If the old regimes supported it, it’s sure to be unpopular in central and eastern Europe at the moment. And that includes the anti-apartheid cause.

Paul Hockenos and Jane Hunter examine the new unholy alliance between the Comecon countries and Pretoria.

The West’s euphoria over Eastern Europe’s metamorphosis is conspicuously absent in the Third World. Not without reason, developing countries and liberation movements—particularly those with left orientations—see themselves as victims of the political turnover and East-West rapprochement.

The erosion of Moscow’s support and the sudden loss of Eastern Europe as a political patron constitute an enormous blow to Third World anti-imperialist struggles. Moreover, the new democracies in Central Europe will not be neutral players in global politics.

To varying degrees, all seven Warsaw Pact members have distanced themselves from their former ‘socialist brothers’ in the Third World and have embraced old adversaries, South Africa foremost among them. In Eastern Europe, decades of solidarity with the African National Congress has either been hedged or reversed outright in favour of closer political and economic partnerships with Pretoria. Charges of betrayal from the ANC and other liberation movements have done nothing to slow the process which has had a resounding impact on liberation strategies.

Although not without its own share of hypocrisy, Soviet bloc foreign policy provided resistance movements with critical military, economic and political support. Under the Brezhnev Doctrine, the cold war logic of competing power blocs demanded extensive assistance programs to secure markets and establish a separate political identity outside the capitalist sphere of influence.

The aid kept many of its beleaguered recipients afloat—dictatorships and genuine revolutionary struggles alike. Eastern Europe’s backing came mostly, but by no means exclusively, in the form of non-military aid. The diverse projects, from educational exchanges to giant development efforts, often proved more effective than the bloody results of arms.

Since Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s arrival and the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in 1988-9, the doctrine’s reappraisal has seen assistance to the Third World slashed at every level. Soviet Third World policy has been in the main concessionary—a dignified rout as Moscow directs its resources to its own economy and seeks to cement its relations with the US and Western economic powers.

While the Soviet Union has won almost universal kudos for its willingness to wind down the cold war, in prac-
tical terms a hard-pressed Moscow has capitulated to Washington in region after region. Using the space created by Gorbachev, the communist governments of Eastern Europe embarked on a gradual re-evaluation of their relations with the Third World as long as two years ago. This year, however, the newly-elected governments have forged a far more radical course. Their strapped economies plainly at the mercy of Western capital, the realpolitik of self-preservation has meant a near total abandonment of the Third World. At the same time, the association of solidarity programs with the orthodox regimes has won the new policies, and the politicians behind them popular approval at home.

At a time when the West is showing a renewed interest in the South African struggle, Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia are developing ties with South Africa. Pace-setting Hungary’s opportunistic policies have already evoked charges of breaching international sanctions. In January, two months before the free parliamentary elections, Foreign Minister Pik Botha became the first ranking South African official to visit a Warsaw Pact country. Under the then-ruling Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP), a reformed version of the hardline communist party, the two nations agreed on a gradual ‘normalisation’ of relations and the development of commercial and industrial links.

The Botha visit and earlier contacts with the white government in 1989 had the HSP nervous that the meeting would be used as political ammunition against them. But their worry proved unfounded as the fledgling opposition parties jumped at the chance to greet the South Africans. In a gaffe to Western reporters, the now Foreign Minister of the ruling Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF), Geza Jeszensky, let slip that no debate at all occurred within his party before the decision.

Since the right-nationalist HDF’s victory, diplomatic liaisons have been made and economic contacts greatly accelerated. On the third floor of the Budapest Intercontinental, the South African mission has overlooked the Danube since April. There, its single representative, Cornelius Scholtz, meets with ‘the flood’ of South African businessmen inquiring into joint ventures, investments and potential markets. Scholtz plays down the increasing trade with Hungary, but is openly optimistic about the new relations. “The government here has been very helpful and encouraging. There is no reason that full diplomatic relations will not be a reality in the near future,” he explains, echoing statements by Hungarian politicians. On the subject of commerce, he says that there “is little that Hungary can offer us. Our business interests see the Hungarian market primarily in terms of export, mining and technology for example”.

The latest deal includes a joint bus manufacturing operation, central bank co-ordination, air traffic permits for the Hungarian and South African national airlines.
(the latter is banned from the US) and an easing of visa requirements. For at least a year South African fruit has appeared in Budapest stores and other commercial academic and tourist contacts have been stepped up in the months leading up to the diplomatic swap. The co-operation opens the way for Central Europe to serve as an entrepot for sanction-busters with an eye to the West Europe market. The scam already has precedent. ANC exiles in Budapest confirm French reports that, despite Hungary's alleged adherence to Comecon's total embargo against Pretoria, for the past several years it has been helping South Africa skirt Western sanctions by re-exporting South African products with fraudulent 'Made in Hungary' labels. At a Budapest publishing house, employees say that South African firms have used the facilities to print Afrikaans-language books that are identified as being produced in South Africa.

Budapest feebly justifies the 'special relationship' with the presence of a tiny 14,000-strong Hungarian community in South Africa, mostly exiles from 1956. In order to strengthen the bonds, Pretoria has begun actively recruiting Hungarians to migrate through 'help wanted' ads in newspapers. For skilled, white labour such as engineers, doctors, mathematicians and other professionals, the apartheid state will pay 80% of travel expenses plus other costs, and grant full citizenship. Over 23,000 Hungarians have rushed to apply for visas at the Vienna embassy and 2,000 a month are on their way to South Africa.

