Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe

Challenges to Communist Rule

Edited by
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Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe
Sheffield, December 2005

List of Abbreviations and Glossary of Terms

ÁVO	State Security Department (Hungary)
CC	Central Committee (of Communist Party)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
Cominform	Communist Information Bureau
CP	Communist Party
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CPY	Communist Party of Yugoslavia
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
FDGB	Free German Trade Union Federation (GDR)
FDJ	Free German Youth (GDR)
Fidesz	Federation of Young Democrats (Hungary)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
glasnost	'openness' (in Soviet Union under Gorbachev)
HDZS	Movement for a Democratic Slovakia
HO	State-owned retail organisation (GDR)
K-231	Club of Political Prisoners (Czechoslovakia)
KDNP	Christian Democratic People's Party (Hungary)
KGB	Committee of State Security (USSR)
KKP	Solidarity National Coordinating Committee (Poland)
KOR	Committee of Workers' Defence (Poland)
KOVO	Union of Metalworkers (Czechoslovakia)
KPD	German Communist Party
KPN	Confederation for an Independent Poland
KSS-KOR	Committee of Social Self-Defence of KOR (Poland)
KVP	People's Police in Barracks (GDR)
LPG	State-owned agricultural cooperative (GDR)
MDF	Hungarian Democratic Forum
MKS	Interfactory Strike Committee (Poland)
MNP	Hungarian People's Party
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NKVD	People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (Stalinist secret police)
nomenklatura	list of key administrative appointments approved by the party
NRT	National Round Table (Hungary)
NVA	National People's Army (GDR)

OF	Civic Forum (Czechoslovakia)
OPC	Office of Political Coordination (of CIA)
ORT	Opposition Round Table (Hungary)
Ostpolitik	policy pursued by successive West German governments from 1966 onwards aimed at 'normalising' relations with Eastern Europe (for instance through closer trade links and recognition of the post-1945 border between Germany and Poland) while stopping short of granting full diplomatic recognition to the GDR as an independent, sovereign state
PDS	Party of Democratic Socialism (Germany)
perestroika	'reconstruction' (of Soviet economy and society under Gorbachev)
Politburo	Political Bureau (of Communist Party)
PZPR	Polish United Workers' Party
RIAS	Radio in the American Sector (of Berlin)
ROPCiO	Movement for the Defence of Human and Civil Rights (Poland)
samizdat	literally means self-publishing; came to refer to the underground publication and circulation of prohibited material
SB	Polish Secret Police
Securitate	Romanian Secret Police
SED	Socialist Unity Party (GDR)
SKS	Students' Solidarity Committee (Poland)
SPD	Social Democratic Party (Germany)
Stasi	Ministry of State Security (GDR)
SZDSZ	Federation of Free Democrats (Hungary)
TKN	Society of Scientific Courses (Poland)
UB	State Security Ministry (Poland)
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VPN	Public against Violence (Czechoslovakia)
WRON	Military Council for National Salvation (Poland)

List of Archives and Archival Abbreviations

AAN	Archive of New Documents (Poland)
a. e.	*arkhivna edinitsa* (file)
A FMV ČSFR	Archive of the Federal Ministry of the Interior of Czechoslovakia
AJ	Archive of Yugoslavia
AJBT-KMJ	Josip Broz Tito's Archive: The Marshal of Yugoslavia's Office
APRF	Archive of the President of the Russian Federation
ASSIP-PA	Archive of the Federal Secretariat for Foreign Affairs of Yugoslavia (now Archive of the Foreign Ministry of Serbia and Montenegro), Political Archives
A ÚV KSČ	Archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia
A ÚV KSS	Archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia
AVP RF	Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation
d.	*delo* (file)
dob.	*doboz* (box)
dok.	*dokument* (document)
f.	*fond* (collection)
k.	*kötet* (volume)
KVVM	Office for Public Opinion Research (Czechoslovakia)
Landesarchiv Berlin	Berlin provincial archives
l. (ll.)	*list(y)* (folio(s))
MOL	Hungarian National Archive
ő. e.	*őrzési egység* (preservation unit)
old.	*oldal* (page)
op.	*opis'* (inventory)
p.	*papka* (folder)
paczka	box, packet
per.	*perechen'* (list)
PIL	Archive of the Institute of Political History (Hungary)
RGANI	Russian State Archive of Contemporary History
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Social and Political History
s.	*strona* (page)

SAPMO-BA	Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (Germany)
SRI	Archive of the Romanian Security Service
SÚA	State Central Archive (Czechoslovakia)
Str. Pov.	*strogo poverljivo* (top secret)
tom	volume
TsDA	Central State Archive (Bulgaria)
ÚVVM	Institute of Public Opinion Research (Czechoslovakia)

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Foreword

Pavel Seifter

A distance of sixteen years from the revolutions of 1989 seems to offer sufficient space for serious reflection and recapitulation. Yet although a new generation has grown up in the meantime, it is still memory that dominates the debate over 1989, and also over 1968, 1956 and 1953 – right back to the war. While the cycle of active wartime memory is now closing after sixty years, the battlefield of Cold War memories, the memories of life and resistance under communism, is still alive and noisy.

But memory, by nature contentious and partisan, is a very unreliable and misleading guide to the past. Memory tends to confirm and reinforce itself – and in any case it is impossible to remember how it truly was: not only do people forget, they remember a past that they tend to perpetuate in the present. That is not necessarily a past that happened. Moreover there is no single memory of the past; many of these pasts are competing with, contradicting, fighting and excluding each other, often feverishly following contemporary political and ideological battle lines.

The instrument of true learning about the past can only be history disciplined by rigorous investigation and interrogation. Still relatively soon after 1989 (and the opening of the archives) the real story is emerging only slowly and in pieces. Most historians are busy researching and interpreting fragments in time, nation by nation, and approaching them from the various angles of their profession. Yet the story of what really went on in Eastern Europe in the past sixty years can only be understood in its complexity, as a whole and by keeping in mind that while revolts were attempted on the fringes, their fate was decided by strength or weakness and decline at the core of the system – in Moscow. And, in the end, 1989 will have to be seen not merely from inside communism and explained by its own mechanics. It will be seen as heralding the end of an epoch, first by the implosion of Communist Eastern Europe, followed by change everywhere, in the West, and globally. The world has moved from *samizdat* to virtual communication, and from barbed frontiers to global markets. First attempts to paint a comprehensive new picture of the time that has passed have been made only recently: for such a perspective history needs distance. This volume represents an important contribution to this process.

History can tame memory. It can ask the right questions and answer some. Revolution and resistance under communism will be revisited by every new generation of Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Romanians, Germans and others. History

will assist them as far as it goes. The rest will be told by literature and art: the story of the individual, of utopia and tragedy, of dignity and humiliation, of fear, and of freedom acquired by overcoming fear.

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Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: An Overview

Kevin McDermott and *Matthew Stibbe*

The Cold War spawned a veritable 'Other Europe' – the communist states lying to the east of the Iron Curtain. Ever since the 1950s scholars have been preoccupied with how the diverse peoples of this region reacted to the establishment – many would say imposition – of Soviet-type systems in their lands; how indigenous communist parties interacted with, or challenged, their Soviet overlords; and how local authorities and Moscow dealt with the looming presence of nonconformity, dissent and resistance among relatively broad strata of the population. This volume seeks to explore critically these intriguing questions. It is neither a history of the Cold War in Europe, nor a general survey of post-war developments in the eastern half of the continent.[1] Even less is it a triumphalist reassertion of the innate superiority of capitalist democracy over communist dictatorship. It aims rather to elucidate what can be called the 'flashpoints' in the complex relationship between the USSR and its client states, focusing on such pivotal moments as the Soviet-Yugoslav split of 1948, the East German Uprising of 1953, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, the rise of Solidarity in Poland and the collapse of communism in the late 1980s. The chapters, written by experts from Britain, the USA, Russia and Eastern Europe, incorporate recently accessible archival material and post-communist historiography, and hence represent the very latest research on their given themes. As a whole, they affirm the diversity of East European responses to perceived Soviet hegemony, both at state and society level. There is no common approach or conclusion among the authors, but all demonstrate the inordinate difficulties experienced by the indigenous communist parties in establishing sustained political legitimacy and social cohesion in their respective domains.

This is not to say that popular 'resistance', 'dissidence' and the threat of revolution everywhere and always outweighed accommodation and conformity – many East European citizens benefited from socialist transformation and broadly supported the regimes, at least at certain times and to varying degrees. Indeed, we do not wish to posit a strict 'us versus them' binary opposition, pitting an isolated, repressive 'state' against a downtrodden, but recalcitrant 'society'. Reality, we believe, was more complicated and subtle. As Lynne Viola has persuasively argued in the context of the USSR in the 1930s: 'Resistance was only one part of a wide continuum

of societal responses to Stalinism that also included accommodation, adaptation, acquiescence, apathy, internal emigration, opportunism, and positive support'.[2] What is more, neither was the communist state itself a monolithic entity totally cocooned and divorced from societal strivings and moods. The central authorities could never be sure that their directives and decrees were being fully implemented by regional and local party-state bureaucracies. And, by the 1980s, lower-level communists and functionaries were increasingly influenced by the advent of what many commentators have termed 'civil society' – the emergence of independent and informal groups and trends associated with an embryonic pluralism.[3]

We should begin by briefly defining our terms. Where is 'Eastern Europe'? We have basically adopted a geopolitical definition, equating the region with the countries of the former Soviet bloc, emphatically including East Germany (the GDR), and also Yugoslavia up to the split of 1948, but excluding Albania.[4] What is 'communism'? According to a recent political dictionary, it can be defined as a 'system of government in which a communist party rules, without permitting legal opposition'.[5] In essence, it is a political dictatorship undertaken by the party on behalf of the proletariat. The East European communist systems did allow other parties to exist, but only within a tightly regimented framework in which the Communist Party was guaranteed recognition of its 'leading role' in state and society. The forceful suppression of dissent, both real and imagined, was the fulcrum of communist rule in Eastern Europe between 1948 and 1953, the period of 'High Stalinism'. From the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev made efforts to curb the worst excesses of the past – the mass purges, arbitrary terror and the all-pervasive 'cult of personality' associated with his predecessor, Josef Stalin. But the brief thaw gave way to the renewed frost of the Brezhnev era, which lasted into the 1980s and came to an end only with the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in March 1985.

A whole literature exists on the theory and practice of 'resistance', originating in debates on the nature and extent of popular opposition to the Nazi regime.[6] Of all the competing definitions, we find Viola's the most apt: 'At its core, resistance involves opposition – active, passive, artfully disguised, attributed, and even inferred … [it] may include rebellions, mutinies, and riots; demonstrations and protest meetings; strikes and work stoppages; … arson, assaults, and assassinations … footdragging, negligence, sabotage, theft, and flight … [and] "everyday forms of resistance" [such as] popular discourse(s), ritual, feigned ignorance, dissimulation, and false compliance.'[7] As the following pages show graphically, the history of communism in Eastern Europe is littered with such activities and mentalities. Similarly, 'revolution' is a controversial category. A current definition tells us that it 'seems to mean any major transformation that occurs simultaneously on the social and political level'.[8] However, as Nigel Swain's and James Krapfl's essays clearly demonstrate, fundamental political change does not have to be enforced suddenly through violence. It can be 'negotiated' in a conscious effort to repudiate older traditions of

coercion and unfettered voluntarism. Conversely, even when revolutions usher in rapid and uncontrollable changes in social relations, they can still be 'self-limiting' in the political sphere, a phenomenon first highlighted by the sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis in relation to the events in Poland in 1980–1.[9] We have therefore adopted a flexible approach to the term 'revolution', allowing it to denote sudden/violent or gradual/negotiated transformations that are either predominantly social in nature, or predominantly political, or both.

Communist regimes first emerged in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of fascism's defeat in the Second World War, and were immediately confronted with a series of challenges connected with the Cold War, economic reconstruction, Stalinist purges and the supposed threat from the West. These early experiences, in turn, led to great emphasis on the mobilisation of industrial and cultural resources in order to increase the hold of the state over the lives of its citizens, and do battle with the enemies of socialism, whether internal or external. As in the Soviet Union itself, 'every civilian activity [had] to be examined for the contribution it could make to military preparedness', at least from 1948 onwards.[10] Having said this, it is essential to recognise that communist rule did not rely on political repression alone. Particularly in the post-Stalin era, considerable efforts were made to build a 'socialist consumerism' and leisure industries, which would satisfy the demands of workers for higher living standards and improved quality of goods and services in the shops, albeit combined with continued central control of production and distribution. Admittedly this process went further in some countries than others. In Poland change was evident from the mid-1950s onwards, in the covers of fashion magazines and in the 'modern' appearance of new urban shop fronts,[11] while in Hungary consumerism developed more slowly and thoroughly – 'goulash communism' – helping to uproot 'established patterns of working-class culture' in the decade after the failed 1956 revolution.[12] In more puritanical East Germany, on the other hand, the material and political aspects of de-Stalinisation were given less prominence and were already in abeyance by the late 1950s. Here, the close geographical proximity of the much larger Federal Republic and the GDR's apparent lack of political legitimacy led to a continued insistence that the East Germans were constructing a new socialist state at a higher stage of historical development than their capitalist neighbour to the west. This in turn provided the ideological justification for the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961.[13] Czechoslovakia likewise remained hard-line in approach until the mid-1960s, refusing, for instance, to rehabilitate in public the victims of the Stalinist purges and show trials in spite of being encouraged to do so by the examples of Poland and Hungary, and by Khrushchev's own reforms in the Soviet Union.[14]

In respect of resistance, as the essays in this volume suggest, it is also difficult in retrospect to discern any common pattern of development. Rather, challenges to communist rule came from several directions and were met by a diverse range of

responses from the rulers themselves. To further this analysis we have identified a four-part typology, as follows:

1. *National communism*. There were two varieties of this: first, regimes which publicly distanced themselves from the Soviet Union in world affairs; and second, those which sought a degree of autonomy in the domestic sphere – or what was sometimes known as a 'national road to communism' – while remaining broadly within the Soviet camp. The foremost representative of the first variant was Tito, as illustrated in Leonid Gibianskii's detailed contribution. But the post-1948 Yugoslav experiment, which involved cautious openings both to the West and to the non-aligned movement, was unusual and found no direct imitators. Other countries that challenged Moscow's claim to speak for the international communist movement, such as Albania and Romania, pursued a policy of partial independence in the diplomatic sphere, 'while remaining grimly Stalinist at home', as David Reynolds puts it.[15] In practice this was little threat either to communist rule or, ultimately, to Soviet hegemony.

