djilas, Stalin made no secret of his intentions. "This war," he said, "is not as in the past; whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system. Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise."

Many of today's problems are rooted in the immediate postwar period, when this new class of rulers, installed with Moscow's blessing and support, set up virtually identical totalitarian regimes in all six countries of the new Soviet im-

perium. They called them people's democracies, a double misnomer. Like the old Radical Socialist Party in prewar France, which was famous for being neither radical nor socialist, the people's democracies of Central and Eastern Europe were in no sense democratic, nor did the people have much to say about how they were to be ruled or by whom. What they got instead of elections was a set of single-party dictatorships, answerable in the first instance to Moscow.

With the consolidation of Communist rule in the late 1940s, the Soviet way of doing things became the only way in all six countries, regardless of differing national circumstances. Human rights were grandly proclaimed in official documents, though they were seldom observed. The oppressive weight of bureaucracy hung over the most trivial transactions between citizen and state. Governments busied themselves with tasks better left undone, or better done by others: deciding, for example, what products each factory should produce, in what quantities; fixing the prices of all goods and commodities, regardless of supply or demand; controlling the movements of all citizens within their own countries or across frontiers; dictating what should be taught in the schools; censoring all books, magazines, journals, newspapers, radio, television, stage plays, and motion pictures; clapping dissidents, real or suspected, into jail and not infrequently roughing them up. In the early postwar years, fidelity to the Soviet model also demanded show trials of prominent Communist leaders (Laszlo Rajk in Hungary and Rudolf Slansky in Czechoslovakia, to name two), on patently preposterous charges leading to death sentences.

The pattern varied slightly from country to country, save in two respects: there could be no thought of any Soviet bloc country quitting the Warsaw Pact or abandoning the established, so-called socialist order. A bit of tinkering around the edges of party dogma, a mild flirtation with a hybrid notion called market socialism, might be tolerated in one or

two countries, though not before the late 1960s. But the "commanding heights" of the economy, and of society as a whole, had to remain under firm and permanent Communist control.

These restrictions have lost much of their power in the final decade of the century. Poland has a non-Communist prime minister, and Hungary may soon have one. Even the East German Communists, reversing course after forty years of orthodox Stalinist methods, have promised free elections in 1990, unrestricted travel to the West, market-oriented reforms, and freedom of expression. Czechoslovakia is expected to follow suit. The Soviet Union itself, like Eastern Europe, is in the grip of a crisis that is political and moral as well as economic. The old Leninist-Stalinist order appears to be crumbling, and the shape of the new order has yet to be defined.

For the men in power, Gorbachev's "new thinking" was a two-edged sword. It widened their space for independent action, most markedly in Poland and Hungary. But as members of the *nomenklatura,* a highly privileged class, they had a great deal to lose if radical reform created turbulence at home. Few East European leaders, accordingly, had embraced Gorbachev's *perestroika* or *glasnost.* Only Hungary and Poland, at the outset, chose the route of political pluralism and market-driven economic reform. Even in these countries, however, one encounters far more skepticism than in the West about the prospects of Gorbachev's political survival.

The East European Communist leaders have spent most of their lives working inside a system modeled directly on the Soviets'. They understand better than Western politicians how difficult it is to turn that system around, to decentralize the world's most centralized economy, to weed out the lazy, corrupt, and incompetent managers, to establish and enforce rules of public accountability, to shut down state

enterprises that cannot survive without enormously wasteful subsidies, to restrain the police and the military, and to waken a spirit of enterprise in a populace that for decades past has looked to the state as employer, landlord, educator, and moral guide. They also know that they are more vulnerable than their counterparts in Moscow. Any Soviet leader can count on a broad layer of patriotic support, notably among ethnic Russians. The remarkable fact about the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, by contrast, was that tens of millions among them, after more than four decades, remained unreconciled to a system they regarded as alien, to be enforced, when the need arose, by the armed might of the Red Army.

Three times since World War II the Red Army has been called on to defend the Soviet hegemony by force of arms. Each time Moscow sent troops and tanks to rescue Communist regimes from their own people — in East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. The huge Soviet troop commitment, in short, while difficult to justify in purely military terms as fear of a third world war receded, remained the ultimate instrument of control over the restless peoples of the empire.

At the annual meeting of the Warsaw Pact ministers in 1989, Gorbachev proclaimed a modified policy of nonintervention. The official communiqué said, "No country has the right to dictate events in another country, to assume the position of judge or arbiter." The document also laid down the principle that "there are no universal models of socialism."

Gorbachev told the leaders of all six nations that they no longer were required to follow the Soviet example in every respect. Their task, he said repeatedly, was to reshape and revive their feeble economies, to make their systems more responsive and above all more efficient, bearing in mind the needs and traditions of their people. The Poles and Hungarians needed no urging to move in that direction. Both

countries anticipated and surpassed Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union. But Gorbachev's urgings to speed the reform process met with lip service or dogged resistance in the other Soviet bloc countries until it was too late to save their recalcitrant leaders — Erich Honecker in East Germany, Milos Jakes in Czechoslovakia, Todor Zhivkov in Bulgaria (there is clear evidence that the Kremlin had a hand in their removal) and, finally, Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania.

Although the Warsaw Pact remains intact, the once-seamless political unity of the East bloc will be hard to restore with non-Communists moving into positions of power in several countries. The countries of the shattered bloc, moreover, are increasingly caught up in neighbor-to-neighbor disputes over nationality issues, emigration, and trade.

