

Uneasy **TRIUMPH**

The collapse and integration of the old East Germany into a greater Germany is now history. Yet still, amid the triumph of the West German dream there is a sense of unease. And now the 'Ostis' are discovering the harsh realities of their choice. John Milfull reflects on an extraordinary and disturbing 18 months.

History repeats itself as farce: Marx's old intuition may well prove the best key to the understanding of the last eighteen months in Eastern Europe. In hindsight, it has become obvious that the Gorbachev faction not only tolerated but forced the pace of change in the governments of its Warsaw Pact allies—less, perhaps, from philosophical conviction than from the strategic calculation that the successful achievement of reforms in the rest of the "socialist empire" would present the hard-liners in the Soviet Union with a *fait accompli* from which they could not resist.

The climax and turning point of this tragic farce was the extraordinary administrative bungle, back in December 1989, in which, with one news release, Egon Krenz and Günter Schabowski, the Laurel and Hardy of a reeling GDR leadership, blew themselves up along with the Berlin Wall and destroyed the possibility of a transition to democratic socialism in East Germany and Eastern Europe for the foreseeable future. The likely end of the farce: the fragmentation of the Soviet Empire into a number of crypto-fascist, warring states, the total economic and political dominance of the Homogenised Republic of Germany, and the shrinking of the heartland of the Russian Revolution to the borders of 1919.

I suspect it was no coincidence that in the last days of Nikita Khrushchev rumours were rife of an approaching accom-

modation with the Federal Republic of Germany; the "German question", with varying signs, has dominated the entire history of the Soviet Union. One can only agree with Trotsky that a socialist revolution in Germany after the Great War would have had a profound impact on the course of the Soviet revolution and that the defensive isolation which was the breeding ground of stalinism would, of necessity, have been replaced by a broader international perspective, for good or ill. What is clear to me is that the collapse of the GDR and of any *cordon sanitaire* between the ailing planned economies of Eastern Europe and the rapacious market economies of the West signalled the end, before it had even begun, of the realisation of Gorbachev's vision of "democratic socialism" and a common European home. It was not the passing into history of the Warsaw Pact as a military alliance, but the removal of a leading player, the destruction of Comecon and the internal market between these countries which made fragmentation and total dependence on the West inevitable. Those commentators, across the political spectrum, who argued before 1989 for stability in Europe as the prerequisite for democratisation and reform, have not been proved wrong; they will, I think, be increasingly vindicated by a process which, in the name of democratisation, liberates some of the less attractive ghosts of the Eastern European past and turns the Warsaw Pact countries, to borrow George Markus' depressing phrase, (in *ALR*, May 1990) into the Latin America of the EEC.

Precisely for these reasons, it is important to understand what happened in the GDR, in the course of this "licensed revolution", sanctioned and encouraged by the imperial power in Moscow. There is little doubt that, without this sanction, the undoubted courage of those tens of thousands of East Germans who took to the streets to demonstrate for democratic reform would have found difficulty in manifesting itself—a further farcical element which would have given Marx grim pleasure. The power which, at crucial stages in the East German development, had implacably blocked even the most timorous attempts at reform, was now their advocate. Just as, after 1945, the movement for an independent path to socialism had rapidly been forced to accept the "superior wisdom and experience" of the Soviet exporters of revolution, the reformers of 1989 were compromised in advance by their dependence on the tolerance of the Big Brother against whose exported socialism they were protesting. One of the most distressing elements of the last years has been the unwillingness of the Soviet leaders to admit their own responsibility for the developments in Eastern European countries, and their willingness to blame their client states for not introducing reforms which they not only actively hindered, but opposed, at home. In the process, they have destroyed the last remnant of credibility of thousands of committed socialists who clung to the hope that they would one day be released from the constant interference and domination of their "Soviet brothers".

Was there a "revolution" in the GDR? If so, was it a "success" or a "failure"? What were its aims and origins? In retrospect, again, it is clear that two vastly different groups were involved, both exploiting the "winds of change" from Moscow, but in very different ways and for quite different

ends. The "democratic reformers" who took to the streets were motivated, above all, by the desire to reform the existing GDR, to create an independent, democratic socialist state which might enter, at a later date, into a federative arrangement with West Germany, but whose primary role would be to act as a catalyst for the development of a "third way" in Eastern Europe, a course between market capitalism and post-stalinism. Their primary and overriding aim was the establishment of civil rights, the restitution of the individual freedoms for which the first bourgeois revolutions had fought, and which had been withdrawn or ignored by "feudal socialism".