The most successful example of the second variant of national communism was Władysław Gomułka, the Polish leader from 1956 to 1970, who, in Raymond Pearson's words, managed to 'negotiat[e] with Khrushchev for major Soviet concessions … within a more devolved imperial jurisdiction', including a return to private landholding and the granting of considerable freedoms to the Roman Catholic Church in Polish society.[16] Less contained, and therefore less fortunate, were Imre Nagy, the Hungarian Prime Minister in 1956, and Alexander Dubček, the Czechoslovak First Secretary in 1968, both of whom fell victim to Soviet military intervention after allowing domestic reforms to go beyond the limits considered acceptable by the Kremlin (Nagy was executed in June 1958; Dubček was replaced as First Secretary in April 1969 and expelled from the party in 1970).

2. *Intellectual dissent*. The 1950s and 1960s in Eastern Europe produced many admirers of Tito, reformist and dissident Marxists of various kinds, Maoists in Hungarian universities, not to mention a whole range of intellectuals, writers and 'cultural workers', who placed art (form) over life (content) and thereby redefined the boundaries of socialist realism.[17] However, so-called 'revisionism' or 'reform communism' became less of a threat as time went on, especially after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. In Hungary, János Kádár allowed relative freedom to intellectuals, provided they were broadly Marxist in their thinking, while Czechoslovakia and the GDR tended to export their dissidents – in the latter's case in exchange for hard currency. In Romania, open dissent was extremely hard to find, and virtually its only proponent in the 1970s, Paul Goma, was himself a former party member. Otherwise the threat from the Securitate and the regime's own espousal of anti-Russian sentiment from 1968 effectively silenced public intellectual criticism of communist rule, at least until the end of the 1980s.

3. *Armed peasant resistance*. The examples here come mostly from the Balkans which had a long tradition of banditry. For instance, there was a series of rural uprisings in 1949–50 in various parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Macedonia, some led by outlawed Četnik and Ustaša groups, but others by farmers resisting collectivisation. At Cazin, in north-western Bosnia, over a thousand peasants took part in a rebellion in the spring of 1950, involving widespread looting and attacks on state-owned property. A hard core of a hundred held out for several weeks and were defeated only when the army moved in and executed the ringleaders.[18] In the Romanian case, as Dennis Deletant demonstrates, small groups of anti-communist outlaws took part in acts of sabotage and revenge in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and some evaded capture for remarkably long periods, but their peculiar brand of resistance was never more than a minor or symbolic threat to communist rule and had all but fizzled out by the late 1950s.

4. *Popular protests against communist rule*. These could take various forms, ranging from small-scale strikes and demonstrations to mass uprisings and, in some instances, to what Peter Grieder refers to as 'sudden systemic change' (Hungary in 1956; the whole of the communist bloc in 1989). These collective actions were often sparked by acute, working-class discontent over stagnating living standards, scarce availability of consumer items and especially rapid price rises of staple goods (East Germany in 1953; Poland in 1956, 1970, 1976 and, more famously, 1980; even in the USSR itself in the southern city of Novocherkassk in June 1962). The response of state authorities varied from piecemeal accommodation to outright suppression and persecution of ringleaders. What most concerned the communists was the possibility of a 'united front' of disgruntled workers and sympathetic intellectuals, as occurred in Poland during the Solidarity era.

However, we should be careful here to see differences as well as similarities. For instance, the material factors which caused the strikes in the Czechoslovak town of Plzeň (Pilsen) and in the whole of the GDR in June 1953 were very different to the socio-economic demands of 1989. In the former case, wage cuts or increases in the working day imposed as a result of high production norms were the main factors, along with food shortages and inflated prices for basic goods. In effect, workers were being asked to postpone consumption today in return for a promise of higher living standards in the future, or, as Jonathan Sperber puts it:

> The government of the GDR, with its plans for collectivization, forced industrialization and military mobilization, quite deliberately made consumer goods a low priority – indeed, accepted drastic declines in the popular standard of living. The insurgents' economic demands centred on a reduction of high prices and the need for better and more equitable rationing, rather than for the introduction of a consumer society – which was just barely beginning to come into existence in West Germany.[19]

It might be added that greater democracy in the workplace was also a key demand, both in 1953 in the GDR and in 1956 in Hungary. Adherents of old-style social democracy inside the factories fought for workers' traditional rights and freedoms against the authoritarian tendencies in Stalinism, although admittedly their slogans (free elections, new management structures and the right to strike without fear of state retaliation) had less impact on the younger generation of radicalised workers who had known nothing but the terrible austerity of the war years and the post-1945 period.

In 1989, on the other hand, the main complaint had become the slow deterioration of living standards in comparison with growth rates in the West, combined with the refusal of communist leaders to provide an honest account of the state of indebtedness and stagnation in their respective countries. Consumerism alone was not enough, especially when set against other popular grievances, including environmental damage and lack of basic human rights such as the freedom to travel abroad – issues which, as Sperber notes, were 'inconceivable thirty-six years earlier'.[20]

Political and cultural factors also varied over time and place. Nationalism and religion were important in fostering opposition to communist rule in Hungary and Slovakia and especially in Poland, a point which comes across very vividly in Bartosz Kaliski's piece on the Solidarity movement in this volume. However, they had less of an impact in the Czech lands and the GDR, where industrialisation had taken place prior to the imposition of communism and society was already relatively secularised. In Romania the strong influence of the Orthodox Church (80 per cent of Romanians are members of this faith) acted as a brake on protest and dissent, reinforcing passivity and submission. In the GDR peace was a key factor, reflecting not only the legacy of Nazism, but also the constant shadow of nuclear war. Indeed, it was no accident that East Germany was the only member of the Warsaw Pact that allowed its citizens to perform an alternative to military service in the shape of the so-called *Bausoldaten* (construction soldiers). Even so, the various unofficial peace initiatives of the early to mid-1980s remained the preserve of a small activist minority and failed to inspire mass demonstrations on a par with 1953 or 1989.[21]

The interplay between Moscow and its satellites also impacted on the success or failure of the various challenges to communist rule. The USSR was clearly hegemonic, and its intervention was decisive in saving the regimes in East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956, as Matthew Stibbe and Johanna Granville show in some detail. However, there were also instances where the satellites themselves had an influence on policies formally decided on in Moscow. For example, Granville reconstructs the behind-the-scenes machinations in the 'Polish October' of 1956, which culminated in Khrushchev abandoning any plans for military action in the face of growing anti-Soviet demonstrations. Instead, he agreed to the appointment of the reformist Gomułka as First Secretary of the Communist Party, even though the latter had previously been purged because of his attachment to 'national roads to socialism' and his apparent affinities with Tito. As we have already seen, Gomułka

was granted considerable freedom to develop his own domestic policies, provided that he showed complete support for the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact in international affairs.[22]

On the other hand, in 1968 the rulers of Poland, East Germany and Bulgaria (Gomułka, Ulbricht and Zhivkov respectively) all played an important role in urging Leonid Brezhnev and other Soviet Politburo members to come down hard on the Czechoslovak leaders of the Prague Spring. Part of their motive, as Mike Dennis notes in relation to the GDR, was their concern at 'the positive reception of the Prague reforms among broad sections of [their own] population', especially among university students and other young people, which threatened the basis of their power. However, it could be that they also hoped, through use of military force, to avoid a recurrence of the terrible civil violence and bloodshed that had characterised the 1956 revolution in Hungary.[23] The 'Brezhnev doctrine', in other words, was not solely a Soviet invention and was supported by communist rulers throughout the region, with the exception of Romania, Yugoslavia and Albania, even if it was opposed by the majority of the people in Eastern Europe.

More generally, the Soviets and their Eastern European comrades proved remarkably resilient in the face of new political challenges, and the lessons of the past were not lost on them. Repression could be brutal, but was usually tempered by concessions in the material and political spheres. After the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, for example, the Soviets chose to negotiate with Dubček rather than install a new hard-line regime immediately, and when Dubček eventually fell in April 1969, he was replaced by another 'centrist' (and fellow Slovak) Gustáv Husák. Under these circumstances, most people appeared resigned to the inevitability of long-term Soviet occupation, while others contented themselves with low-key and largely symbolic acts of opposition to the government's self-styled policy of 'normalisation'. 'Normalisation', as Kieran Williams argues, did not just mean political repression, but also some economic reforms as part of an unwritten 'social contract' between state and society. Even the 1970 purge of the party was undertaken in a limited and controlled way, with the secret police deliberately excluded from the process in order to avoid a return to Stalinist terror (to which Husák himself had fallen victim in the early 1950s).

In Romania, too, timely concessions backed up by selective repression were used to avert open revolt – as in the case of worker and student demonstrations in Bucharest, Cluj, Iaşi and Timişoara in October 1956, and the miners' strike in the Jiu valley in 1977. Intellectuals and workers failed to unite, and dissidents rarely preached outright rejection of the system, even when they operated from a position outside it. Before and during the 1980s the process of liberalisation went furthest in Hungary and Poland, but even in more hard-line Czechoslovakia and East Germany there was a tendency to accept a degree of social criticism and debate, albeit within limits strictly controlled by the party. Over and above this, censorship ensured that dissident authors' works were often better known in the West than in their own

countries.[24] The West, in turn, continued to wine and dine communist leaders while simultaneously condemning the lack of human rights in the Soviet bloc.

In fact there was nothing inevitable about the collapse of communism or the rediscovery of a common 'Central European' cultural community in the 1980s. The early to mid-1950s were the least stable time for the Eastern European dictatorships,[25] while the early to mid-1970s were the most stable. Relative economic success (measured in terms of growing car and TV ownership and more private holidays to country retreats) was combined at international level with a growing accommodation with the West. In the GDR the government struck an important deal with Church leaders in 1978, while Honecker's state visit to Bonn in 1987 brought the regime added prestige. The meeting in December 1981 between Helmut Schmidt and Honecker at Werbellinsee, just north of Berlin, which took place on the eve of the declaration of martial law in Poland, seemed to indicate that the two sides could live side by side. Significantly, even former critics of *Ostpolitik* like the Bavarian Prime Minister Franz Josef Strauss were willing to provide the GDR with government-backed loans and credits after the centre-right returned to office in Bonn in 1982.[26] In Slovakia, meanwhile, the ruling communists recognised the Greek Catholic Church for the first time, albeit in a limited fashion. Religion, nationalism and communism no longer appeared completely incompatible, at least to some observers. In Poland the communist leader General Wojciech Jaruzelski even appealed to many non-communists as a national saviour in the face of a threatened Soviet invasion. This was in spite of his decision to impose martial law in December 1981 and to issue a ban on the Solidarity trade union in October 1982.[27]

Ironically, it was the very success of 'normalisation' which contained the seeds of communism's downfall. On the one hand, it gave way to rising expectations in the 1980s which communist regimes were not able to meet – especially as they had to squeeze consumption at home in order to pay off interest on loans raised in the West. Wider TV ownership, for instance, meant that more people could access information about Western lifestyles and attitudes, while eschewing 'conscious-raising' activities like attending trade union branch meetings. Gradual depoliticisation – people turning inwards to the family and consumerism and away from active involvement in political life – was partly offset by increased desire for knowledge and information about the true state of affairs gleaned from non-official, Western or *samizdat* sources. Surprisingly large numbers of Czechs did discuss political issues with family and friends, if the secret opinion polls analysed by Kieran Williams are to be believed. In the GDR party members and ordinary people enthused about Gorbachev and protested when the Soviet magazine *Sputnik* was banned in November 1988. In Poland it was above all the election of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II in October 1978 that symbolised the rebirth of popular nationalism and kept it alive after the collapse of the Solidarity protests, while across the region as a whole 'religious life underwent a considerable revival in the second half of the 1980s', as R.J. Crampton puts it.[28]

At the same time, communist regimes also had to come to terms with small-scale dissidence as the price of their adherence to the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe of 1975, also known as the Helsinki Accords. The human rights provisions within these accords, signed by 35 states, including Yugoslavia, the USSR and its Eastern European allies (but not Albania), exposed the governments of the Soviet bloc to unprecedented forms of public criticism and accountability, while also increasing pressure on them to implement domestic reforms. Opposition movements, drawing inspiration from Helsinki, devised new political strategies of their own to fit in with the changing international situation. Thus East German dissidents in the 1980s rejected the violence of 1953 and instead looked to alternative models of peaceful protest – the Prague Spring, the Solidarity movement in Poland and, later still, the student campaigns in Beijing.[29] They now also enjoyed greater protection as the Church–state agreement of March 1978 provided limited 'free spaces' for oppositional activity – contrary to Honecker's intentions.[30] The Poles, who had a 200-year tradition of resisting foreign domination to fall back on, narrowly avoided direct Soviet military intervention in 1981, albeit at a price. By 1987, as Nigel Swain notes, Solidarity was split over its future direction and identity, and significant elements were preparing to compromise with the regime. For Czech and Slovak dissidents, the key lesson from 1968 was how much could be achieved by peaceful protest combined with patience, pragmatism, even 'dialogue' with the authorities. The outcome in the 1970s and 1980s was the human rights movement Charter 77, of which Václav Havel was a leading spokesperson. His seminal tract 'The Power of the Powerless' (1978) arguably did more than any other single document to elucidate the underlying weakness of the supposedly omnipotent 'post-totalitarian' state.[31] In Romania, meanwhile, Paul Goma deftly followed the Czechoslovak example, making several efforts to persuade Ceauşescu to sign a declaration of solidarity with Charter 77, and publishing an open letter condemning communist violations of human rights and other obligations under the Helsinki Final Act.

