The Year of TRUTH

1989 was the most dramatic year in Europe for four decades. Here, in a provocative extract from his new book *We the People*, Timothy Garton Ash argues that, like 1848 in the West, 1989 was the year of the citizen in Eastern Europe.

989 was the year communism in Eastern Europe died. 1949-1989 R.I.P. And the epitaph might be: Nothing in his life, became him like the leaving it. The thing that was comprehensively installed in the newly defined territories of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, and in the newly created German Democratic Republic after 1949, the thing called, according to viewpoint, ‘socialism’, ‘totalitarianism’, ‘stalinism’, ‘politbureaucratic dictatorship’, ‘real existing socialism’, ‘state capitalism’, ‘dictatorship over needs’, or, most neutrally, ‘the Soviet-type system’ - that thing will never walk again. And arguably, if we can no longer talk of communism we should no longer talk of Eastern Europe, at least with a capital ‘E’ for Eastern. Instead, we shall have central Europe again, east central Europe, south-eastern Europe, eastern Europe with a small ‘e’ and, above all, individual peoples, nations and states.

To be sure, even without a political-military reversal inside the Soviet Union there will be many further conflicts, injustices and miseries in these lands. But they will be different conflicts, injustices and miseries: new and old, post-communist but also pre-communist. In the worst case, there might yet be dictators; but they would be different dictators. We shall not see again that particular system, characterised by the concentration of political and economic power and the instruments of coercion in the hands of one leninist party, manifested sociologically as a privileged new class, in states with arbitrarily limited sovereignty.

Of course, if we walk the streets of Prague, Warsaw or Leipzig we can still find the grey, familiar traces: the flattened neo-classical stalinist facades on all the Victory Squares, the Lenin boulevards, steelworks, shipyards, the balding middle-aged officials with their prefabricated lies, the cheap paper forms for completion in quadruplicate, the queues, the attitude of ‘We pretend to work and you pretend to pay us’. Yet even the physical evidences are being removed at a speed that must cause some anxiety to conservationists. (In Poland there is a scheme for preserving all the old props in an entertainment park. The proposed name is Stalinland.)

If 1989 was the end, what was the beginning of the end?
To read the press you would think history began with Gorbachev.

That Moscow permitted the former 'satellite' countries to determine how they want to govern themselves was clearly a sine qua non. But the nature and direction of the processes of domestic political self-determination cannot be understood by studying Soviet policy. The causes lie elsewhere, in the history of individual countries, in their interaction with their East European neighbours and with the more free and prosperous Europe that lies to the west, north and south of them.

The example of Solidarity was seminal. It pioneered a new kind of politics in Eastern Europe (and new not only there): a politics of social self-organisation and negotiating the transition from communism. The players, forms and issues of 1980-81 in Poland were fundamentally different from anything seen in Eastern Europe between 1949 and 1979: in many respects, they presaged those seen throughout Eastern Europe in 1989. If there is any truth in this judgment, then there was something especially fitting in the fact that it was in 1989 that the Russian leader and the Polish Pope finally met. In their very different ways, they both started it.

To find a year in European history comparable with 1989, however, we obviously have to reach back much farther than 1979, or 1949. 1789 in France? 1917 in Russia? Or, closer to home, 1918/19 in Central Europe? But 1918/19 was the aftermath of World War. The closer parallel is surely 1848, the springtime of nations. In the space of a few paragraphs such comparisons are little better than parlour games. Yet, like parlour games, they can be amusing, and may sometimes help to concentrate the mind.

1848 erupted, according to A J P Taylor, "after forty years of peace and stability" while Lewis Namier describes it, with somewhat less cavalier arithmetic, as "the outcome of thirty-three creative years of European peace carefully preserved on a consciously counter-revolutionary basis". The revolution, Namier writes, "was born at least as much of hopes as of discontents". There was undoubtedly an economic and social background: lean harvests and the potato disease. But "the common denominator was ideological". He quotes the exiled Louis-Philippe declaring that he had given way to une insurrection morale, and King Wilhelm of Württemberg excusing himself to the Russian minister at Stuttgart, one Gorchakov, with the words: Je ne puis monter à cheval contre les idées ("I can't mount my horse against ideas"). And Namier calls his magnificent essay, "The Revolution of the Intellectuals".

Like 1848, this, too, might be called a 'revolution of the intellectuals'. To be sure, the renewed flexing of workers' muscle in two strike-waves in 1988 was what finally brought Poland's communists to the first Round Table of 1989. To be sure, it was the masses on the streets in demonstrations in all the other East European countries that brought the old rulers down. But the politics of the revolution were not made by workers or peasants. They were made by intellectuals: the playwright Václav Havel, the mediaevalist Bronislaw Geremek, the Catholic editor Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the painter Bärbel Bohley in Berlin, the conductor Kurt Masur in Leipzig, the philosophers János Kis and Gáspár Miklós Tamás in Budapest, the en-
As in 1848, the common denominator was ideological. The inner history of these revolutions is that of a set of ideas whose time had come, and a set of ideas whose time had gone. At first glance this may seem a surprising statement. For had not the ideology ceased to be an active force many years before? Surely the rulers no longer believed a rod of the guff they spouted, nor expected their subjects to believe it, nor even expected their subjects to believe that they, the rulers, believed it? This is probably true in most cases, although who knows what an old man like Erich Honecker, a communist from his earliest youth, still genuinely believed? (One must never underestimate the human capacity for self-deception.)