As far as one can tell, their membership, too, was entirely typical of such "democratic protest" movements, ranging from representatives of an alternative youth culture to concerned older citizens committed to democratic reform. Centred around the meeting places provided by a Lutheran Church shaped by its own need to atone for the collaborations of the Third Reich, they developed a clearly articulated program of non-violent reform which shared many features with the undogmatic socialist and ecological movements in the West. Although I do not wish to broach the question here as to the extent to which class divisions persisted in the GDR, it seems utterly appropriate to describe this movement qualitatively as a "bourgeois intellectual" protest movement. Whether it can be described as "revolutionary" is another matter entirely; the overwhelming consensus that only non-violent strategies were appropriate to the situation in the GDR and the rejection of all chauvinist and aggressive tendencies certainly mark it off distinctly from other protest movements in Eastern Europe. If it was a "revolutionary" movement, one must say, with considerable sorrow, that it was an unambiguous failure; at the crucial moment, its aims, strategies and visions were pushed aside by developments over which it had no control. I will always remember the wry grin with which a student at the East Berlin theological seminary, who was trying to help me find someone from the New Forum movement for Bruce Petty to interview in December 1990, said sadly: "It won't be easy. Last year we demonstrated, this year we are studying. We have no choice."

At their demonstrations, the protesters constantly appealed to the other group, those who had already deserted to the West through the emerging cracks in the socialist alliance. "Come back", they cried, "help us build a democratic GDR together. Without you we will have no chance." The appeal was addressed, of course, not only to those who had already left, but to those who were planning to leave. Until the collapse of the Wall, this was a relatively defined group with weak social ties, largely un- or anti-political, whose motivation was primarily frustration with the economic stagnation and the greyness of everyday life in the GDR, contrasted with the images of Western affluence with which they were constantly bombarded. They were little interested in socialism, or even democracy, but in the prospect of a better life in terms very similar to those in which the average citizen of Australia or New Zealand would define it. They were the vanguard of the silent majority which began to speak with one voice only after the collapse of the Wall and the realisation that it was no



The breach that started a flood.

longer necessary to make the radical break with homes, friends and possessions the first refugees had taken on themselves. Unimaginably, the mountain--or should I say paradise with its houris--could and would come to Mohammed.

The silent majority and its vanguard were "bourgeois" in a different sense: they wanted, above all, the restoration of the right to individual affluence, to the good life, release from the constant restrictions and inefficiencies of GDR life, and access to the magic of Western consumer goods. Perhaps here I can counterpoint my images of thousands of East Germans thronging the streets of West Berlin in search of video recorders and stereos with a note from the

archives of the dreaded state security service I found in Halle, and which seems to me to sum up, in its inimitable style, the drab resignation life held for these people before 1989:

[Comrade Otto Jacob] wished to inform me that he had been elected chair of the Trade Union Committee of the State and University Library despite 23 votes against him from the bookstacks. These seem to have resulted from an argument with A Hochheim from the Loans section, who took the fact that the lift was out of service (for nine months) as an occasion for politically negative comments in the 35th year since the foundation of the GDR. She doubts that things are improving in the GDR.

The juxtaposition of A Hochheim's fury at a broken-down lift with the pompous party phrase "in the 35th year since the foundation of the GDR" is the farcical expression of the abyss between party rhetoric and the reality of everyday life to which Erich Honecker had fallen victim after a very disturbed 40th birthday party for the GDR, soon to be followed by his entire regime.