Patience, indeed, was what was needed. By the mid-1980s the communist regimes faced a major crisis, caused, in part, by developments in the international economy and also by pressures at home. Their increasingly elderly leadership could not keep pace with a burgeoning desire for greater liberalisation on the part of ordinary people, encompassing both economic and political freedoms, including the right to travel abroad. In this situation, groups like Charter 77 and the environmentalist movement in the GDR formed the basis for a revitalised 'civil society' and the eventual legalisation of opposition parties at the end of 1989. Poland and Hungary, however, led the way, ending censorship and releasing political prisoners in the faint hope of eventually obtaining a new political settlement that would favour continued communist rule in some shape or form. The immediate origins of the Hungarian reforms could be traced back to the mid-1980s and were accelerated by the removal of Kádár as party First Secretary in May 1988. Even so, the opening

of the border with Austria in May 1989 took many international commentators by surprise, especially when it was followed soon by a renewed agreement between the ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and the opposition to hold talks aimed at smoothing the path towards democracy and free elections. Thereafter, however, negotiations between the two sides seemed to get stuck in a rut.

In Poland, on the other hand, all partners in the Round Table talks of February to April 1989 expected that the leading role of the communist party would be preserved, along with the country's continued membership of the Warsaw Pact. In the end it was to take a landslide defeat for the communists in the partially free elections in June 1989, and a change of heart on the part of opposition leaders, before General Jaruzelski finally gave way and appointed the first non-communist prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, in the Soviet bloc for over forty years. However, as Nigel Swain avers, the 'your President, our Prime Minister' formula ensured Jaruzelski's own political survival as the first president of the reformed Polish Republic, a decision carried by the narrowest majority of one in the new parliament and senate. In contrast to 1956 and 1968, Moscow stood by and allowed matters to take their own course (the so-called 'Sinatra doctrine' having now replaced the Brezhnev doctrine). Over two years earlier, during Gorbachev's state visit to Prague in April 1987, a Soviet Foreign Ministry official was invited to explain the difference between *perestroika* and the Prague Spring. 'Nineteen years' was the now famous response.[32]

The reform agenda in Poland and Hungary, and Gorbachev's refusal to intervene, put the rulers of the other communist states in an almost impossible situation. However, only in Romania did events get out of hand, leading to violent clashes between supporters and opponents of the regime and ending in the bloody downfall of Ceauşescu between 21 and 25 December 1989. In East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, by contrast, the ruling parties, which at first strongly resisted the pressure to reform, seemed to give up almost without a fight. In Czechoslovakia, as in GDR, the key slogan of the unarmed demonstrators in November 1989 was no violence – *nenasili / keine Gewalt* – and this strategy paid off. In many ways, as James Krapfl argues, the revolutionaries of 1989 were determined to stage their own 'revolt against a revolutionary tradition which was perceived as violent and unclean'. This then gave rise to the idea of the 'Velvet' or 'Gentle Revolution', a construct used to contrast events in Central Europe (especially in Prague) with previous violent revolutions; or as Richard Vinen puts it:

> The revolutions of 1989 – at least in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and East Germany – had the advantage of limited expectations. No one talked of 'new men' or the Robespierrian incorruptibility of the true revolutionary. It was understood that politics was not an end but simply a means of earning freedom to do something else.[33]

However, as Krapfl shows, shifts in domestic power relations since the early 1990s meant that not all those involved viewed the events of 1989 in the same

romantic light, particularly when the excitement of taking part in world-changing events gave way to the more sober realities and messy compromises of life in a post-communist society. Some even denied that a 'revolution' had taken place at all. In this climate local or national issues were often treated, in retrospect, as more important to understanding what happened in 1989 than the overall demand for freedom from communist tyranny. This can be seen in particular in the case of the Czechs and Slovaks, who negotiated a successful mutual divorce in 1992–3, and in Yugoslavia where the ex-communist Slobodan Milošević used nationalism as a tool for launching his bid for power in Serbia, with appalling consequences for ethnic harmony in the region. Elsewhere, in general, Europe seems to be looking forward to a twenty-first century based on global markets, liberalisation and free trade. However, if the essays in this volume teach us anything, it is that we should be wary of assuming too much about the supposed inevitability of historical processes. The future of post-communist Eastern Europe is still far from certain, even more than fifteen years after the events of 1989.

Notes

1. The term 'Other Europe' was first used, to the best of our knowledge, in the late 1980s. See Jacques Rupnik, *The Other Europe* (London, 1988) and E. Garrison Walters, *The Other Europe: Eastern Europe to 1945* (Syracuse, NY, 1988). Since the collapse of the communist states in this 'Other Europe', there has been an explosion of interest in their history. Among the best English-language sources are: Ivan T. Berend, *Central and Eastern Europe, 1944–1993: Detour from the Periphery to the Periphery* (Cambridge, 1996); Mark Pittaway, *Eastern Europe, 1939–2000* (London, 2004); George Schöpflin, *The Politics of Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 1993); Geoffrey Swain and Nigel Swain, *Eastern Europe since 1945*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke, 2003); and Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York, 1992). The volume by Grzegorz Ekiert, *The State Against Society: Political Crises and their Aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 1996) shares a similar approach as this anthology, but is geographically more limited, focusing almost exclusively on developments in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Similarly, Jason Sharman, *Repression and Resistance in Communist Europe* (London, 2003) concentrates on three key events – collectivisation in the USSR, Hungary in 1956 and Solidarity in Poland – and is thus more restricted in its coverage than this volume.
2. Lynne Viola (ed.), *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s* (Ithaca, NY, 2002), p. 1.

3. On this point, see Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation* (London, 1989), pp. 80–2.
4. Largely for reasons of space, we have not included Bulgaria, a socialist state not noted for its 'resistance' to Soviet dominance.
5. Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (London, 1982), p. 81.
6. For example, Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich. Bavaria 1933–1945* (Oxford, 1983); Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (London, 1987); and David Clay Large (ed.), *Contending with Hitler. Varieties of German Resistance in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1991).
7. Viola (ed.), *Contending with Stalinism*, pp. 18–20.
8. Scruton, *A Dictionary*, p. 406.
9. Jadwiga Staniszkis, *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution*, ed. Jan T. Gross (Princeton, NJ, 1984).
10. David Holloway, 'War, Militarism and the Soviet State', in E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith (eds), *Protest and Survive* (London, 1980), pp. 136–7.
11. David Crowley, 'Warsaw's Shops, Stalinism and the Thaw', in Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (eds), *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 25–47.
12. Pittaway, *Eastern Europe, 1939–2000*, p. 73.
13. Erica Carter, 'Culture, History and National Identity in the Two Germanies', in Mary Fulbrook (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Germany. Politics, Culture and Society, 1918–1990* (London, 2000), pp. 247–69. See also Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London, 2002).
14. See, for example, Maria Dowling, *Czechoslovakia* (London, 2002), p. 99. Also Heda Margolius Kovály, *Eine Jüdin in Prag. Unter dem Schatten von Hitler und Stalin* (Berlin, 1992).
15. David Reynolds, 'Europe Divided and Reunited', in T.C.W. Blanning (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1996), p. 290.
16. Raymond Pearson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire* (London, 1998), p. 53.
17. See György Péteri (ed.), *Intellectual Life and the First Crisis of State Socialism in East Central Europe, 1953–1956* (Trondheim, 2001); also Anne White, *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture. Declining State Control over Leisure in the USSR, Poland and Hungary, 1953–89* (London, 1990).
18. Misha Glenny, *The Balkans, 1804–1999. Nationalism, War and the Great Powers* (London, 1999), pp. 545–52.
19. Jonathan Sperber, '17 June 1953: Revisiting a Revolution', *German History*, vol. 22 (2004), p. 639.
20. Ibid.

21. Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR, 1949–1989* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 201–36. It should be noted, of course, that becoming a 'construction soldier' in East Germany was no easy option; it was longer than the usual period of military service and could also cause considerable damage to the individual's career prospects or chances of gaining a university place (see ibid., p. 203).
22. Cf. R.J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, 2nd edn (London, 1997), pp. 286–7.
23. Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945–1990* (London, 2000), pp. 128–9.
24. Richard Vinen, *A History in Fragments. Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2000), p. 482.
25. This view is also put forward by Pittaway, *Eastern Europe, 1939–2000*, pp. 7 and 56–61.
26. Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name. Germany and the Divided Continent* (London, 1993), pp. 31–2.
27. Vinen, *A History in Fragments*, pp. 476–7.
28. Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, p. 414.
29. Sperber, '17 June 1953', p. 640.
30. Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, p. 201.
31. Václav Havel et al., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. John Keane (London, 1985), pp. 23–96.
32. Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name*, p. 124; Reynolds, 'Europe Divided and Reunited', p. 299; Vinen, *A History in Fragments*, p. 423.
33. Vinen, *A History in Fragments*, p. 487.

86. For more details, see L. Ia. Gibianskii, 'Forsirovanie sovetskoi blokovoi politiki', in N.I. Egorova and A.O. Chubar'ian (eds), *Kholodnaia voina. 1945–1963 gg. Istoricheskaia retrospektiva: Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 2003), pp. 171–4.
87. The preparations for the conference are analysed in Silvio Pons, 'The Twilight of the Cominform', in Procacci et al. (eds), *The Cominform*, pp. 483–503. Archival documents dealing with the conference proper are published in ibid., pp. 506–641; and Adibekov et al. (eds), *Soveshchaniia Kominforma*, pp. 399–505.
88. See Adibekov et al. (eds), *Soveshchaniia Kominforma*, pp. 483, 485, 488.

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The SED, German Communism and the June 1953 Uprising: New Trends and New Research*

Matthew Stibbe

> All kinds of details to report. First of all a thought. What jubilation there was that day at the Party Congress, when the PEOPLE'S Police marched into the hall. No longer *against* the workers – your brothers and sons, *your* protectors!! And now? They are more hated than the Russians, who maintain discipline and don't shoot to kill…
>
> Victor Klemperer, diary entry, 2 July 1953[1]

On 16 June 1953 construction workers on the prestigious Stalinallee building site in East Berlin downed tools and marched on the House of Ministries, the headquarters of government, to demonstrate their opposition to the new work norms announced by the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the previous month. This event proved to be the starting point for a wave of strikes and protests that engulfed virtually the whole of East Germany by 17 June and led to the first full-scale uprising against communist rule in the post-1945 Soviet bloc. Party officials, union leaders and supporters of the East German regime were taken very much by surprise by these events. Only three months earlier Stalin had died; now it seemed as if the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the first experiment in socialism on German soil, might die with him. Even after the uprising had been crushed by Soviet tanks, thus forestalling any moves towards the dismantling of socialism in East Germany, many GDR loyalists felt disoriented and let down by the party. How had it come to this? How could the workers revolt against the 'Workers' and Peasants' State'?

