The Comrade’s CAP

The new East European governments have been keen to make a clean break with the past. In fact, they’ve been keen to forget the past. Paul Hockenos contends that this collective amnesia bodes ill for a democratic political culture in the old Soviet bloc.

Milan Kundera opens The Book of Laughter and Forgetting with a parable about the treatment of history under communism. On a snowy winter’s day in 1948, Czech communist leader Klement Gottwald posed for a photo with his inner circle. Next to him stood Comrade Clementis, who took off his own fur cap and set it on Gottwald’s bare head. After the purges four years later, Clementis was air-brushed out of the photo. All that remained of him was his cap on Gottwald’s head.

When the revolutions of 1989 brought down the Eastern bloc dictatorships, they swept away the facade of historical half-truths, distortions and lies upon which the ruling elites grounded their legitimacy. If “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”, as Kundera puts it, then in 1989 memory was victorious.

The close of a discredited historical epoch, however, poses new questions about remembrance and forgetting, about the new relationship between ‘man’ and power. In a region so steeped in historical tragedy as Eastern and Central Europe, the form of democracy that evolves is implicitly informed by the post-communist systems’ relation to their pasts.

In a word, at least, all of Europe’s new member-states concur that the dissolution of single-party rule constitutes a clean break with the communist era. But like the will to erase a bad dream, the East Europeans have tried to put the last four decades behind them as if they had never existed. To the detriment of their societies, the people of the former Eastern bloc have concentrated their collective energy on forgetting.

Of the many aspects of political transition, the Central and East Europeans have taken little pain to confront the legacy of stalinism in their countries. Certainly, previously sup-
pressed knowledge about the political gulags and the Gestapo tactics of the secret police have done much to underline the totalitarian core of even the ‘soft’ regimes such as Hungary. Yet that examination has stopped drastically short of a searching investigation into the past. As quickly as Romanian revolutionaries changed Lenin Strada to Strada Demokratiei, the complex questions of responsibility and guilt were brushed aside to clear the way for the new era. The necessity of a penetrating Aufarbeitung der Geschichte, or coming to terms with the past, is nowhere on the young democracies’ agendas.

Immediately after the Eastern bloc regimes tumbled, even the top nomenklatura professed that they had been closet democrats all along, pushing relentlessly for change from within the structures of power. For the discontented populations, the fact that the state outlawed political opposition and ruthlessly crushed popular uprisings served as a handy and not altogether unconvincing alibi for their own political conformism. Admittedly, communism pressed the average citizen into active complicity with the system, unless she or he was prepared to sacrifice a normal life. As party member, low-level bureaucrat or obedient fellow-traveller, the average person struck his or her compromise with power. In former East Germany today, weekly revelations about the co-operation of even leading figures in the pre-1989 underground opposition with the secret police has exposed the shocking totality of society’s complicity. In hindsight, the Vaclav Havels and the Adam Michniks stand out as the precious few.

This broad collaboration with the powers-that-were explains the readiness to skip over a full coming-to-accounts with the past. With the single exception of former East Germany, the calls of yesterday’s dissidents to open the secret police files have run into brick walls. Nor is it simply a matter of politics that most of the democratic disdained parties fared poorly at the polls. The majority of the populace not only identifies better with the careerist-turned-nationalist, but finds its conscience better protected there, too.

It is that sort of bad conscience which demands that somebody from the very top be indicted for the crimes of the systems as a whole. The trials of Bulgaria’s former dictator or a handful of Ceausescu’s secret police are aimed at scapegoating a few of the ringleaders and putting the issue to rest. Perhaps the pinnacle of absurdity is the Federal Republic’s demand that former German Democratic Republic (GDR) President Erich Honecker be retrieved from his death bed (at the moment in the Chilean Embassy in Moscow) to face trial for the state’s shoot-to-kill order along the former German-German border. If Honecker is convicted, the implication is that the majority is absolved from responsibility for the years of dutiful voting in the GDR’s showcase elections.

Czechoslovakia’s far-reaching new law that bans all members of the ‘old structures’ from a public office for five years purports to solve the problem of the past with a simple administrative stroke of the pen. The blanket ‘collective guilt’ of the nomenklatura (including reform-minded Prague Spring communists such as Alexander Dubcek) again effectively translates into society’s ‘collective innocence’.

The release of the individual (or at least most individuals) from accountability lays a precarious basis for a new democratic political culture. Most importantly, it fails to replace the individual’s consciously hypocritical acquiescence to state power with an active ethic of civic responsibility or political obligation. Despite the introduction of multi-party electoral democracy, the implication persists that the system and its ruling elite alone shoulder the burden of social accountability. In Hungary, for example, the Germans are to blame for the Hungarian holocaust, the ‘Russians’ for Soviet communism and now, in some circles,
the Jews for the failures of capitalism. Turn-outs for local elections in Hungary have dropped from 40% to 20% and, in some recent votes down below 15%. There are more than a few Hungarians who would happily revert to the good old days of Kadarism, when Hungarian President Janos Kadar (1956-1986) offered the ‘cheeriest barracks’ in Eastern Europe a relatively high standard of living in return for its political passivity.

