Ghosts From The Past

The pace of change in Hungary and Poland recently has been staggering. Hungary’s communists now look to Sweden rather than Moscow for their inspiration. But Mike Ticher sounds a note of caution. The transition to multi-party democracy may not be as smooth as it appears.

The extraordinary events in Poland and Hungary in the last twelve months have raised widespread hopes that a fundamental transformation in the politics of Eastern Europe is at hand. With the installation of a non-communist prime minister in Poland in August, and free elections in Hungary scheduled for December, such hopes have been raised to expectations. But expectations of what, exactly?

Commentators have proclaimed the end of communist hegemony in what, for over forty years, have been mere satellite states of the Soviet Union. However, they have so far been understandably reluctant to speculate on the nature of the societies and political systems which might replace the current regimes in the next few decades. The vague assumption seems to be that the Western and Central European countries, starting with Hungary and Poland, with East Germany or Czechoslovakia possibly next, will gradually (or even suddenly) transform themselves into amenable, unthreatening, Western-style, market-oriented liberal democracies.

There has already been speculation (including by the Hungarians) over the possibility of Hungary applying to join the European Community in the not-too-distant future. Timothy Garton Ash, for example, writing in the first issue of the Independent Monthly claimed that: “What we have in those two countries (ie, Poland and Hungary) is nothing less than the attempt to transform communist systems back into some version of Western European liberal democracies, with market economies, constitutional government, the rule of law, and the pluralism of a developed civil society”. The crucial word here is ‘back’. It signals an unspoken but powerful revision of the history of Eastern Europe - namely, that before the communist takeover after World War Two, these countries were very much like their Western counterparts in political culture and tradition, and that their ‘liberation’ by the Soviet Union in 1945 imposed totalitarian rule on previously flourishing democracies.

Such an assumption, which informs much Western comment on the dramas now unfolding throughout the communist world, is simply nonsense. It is born of an arrogance which assumes that Western political and economic systems are the ideal for every country in the world, which all would choose if they were not prevented from doing so by communist or other authoritarian regimes. Its corollary is the acceptance (particularly in American foreign policy) of any ideology which proclaims itself to be ‘anti-communist’, no matter what excesses it might commit against human rights or democracy. This attitude ignores the historical reality which is that, for most of the countries in question, Soviet domination has been not an interruption, but a continuation of centuries of authoritarian and profoundly undemocratic rule.

The only exception to this rule is Czechoslovakia which was, indeed, a liberal democracy between the wars and again until 1948 (when the communists won 40% of the vote in the last free elections). Its relative economic well-
After World War One, Poland was at last free of the three great powers which had carved it up between them for the last hundred years and more. The collapse of the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian empires, and the fall of the Tsar in Russia, allowed the Poles to rule themselves again. Until 1926, it staggered along under a chaotic democracy of sorts, although the dominant figure of Marshal Josef Pilsudski largely succeeded in imposing his will on parliament. The inter-war years were characterised by extremist movements of both left and right, and particularly by increasing waves of anti-semitism and intolerance of the many minorities, Ukrainians in particular, which were then within Poland’s borders.

Pilsudski’s virtual coup in 1926 and the depression of the early 1930s heralded more and more repressive measures, including censorship, purges and rigged elections (half the electorate refused to vote in 1935 in protest). Poland even had its own concentration camp, used for both left and rightwing opponents of the regime, and for Ukrainian nationalists. Parliament was rendered virtually impotent by the 1935 constitution which installed a presidency with almost dictatorial powers.

Following Pilsudski’s death in 1935, racialism and intolerance were rampant, both among supporters of the regime and openly fascist groups opposed to it. In 1938, when Hitler occupied the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia, the Polish reaction was not to throw its hands up in horror at such an outrage, but to seize a small piece of ‘Polish’ territory in Czechoslovakia for itself, hardly the behaviour of a model liberal state afforded by the bullying ways of dictatorship.

Hungary, too, collaborated with Nazi Germany to redress its own grievances over territory ceded to its neighbours after World War One. Throughout the inter-war period, a succession of governments under the regent, Admiral Horthy, enacted steadily more authoritarian measures. The first stable government after 1918, with Bethlen as prime minister, repealed the secret ballot for rural areas, and the universal franchise. The new 1922 franchise allowed him to remain in power throughout the 1920s.

As in Poland, anti-semitism simmered for two decades, and boiled over under the prime ministership of the fanatical racist, Gyula Gombos, of the Right Radical Party in the 1930s, despite the more ‘traditional’ and relatively moderate conservative leanings of Horthy himself. By 1939, laws had been introduced limiting Jewish participation in certain occupations to 6%, Imredy, the near fascist prime minister who enacted the policy, was himself forced to resign in 1930 after being accused of having Jewish ancestry.

In the elections of 1939, the fascist Arrow Cross was the second largest party (in a genuine secret ballot). Although Horthy succeeded in protecting the Jewish population in the earlier years of the war, by 1944 the desperation of the Nazi regime impelled them to exert more direct control over their Hungarian ‘allies’. Horthy appointed a collaborationist government under General Szotay, as a result of which hundreds of thousands of Jews and others were deported to the death-camps, and the anti-Nazi parties still in existence were obliterated.