Similar questions may well have been on the lips of many communist veterans in the summer and autumn of 1989, when the GDR was again faced with a mass movement demanding political reforms and the end of the SED power monopoly. On 31 August 1989, for instance, the long-serving head of the Stasi or East German secret police, Erich Mielke, wondered aloud at a meeting with his regional commanders whether there would be another 17 June. This time, however, there was no Soviet military intervention to quell the unrest and prevent the collapse of communist rule.[2] More recently, 1953 has been at the forefront of discussions about the origins and nature of the East German dictatorship, and in particular about the

relationship between the SED/state hierarchy and the ordinary people who had to accommodate themselves to living under communism.[3] One German author even claimed, in a book published on the fiftieth anniversary of the uprising, that 17 June was a 'milestone' in the post-war history of Germany and of Eastern Europe as a whole: '[It] is proof that the most dangerous moment for autocratic regimes is not the point of greatest repression, but the point where they are forced to release the pressure – a situation which the Soviet system experienced on several occasions and which ultimately led to its downfall.'[4]

The purpose of this essay is to examine changing trends in historical writing on 17 June 1953 since the collapse of the GDR in 1989 and the opening up of East German (and, to a more limited extent, Soviet) archives. In particular, two main themes can be identified. First, the uprising is no longer regarded simply as a 'workers' revolt', rooted in opposition to the new work norms, but rather as the product of a much broader level of popular dissatisfaction with the SED regime and its attempts to impose socialism by force on the German people.[5] Many farmers, for instance, were already voting with their feet against the collectivisation of agriculture by fleeing to West Germany via the escape hatch of West Berlin. The sealing of the inner-German border in May 1952, and the compulsory 'evacuation' of tens of thousands of local residents from the new five-kilometre frontier zone with West Germany, also caused mass resentment. Strikes and go-slows were commonplace in factories in 1952 and 1953, particularly after what was perceived to be an unfair distribution of Christmas bonuses in December 1952. Above all, protestors in all parts of East Germany on 17 June were united in their demand for free elections and the resignation of the government. There were also calls for the abolition of the pro-communist people's police (*Volkspolizei*) and its paramilitary wing, the so-called *Kasernierte Volkspolizei* (KVP or people's police in barracks), and police stations were indeed frequently targeted by the demonstrators.[6]

Second, from the summer of 1952 to the summer of 1953 it now seems that the SED leadership was pursuing its own hard-line agenda, not simply following Moscow's orders, and indeed actually ignoring advice from the Kremlin on several occasions, both before and after Stalin's death in March 1953. Indeed, the whole crisis may have been caused by the GDR's increasingly independent course from July 1952, combined with a series of internal power struggles within the East German Politburo itself, which led, ultimately, to an open bid to depose Walter Ulbricht as de facto leader of the SED in late June and early July 1953. However, Ulbricht was perhaps cleverer than his opponents. His aims were to thwart any Soviet moves towards abandoning the GDR in favour of a deal with the West on German reunification, a possibility which was still very much on the cards in the early 1950s, and at the same time to strengthen his own position inside the SED, which was threatened by the emergence of potential rivals. In both these aims he had been successful by the end of 1953, although arguably his status as leader of the party was not entirely secure until 1958, or even 1961.[7]

In what follows I will review the latest literature on June 1953 in light of the two propositions above: namely that 1953 was a popular uprising led by workers, but involving broader sections of East German society; and that it was caused by the uncompromising attitude not of Moscow, but of the SED and its ruling elite. I will also consider how veteran communists and senior figures within the SED later tried to come to terms with the idea that the people had revolted against the system. Were they privately as cynical as Bertolt Brecht, who argued in his famous poem that if the people did not like the government, the simplest thing would be for the government to dissolve the people and elect a new one? Or did they genuinely believe their own propaganda, which suggested that June 1953 had been a 'fascist provocation' caused by imperialist agents and class traitors acting under orders from Washington and Bonn, and not by any particular faults in the system?

The Origins of the Crisis

While there had already been many serious rifts between the East German people and their communist rulers before 1952, especially over reparations policy and relations with the USSR, a new low point was reached with the 'accelerated construction of socialism', announced by Ulbricht at the second party conference of the SED on 9–12 July 1952. This proclamation set in train a series of measures which were intended to transform the GDR into a socialist society along Soviet lines, while rooting out real and suspected enemies of the state and the party. In the economic sphere, this meant a ruthless campaign against independent farmers and small businessmen, who were forced to join new agricultural cooperatives (*Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaften*, or LPGs), causing many to leave for the West. It also meant concentrating on investment in heavy industry, and improving productivity rates in this sector, while reducing the output of consumer goods. In the short term at least, workers and their families would feel the pinch, as shortages of food and other basic household products were almost certain to occur. Indeed, a key demand in June 1953 was for the reduction of the prices charged to ordinary consumers in the state-owned retail chain, the *Handelsorganisation* (HO).[8]

In the ideological sphere, the 'accelerated construction of socialism' led to increased pressure on artists and intellectuals to fall into line with the requirements of 'socialist realism'. The leading role of the party would have to be accepted in the arts, the universities and in the field of scientific research. Persecution of the churches was also stepped up: for instance, religious education was banned from secondary schools, several leading church officials were arrested and members of the evangelical youth group, *Junge Gemeinde*, were blacklisted and expelled from universities. Again, those whose careers or livelihoods were threatened by these measures were forced to consider moving to the West.[9]

Any prospects of unity with West Germany were now curtailed, not only by the sealing of the inner-German border in May 1952, but also by the decision to abolish the traditional German *Länder* at the end of July and replace them with fourteen new *Bezirke*, or regional administrative districts, which had no basis in Germany's past, but were entirely arbitrary creations. Each *Bezirk* was ruled by a *Bezirksrat* (regional council), and the office of *Bezirkssekretär* (regional chief secretary) was placed in the hands of an SED member, thus ensuring full party control over regional and local government.[10]

Finally, the 'accelerated construction of socialism' was cemented by an increased emphasis on internal security and an intensification of the battle against crime, with policing and justice now identified as crucial instruments in the ongoing class struggle. 'Criminal' and 'subversive' elements were arrested in their thousands for petty offences against state property, and the prison population itself rose from around 45,000 at the end of 1952 to 66,317 in May 1953.[11] Other 'enemies of the people' were placed before the courts, charged with tax evasion or illegal currency and black market trading. A series of raids on private hotels and guest houses on the Baltic coast in early February 1953, for example, led to dozens of convictions and the confiscation of holiday properties which were then handed over to the FDGB (the SED-controlled trade union federation) to use as workers' convalescent homes.[12]

According to Peter Grieder, 'the imposition of this crash course in Sovietization united East Germans against the SED, unleashed dangerous social tensions and deepened divisions with the West'.[13] More than this, it caused problems in the SED's relationship with the 'friends' in Moscow, who took the unusual step of staying away from the second party conference in July 1952, in order to make clear their doubts about the applicability of Soviet-style methods to the GDR. By late 1952 evidence was growing that the 'accelerated construction of socialism' was not working, that it was unpopular and that it was causing a split between the SED and the workers it was supposed to represent. This, in turn, undermined the viability of the GDR as a separate state in the eyes of the Soviet leadership. Indeed, even Stalin himself seems to have had reservations about Ulbricht, noting in a conversation in October 1952 that the East German leader was a good communist but a poor theoretician: 'when he laid his fist on the table it was sometimes bigger than his head'.[14]

Nonetheless, the new measures do seem to have been popular with many senior SED functionaries, at least until the end of 1952. The intensification of the 'class struggle' against landowners, capitalists, priests and other 'enemies of the people' was almost bound to be popular with veteran communists, especially those who had been victims of Nazi persecution and had seen how the churches, the aristocracy and the property-owning middle classes had helped von Papen and then Hitler into power. It is thus not surprising that Ulbricht enjoyed genuine support among the party faithful in the summer of 1952. Indeed, as Catherine Epstein has argued convincingly, many veterans of the communist movement remained stuck in the world of the early 1930s, when they battled for control of the streets against the Nazis and the police,

and for control of the labour movement against the 'class traitors' in the SPD and the free trade unions.[15] Attachment to the principles of Marxism-Leninism and faith in the absolute goodness of the Soviet cause gave them confidence that the course of history would prove them right, even though they knew how little support they had among the East German people and that they had to rely on the Soviet occupiers and the KVP to remain in power. The mentality of the KPD/SED in this period was summed up by Arthur Koestler, himself a party member between 1932 and 1938, in an essay published in 1950:

> What is the difference between a gun in the hands of a policeman and a gun in the hands of a member of the revolutionary working class? The difference … is that the policeman is a lackey of the ruling class and his gun an instrument of oppression, whereas the same gun in the hands of a member of the revolutionary working class is an instrument of the liberation of the oppressed masses.[16]

Against such 'iron logic', it was, of course, very difficult to admit that the party could ever make mistakes or do harm to the workers' interests.

The Tension Mounts

During 1952 Ulbricht was clearly the driving force behind SED policy and possessed an authority above that of his comrades in the Politburo, especially in respect of decisions involving internal security and relations with the Soviet Union and West Germany. Nonetheless, by the end of 1952 some senior East German communists were beginning to voice concerns about certain aspects of Ulbricht's 'personal rule'. At various Politburo meetings, for instance, Fred Oelßner, Anton Ackermann, Friedrich Ebert and Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl all appeared to advocate a more moderate course in particular areas, although none of these figures openly challenged the concept of party hegemony or opposed the more general leftward shift in policy from July 1952. Tensions within the upper echelons of the SED increased following Stalin's death in March 1953, but were, of course, kept largely hidden from public view. One of the more persistent advocates of change was Rudolf Herrnstadt, editor of the party newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, who had spent the Nazi era in the Soviet Union and still had contacts in Moscow. His attempts, from the early 1950s onwards, to rescue the party from what he saw as Ulbricht's sectarian tendencies, were backed by Wilhelm Zaisser, the Minister of State Security and Spanish Civil War hero, who had also spent much time in the USSR before 1945 and had acquired Soviet citizenship.[17]

In the lower ranks of the party, too, discontent was mounting. Party activists were finding it increasingly difficult to sell government policy to discontented workers and housewives, many of whom were suffering materially as a result of the 'accelerated construction of socialism'. According to Volker Koop, living standards had fallen

below the levels of 1947 by the end of 1952, and things only got worse after the Soviets refused to bail the GDR out of its economic difficulties in January 1953.[18] The final blow came on 9 April 1953, when the East German Council of Ministers announced a series of price rises and the withdrawal of food subsidies for two million 'non-essential' workers, followed on 28 May by a new government decree raising work norms in industry by 10 per cent. These measures were designed to stem the economic crisis caused by the fall in agricultural output and the subsequent problems in the food supply since 1952, and to improve living standards for ordinary workers in the long run. But they were introduced without any discussion in the broader ranks of the party or mass organisations like the FDGB, thus further fanning the flames of popular discontent.[19]

Matters came to a head in early June 1953, when the SED leaders Ulbricht, Grotewohl and Oelßner were called to Moscow. The new-found willingness of the USSR to negotiate with the Americans over Korea, coupled with British Prime Minister Churchill's proposal for an international conference to solve the 'German question' on 11 May 1953, had caused some consternation to the rulers in East Berlin, and they in turn sought assurances from the Kremlin about the Soviet leadership's continued commitment to the GDR. Such assurances, it became clear, would only be forthcoming if the SED agreed to adopt a New Course, especially with respect to economic policy. Or, as Vladimir Semyonov, the new Soviet High Commissioner, subsequently put it after the return of the SED leaders to East Berlin on 6 June: 'Do away with the *old* measures and replace them with *new* ones!'[20]

At its meeting on 9 June 1953, which Semyonov attended in person, the East German Politburo formally approved the New Course, thus signalling a major personal defeat for Ulbricht. An official communiqué, which was drafted by Herrnstadt and endorsed by the Council of Ministers on 11 June, admitted that the SED and the government had committed a 'series of errors' which they now intended to rectify. In particular, measures would be undertaken to raise 'the standards of living of the workers, intellectuals, peasants, artisans and other sections of the middle class'. Furthermore, farmers and hotel owners who had fled to the West were to be encouraged to return by the promise that their lands and property would be restored; and persecution of the *Junge Gemeinde* and other Christian groups would cease. Middle-class children would no longer be discriminated against when applying for university places, and travel restrictions between East and West Germany, and between the different sectors of Berlin, would be eased. Finally, the price increases and the withdrawal of food subsidies to two million people, announced in April, would also be reversed. Significantly, however, the communiqué made no mention of the 10 per cent increase in work norms which were due to come into effect on 30 June, so that workers still faced an effective cut in their wages.[21]

Once again, this abrupt reversal of policy did not go down well with the party rank and file, or with the broader East German population. Police and internal party reports from the Berlin area, for instance, suggest that the latest measures were

widely interpreted as an admission of failure rather than as a positive sign that the party was willing to listen to the people. Few anticipated improvements in their standard of living. Workers in some factories suspected that the New Course would increase pressure on housing and other public services, and demanded assurances that 'asocial' and 'criminal' elements who had fled across the border would not be allowed to return to the GDR. Likewise, many housewives voiced their concern that the redistribution of ration cards would allow thousands of West Berliners to come to East Berlin in search of cheap food, leading to renewed shortages and longer queues outside shops.[22] In Wedding, West Berlin, a woman was reported to have spread a story she had heard on the U-Bahn that Ulbricht had shot himself 'because of the new measures'. And in Weißensee, East Berlin, a pensioner expressed her bitterness at the apparent imminent return of private landlords, seeing this as a slap in the face for loyal communists and GDR citizens like herself.[23]

As the above examples demonstrate, the increased work norms were not the only issue on people's minds in the run-up to 17 June, although they certainly remained a key concern for those engaged in the building trade and other forms of heavy manual labour.[24] On 14 June *Neues Deutschland*, then still under the editorship of Herrnstadt, published an article hinting that the government was about to make concessions here too. On 16 June, however, the official trade union paper, *Tribüne*, brought out a piece which defended the new work norms in no uncertain terms: 'The work quotas are not being raised in order to force down wages but in order to produce more, better, cheaper goods for the same amount of work but with more effective working methods'.[25] This was reportedly the spark that led the construction workers on the Stalinallee to stop work and march to the headquarters of the FDGB to demonstrate. From there they proceeded to the House of Ministries, where they issued a call for a general strike the following day unless immediate changes in government policy were implemented, including the cancellation of the new work norms, the granting of free elections and a guarantee against reprisals. They also sent representatives to the offices of RIAS, the American public radio station in West Berlin, which agreed to broadcast news of their demands – without openly endorsing the strike call – in the late afternoon of 16 June.[26] Thus began the first mass uprising against a communist state in post-1945 Europe.