With bloc unity faltering and ideology losing its force, the external empire has seen a remarkable resurgence of long-suppressed national feelings and traditions, including a revival of churchgoing. What is even more remarkable, the internal Soviet empire of non-Russian peoples is in turmoil as Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Moldavians, Armenians, and other national entities press demands ranging from the right to replace the use of Russian with their own languages to outright independence. Terms like "self-determination" and "national sovereignty" have become part of everyday speech.

Like Charles de Gaulle, whose vision of the future encompassed an unbroken stretch from the Atlantic to the Urals, Gorbachev talks to Western European audiences about "our common European home." When reminded that the phrase, which he had used repeatedly, suggested an effort to counteract the influence of the United States, Gorbachev backtracked. In a subsequent speech he made a point of endorsing active participation in European affairs by the United States and Canada. In Eastern Europe, coffee house talk of making Europe whole again has another meaning. It means

tearing down the rusty Iron Curtain, as Hungary has already done; demolishing what remains of the Berlin wall; establishing closer ties of trade, culture, and travel with the prosperous West; and putting an end to one-party rule.

Even the terminology is changing. Diehard Communist officials today are commonly described as "Bolsheviks," and the term "Eastern Europe" has fallen out of favor. Large numbers of Poles, Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks, Slovenes and Croats object to being labeled East Europeans. They prefer to think of themselves as Central Europeans, who, like Austrians and Germans, share a common civilization with the West. They have in mind shared religious beliefs, Catholic or Protestant, the historical experiences of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and the powerful contemporary values they associate with the West: the rule of law, respect for human rights, parliamentary democracy, and thriving economies — all values of which they felt deprived within the boundaries of the Soviet empire.

On the theoretical level, the underlying goal of Gorbachev's program has been described as a return to Leninism after the distortions of the Stalin era have been stripped away and the idealism once associated with the Russian revolution has somehow been recaptured. That is not the goal of most reformers in Eastern Europe. They see little hope of solving their economic and social problems unless the Marxist-Leninist system itself can be dismantled and preserved under glass in a museum. Many think of that system as an unmitigated disaster which has pauperized their peoples and plunged the whole region into a profound and chronic crisis. In fact, the word "crisis" kept recurring with extraordinary frequency in almost every one of dozens of conversations I had during the three months of my latest visit to Eastern Europe.

I met party members who denounced the Soviet model as a demonstrable failure. They praised the dynamism of mar-

ket-driven systems in contrast to the rigid and wasteful command economies they knew so well. Some argued for a complete redefinition of socialism that would ensure social justice, human rights, and parliamentary democracy. But comparatively few of the people I interviewed advocated a transition to full-scale, unrestrained capitalism. For most, the United States was not the preferred model. They conceded that the American economy was admirably productive and remarkably efficient in allocating resources. But more than a few were troubled by what they viewed as its essential heartlessness; they cited our boom-and-bust cycles, recurrent unemployment, the stubborn survival of poverty in the midst of plenty, and the astronomical cost of medical care. When I asked them to name countries that had resolved these problems, Finland, Sweden, and Austria led the list — all three parliamentary democracies with mixed economies and generous social services. A Hungarian official remarked that Finland was a more convincing example of socialism at work than was his own country.

The disastrous state of the economy dominated my discussions with government and party officials. A common thread running through these talks was their concern that continued stagnation could push the countries back to a Third World level. It seemed to me that debate about whether a socialist state should allow privately owned pizza parlors, restaurants, or taxis was an absurd waste of time. Deng Xiaoping had it about right, a Yugoslav friend suggested, when he said that it didn't matter whether a cat was black or white as long as it caught mice. In Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw, people readily acknowledged that Austria and Finland, both spared the benefits of Soviet-style socialism, had far outdistanced their own countries. The most admired foreign leader, according to my informal soundings, was

Margaret Thatcher, not least because she was perceived as having turned Britain away from Socialism.

The Soviet model was not always so unpopular in this part of the world. Forced-draft industrialization did produce rapid growth in the early postwar years. Millions of peasants left the countryside for new jobs in industry, the avenue of upward mobility for themselves and their children. But the rapid growth of the 1950s and 1960s concealed underlying defects of the Stalinist system, which became more apparent as the growth rate slowed. Thomas W. Simons, Jr., a knowledgeable American foreign service officer, put it this way: "Everywhere, in one degree or another, the rigidity and centralization of the Soviet model is increasingly seen as an obstacle to further development. It is a model that in today's conditions tends to produce the wrong goods for the wrong markets, and to educate people for the wrong jobs or for no jobs at all. It is extremely wasteful in the use of human and material resources. It has no reliable self-correcting mechanism. The time of extensive resources to be exploited — of abundant manpower drawn from the peasantry — is gone."

Eastern Europe, moreover, has become a heavy economic burden for the Soviet Union, whose leaders complain that it is being shortchanged in its trade relations with the rest of the bloc. The Stalin era, when Russians felt free to loot the machinery and industrial raw materials of such countries as East Germany and Romania, is long past, though not forgotten. Today there are grievances on both sides. The Soviets supply their resource-poor allies with vast quantities of petroleum, natural gas, iron ore, and other commodities, some of which would command higher prices on the world market. The East Europeans, in exchange, supply machinery, grains, and other foodstuffs, mostly products they cannot easily sell to the West.

The fact that socialism in theory and practice is being re-