Sadly, it was not fear of the democratic protest movement which forced Krenz and Schabowski to open the Wall, but fear of the massive defection of the silent majority or its alliance with the democrats in street protests which would rapidly leave the earlier self-imposed limits behind. The GDR leadership could no longer afford the wave of defections to the West, economically or politically; it had left any move to liberalisation far too late, and was discredited both at home and abroad. After the opening of the Wall, in the form that it took, the democratic protest movement was doomed, their rallies broken up and dominated by the new voices of those who wanted the West to come to them as soon as possible. The process was irreversible, and the ignominious failure of the communists to come to terms with the situation discredited not only the ruling party, but any group which included even a passing reference to socialism in its platform. The debacle of the elections proved that the vast majority of the GDR population was simply not interested in political issues; all they wanted was incorporation in Western consumer society, and they cared little under what banner, and with which slogans, it was achieved. Kohl and Genscher needed no further program than this. How, when and if it will be achieved is another matter entirely.

A startled West German leadership began to realise in 1989 that the fossilised demands for reunification, which remained enshrined in the Republic's Basic Law, but which had long ceased to be a focus for its real concerns, were likely to be translated into reality. It became clear that some rapid rethinking was necessary. Many of the Kohl government's reactions were simply dictated by political pragmatism: it was evident from the beginning that any talk of German reunification would need to be embedded in the rhetoric of European union, given new impetus by Gorbachev's vision of a wider Europe, if it were not to unsettle and alienate both West Germany's EEC allies and her Eastern European neighbours. Kohl pursued this line without much subtlety, occasionally stumbling over sensitivities of which he seemed unaware, but with extraordinary perseverance and eventual success.

It is interesting and, I think, important to speculate both on the reasons for this single-minded pursuit of a goal which, from the beginning, had been something of a national fig-leaf for the Christian Democrats, whose West German regionalism and unambiguous loyalty to Western Europe was never really in doubt, and for its acceptance by West Germany's allies and neighbours. Again, I think it is fair to say that these reasons are fundamentally economic and politically pragmatic, rather than being rooted in any deeply felt commitment to a German nation, however defined. There is little doubt that it rapidly became clear to Kohl that unification offered him a quite unexpected chance of reversing the ailing political fortunes of his party

and retaining government. He was not slow to take advantage of this opportunity. In the longer term, the creation of a massive new arena for the export of West German products and expertise, for all the short-term disadvantages and "start-up costs", was an offer too good to refuse for a government increasingly concerned about the stability of the world market and heavily dependent on its export performance to underwrite prosperity at home. East Germany was the key to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

This insight quickly communicated itself to the Federal Republic's EEC allies and its Eastern European neighbours. The initial political reservations of France and England were soon replaced by the realisation that they could not afford to stand aside from this "sale of the century" if they wished to share in its profits and prevent Germany "going it alone", with the consequent even greater dominance in Europe and the EEC that would bring. With even greater pragmatism, the Warsaw Pact states, with far deeper scars from a different German past, rapidly arrived at the conviction that the destruction of the internal market left them no alternative but to seek the assistance of the EEC—spearheaded and co-ordinated by the West German economic machine—to rebuild their collapsed economies. There have been a number of bitter diplomatic pills to swallow, but it has to be said that Genscher, and even Kohl, have shown an increasing ability to demonstrate the graciousness of the victor, even matching Vaclav Havel's apology for the mistreatment of Czech Germans after the war with the acknowledgment that there were some reasons for this which led outside Czechoslovakia.

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Nearly everyone has commented on the "national reticence" with which this extraordinary project has been carried out. Even the East German crowds' slogan Deutschland einig Vaterland (Germany—united fatherland) was characterised less by passion than impatience: What do we want? Affluence! When do we want it? Now! I have pointed out that there were obvious pragmatic reasons why the West German government needed to play down any component of nationalistic fervour and cover it with a sugar-coating of Europeanism. Nevertheless, it is demonstrable that there was, in fact, very little nationalistic content, at least of a traditional kind, in the pill to be coated. It is surely significant that the ceremony in Berlin to mark unification was so unsure of its symbolism and purpose that it might easily have been mistaken for a church synod or an attempt to demonstrate the success of equal employ-

ment opportunity policies, had it not been for that quite extraordinary scowl on the Chancellor's face when an unbidden guest threatened to disturb the pre-ordained mix of calm, culture and boredom. The only real slogan that could be read out of the proceedings was business as usual; good business, and morally responsible business, it goes without saying.