The Uprising

The exact course of events in East Berlin and elsewhere in the GDR on 17 June 1953 has now been reconstructed in the minutest detail and does not need to be repeated here at any great length. The figures speak for themselves. In East Berlin an estimated 90,000 people poured on to the streets, and throughout East Germany the number of demonstrators swelled to around 418,000. Strikes were called in 593 factories, with just under half a million workers, or 5 per cent of the workforce,

taking part.[27] Outside Berlin, the areas most seriously affected were the industrial regions of Halle, Magdeburg and Leipzig, traditionally strongholds of the German left and the workers' movement; but there were also disturbances in many smaller towns as well.[28] In some places angry crowds targeted buildings belonging to the SED or affiliated organisations, such as the FDGB and the FDJ (East German Youth), looting them and burning them to the ground. In other places they attempted to take over prisons and free political prisoners. The SED-controlled media, for instance, made much of the fact that in Halle, 'fascist provocateurs' had succeeded in storming the local jail and releasing a woman prisoner, Erna Dorn, who was alleged to be a former officer at the Ravensbrück concentration camp and was serving a fifteen-year prison sentence for various crimes against humanity.[29] Rumours were also spread that the town of Görlitz had been taken over temporarily by former Nazis.[30]

Meanwhile, although the larger demonstrations were crushed by Soviet tanks in the latter half of 17 June, isolated disturbances continued for up to a week afterwards. In total, figures from GDR sources suggest that 373 towns and villages were in a state of unrest between 17 and 23 June, including 113 out of 181 district towns and 14 out of 15 regional capitals.[31] Only the northern *Bezirke*, those concentrated in the former state of Mecklenburg, were relatively unaffected, as were *Bezirk* Suhl in Thuringia and *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt in Saxony.[32] Elsewhere there was evidence of support for the aims of the rebels, even in areas at some distance from the main centres of the uprising. In Neustrelitz, for example, a 15-year-old schoolboy was arrested on 20 June 1953 for distributing flysheets calling for strikes and work stoppages.[33] In other places, including Zossen, Jessen and Mühlhausen, rural communities reacted to the news from Berlin by organising their own spontaneous demonstrations, which, in the latter two instances, had to be dispersed forcibly by Soviet troops. The response of farmers to the uprising was quite mixed, however, and most reacted passively, preferring to await the outcome of further events. Intimidation and fear of violence also stopped the rebellion from spreading; indeed an SED report of July 1953 noted that, in some areas, workers on collective farms had formed their own defence organisations against the 'provocation' in the countryside and had even threatened to kill returning private landowners rather than give them back their land and property. Nonetheless, 58 collective farms and been dissolved and another 112 were on the verge of collapse by 30 June.[34]

The number of civilians who lost their lives during and immediately following the events of June 1953 is still unclear, even after the opening of the relevant state and party archives. At least 51 demonstrators are estimated to have been killed by Soviet forces and the *Volkspolizei* on 17 and 18 June – some shot and some crushed to death by tanks.[35] Members of the *Volkspolizei* were themselves attacked by angry crowds, and a handful died or were seriously assaulted.[36] By 22 June, up to twenty people had been summarily executed after appearing before Soviet military tribunals.[37] Among them were at least three policemen, who were found guilty of disobeying orders,

as well as two 17-year-olds and one 15-year-old, who had supposedly taken part as ringleaders in demonstrations.[38] However, Soviet tank commanders were apparently under orders to avoid civilian casualties wherever possible and it is now accepted that the number of deaths was much lower than the several hundred reported by some Western sources during the Cold War era.[39]

Even so, in the aftermath of the uprising about 6,000 people were taken into police custody, a figure which rose to between 8,000 and 10,000 by 1 July 1953, and to 13,000 by 1 August 1953.[40] In addition, several hundred anti-communist 'suspects' were arrested by Soviet enforcement agencies and deported to Siberia; they were released along with the last remaining POWs from the Second World War only after Adenauer's visit to Moscow in 1955.[41] Significantly, internal GDR reports suggest that at least 70 per cent of those detained for questioning by the *Volkspolizei* were ordinary East German workers, including some SED members. Less than 5 per cent were citizens of West Berlin or the Federal Republic.[42] Most of the detainees were released without charge, but East German courts imposed two death sentences and 1,524 prison sentences, ranging from up to a year (in 546 cases) and up to five years (in 824 cases), to ten years and over (in 13 cases) and life (in 3 cases). Only 76 of the people who stood trial in the GDR for offences allegedly committed in association with the June uprising were acquitted by the courts.[43] The purpose of these trials was to intimidate potential opponents of the regime as well as to punish the individuals concerned. East German justice now had an even more overtly political ring to it, as the death sentence passed on Erna Dorn, the alleged 'Kommandeuse' of Ravensbrück, on 22 June, clearly shows.[44]

The Aftermath

After 22 June, unrest seemed to move from the streets into the factories. Stoppages, go-slows and absenteeism continued for several weeks, with the people's police apparently powerless to intervene.[45] On 23 June, for instance, Ulbricht, Grotewohl, Herrnstadt and Ebert were all heckled as they addressed groups of disgruntled workers in factories in different parts of East Berlin. Ulbricht was accompanied by dozens of bodyguards and police as he tried to talk to employees at the state-owned machine tool factory '7 October' in Berlin-Weißensee, but he was still greeted with shouts, boos and cat calls. An SED member who was present complained about the lack of freedom of speech: 'We have always upheld the right to … criticise. But now things have got so bad that we no longer dare to open our mouths'. Another worker posed the following question to Ulbricht: 'If I don't do my job properly, then I get the sack. You have publicly admitted that you have failed in your political work, but you are still here. So what will you do now?'[46] None of this appeared in the official party press, of course, which was at pains to deny any further evidence of unrest once the Soviets had succeeded in crushing the 'attempted fascist putsch'. *Neues Deutschland*, for example, commented on 24 June 1953:

> The workers, employees and members of the intelligentsia in these factories greeted the representatives of the Socialist Unity Party with a hearty applause… All four meetings ended with thousands of workers declaring their unanimous and categorical rejection of the … Putsch as an attempt by fascists and their West Berlin backers to prevent the implementation of the latest decrees issued by the government of the German Democratic Republic, and to start a new war.[47]

Prominent academics like Ernst Engelberg were also mobilised to provide 'scientific proof' of the 'fascist' character of the June uprising and to ensure a uniform approach among East German scholars. As early as 26 June 1953, Engelberg told the SED historians group in Leipzig:

> We must show that there is method in their madness, that the parallels between *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 and the 17 June [uprising] are more than superficial... Who can forget the columns of SA thugs and murderers from the period before 1933?... The same rabid mindless infatuation, the same violent rowdiness, the same raucous mendacity. No one shall come along and claim any connection between the 16 and 17 June and the real workers' movement.[48]

While the SED seemed determined to deny any responsibility for the uprising, an important question mark still hung over Ulbricht and his position as party General Secretary. The events of 17–18 June, when the top SED leaders were forced to take refuge in the Soviet military headquarters at Karlshorst in the eastern outskirts of Berlin, had seriously damaged Ulbricht's standing in the eyes of his comrades and among the population as a whole. For a time it looked as if his days in office were numbered and that a majority in the Politburo was now against him.[49] However, he survived, partly because of the ineptitude of his rivals, who failed to seize the right moment on 8 July 1953 to push Herrnstadt forward as their candidate, and partly because at some point shortly after this Moscow switched sides, deciding to ditch any plans they may have had to force a leadership change in East Berlin. Thenceforth it was relatively plain sailing for Ulbricht. On 18 July 1953 Zaisser, who had already been forced to undergo self-criticism for his alleged lack of vigilance in the run-up to the June uprising, was formerly relieved of his post as Minister of State Security. Five days later Zaisser, Herrnstadt, Elli Schmidt, Hans Jendretzky and Anton Ackermann were removed from the Politburo for 'factionalism' and undermining party unity, and in January 1954 Zaisser and Herrnstadt were also expelled from the SED, never to be readmitted.[50]

The arrest of the Soviet Minister of Interior, Lavrentii Beria, in Moscow on 26 June 1953, and the subsequent 'revelation' that he had plotted, among other things, to dismantle socialism in the GDR, may also have helped Ulbricht's cause. At a Central Committee meeting on 24 July 1953, for instance, Ulbricht deliberately implied that Zaisser and Herrnstadt had been secretly colluding with Beria in pursuit of a 'capitulatory policy which would have ended in the restoration of capitalism', and cited alleged findings of the Central Committee of the CPSU to this effect.[51] However, there is no hard evidence that Beria was in direct contact with the anti-Ulbricht faction in East Berlin, and even if he had been, Herrnstadt and Zaisser denied this to the end. Neither did the Soviets ever make such allegations, sticking to the line that Beria had acted alone.[52]

Once confirmed back in power, Ulbricht's main priority was to increase the strength of the state's internal security organs. Particular attention was paid to the Stasi, which was deemed to have failed badly under Zaisser. If major 'provocations' were to be avoided in the future, this would have to be, first and foremost, the task of the secret police, using its intelligence arms inside and outside the GDR. The KVP was also built up even further, becoming the nucleus of the NVA, the National People's Army, in 1956. At the same time, the party was purged of those suspected of having social democratic or 'defeatist' tendencies. Max Fechner, ex-SPD member and Minister of Justice, was not only sacked but actually imprisoned for two articles he published in *Neues Deutschland* on 30 June and 2 July, defending the right to strike and advocating a milder treatment of demonstrators. The SED leadership now lived in constant fear of another 'Day X', so much so that on the first two anniversaries of the uprising, all police units, including the KVP and the special 'combat groups of the working class' (*Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse*), were ordered to remain on a 'state of heightened readiness'.[53] Meanwhile, in 1960 Ulbricht, Grotewohl and other SED leaders moved from their original residences in the Berlin suburb of Pankow to a new, highly secluded and well-guarded estate at Wandlitz in Brandenburg, where they would be more effectively protected in the event of further public disturbances. Ernst Wollweber, Zaisser's replacement as Minister of State Security, who was himself purged in 1957, later recalled that the 'fright of June 17, 1953 still haunted' Ulbricht, years after the event.[54]

The building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 was undoubtedly another symptom of Ulbricht's fears. But communist rule after 1953 did not depend on political repression alone. Rather, the SED was also forced into making a number of important concessions to workers and peasants in the aftermath of the June uprising. For instance, workers benefited from the new tendency to 'manage' disputes over pay and conditions of service within individual state-owned companies, giving them considerable, if largely hidden, negotiating power at the plant or factory level, including an informal right to consultation over company social policy.[55] Independent farmers were also able to wage a hidden campaign against state interference in village life, and were aided in this by party functionaries at the grass roots, who decided not to push through collectivisation in areas where it was unpopular with local people. Even after a renewed collectivisation campaign in 1959–60, many LPGs 'existed in little more than name', according to Corey Ross.[56] Finally, a series of price reductions in state-owned shops, and wage increases for the lowest paid, meant that by September 1954 an estimated 3.7 billion East German marks had been redistributed to the general population.[57]

The Soviets also loosened their economic grip on the GDR to some extent, keeping their promise to end reparations payments by 1 January 1954, and providing financial aid to help improve living standards for ordinary workers.[58] Why did they save Ulbricht instead of replacing him with Herrnstadt? According to Peter Grieder, on 8 July 1953 Ulbricht 'came within a hair's breadth of losing the SED leadership'.[59] We will probably never know for sure why he survived, but one contributory factor may have been Moscow's concern that unseating him would be perceived both in Germany and internationally as a concession to 'fascist' rebels, and therefore as a sign of impotence in the face of continued 'provocations' from the West. There were also fears – not altogether unfounded – that unrest could spill over into neighbouring communist states if the June uprising was seen to succeed. The Kremlin's longer-term plans for the GDR still remained unclear, however, and Ulbricht was obliged to pay lip service to the New Course at least until June 1955, even if he was able to resume many of his more hard-line polices before then.[60]

Conclusion: Consequences

The period June–July 1953 was a remarkable one in the history of post-war East Germany. For a few short weeks 'the grip of Stalinism was loosened', as Gareth Pritchard puts it.[61] The evidence emerging from police and party records also justifies the thesis that what took place was a 'people's uprising' against communism and not simply a 'workers' uprising' in reaction to the raised work norms. The strikes and demonstrations were led by workers in most cases, but also involved farmers, youths, housewives, schoolchildren and members of the middle class. Having said this, the extent of popular support for the uprising should not be exaggerated, and nor should its revolutionary potential. Only half a million people (in a population of just over 17 million) participated directly in the protests, and most of these were workers. Political self-determination was high on their agenda, but so too was economic hardship and hostility towards the privileges granted to the *Vopos* or people's police. It seems likely that it was these material resentments that caused the uprising to become political, rather than vice versa, a point which was not entirely lost on the SED and its Soviet masters. The repression which followed, while fierce, was also tempered by compromise on the economic front.[62]

