East Germany has emerged as the focal point of the upheavals which have altered the face of Europe in the last few weeks. Here are all the dilemmas facing Eastern Europe at present. Will the communists really give up power? Are there stable alternative governments? Can anyone win public support to drastically reform economies while causing economic pain? Pierre Vicary was recently in East Berlin. There he spoke to opposition Neues Forum spokesperson Mike Hamburger, and disillusioned communist Werner Goldstein.

A Sense of Anger

Mike Hamburger is a dramaturg (literary adviser) at East Germany’s chief theatre, the Deutsches Theatre, in East Berlin. He is a senior spokesperson for the major opposition group Neues Forum.

When I talk to the Communists they say that the changes which are taking place in the GDR at present are a consequence of Mr Gorbachev and because the rank and file of the party insisted upon them. When I talk to church people they say that the umbrella organisations they were allowed to form in the stalinist period are what have made these changes possible. Who’s telling the truth?

I don’t think there’s a contradiction. Opposition movements for many years have had to use the church as a cover because there was no possibility of meeting or bringing out publications outside the church. Only since Gorbachev’s reforms and the changes in the rest of Eastern Europe have these people been able to come out of the church and resume their activities in the public sphere.

What was it the churches were able to provide on a day-to-day basis?

Firstly, they were able to provide places for people to meet, either in churches or on church property. Normally, people were not allowed to assemble in private rooms to discuss things. An assembly of more than ten people had
to give notice to the police. Technically, of course, this applied even to weddings and birthday parties. The police could use this law against any political discussions, to disturb them, arrest people and discriminate against them. But church premises were off-limits to this sort of harassment, by a kind of understanding between the churches and the state. The fact that the church offered this freedom of assembly was of great importance.

The churches were also able to have documents published - that is to say, copied on xerox machines and distributed. Outside the church, all publications had to have a licence from a state institution and, of course, no opposition group would ever get such a licence. But the church is allowed to bring out samizdat publications, on the first page of which is written 'only for use within the church'. And this was made use of by opposition groups, even those who were not really church people or even Christians, but who had no other possibility of making their views known. The churches have allowed these people to work within the church framework - though not always very willingly, I must say, because it changed the relations between the church and the state. There was a certain amount of conflict between the grassroots in the church and the bishops and top church officials.

You use the word 'churches' in a general sense. Was there a difference between Protestants and Catholics?

It was almost all Protestant. The Catholic church, as far as I know, has not offered facilities to opposition groups.

Was the church just an instrument through which these activities could take place, or were the priests and pastors at the grassroots level actually involved in politics?

I think both factors were involved. Some vicars and church people themselves were active in the opposition, and are now well-known figures and speakers for the opposition movements. And there were people who were not church people at all, who were atheists or even marxists. They were perhaps not overjoyed to have to make use of the facilities of the church because they had no religious impetus, but they had no alternative.

When the opposition used those facilities, did you take any of the religiosity away with you? Was there a Christian component to what later happened?

Yes. When these movements went out of the church, of course the church people remained in the movements. So all these opposition groups do have a considerable sector of church people in their founding groups and among their members - although the membership by and large is not Christian, as is true of our population generally.

Is that also the case in Neues Forum?

Yes, we have people who came out of the churches. In our founding group we have some Catholics and some Lutherans, but the philosophy of Neues Forum is not a Christian one. It is a philosophy of humanism, liberalism, tolerance and reason. It has some of the liberal ethics of the Enlightenment. And some of those moral attitudes are connected in certain ways with the moral teachings of the church. But there is no direct religious impetus in Neues Forum any more.

What are those moral points of contact?

Things like a feeling for human dignity, for the values of human life, questions of what we live for, values like helping your neighbour, a sense of responsibility for yourself and also for society as a whole. In short, the whole catalogue of humanist values.

Can we widen the discussion a bit and talk about the roundtable talks between the opposition and the government which began in early December. What are the opposition groups hoping to achieve from them? Are you now entrenching the gains you’ve made on the streets?

That’s difficult to say, because the roundtable discussions originated from the current crisis situation. The talks have been dictated largely by the immediate needs of the country: the need to calm the people down, to restrain them from violence. In the longer view the roundtable talks are a means for the opposition groups to watch over the government and prevent abuses of power taking place in future.