Why then did I feel so acutely uncomfortable and sceptical in Oxford last year when a British colleague, projecting a not dissimilar middle-class self-satisfaction, tried to convince us that West German nationalism was a *quantité négligeable*, that German nationalism had died with the passing of the Third Reich? I suppose he merely provoked the same scepticism I would bring to the proposition that the collapse of the empires after World War II brought with it the end of imperialism and the liberation of the colonised. It is a commonplace to observe that, just as one of the major reasons for the abolition of slavery was the increasing conviction that it was bad business, the exploitation of the previous colonies has progressed with far greater efficiency and an infinitely improved image since they ceased to be colonies in name. The latecomers to empire, Germany and Japan, have achieved through trade and finance a dominance which makes their earlier attempts to enter the club by military means appear coarse, misguided and thoroughly outmoded.

West German national pride is well aware of the taboos of history, and has from the beginning sought new forms to express itself. Some of these have a clear fig-leaf function: the claim, for instance, to be the best "Europeans" and the only really "modern" European state, which has freed itself of traditional baggage, asserts a position of leadership in an ingenious and sanitised way. But no one who has accompanied the West Germans through their post-war saga as long as I have will doubt that the major displacement of this national pride has been into the economic sphere, anticipating the lessons of the world's greatest treasurer before he even thought of them. Reconstruction and prosperity became (as they had once before, after the failure of 1848) the cherished national aims; as Peter Weiss formulated them in 1964, through the perspective of the Napoleonic restoration, "the right to enrich oneself in a process of happy mutual exploitation—every man his own Croesus". The political downside of this rather Darwinian ethic is heavily masked following Bismarck's insights from the Second Reich, by exemplary social welfare legislation which maintains the market and the social order. But there is no doubt anyone who criticises the shared myth of prosperity and social justice will provoke a response of panic, hysterical overreaction and intense aggression.

What impact will the homogenisation of Germany—I prefer the term to unification, which suggests some kind of growing together—have on this defensive, displaced, but nevertheless strong sense of national pride? It should first be pointed out that it is in many ways a specifically West German national pride, and will not easily extend itself to the brothers and sisters from the East who will be told by the owners of four bedroom villas and multiple Mercedes that they must learn to work as "we" do, if they want to share in the benefits of the German dream. After all the

rhetoric about the liberation of the enslaved peoples of the East, there is remarkably little sympathy for the conditions under which they had to live and work, or willingness to help: they must be put through the cold shower of the market, must somehow repeat a West German post-war experience beyond the recall of most of those who advocate it, before they can be admitted on equal terms. It seems to have been conveniently forgotten that Eastern Europe shared a far worse post-war experience than West Germany, and that the same West Germans who condemn the inefficient work practices and laziness of their brothers and sisters in the East were the first to condemn a system which produced these attitudes. The moral rigour with which

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perhaps the least revolutionary nation in the world seems to require of its new fellow-citizens that they should have taken the path of active resistance when it was most dangerous to do so, is nothing short of astonishing.

And the Easterners, the "Ossis", to whom I feel such a strong bond? They are learning to understand economics. I went to a shoestring cabaret in Halle with my friends; one of the sketches summed it up nicely. "We have the right to do anything we like, to buy anything we like, but no money to do it with." I was reminded of one of the ironic slogans of post-war years: "Now we're democrats, now we can starve!" I suppose that, after a sufficient period of chastening, the Ossis will be admitted to the groaning table of West German affluence, but they will be made to feel their place for some years to come. The question that no-one can answer: will the inevitable breaking of Chancellor Kohl's promise that "no-one will be worse off", that homogenisation will cost no-one anything, revive that other shy, contorted and complex growth, East German national pride? How long will an unemployed and unequal population continue to accept that their efforts of 40 years were worthless, useless and somehow morally wrong? I suspect that there is a small bone hidden somewhere in the homogenised steak on which someone, before too long, will break a tooth or two. Forgive me for expressing such an unworthy doubt about the total and utter triumph of German know-how. As a friend in Munich said when I visited her last year: "If we pull this off, you'll really have to respect us." I had trouble with both the "we" and the "you", which are indefinite plurals of a kind of which I am deeply suspicious.

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