There were of course other reasons why the 17 June uprising failed to develop into a full-blown revolution against communist rule on a par with 1989. The most important factor was the readiness and ability of Soviet tanks to intervene to save the GDR from collapse, and the decision by the Western powers in Berlin – and by the Adenauer government in Bonn – to restrict their reactions to verbal protests.[63] On top of this, the uprising found little support among East German students, intellectuals and church leaders, most of whom adopted a passive stance which stopped short of endorsing the strikers' demands. The main explanation for this seems to lie in

anxieties about the possibility of a third world war, or a desire not to endanger the concessions announced by the party under the New Course.[64] Furthermore, at least a part of the intelligentsia had an intrinsic distrust of the masses and a respect for political realities. For instance, the historian Joachim Petzold, who was a student in East Berlin in 1953, later remembered: 'I wanted reform, took on board the [government's] assurance that it would come, and opposed the revolutionary unrest, because I believed nothing good would come of it and because it was pointless anyway in view of the intervention of Soviet troops'.[65]

As we have seen, many 'ordinary' East Germans also stood aloof from the events of 17 June, preferring to adopt a 'wait and see' policy. Some feared that political change would only lead to greater economic chaos, especially if the borders with West Germany and West Berlin were opened too wide. Others were put off by the violence of some of the demonstrators, or by the absence of clear leadership in the opposition camp. In particular, it is worth remembering that the original leaders of the old SPD and the bourgeois parties had already fled west or been driven underground through a series of arrests and denunciations in the late 1940s, leaving nobody of any standing who could negotiate with the SED on behalf of the rebels in June 1953.[66]

Last, but by no means least, the East German regime could still rely on hundreds of thousands of loyal supporters in 1953. For veteran communists, even those who had become disillusioned with SED rule, the idea of unification with Adenauer's West Germany, an unreformed capitalist state in which Nazism and militarism were allegedly still rampant, was too much to stomach. In the words of Victor Klemperer, a university professor and Holocaust survivor from an impeccable bourgeois-liberal background, who had converted to communism after 1945, the GDR was the 'lesser evil' and therefore had to be supported.[67] Bertolt Brecht, the playwright and theatre director, was even clearer in his condemnation of the uprising, in spite of harbouring private doubts. In an open letter to Ulbricht, published in *Neues Deutschland* on 23 June 1953, he wrote:

> On the morning of 17 June, when it became clear that the workers' demonstrations were being exploited for war-like purposes, I declared my solidarity with the Socialist Unity Party. I now hope that the provocateurs will be isolated and their communication networks destroyed. But I also hope that the workers who have demonstrated because of just grievances will not be tarred with the same brush, so that the urgent exchange of views regarding the mistakes made by all sides will not be prevented from the outset.[68]

Even so, there is no doubt that June 1953 did lasting damage to the unity and purpose of the party. As Brecht's words show, few veteran communists really believed the official line that this was simply a 'fascist provocation', with no real basis among the East German people themselves. Indeed, even as loyal a party functionary as Fritz Selbmann, who as GDR Minister of Industry played a leading

role in the suppression of the uprising, showed signs of dissatisfaction with the way the party had dealt with the growing evidence of worker unrest in 1953. That part of his memoirs dealing with the early history of the GDR, although written shortly before his death in 1975, could not be published until after 1989, among other things because of a passage which revealed the extent of his (and others') misgivings over the price rises of April 1953 and the sudden reversal of that policy a few weeks later:

> In discussions about these issues I repeatedly expressed my opposition to the decisions [adopted by the party and approved by the Council of Ministers]. Of course I was aware that the extraordinarily high costs of investment in heavy industry placed considerable demands on the state budget and that these demands would have to be met by new tax measures and to some extent by price increases in state-owned retail outlets. Nonetheless I did not agree with all the decisions taken in March [and April] 1953.[69]

Likewise, Klemperer became increasingly frustrated by the apparent failure of the SED leadership to learn from its past mistakes or to reassess its policies in the wake of June 1953. In one his diary entries in August 1957, which has been published only recently, he noted: 'Everywhere it is power that is at stake, between states, between parties, within parties… At the moment things are evidently more brutal, Asiatic here than in the Adenauer state. But over there is the most blatant return to Nazism – here to Bolshevism. De profundissimis.'[70]

Open criticism of the party's role in June 1953 was rare, however. Only after 1990 did the post-communist PDS, the successor party to the SED, come to a different interpretation of the events of 1953. In 2003, for instance, the Executive Committee of the PDS issued a statement marking the fiftieth anniversary of the uprising, in which it declared:

> The SED's claim to be realising 'objective social interests' and to be leading society towards an association of equals, was neither realistic nor truly emancipatory against the background of its dictatorial abuse of power. Its policies helped to create political and social structures which prevented socialism from developing into a persistent movement for human rights. These structures both inhibited and stifled initiatives, innovations and attempts at democratic renewal. Above all, 17 June 1953 shows that the construction of a socialist society cannot be achieved by means of a dictatorship.[71]

In the end, though, this was too little too late. The failure to come to terms with the mistakes of 1953, like the failure to come to terms with the mistakes of 1932–3, damaged the cause of German communism long before the events of the summer and autumn of 1989 finally overthrew the SED regime, and with it the first experiment in socialism on German soil. A year later the GDR itself disappeared, swallowed up by its much larger neighbour, the capitalist *Bundesrepublik*. Today the uprising is remembered first and foremost as a landmark in recent German history. However, it was also the first chink in the armour of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe as a whole.

Notes

*I would like to thank Peter Grieder for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

1. Victor Klemperer, *The Lesser Evil. The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1945–1959*, translated by Martin Chalmers (London, 2003), p. 420.
2. Charles S. Maier, *Das Verschwinden der DDR und der Untergang des Kommunismus* (Frankfurt/Main, 2000), p. 252.
3. For an excellent account which looks at the view from the bottom up, see Corey Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots. The Transformation of East Germany, 1945–65* (Basingstoke, 2000). Still very useful is Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR* (Oxford, 1995).
4. Hubertus Knabe, *17. Juni 1953. Ein deutscher Aufstand* (Munich, 2003), pp. 431–2.
5. The most influential study putting across this new view is Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle (eds), *Der Tag X – 17. Juni 1953. Die 'Innere Staatsgründung' der DDR als Ergebnis der Krise 1952/54* (Berlin, 1995). This interpretation is nonetheless contested by some historians, who emphasise the proletarian and class-specific roots of the uprising. See, in particular, Torsten Diedrich, *Der 17. Juni 1953 in der DDR. Bewaffnete Gewalt gegen das Volk* (Berlin, 1991), pp. 148–50. Even Diedrich has accepted the 'people's uprising' thesis in his latest book – see Diedrich, *Waffen gegen das Volk. Der 17. Juni 1953 in der DDR* (Munich, 2003), pp. 155–65. For a useful overview of the most recent publications, see also Jonathan Sperber, '17 June 1953: Revisiting a German Revolution', *German History*, vol. 22 (2004), pp. 619–43.
6. 'Bericht der Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Volkspolizei über die Unruhen in der Zeit vom 16.6 bis 22.6.1953' (no date), reproduced in Dierk Hoffmann, Karl-Heinz Schmidt and Peter Skyba (eds), *Die DDR vor dem Mauerbau. Dokumente zur Geschichte des anderen deutschen Staates, 1949–1961* (Munich, 1996), pp. 163–71.
7. Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership, 1946–1973. Conflict and Crisis* (Manchester, 1999), esp. pp. 53–107.
8. 'Bericht der Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Volkspolizei', p. 169.

9. Udo Baron, 'Die fünfte Kolonne? Die evangelische Kirche in der DDR und der Aufbau des Sozialismus', in Kowalczuk et al. (eds), *Der Tag X*, pp. 311–33.
10. Hermann Weber, *Geschichte der DDR*, new edn. (Munich, 2000), p. 155.
11. Falco Werkentin, *Politische Strafjustiz in der Ära Ulbricht. Vom bekennenden Terror zur verdeckten Repression*, 2nd edn (Berlin, 1997), pp. 339–40 and 375–9.
12. Ibid., pp. 56–64.
13. Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, pp. 58–9.
14. Ibid., p. 59.
15. Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries. German Communists and their Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).
16. Richard Crossman (ed.), *The God that Failed. Six Studies in Communism* (London, 1950), pp. 55–6.
17. Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, pp. 53–4.
18. Volker Koop, *Der 17. Juni 1953. Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Berlin, 2003), p. 41.
19. Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, pp. 180–1.
20. Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, p. 69.
21. 'Kommuniqué der Sitzung des SED-Politbüros, 9.6.1953', reproduced in Koop, *Der 17. Juni 1953*, pp. 361–4.
22. 'Stimmungsbericht aus der Bevölkerung über das Kommuniqué des Politbüros vom 9.6.1953', 12 June 1953, in Landesarchiv Berlin, C Rep. 303–26, No. 094, Bl. 40–6.
23. 'Stellungnahme zum Kommuniqué des Politbüros der SED vom 9.6.53', 12 June 1953, in Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (henceforth SAPMO-BA), DY6/4626/514.
24. See the evidence in 'Stimmungsbericht aus der Bevölkerung', Bl. 40.
25. The article is reproduced in Arnulf Baring, *Der 17. Juni 1953*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart, 1983), pp. 170–4.
26. Diedrich, *Der 17. Juni 1953*, pp. 62 and 219–20.
27. Figures in ibid., p. 288.
28. Hans-Peter Löhn, *'Spitzbart, Bauch und Brille sind nicht des Volkes Wille!'. Der Volksaufstand am 17. Juni 1953 in Halle an der Saale* (Bremen, 1994), esp. pp. 9–10.
29. See the reports on Dorn in *Neues Deutschland*, 23, 24 and 26 June 1953. Also the draft statement written by Rudolf Herrnstadt and presented to the Central Committee of the SED at its fourteenth plenum on 21 June 1953. Reproduced in Koop, *Der 17. Juni 1953*, pp. 381–3. On 22 June 1953, one day after the Central Committee meeting, Dorn was sentenced to death by a court in Halle, and the sentence was carried out on 1 October 1953 in Dresden. After 1989 it transpired that Dorn was a mentally ill woman who had been tricked into confessing to various crimes by the Stasi. In all probability, she had not been at Ravensbrück during the war at all, although she had confessed to this several times in interviews with her captors. Her conviction was finally overturned in 1994. See Löhn, *'Spitzbart, Bauch und Brille'*, pp. 96–103; Werkentin, *Politische Strafjustiz*, pp. 183–99; and Jens Ebert and Insa Eschebach, *'Die Kommandeuse'. Erna Dorn – zwischen Nationalsozialismus und Kaltem Krieg* (Berlin, 1994).
30. Klemperer, *The Lesser Evil*, p. 418 (diary entry for 19 June 1953). In fact, it was the SPD that had been refounded in Görlitz – see Diedrich, *Der 17. Juni 1953*, pp. 129–30.
31. Diedrich, *Der 17. Juni 1953*, pp. 132 and 289–93.
32. 'Bericht der Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Volkspolizei', p. 165.
33. 'Bericht der BDVP Neubrandenburg', 21 June 1953, in SAPMO-BA, DO1-11/1226, Bl. 100.
34. 'Analyse über die Vorbereitung, den Ausbruch und die Niederschlagung des faschistischen Abenteuers vom 16.-22.6.1953', 20 July 1953, in SAPMO-BA, DY30/IV/3688, Bl. 111–12.
35. For a discussion of numbers killed, see Knabe, *17. Juni 1953*, pp. 343–4; and Koop, *Der 17. Juni 1953*, pp. 310–11.
36. 'Gesamtbericht der Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Volkspolizei über die Ereignisse am 17.6.1953', 18 June 1953, in SAPMO-BA, DO1-11/45, Bl. 11–16.
37. Knabe, *17. Juni 1953*, p. 348, states that nineteen death sentences were passed by the Soviets, and eighteen were carried out. Richard J. Evans, *Rituals of Retribution. Capital Punishment in Germany, 1600–1987* (London, 1996), p. 831, gives the slightly lower figure of sixteen. Weber, *Geschichte der DDR*, p. 166, suggests at least twenty, possibly forty, but the latter figure is probably too high.
38. Knabe, *17. Juni 1953*, pp. 349–50; Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, pp. 831–2, suggests that as many as five East German policemen were executed for disobeying orders, two in Erfurt and three in East Berlin.
39. Cf. Koop, *Der 17. Juni 1953*, p. 311.
40. Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, p. 831; Weber, *Geschichte der DDR*, p. 166; Knabe, *17. Juni 1953*, p. 357.
41. Knabe, *17. Juni 1953*, p. 354.
42. 'Bericht der Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Volkspolizei', p. 171. Of the 6,057 persons in police custody by 22 June 1953, 5,777 were citizens of the GDR, compared to 42 citizens of West Germany and 238 citizens of West Berlin.
43. Werkentin, *Politische Strafjustiz*, p. 150.
44. Ibid., pp. 194–9. See also note 29 above.
45. Gareth Pritchard, 'Workers and the Socialist Unity Party of Germany in the summer of 1953', in Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (eds), *The Workers' and Peasants' State. Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht, 1945–71* (Manchester, 2002), pp. 112–29.