You talk about violence. How much of a problem is it, and how angry are the people of East Germany? Is the motivation for their anger the ongoing corruption revelations?
The people are very angry. They realise they have been working hard for forty years, and they have been deprived of the fruits of their work. They have been cheated, and they've been lied to. They have taken shortages and economic difficulties, and, compared with West Germany, a relative degree of poverty upon themselves in the belief and the hope that this is an aid to socialism, that they are building up a new society which will be an alternative to capitalist society. They realise now that they have been absolutely cheated.

Their anger grew with the various revelations of corruption and extravagance. People heard that files were being destroyed in the military and security forces, and in industry - files which would have been evidence of more corruption, and of how the security police had been watching over the people. In order to stop the destruction of those records, people wanted to storm those institutions. Mostly, this urge has been restrained by the opposition groups. But the people are quite right. Their rage was perfectly understandable. I don't know if a people has ever been deceived to such an extent. They've become more and more aware of the huge riches which have been amassed by a very few people at the top of the government and the party.

For instance, hard currency has always been in short supply here. We haven't been able to buy much medical equipment and medicines, and electronic equipment which we badly needed. Theatres, to take an example from my own field, haven't been able to play as many Western authors as we would have liked - not so much my theatre, but certainly the smaller theatres - because we couldn't get the hard currency. And now we find out that our top officials have been tossing hard currency away on personal aeroplanes, huge houses and castles, and also, it seems, large Swiss bank accounts. People are understandably enraged about that.

But did people really not know? Surely Wandlitz, the party's massive estate outside Berlin, was an open secret?

People realised that there was a certain degree of luxury, but they assumed this was only within certain limits. They had no idea of the dimensions of the corruption.

Can we talk a bit about the long-term desires of the German people? It seems patently clear to me that in the GDR, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, you've got to move quickly towards a market economy, that a centrally planned economy doesn't work. But it also seems to me that you don't want to take over all of the aspects of capitalism. You want somehow to fuse the market economy with some of the better aspects of the societies you've been trying to build. Is that the case? Can you define it more precisely than that?

I'm sure that's the case, but it's very difficult to be precise, because it means practically inventing a new theory of economics. What people would of course like is a greater degree of prosperity, and a greater degree of flexibility between different economic forms and modes. But what they do not want is the dropouts you have in Western society, the bottom one-third of the population which lives under very poor conditions. We don't want the old and the poor to drop out of society. We don't want unemployment. We don't want exploitation of Third World countries. And we don't want the forced growth that is part of capitalism, which by its inner laws is forced to expand all the time, and consequently to create greater and greater exploitation of natural resources, and in the last event also of the people themselves. Whether or not there is a viable alternative we don't know. No-one really knows. What we're doing at the moment is evolve concepts which would lead in this direction.

But you certainly don't want to re-invent the wheel. You'll move towards some form of a market economy?

Yes, I think that's inevitable. The question is whether you can have a market economy which will work within some kind of framework of planning. We have to say goodbye to the kind of administrative planned economy which the socialist countries have had hitherto. That is clear.

I was in Leipzig recently, and the calls for German reunification seemed much stronger than they were a few months ago. Is it viable, and if so, under what conditions?

I think these calls for reunification are based upon an illusion. The truth, I think, is that people have lost all
confidence in finding a force in this country that will lead it out of its present chaos. People don't believe that anything can be salvaged from the old socialist regime. They see a vacuum out there, and so the easiest and most obvious solution is to go into the embrace of the rich brother next door. That is an illusion, because reunification, even if it does happen, will certainly not happen tomorrow. Reunification will not solve the problems of today or of the next few years. As regards reunification on a long-term basis, I think that is the will of a large part of the population. Quite how many is very difficult to assess. But there are both interior and exterior constraints. There will obviously be a change in Central Europe as regards military pacts and so on - those are the exterior conditions. And the internal conditions are, I think, that the countries move towards each other in a process of confederation, and then decide whether or not to unite in a number of years' time. This won't happen immediately.

And by then, perhaps, the choice may not be whether one should rejoin the two Germanies but whether one simply calls oneself a European?

That may be the solution. Europe can also profit from what the socialist, or former socialist, countries have to bring, in terms of ideals and values. I don't think that's been lost. Obviously it's been lost as an ideal of stalinist socialism, but it's still a force within the people. And I think that can help in a small way to give an accent in the direction of humanism to a future Europe - of concern for socially weaker people, and so on.

The Communist Party is obviously still in complete disarray. If the party does disintegrate, is the opposition ready to take over the running of this country? If there were free elections in May as is planned, would you be ready?