The other link that the new allies draw upon is their mutual disdain for socialism. In the Hungarian press, Botha directly appealed to the potent anti-communist sentiment here: "So far the ANC is still preaching and advocating systems that Central and Eastern European nations have thrown out, and which have brought misery and oppression to their people." The message strikes a chord in Hungary where resentment runs so deep that even solidarity work is tainted with the overtones of the old regime. The complete absence of anti-apartheid movement enabled the racist government to walk into Hungary without a word of protest.

The HDF leadership responds testily to questions about the connection. Prime Minister Joszef Antall neglects even to criticise the black majority's oppression. "When did the international community ever protest at the treatment of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania?" he answers instead, reflecting the self-pity and egotism characteristic of his nationalistic party. Jeszenszky distances the new government from 'terrorist organisations' that Hungary backed in the past and says that foreign policy will now have 'democratic criteria'. South Africa's 'promising developments' appear to meet those criteria as the prime minister will not pledge adherence to international sanctions.

To a lesser degree Poland is also complicit. In April the South African trade minister met with Warsaw ministers and Bankers. The visit preceded an exchange of representatives and trade in the likely form of Polish shipbuilding and technical expertise in return for raw materials, tropical produce and manufactured goods. The Poles have already agreed to buy 200,000 tons of iron ore (with a promise to import an additional 600,000 tons during 1990) and set up a joint food venture. Reports from Prague claim that Czechoslovakia intends to establish diplomatic relations with Pretoria by the end of the year.

The ANC has reacted to the moves with outrage. General Secretary Alfred Nzo said the ANC "unequivocally condemns" Hungary's action as a "cynical disregard for international agreements" and a "betrayal of the majority of the people of South Africa by forming a racist partnership with apartheid". A UN diplomat stated that Hungary's behaviour has "raised serious concern in UN circles about whether it ought to continue on the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid". Since the UN has no mechanism for removing members of special committees, individual members have exerted pressure directly on the country.

South African ties with Moscow are on a somewhat different basis, but they are strengthening too. There has long been collusion between the two on international gold and diamond pricing. In the last few years the USSR has dropped its overt hostility toward Pretoria and begun tentative contacts which it explains as contributing to a negotiated end to apartheid. However, there has been considerable speculation that Moscow might cut or curtail ANC aid - speculation that has only increased since Nelson Mandela failed to include the Kremlin in his international itinerary.

Nevertheless, the ANC claims that it is not aware of any change in its relationship with Moscow or its most important East European ally, the German Democratic Republic. In light of the impending German reunification, however, the GDR's military-intelligence cooperation and heavily state-funded solidarity projects...
are certain to be terminated, if they have not already. So far, the Soviet Union has not pressured the ANC to end its armed struggle, but the effect of Moscow’s ‘new thinking’ is undeniable in the organisation’s present emphasis of a negotiated settlement. For example, Namibia’s independence, to date the crowning achievement of superpower co-operation on regional issues, forced the ANC to give up its front-line bases in Angola.

The ANC has received little support from its Western backers. Only Sweden is known to have complained to Hungary about its new ties. So mute has the international response been that Nigeria has taken it upon itself to remonstrate with the Central European states. The veiled dealings of the East should become a target for the Western anti-apartheid movement which could push the insecure new governments into the limelight. Indigenous solidarity movements must also come together, if Central Europe is to be prevented from sustaining the longevity of apartheid.

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RETURNING HOME

Czechs are fed up with dogmatic communism. But the result can be unsettling. Pavela Miller catches up for a meal with old friends.

Last month I went to visit my family and friends in Czechoslovakia. For a couple of weeks, everything went well. Prague was as beautiful as ever, my relatives cautious but chirpy about the recent political changes, the ever-present signs of political activity moving and exciting.

My first visit to old school friends was a success; catching up on who did what until well into the night. The second visit started innocuously enough, with light chatter over biscuits and wine. Before soup, unemployment, inflation, high interest rates and concentration of media ownership found their way into my description of what life was like in Australia.

After some deliberation, my friends decided that Australia was not a country to emulate, in economic matters at least. You obviously do not have a proper capitalist economy with a proper free market, they retorted, and that’s what we need here. I suggested that a “proper free market”, unconstrained by monopolies, restrictive trading practices and such is a bit difficult to come by, except perhaps in fresh vegetables.

The soup got burnt as the debate heated up. I took the line that rejection of a corrupt and inefficient communist regime need not imply that “proper” capitalism (whatever that meant) was full of virtue; one should not trust either lot.

My friends argued that any attack on capitalism put me in the same boat as the corrupt communists. You have listened to too much propaganda, they said. The logic of capitalism is neutral and impartial. It is efficient and logical. You need to do away with the welfare state to get the economy functioning properly. Look how well South Korea and Chile are doing. Now that the communist dictatorship has fallen in Nicaragua, even they will be able to become prosperous.

There followed a tiny bowl of burnt soup and a fierce argument about US imperialism, freedom fighters and such. It was then that I brought up the matter of the World Bank and its influence on Third World countries through crippling debt repayments. Does that sound like democracy? They should not have borrowed the money if they couldn’t pay it back, argued my increasingly unfriendly friends. We never finished the meal. Hostility against detractors of the World Bank and all it stands for had become too intense.

This is a true story about otherwise friendly and honest impoverished intellectuals, hard working, idealistic and long interested in politics; people in many ways similar, I would imagine, to a large proportion of ALR readership. Their views are undoubtedly representative of a large section of the Czech population. They are no simple reactionaries - they would probably let rightwing visitors finish their meal, but would disagree vehemently on many fundamental issues.

And there is no end to the story. Logically, it seems to make sense for an unrelenting diet of dogmatic communism to give way to dogmatic anti-communism. But logic notwithstanding, the experience has left me thoroughly confused.

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