46. Knabe, *17. Juni 1953*, p. 274.
47. *Neues Deutschland*, 24 June 1953.
48. Cited in Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, 'Die Historiker der DDR und der 17. Juni 1953', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, vol. 44 (1993), p. 721.
49. At the Politburo meeting on 8 July only two of the thirteen comrades present spoke in favour of Ulbricht's continued stay in office – Hermann Matern and Erich Honecker. Two others, Erich Mückenberger and Fred Oelßner, declined to express a clear view, while the remaining comrades concluded that Ulbricht would have to go. See 'Diskussion im Politbüro am 8.7.1953: handschriftliche Aufzeichnungen Otto Grotewohls', reproduced in Hoffmann et al. (eds), *Die DDR vor dem Mauerbau*, pp. 174–6. Also Nadja Stulz-Herrnstadt (ed.), *Das Herrnstadt-Dokument. Das Politbüro der SED und die Geschichte des 17. Juni 1953* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1991), pp. 126–7.
50. For a more detailed discussion, see Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, pp. 74–85.
51. Stulz-Herrnstadt (ed.), *Das Herrnstadt-Dokument*, pp. 160–1.
52. In 1961, and again in 1963, the Central Committee of the CPSU added the former Soviet Prime Minister Georgii Malenkov as a co-conspirator with Beria, but there was still no mention of any East German involvement in the alleged plot to abandon the GDR to the West. See François Fejtö, *A History of the People's Democracies. Eastern Europe since Stalin* (London, 1974), p. 37.
53. Richard Bessel, 'The People's Police and the People in Ulbricht's Germany', in Major and Osmond (eds), *The Workers' and Peasants' State*, p. 71.
54. Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*, p. 160.
55. Peter Hübner, *Konsens, Konflikt und Kompromiß. Soziale Arbeiterinteressen und Sozialpolitik in der SBZ/DDR, 1945–1970* (Berlin, 1995), esp. pp. 178–210; Stefan Berger, *Social Democracy and the Working Class in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany* (London, 2000), pp. 163–6.
56. Corey Ross, 'East Germans and the Berlin Wall. Popular Opinion and Social Change Before and After the Border Closure of August 1961', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 39 (2004), p. 28.
57. Knabe, *17. Juni 1953*, p. 421.
58. Weber, *Geschichte der DDR*, p. 171.
59. Grieder, *The East German Leadership*, pp. 79–80.
60. Ibid., p. 89; Mario Frank, *Walter Ulbricht. Eine deutsche Biografie* (Berlin, 2001), pp. 258–60. Interestingly, Frank places the events of June–July 1953 at the beginning of his biography of Ulbricht, seeing them as the decisive event in his career. Like Grieder, he concludes that the general secretary survived by the skin of his teeth, and only because the Soviets were anxious about making the GDR look weak in the aftermath of the uprising (see ibid., p. 26).
61. Pritchard, 'Workers and the Socialist Unity Party', p. 113.

62. Diedrich, *Waffen gegen das Volk*, pp. 29–30 and 215–16. For a contrasting view, which stresses the idea that 17 June was not simply an uprising, but a genuine 'people's revolution', rooted in long-term popular and political resistance to socialism, see Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People. Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany, 1945–1955* (Lanham, MD, 2003).
63. Of the three Western powers in Berlin, only the USA seriously considered supplying arms to the East German rebels in June 1953. However, even President Eisenhower very wisely insisted, at a meeting of the National Security Council on 18 June, that the revolt would have to become more serious and more widespread before America could risk intervening in such a direct manner, and in the end the plan came to nothing. For a further discussion, see Knabe, *17. Juni 1953*, pp. 400–16.
64. Ibid., p. 246. See also Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, 'Volkserhebung ohne "Geistesarbeiter"? Die Intelligenz in der DDR', in Kowalczuk et al. (eds), *Der Tag X*, pp. 129–69.
65. Joachim Petzold (with Waltraud Petzold), *Parteinahme wofür? DDR-Historiker im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Wissenschaft*, ed. Martin Sabrow (Potsdam, 2000), p. 60.
66. Bruce, *Resistance with the People*, esp. pp. 65–118.
67. Klemperer, *The Lesser Evil*, passim.
68. *Neues Deutschland*, 23 June 1953.
69. Fritz Selbmann, *Acht Jahre und ein Tag. Bilder aus den Gründerjahren der DDR* (Berlin, 1999), p. 265.
70. Klemperer, *The Lesser Evil*, p. 495 (diary entry for 10 August 1957).
71. 'Erklärung des Parteivorstandes der PDS zum 50. Jahrestag des 17. Juni 1953', Berlin, 26 May 2003 (online version at http://www.pds-online.de/partei/geschichte/index.htm.) On the PDS and post-communist historiography, see also Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, '"Faschistischer Putsch" – "Konterrevolution" – "Arbeitererhebung": Der 17. Juni 1953 im Urteil von SED und PDS', in Rainer Eckert and Bernd Faulenbach (eds), *Halbherziger Revisionismus. Zum postkommunistischen Geschichtsbild* (Munich, 1996), pp. 69–82; and the more sympathetic account offered by Stefan Berger, 'Former GDR Historians in the Reunified Germany. An Alternative Historical Culture and its Attempts to Come to Terms with the GDR Past', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 38 (2003), pp. 63–83.

83. Vladimír Mečiar, 'Aby ľudia mali komu veriť (Vystúpenie Vladimíra Mečiara na stretnutí PZDS v Martine dňa 23.3.1991)', *Telefax VPN*, no. 4 (26 March 1991), p. 6.
84. 'Iniciatíva na obranu demokracie: Vyhlásenie členov novembrového Koordinačného výboru vysokých škôl Slovenska', Bratislava, 28 October 1990, in *Echo*, vol. 1, no. 10, p. 1.
85. 'Provolání VŠ studentů k vyročí 17. listopadu', *Studentské listy*, vol. 1, special issue (Autumn 1990), pp. 1–2. Emphasis added.
86. Bohuslav Fic, 'Ke druhému výročí 17. listopadu', *Studentské listy*, vol. 2, no. 23 (November 1991), p. 5; and Jan Kavan and Libor Konvička, 'Youth Movements and the Velvet Revolution', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1994), p. 168.
87. Jan Urban, 'Bezmocnost mocných', *Listy*, vol. 23, no. 5 (1993), p. 7.
88. Frye, *The Anatomy*, p. 223.
89. Ibid., p. 192.
90. Ibid., p. 37.
91. See *Fórum*, 12 December 1990, p. 3; and Měchýř, *Velký převrat*, p. 213.
92. Martin Bartůněk, 'Mládí vpřed!', *Studentské listy*, vol. 1, special issue (Autumn 1990), p. 2.
93. Pavla Grünthalová, 'Requiem za 17. listopad: Rozhovor s Pavlem Naumannem', *Ty rudá krávo*, no. 27 (1992), p. 5.
94. Urban, 'Bezmocnost', p. 3.
95. *Lidové noviny*, 15 November 2004, p. 12.
96. See Ilan Rachum, 'The Meaning of "Revolution" in the English Revolution (1648–1660)', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 56, no. 2 (1973), pp. 30–8.

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Afterword: East or West?

Tony Kemp-Welch

The editors may have hoped for a concluding taxonomy of revolution in Eastern Europe. But I cannot improve on their typology of national communism, intellectual dissent, armed rural resistance and popular protest. Moreover, the chapters that follow their introduction tell the stories for differing countries with too much skill and admirable archival scholarship for a neater overview. So, accepting the broad categorisation on which the book is based, I will take up the question underlying most contributions: What was the changing role of the Soviet Union? and add one of my own: Did Western policy have any real impact on it?

Stalin's policy towards post-war Eastern Europe was simple. He sought secure borders in the West, through which Russia had been invaded twice in a generation. The military imperative for a protective glacis between itself and a resurgent Germany was provided by the territories held under Red Army occupation from 1944. A second objective of Soviet policy in Eastern Europe was less forced. In Moscow's view, Germany had caused the war and should pay for it. Its zone of occupation should be used to speed Soviet economic recovery. Thus East Germany was stripped of industrial assets, which were transported and reassembled in the Urals. A similar attitude was taken to all new allies: Polish coal was compulsorily delivered to the Soviet Union at a tenth of the price paid by Denmark, and Czechoslovak uranium sent east at a fraction of world prices. It did not require great sophistication to understand such exploitation. Beneath the soothing parlance of 'People's Democracies', Eastern European states were being used as colonies by the Soviet Empire. I agree with Peter Grieder's description of the eventual retreat as 'decolonisation' and will argue later that it took place as part of a general rethink during the 1980s.

To the United States, the post-war goal was European economic recovery in the shortest possible period. Since this was impossible without Germany, the American approach entailed a readiness to forgive (or overlook) past culpabilities, and the speedy involvement of all 'rational' parties in a reconstruction programme. This process would require supervision, which meant putting the United States into the balance of power in Europe permanently, and backing it by the threat of nuclear war. At the same time, the USSR was excluded from any role in post-war Western Europe. By the early 1950s, however, the Soviet Union had achieved comparable nuclear status, changing the rules of the game.

The rhetoric of 'roll-back' was obsolete and dangerous once the Soviet Union had the capacity to retaliate. It was quietly dropped. A cultural Cold War continued with the loud – and to the Soviet Union inflammatory – broadcasts of Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, but finding wider political alternatives proved problematic. Scholars started to recognise that notions of security 'depend as much on a state of mind as on physical evidence, in any situation where there is no actual aggression'.[1] So far as they relate to the social and psychological imbalances that military deployment seeks to redress, this suggested a fresh look at Soviet intentions. Was the Soviet Union driven by 'Riga Axioms', a messianic drive for world mastery, or by 'Yalta Axioms', jockeying for position within a traditional Great Power system?[2]

The Stalinist pattern of development, strictly enforced from 1948, insisted that the allies must all follow the Soviet 'model'. This did bring some to the first stages of industrialisation. Yet there were rigidities: Hungary, devoid of iron ore and coal, had to have a steel mill (at Sztálinváros). Such absurdities did nothing to reduce anti-Soviet sentiments. Social protests in Eastern Europe were endemic after the demise of Stalin. Matthew Stibbe documents those in East Germany in 1953, and Johanna Granville those in Poland and Hungary in 1956. While government officials always sought to portray such outbursts as exceptional upsets to the status quo, the contrary can be suggested. As Jan Gross puts it, crises are the moments of normality when the false façade of 'unanimity' is torn off, exposing the contesting parties as they really are.[3] Even when not suppressed by force, they necessitated regular emergency supplies or credits from Moscow.

The Warsaw Pact, founded in 1955, did not necessarily pose a threat to countries not under its hegemony. This 'dovish' argument was given support by the Soviet Communist Party's Twentieth Congress in February 1956. Lenin's theory of imperialism was dropped. The final victory of communism, though still assured, would not now be reached as the successful outcome of a world war, since that would result only in mutual destruction. But where did this leave the 'great contest' between rival systems? Would this doctrinal revision usher in a long duration of peaceful competition, a contest that each side, assured of the superiority of its own system, expected to win? Or might the East revert to the military option? Under the guise of coexistence, the Soviet side might continue to arm for a final conflict. This possibility required the West to remain both patient and vigilant. It was a very long wait.

The delay was compounded by the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. NATO had accepted Moscow's reassurances that the invasion posed no threat to them. There was not even a general alert. US forces in Europe were pulled back some 200 kilometres. All those Dubček met in Washington much later praised his calmness in face of the invasion, and mentioned that any other response 'would have posed a danger, and a danger not only for you, but one that could have meant a catastrophe for all of Europe and ultimately, perhaps, for the whole world'.[4] Yet for home consumption, the Soviet Union had argued the opposite: that the invasion

was to forestall Western 'revanchism', even informing incredulous Czechs that West German divisions were massing on their borders. The lessons of US passivity were not lost on Johnson's successors. Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Adviser under President Jimmy Carter, was determined that weakness in the White House should not be repeated in the crisis over Solidarity.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia did not cause a major international crisis, and at no point was there any likelihood that war would result. And yet it was a major crisis in the development of European society. For the first time, the Soviet Union, 'in collusion with other powers, acted as a deliberate aggressor without even the pretence of legality behind it'.[5] Unlike Hungarians in 1956, Czechs and Slovaks had remained loyal to the Warsaw Pact. A joint document, signed in Bratislava on 4 August 1968, affirmed the sovereignty of Czechoslovakia and the inviolability of its borders. Since this had been torn up three weeks later, the question arose whether the Soviet government could be trusted in international relations again.

Brezhnev's speech to the Polish Party's Fifth Congress in Warsaw in November 1968 elaborated alibis for the invasion. Though acknowledging that it had been 'an extraordinary step, dictated by necessity', he offered no justification for the use of military power and no basis either in international law. Instead, he clothed the unprovoked attack – which the recipients had said in advance they would not resist with force – within the broadest ideological framework. There was an inevitable struggle between the forces of socialism and imperialism, Brezhnev taught, which had reached a new stage. Having been held at bay by the threat of nuclear retaliation – which Khrushchev had recognised in 1956 would mean mutual annihilation – imperialism was up to new tricks. Czechoslovak state sovereignty, while still intact, had to take second place to the 'sacred duty' of acting on behalf of the socialist solidarity of the 'socialist commonwealth'.[6]

This argument was self-defining. The Warsaw Pact would invade (itself) wherever socialism was in danger: but the defining of danger, and of socialism, was done in Moscow. In 1956 the Hungarians had experienced the collapse of their Communist Party and had left the Warsaw Pact. It is argued that their neutrality was only declared after reports showed that a second Soviet invasion was in hand: it was a failed attempt to avert such intervention.[7] The Czechs and Slovaks had done neither, yet the outcome was just the same. It was thus difficult to see what conclusions could be drawn from 1968 about the limits, or otherwise, of Soviet military and political behaviour. The 'Brezhnev Doctrine' seemed a carte blanche for interventionism.