No. The opposition groups have only been in existence for a matter of weeks and months, and they are not in a position to take over political power in this country. They may be in a position to become part of a coalition government, or to become part of a strong and important opposition within parliament, but they're not able to take power. They don't have the political experience. They don't have the personalities. They haven't ever gone through a process of political democracy. Democracy is just starting. Nobody knows how it works in a country like this. These are things we have to learn.

No opposition group is going to be able to take a lead in the government. What may happen is that the opposition groups join together in a kind of left coalition. From these groups certain personalities may emerge who have political stature, and who can take an important part in a new parliament. But the groups on the whole are not even political parties, and don't have the structures or organisation to really take over power at present.

Neither did Solidarity, and yet they find themselves in government.

Yes. But as I see it from here, they're not capable of exerting that responsibility. They're trying to govern, but one notices their lack of experience, and also particularly their lack of a positive program. I don't think they're a very good example for us to follow.

The Communist party is obviously in disarray, you're not ready to govern, and the communists' supposed coalition partners, who have at least some experience, are seriously compromised. Is there not a serious power vacuum in this country?

There is indeed a serious power vacuum, and it can only be filled by taking the most honest and credible per-
sonalities from all groups together, and try to form some kind of coalition government from them. Something like that will have to happen. We have no serious parties at present. What we can have by the time elections come in a few months time is a dozen really credible, upright personalities who can exercise some kind of leadership.

The Communist Party is, as you say, in a process of disintegration and will certainly not have a vanguard role in the future. It will just be one among many parties. But from the middle echelons of the party and from the rank and file there will be a good number of honest individuals who will gain political credibility.

People like Gregor Gysi, the new secretary, who is now trying to build up a new party platform. Another man I'm thinking of is the mayor of Dresden, Wolfgang Berghofer, who along with Gysi and Modrow is part of the new leadership in what's left of the party. There are a number of personalities who even the population at large would still believe in.

But, returning to the Polish analogy, the Communist Party at the moment is such a dirty word that one wonders whether, if they went to the polls in May, they'd get more than 10% or 15% of the vote?

Ten or fifteen percent; they'd get a few positions from that! But it's very difficult to speculate. The party's future is still in turmoil. Until that's sorted out it's very difficult to predict what a new democratically elected government would look like.

Preaching Water, Drinking Wine

Werner Goldstein is a senior editor on the foreign desk of Neues Deutschland, the official Socialist Unity Party (SED) newspaper, and is a member of the reform wing of the SED. He has worked on Neues Deutschland for some forty years, since his return to the country from Britain after World War Two. He is angry and disillusioned, but still believes socialism worth striving for.

We're living in a situation in which East Germany has moved very quickly towards change. Some argue that the churches were the main catalyst for that change. Do you think that's correct?

I think there is some truth in that. The church assembled people who had different views and gave them the chance to voice opinions which they would otherwise not have been able to voice. And the church made itself felt on the government in various ways. In that respect it really was a catalyst for change, though not, I think, the main one.

What was it about the churches that made people go there? What could they provide that the state organs and other officials couldn't?

In the GDR the church is very much an independent force; there has always been a separation between state and church. The church was a secure place to voice opinions, and the churches also had their own media. There was a possibility to spread divergent views. That was really the start of the movement in this country.

So it's not a surprise to you when we talk to opposition groups and many of them are priests and Protestant church people, or have close ties with the church?

No, I'm not at all surprised because, for many years, the party leadership, as well as the party at the regional level, has tried to talk with and work together with the church. The party has tried to exchange views and find common ground if possible.

You concede that the church was a catalyst for change in the GDR, but not the main catalyst. In your view, what was the main catalyst for change?

The main catalyst, I believe - and many of my comrades in the Socialist Unity Party believe - has been the Soviet Union: the rise of Gorbachev, and of perestroika and glasnost in the media there.

So was perhaps Gorbachev's visit to Berlin for the fortieth anniversary celebrations of the GDR the final catalyst that began the move for change?

We put a lot of hopes in that visit. We were a bit disappointed in that Honecker didn't really respond. But we were sure that Gorbachev made a big impression, though it took another couple of days or more to be sure that the consequences were in the right direction.

You're implying that even before Gorbachev came to East Berlin there were already divisions inside the East German Communist Party between reformers and conservatives. At the time I must say it was rather difficult to find those reformers.

You have to understand that while the leadership, the