The illusionary tabula rasa also undermines the need for society to reflect upon the consciousness that evolved under the conditions of the past 40 years. Since communism, as well as ‘socialism’, has been forever assigned to history’s dustbin, there appears no pressing need for society to come to terms with just what that system was or how it continues to manifest itself in the present. In depoliticised societies, the totalitarian thought-structures of the old systems fuel today’s chauvinism. In the political sphere, a familiar authoritarianism, intolerance and provincialism, persist in the reigning power structures—although now under the name of nationalism, ‘communism’s opposite’. And, by definitively closing the book on the past, the language of socialism also remains trapped in Stalinism’s wreckage. Thus, the possibility of social democracy is also neatly nipped in the bud.

The denial of the communist era has led political forces in Central and Eastern Europe in two general directions. In liberal democratic circles—those most strongly identified with the dissident tradition—the 1989 revolutions are seen as the chance to embark upon a qualitatively new political future. Their model is contemporary western democracy, something that most of them admit has never existed in its modern form in Eastern Europe. The second and stronger tendency is a conservative nationalism that views the communist era as a Soviet-imposed interruption of a national democratic tradition which had flourished prior to World War Two. The nationalists’ rhetoric is of a ‘return to the past’, to the interwar period when Hungarians ruled Hungary and Poland.

Unfortunately, today’s elected rulers have sought refuge in historical myths no less perilous than those of their communist predecessors. The nationalist revivals throughout the region have prompted sweeping historical revisions which uncritically glorify the nation’s past from the Middle Ages to the present. Amid a new vacuum of power and ideology, these embellished histories remain one of the few threads underpinning the legitimacy of many of the post-communist governments. With economic collapse and political instability looming, liberals too have stooped to tap that national sentiment. The deficit of alternative political ideas has presented conservative nationalists with an open field to define the nascent political culture.

The contention that the national culture stands firmly in the tradition of modern democracy enables political conservatives to anchor their own undemocratic ideologies in whitewashed national precedent. As the much-maligned object of communist propaganda, the fairytales of lost national glory are easily marketed. In Poland, the interwar second Republic and its strong-arm leader, Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, is today held up as a model of Polish democracy. In fact, Pilsudski came to power in a bloody putch four years before Poland’s first free elections and presided over gross human rights violations, the brutal crushing of strikes and virtual civil war with the national minorities.

Hungary’s conservative ruling coalition, led by the Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF), harks back to the populist political culture of the country’s Christian Course during the 1920s and 30s. Picking up where that era left off, the new government restored the power of the Catholic Church and the unabashed exaltation of Hungarianism. The weak interwar democracy serves as the model for a style of rule today in which parliamentary opposition and public criticism are at best resentfully tolerated. Complete with the ugly chauvinism of a bygone age, it is an historical brand of political conservatism considerably less sophisticated than its modern counterparts in Western Europe.

After the humiliation of communism, the positive appraisal of the interwar years soothes bruised pride. First, it absolves the nation from the reality of its often ignominious prewar and wartime past. Second, it bolsters the logic that ‘we, the nation’ were always democrats and communism an inflicted aberration. Under the supra-collective cloak of the nation, individuals are relieved of responsibility for their actions and inaction.

Any criticism of the popular revisionism therefore strikes a sensitive nerve, making it difficult for real debate over domestic nationalism to enter political discourse. Anti-Semitism, for example, is alive and well in Hungary. In the government-friendly media, HDF populists continue to manipulate the anti-Jewish sentiment that proved so damaging to the intellectual-led free Democratic Party in the 1990 election. Yet in Hungary anti-Semitism itself is not discussed in terms of posing an impediment to democracy. Rather, it is criticism of the government’s anti-Semitic posturing which sometimes finds its way into public discussion that supposedly jeopardises the country’s ‘return to Europe’. The governing coalition’s supporters brand their critics as ‘un-Hungarian’ and ‘unpatriotic’ for libelling ‘the nation’ (of which they consider themselves the sole representative) and discrediting Hungary in the eyes of the international community. This modus vivendi enables the regime to continue to stir anti-Semitic feelings with impunity.

Elsewhere, governments and oppositions alike have bound their fragile democracies to heritages with even darker pasts. In Romania, the rehabilitation of the World War Two fascist military dictator, Marshal Ion Antonescu, has earned unanimous public consent. The entire spectrum of political
parties are virtually at each others' throats to claim the legacy of “Romania's greatest national hero”. On 1 June 1991, the 51st anniversary of Antonescu’s execution, the Romanian parliament observed a minute's silence for its nation's misjudged son. “After 44 years, history has finally allowed the Romanians to shed a tear and light a candle for Ion Antonescu,” wrote the leading democratic opposition daily, Romania Libra.