It is against this background that talk of a ‘return’ to democracy in Eastern Europe should be seen. "Constitutional government, the rule of law and the pluralism of a developed civil society" have yet to be established today, in the sense that we understand them, in either Poland or Hungary, though Hungary is very rapidly heading that way. This is even less so in stubbornly dictatorial Bulgaria or Romania. Having said that, it is all too easy to draw simplistic ‘lessons’ even from an accurate reading of history. The fact that Poland and Hungary sustained profoundly undemocratic and authoritarian regimes fifty years ago is, in itself, no reason to suppose that they will do so again if and when communist rule is thrown off. No country in Europe was free from the pressures of economic catastrophe, instability and extremist agitation in the pre-war years and, of course, several which succumbed to totalitarianism, such as Italy, Spain and (West) Germany are now pillars of Western European liberal democracy. In addition, the international pressures on Eastern Europe, particularly from the Soviet Union and unreformed East Germany and Czechoslovakia are certain to remain immense for the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, it would be an even worse mistake to disregard history altogether, or to distort it for contemporary motives. The fact is that Poland and Hungary are not fallen democratic angels whose future political structures will develop along predictable or, necessarily, desirable lines. The West, obsessed as always with ‘anti-communism’, has so far failed to probe too closely the possible ideological directions which the current opposition parties might take in the future. The fact that they may soon be exercising a considerable degree of power makes this a particularly foolish position.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that dictatorial rightwing governments are about to seize power. The point is to identify the historical and cultural forces which will come into play if and when communist rule is indefinitely relaxed, and which may shape at least some of the ideology of future non-communist governments.

There would seem to be few grounds for concern in Hungary at present. The Hungarians have inaugurated western-style democracy by proclaiming an independent republic on the 33rd anniversary of the 1956 uprising. It will be an “independent, democratic and legal state in which the values of bourgeois democracy and democratic socialism are expressed equally”. Hungary, of course, has not presided over the same scale of economic shambles and political repression that the Poles have suffered, nor was its opposition so firmly linked with the Catholic Church and its reactionary political stance in most parts of the world.

Nevertheless, among the many political groups recently established has been the reconstituted Smallholders Party, a relic from pre-war days which played a large part in the authoritarian rule of the 1920s. Then there is the dispute over the fate of ethnic Hungarians in Romania. Although, in this instance, the barbaric policy of Ceaucescu’s gangsters is clearly to blame, a powerful resurgence
of Hungarian nationalism over any issue could have disturbing implications for both its internal and external affairs.

Nationalism is the genie which the break-up of the Soviet empire will release from the bottle. Although it would be foolish to push the analogy too far, the present situation in Eastern Europe does have certain parallels with that of 1918 in this respect. Then, the disintegration of powerful blocs released the pent-up and utterly unpredictable forces of smaller nations at a time of economic disaster and enormous political uncertainty. Although the process this time may be more gradual, and worldwide economic interdependence is much greater, the same potential for totally unforeseen consequences is there. Nowhere is this more true than in Poland.

The forces which will shape the new governments of Poland are many, and their potency after forty years of repression is, as yet, incalculable. What, for example, are the implications of Solidarity’s umbilical links with the Catholic Church - the same church which was the mainstay of the anti-semitic National Democrat Party in the 1920s and 1930s? As Solidarity is forced to come to terms with the realities of political power, it will be fascinating to untangle its ideological roots.

The conservatism of the church and the inevitable reaction to so many years of communist rule will be factors pushing the party to the right. It remains to be seen whether the militancy of the union in its urban strongholds will be an effective counter-balance on the left; or, indeed, whether Solidarity will survive as a single entity at all.

For the moment, the important fact to grasp is the nature of Poland’s enduring political culture. Anti-semitism is alive and well, as the comments of a former Polish journalist in the Sydney Morning Herald recently made clear: “any doubts I may have had about the persistence of anti-semitism in Poland were dispelled by the insulting responses to my reports (on demonstrations at Auschwitz) from more than 100 readers”. Although the present-day Jewish population of Poland is minimal, this underlying current should at least make us wary of the potential nature of Polish nationalism. And this nationalism, as with the inter-war governments, is the force which still binds together the opposition in Poland.

Perhaps the direct historical warning to the West about the future of Poland is its utter impotence at all the crucial moments in Polish history to influence events there. Hitler’s invasion, the communist takeover in 1945, martial law in the 1980s, all have been played out with the Western democracies as, to all intents and purposes, mere onlookers.

Even in the nineteenth century, Poles were aware of the failure of Britain and France to come to their aid. As Neal Ascherson noted, “At the Western end were liberal nations who sympathised with the Polish struggle, but provided only Notes, tears and charity for Polish refugees”.

External events (the rise of Gorbachev, Western economic sanctions) have again helped to unleash forces for change in Polish politics.

But if the West believes that it can impose its will on them, or that Poles will meekly follow a pre-ordained path to liberal democracy, then it will be failing utterly to learn the lessons of history. For a country so obsessed by its past, that would be unforgiveable.

MICHAEL TICHER is a freelance journalist based in Sydney.