One answer was to offset the 'Brezhnev Doctrine' by addressing the Soviet Union's wider security needs. The Soviet leadership sought recognition as a global superpower. It hoped for rapid expansion of East–West trade to remedy the growing lag of Soviet technology in many spheres, though not rocketry. This prospect raised a host of other issues. Could Moscow be trusted as a partner in any deal? If the Soviet Union did settle down as a global superpower with the United States' active assistance, where did this leave Europe? Was it to be a permanent victim of

bipolarity? Unexpectedly, there turned out to be more positive implications. While the Prague Spring had indicated the limits to internal change, it had also shown that the Eastern European societies were permeable. Despite realist international theory, they were not 'billiard balls', but consisted of real people, making genuine demands. How then could Western intentions and Eastern European aspirations be conjoined without giving the Soviet Union a pretext for further intervention?

The chosen instrument was détente. At the primary level, this meant arms control. In May 1971 Moscow agreed to Mutual Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) talks on the military side; in December 1971 NATO accepted that a European Security Conference should be convened. Although MBFR discussions soon became embroiled in political controversies – from which they were not extricated until the late 1980s – talks about a conference proceeded more smoothly. Nixon's first administration sought an 'era of negotiations' to replace the previous policy of confrontation towards the Soviet Union. This meant, first, recognising that the Soviet Union had vital security interests in Eastern Europe, which the United States had no intention of undermining. Second, the countries of Eastern Europe were seen 'as sovereign, not as parts of a monolith'. Hence no doctrine was acceptable that sought to abridge their rights to seek 'reciprocal improvement of relations with us or others'.[8]

While this was primarily directed towards the Soviet Union's most recalcitrant satellite, Romania, and the already polycentric Yugoslavia – the new President visited both – there were wider implications. Proponents of second-level détente – in Europe – now saw an opportunity to mitigate one of its most unacceptable consequences: permanent division of the continent. Their hopes included an eventual reunification of Germany and a gradual reorientation of Poland away from the Soviet sphere. Of course, Poland could not (as wits suggested) change places with Spain or Portugal; long-standing boundaries between the blocs were not going to change overnight; nor were more recently constructed walls going to come tumbling down. However, there could be a policy shift from the strident rhetoric of anti-Sovietism to a subtler approach, drawing the Soviet Union into more constructive international relations, above all the maintenance of peace in Europe's volatile and highly militarised arena.

The Soviet Union, meanwhile, had dropped its objection to the USA and Canada attending the long-heralded Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Its implicit agenda, of excluding and eventually dissolving NATO, disappeared. And there was also a new openness in economic relations with the capitalist world. Brezhnev told business leaders in Washington in June 1973, that 'we have been a prisoner of old trends and to this day have not been able fully to break those fetters'.[9] Now, he assured them, the Soviet Union sought a new era, based on stability and permanence. It was marked by the signing of a mutually advantageous grain deal, to compensate for fluctuating Soviet harvests and the failures of its agriculture. The super-powers declared that international relations were to move from 'from confrontation to negotiation'.[10]

This charm offensive, which offered rich pickings for the West, convinced many of the sceptics. Even if this were a temporary manoeuvre by the Soviets, a cunning ruse to be reversed later, it was worth a try. As Brezhnev put it, 'To live in peace, we must trust each other, we must know each other better'.[11] It was quite widely believed that mutual self-interest, through bilateral trade, credits and even shared technology, would eventually lead to a convergence of the two systems. Revival of the 'end of ideology' thesis gave renewed impetus to détente. Foreign Ministers engaged in extensive final discussions from 1973, leading to a signing ceremony in July 1975. At Helsinki, the high representatives of the thirty-five participating states adopted a new set of principles on security in Europe. They started with sovereignty.

Signatories would refrain from the threat or use of force, except where allowed under the Charter of the United Nations. They would respect each other's 'sovereign equality' – leaving this tautology unexplained – and territorial integrity. There would be confidence-building measures, such as prior notification of military manoeuvres 'exceeding a total of 25,000 troops', and efforts would be made 'to complement political détente in Europe' with disarmament. Signatories would also allow free scope for others to choose their own 'political, social, economic and cultural systems'. Second, there should be cooperation in the field of economics, science and technology, and the environment (oceanography and glaciology were mentioned); and tourism should be promoted in a positive spirit, including 'the formalities required for such travel' (i.e. the issuance of passports and exit visas). Finally, in Basket Three, there was to be cooperation in 'Humanitarian and Other Fields'. This provided for meetings between and reunifications of families; marriages between citizens of different states; travel for personal or professional reasons; and 'Meetings among Young People'.[12]

Helsinki provided an unexpected argument for the nascent Eastern European opposition. It enabled citizens to address their authorities on principles to which they had adhered voluntarily: 'We are merely asking you to keep your international agreements'. Helsinki Monitoring Groups were founded by independently minded citizens in Moscow, Kiev, Tbilisi, Erevan and Vilnius. The Moscow Helsinki Committee prepared 26 documents for the Belgrade Review Conference in 1977, and dispatched 138 reports to the Madrid Review Conference two years later. However, all such groups were much persecuted by the authorities.

These initiatives found a counterpart in Romania, as Dennis Deletant shows, but drew inspiration from Prague, where the Czech Chartist, Jiří Hájek, wrote of the 'international of human rights' which had emerged through conventions since 1945. In particular, the advancement of human rights by the Helsinki process offered 'a conception of a pluralistic society of sovereign European states, differing in size and strength, but equal in rights, and acting in accord with agreed rules of behaviour'. He called for pressure from below, located in peace movements, to give Helsinki momentum, lest it degenerate into a routine diplomatic exercise, endangered by a renewed Cold War and 'the growing influence of the military-industrial complexes'.[13]

The election of 1976 brought to the White House a President, Carter, who sought a moral dimension to foreign policy. Republicans distanced themselves from what they saw as Carter's overzealous and counterproductive espousal of human rights. Their criticism has been reiterated in subsequent historiography. Yet normative foreign policy had much external resonance at the time. In the USSR, dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov considered resolute and sustained pressure from the West necessary. It was the only way to make communist governments respect their Helsinki undertakings on human rights.

In the summer of 1980 Poland erupted for the third time in a decade, this time through peaceful mass strikes and demonstrations. In its first public statement on the Gdańsk events, the US State Department considered current difficulties ones for 'the Polish people and the Polish authorities' to work out by themselves. A clarifying comment added that past US statements on behalf of 'rebel workers' had been counterproductive. Nothing should be done to show a 'red flag – or a trigger – to the Soviets'.[14] On 25 August, National Security Adviser Brzezinski urged the President to underline American interests in these developments through letters to Western European leaders. Their purpose was to initiate an exchange of views on Poland, 'so that a common Western policy would emerge'. They might also express American concern about possible Soviet intervention, though not to Moscow directly. Brzezinski included the Pope in this purview. At a private meeting in June 1980, he had found 'a man of extraordinary vision and political intelligence. In a sense, I think it is fair to say that today he is the outstanding Western leader'.[15]

US policy towards Poland was evolving rapidly. As usual, Washington was speaking in several voices. There was an intention to 'calm the Poles down' in order to stabilise the internal situation. In particular, the policy was to deter false hopes that an armed uprising in Poland would receive Western military assistance (on the lines of that given to Afghanistan). The Poles were to be given support to strengthen their resistance to 'Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism' and to help emancipate the region from Soviet hegemony. In the latter view, the Polish crisis which began in 1980 proved to be the 'last major, protracted Cold War battle in Europe, involving competition between the two super-powers over the international orientation and domestic system of one of the major nations of Europe'.[16] A corollary of this Washington analysis was that the Western European states, 'perceiving the Polish events as destabilizing and hopeless', distanced themselves from attempts to influence Soviet policy, thereby weakening the American ability to do so.[17]

Behind closed doors in Washington, the predominant view in September 1980 was 'the likelihood, [as] most people saw it, of Soviet military intervention, sooner or later, to crush the Polish reform movement'.[18] East European and Soviet specialists were mindful of the 1956 and 1968 precedents. While Poland (which had not been invaded since the war) was regarded as a more complex military target, from which resistance could be anticipated, so also was its strategic position more vital for the Soviet Union. 'The widely-held view was that the USSR would not hesitate for long before stamping out a threat to Polish Communist rule and its own hegemonic position'.[19]

Brzezinski personally thought that Moscow would give the Polish leaders time to attempt an internal resolution of their political crisis. But he had already called for a CIA report on the likelihood of, and possible preparations for, a Soviet invasion. A year earlier, President Carter had been widely criticized for not making public the accumulating evidence of the Soviet military action in Afghanistan. It was not a mistake his administration wished to repeat. While the US military made its estimates, Brzezinski was trying to put together a package to deter a Soviet invasion. Diplomatic deterrents were considered to include strong pressure from Western Europe, with the French President and German Chancellor seen as the significant figures. In the event, reliance on Chancellor Schmidt proved unfounded. He told a meeting of the four-power (QUAD) conference (with Britain, France and the United States) that détente should not become the victim of such a Soviet intervention. Should it take place, German relations with the USSR and its allies would be unimpaired. It would be business as usual. A dismayed Brzezinski remarks: 'This is the best proof yet of the increasing Finlandisation of the Germans'.[20] There was also reliance on Soviet fears of a Chinese reaction, especially if it led to closer US–Chinese military collaboration, which would enhance Moscow's phobia of 'encirclement'.

A third deterrent was 'strong Polish resistance to any invasion'. There was a CIA consensus that the Poles would fight, though it was not clear how organised such resistance would be. Tacit encouragement of Polish resistance might seem a risky strategy, leading to a war in central Europe, but the dangers of passivity were considered to be greater. The example of 1968 was considered minatory. The Johnson Administration had treated the potential Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia as more or less a domestic affair. The effectiveness, or otherwise, of his subsequent rebuke to Moscow was to be reviewed, 'to see if it had any applicability to the current crisis'.[21]

However, by the early 1980s, a body of expert Soviet opinion began to think of ways to end the new Cold War. Domestically, they took the view that economic reform, though imperative, was not possible without a more far-reaching programme, known for short as *perestroika*. That, in turn, required a new form of international relations. Iurii Andropov, Brezhnev's successor, encouraged his East European analysts to speak off the record at weekly briefings. The intention was to promote blue-skies thinking unencumbered by written protocols which might later be held against them. Unfortunately, the position papers which they brought to the meetings remain deeply hidden in KGB archives.

Leonid Abalkin, head of the Institute of Economics in Moscow, assailed the 'mental inertia' which had sabotaged earlier reforms. Reform was risky and could 'change human conduct in an unpredictable way'. Hence 'people in the corridors of power started to lose their customary duties, while retaining their administrative mentality, [and] developed a phobia of becoming unwanted'.[22] The party rank-and-file

endorsed these fears. Under the unreformed system they were protected by helping hands from above; radical change would be a voyage into the unknown. It would bring greater rights, but also greater responsibilities. The impact on Gorbachev of such sophisticated thinking resulted in the impact of Gorbachev on Eastern Europe.

Rational Soviet analysis suggested that the three main reasons for being in Eastern Europe had turned into their opposites. A sought-for security zone was chronically unstable. The areas of economic exploitation had become the reverse. It became apparent, especially after the Western energy crisis from 1973, that this was empire of a novel sort: the centre was subsidising the periphery. Finally, instead of endorsing and following the 'Soviet model', most East European states were incurably revisionist. The first split with Tito, ably analysed by Leonid Gibianskii, was followed by the Soviet-Yugoslav rapprochement after Stalin's death. National communism seemed thereby to be sanctioned.

Gorbachev buried the Brezhnev Doctrine at the autumn 1987 session of the UN General Assembly. Soviet troops were brought home from Afghanistan, a process completed by February 1989. The concomitant message to East European communist leaders was clear: make what compromises with your local populations that you need to stay in power; there will be no ultimate sanction of force to sustain your rule. It is an irony of history that the Eastern European leaders, even the few who were relatively young (with the possible exception of General Jaruzelski in Poland), missed the message. Given the golden opportunity to present themselves as national leaders, differentiated and freed from Moscow, they missed out and disappeared altogether. Their hesitation may have been through lack of imagination. It was also the product of experience: Gorbachev was a reformist leader, promising to underwrite dramatic changes. But would he last? If he did not, his Eastern European adherents would look vulnerable and probably be disposed of by Gorbachev's more orthodox successors.

We did not blow the planet up during the Cold War, though we came close, but neither did we live at peace. Cold War peculiarities were anticipated by Hobbes: 'as the nature of Foule weather lyeth not in a showre or two of rain; but in the inclination thereto of many dayes together: So that the nature of War, consisteth not in actuall fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is PEACE'.[23]

Notes

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