During Antonescu’s rule (between 1940 and 1944) 400,000 Jews and tens of thousands of gypsies lost their lives. In Eichmann in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt describes the horrors of the Romanian concentration camps as “more elaborate and more atrocious than anything in Germany”. She writes that, in August 1941, before the Final Solution orders were given, Goebbels complained to Hitler that “Antonescu proceeds in these matters in a far more radical fashion than we have done up to the present”.

Typically, the revisionists kindle the image of the nationalist leader as the anti-communist patriot, the martyred saviour of their misunderstood and long-suffering country. It was Antonescu, Romanians point out, who won back Romania’s eastern territories in Bessarabia, annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The marshal’s partnership with the fascist Iron Guard and Nazi Germany was simply a matter of national Realpolitik, they say, the unlucky fate of being squeezed between the Soviet Union and the Axis alliance. As for the Romanian Holocaust, they argue, it is a lie that Antonescu killed the Jews. In fact, he saved them. And the gypsies, well...

‘Nationalist historians helped rouse the hatreds that had lain dormant for years in Yugoslavia.’

Intellectuals, too, have jumped on the nationalist bandwagon. For many, the new religion serves as convenient therapy for their years of hack scholarship under communism. The nationalist fervour in Romania has fueled virulent anti-Semitism, a thriving ultra-right, bloody ethnic violence in Transylvania, and regular pogroms against the gypsies. Yet, even in opposition circles, intellectuals have shirked a principled stand. The editor of Romania’s leading liberal intellectual journal 22 wrote: “Romanians are a temperate, tolerant and hospitable people. The presentation of Romania as a country where the extreme right flourishes unhindered, as well as other such charges, is deeply unpatriotic. “Elsewhere, even some of the most critical intellectuals argue that, with the priority of economic restructuring at hand, there simply “isn’t time” for an historical Aufarbeitung.

In Yugoslavia, the manipulation of national myths and a cut-throat war of histories paved the way for the grisly conflict that has raged over the past year between Serbs and Croats. With self-serving and partial versions of the 1940s, nationalist historians helped rouse the passionate hatreds that had lain dormant for years in communist Yugoslavia.

The legacy of World War Two is a painful one for all Yugoslavs. Of the nearly one million people killed, as many died in inter-ethnic strife among themselves as died fighting the nazis. Today, the Croats insist that the number of Serbs, Gypsies and Jews massacred in the camps of the quisling Axis-allied Croatian state was only a tiny fraction of that claimed by the communists. Rather, Serbian royalist Chetniks were the real butchers. Croatia’s President Franjo Tudjman (elected in 1990) made his name in the 1960s as a mercurial historian who charged that only 30,000 people perished at the hands of the Ustashe fascists. One of Tudjman’s first acts in office was to order that the Square for the Victims of fascism in the capital of Zagreb be renamed the square of the Croatian Giants. In the president's nationalist speeches, the words and symbols of the brutal wartime state appear again and again.

For Serbian politicians, meanwhile, Tudjman’s nationalist party is synonymous with the Ustashe itself. Radical historians have stoked the fires, arguing that the bloodthirsty Ustashe slaughtered well over one million Serbs alone. The real memories and exaggerated horror stories have combined to strike the fear of God into the Serbian minority in Croatia. It is the legacy of the genocidal Ustashe state, the minority insists, that has driven them to take up arms against an independent Croatia.

The political vacuum in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe is one explanation for the ready embrace of rightwing ideologies of the inter-war era. Nor was the legacy of those nations’ fascist collaboration constructively addressed, however, in the tense climate of post-war Eastern Europe. Since communism supposedly represented the final victory over nationalism and fascism, the new states simply denied the sources and continuities of those ideologies in society. At the same time, under the guise of socialist rhetoric, the ruling elites ruthlessly manipulated nationalism from above and perpetuated many of the totalitarian structures of fascism in the communist systems. When those historical nationalist ideologies raised their heads in the form of anti-communist opposition, the regimes quashed the ‘counter-revolutionary’ movements and imprisoned their leaders.

Nor can the majority of the Western Left get off scot-free from its responsibility for the situation in post-communist Eastern Europe. The Left’s muted criticisms of the Eastern bloc dictatorships only contributed to the tarnished reputation of socialism of any kind in Eastern and Central Europe. Western Leftists were ignorant about the East Europeans’ refusal to differentiate between a democratic socialism and stalinism, when they themselves never drew a clear line.

But, it seems, that part of history is quickly forgotten too.

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