Yet one of the things these revolutions showed, ex post facto, is just how important the residual veil of ideology still was. Few rulers are content to say simply: "We have the Gatling gun and you do not!" "We hold power because we hold power", ideology provided a residual legitimation, perhaps also enabling the rulers, and their politbureaucratic servants, at least partly to deceive themselves about the nature of their own rule. At the same time, it was vital for the semantic occupation of the public sphere. The combination of censorship and a nearly complete Party-state monopoly of the mass media provided the army of semantic occupation; ideology, in the debased, routinised form of newpeak, was its ammunition. However despised and un-credible these structures of organised lying were, they continued to perform a vital blocking function. They no longer mobilised anyone, but they did still prevent the public articulation of shared aspirations and common truths.

What is more, by demanding from the ordinary citizen seemingly innocuous semantic signs of outward conformity, the system managed somehow to implicatce them in it. It is easy now to forget that, until almost the day before yesterday, almost everyone in East Germany and Czechoslovakia was living a double life: systematically saying one thing in public and another in private. This was a central theme of the essayistic work of Václav Havel over the last decade.

The crucial "line of conflict", he wrote earlier, did not run between people and state, but rather through the middle of each individual "for everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system". A banner I saw above the altar in an East Berlin church vividly expressed the same basic thought. It said: "I am Cain and Abel!".

In order to understand what it meant for ordinary people to stand in those vast crowds in the city squares of Central Europe, chanting their own, spontaneous slogans, you have first to make the imaginative effort to understand what it feels like to pay this daily toll of public hypocrisy. As they stood and shouted together, these men and women were not merely healing divisions in their society; they were healing divisions in themselves. Everything that had to do with the word, with the press, with television, was of the first importance to these crowds. The semantic occupation was as offensive to them as military occupation; cleaning up the linguistic environment as vital as cleaning up the physical environment. As one talks in English of a 'moment of truth' for some undertaking, so this was a year of truth for communism. There is a real sense in which these regimes lived by the word and perished by the word.

For what, after all, happened? A few thousands, then tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands went on to the streets. They spoke a few words, 'Resign!', they said, 'No more shall we be slaves!' 'Free elections!' 'Freedom!' And the walls of Jericho fell. And with the walls, the communist parties simply crumbled. At astonishing speed. By the end of 1989, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party had split in two, with the majority of its members leaving for good. In January 1990, the Polish United Workers' Party followed suit. Within three months, East Germany's Socialist Unity Party lost its leading role, its name, and at least half its members. The inner decay of these parties recalled the remark of a German poet in 1848: "Monarchy is dead, though monarchs still live".

With the single, signal exception of Romania, these revolutions were also remarkable for the almost complete lack of violence. Like Solidarity in 1980-81 they were that historical contradiction-in-terms, 'peaceful revolution'. No bastilles were stormed, no guillotines erected. Lampposts were used only for street-lighting. Romania alone saw tanks and firing squads. Elsewhere the only violence was that used at the outset by police. The young demonstrators in East Berlin and Prague laid candles in front of the police who responded with truncheons. The Marseillaise of 1989 said not 'aux armes, citoyens' but 'aux bougies, citoyens'. The rationale and tradition of non-violence can be found in the history of all the democratic oppositions of East Central Europe throughout the 1980s. Partly it was pragmatic: the other side had all the weapons. But it was also ethical. It was a statement about how things should be. They wanted to start as they intended to go on. History, said Adam Michnik, had taught them that those who start by storming bastiles will end up building their own.
Yet almost as remarkable, historically speaking, was the lack (so far, and Romania plainly excepted) of major counter-revolutionary violence. The police behaved brutally in East Germany up to and notably on the state’s fortieth anniversary, 7 October, and in Czechoslovakia up to and notably on 17 November. In Poland the systematic deployment of counter-revolutionary force lasted over seven years, from the declaration of a ‘state of war’ on 13 December 1981 to the spring of 1989. But once the revolutions (or, in Poland and Hungary, ‘refolutions’) were under way, there was an amazing lack of coercive counter-measures. The communist rulers said, like King Wilhelm of Württemberg, “I cannot mount on horseback against ideas”. But one is bound to ask: why not? Much of the modern history of Central Europe consisted precisely in rulers mounting on horseback against ideas. Much of the contemporary history of Central Europe, since 1945, consists in rulers mounting tanks against ideas.

So why was it different in 1989? Three reasons may be suggested. They might be labelled ‘Gorbachev’, ‘Helsinki’ and ‘Tocqueville’. The new line in Soviet policy, christened by Gennady Gerasimov on 25 October the Sinatra doctrine ‘I had it my way’ as he actually misquoted the famous line - rather than the Brezhnev doctrine, was self-evidently essential. In East Germany, Moscow not only made it plain to the leadership that Soviet troops were not available for purposes of domestic repression, but also, it seems, went out of its way to let it be known - to the West, but also to the population concerned - that this was its position. In Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union helped the revolution along by a nicely timed retrospective condemnation of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion. Throughout East Central Europe, the people at last derived some benefit from their ruling élites’ chronic dependency on the Soviet Union, for, deprived of the Soviet Kalashnikov-crutch, those élites did not have another leg to stand on. Romania was the exception that proves the rule. It is no accident that it was precisely in the state for so long most independent of Moscow that the resistance of the security arm of the powers-that-were was most fierce, bloody and prolonged.

None the less, the factor ‘Gorbachev’ alone does not suffice to explain why these ruling élites did not more vigorously deploy their own, still formidable police and security forces in a last-ditch defence of their own power and privilege. Is it too fanciful to suggest that the constant, persistent harping of the West on certain international norms of domestic conduct, the East European leaders’ yearning for international respectability, and the sensed linkage between this and the hard currency credits they so badly needed, in short, the factor ‘Helsinki’, played at least some part in staying the hands of those who might otherwise have given the order to shoot?

Yet none of this would have stopped them if they had still been convinced of their right to rule. The third, and perhaps the ultimately decisive factor, is that characteristic
of revolutionary situations described by Alexis de Tocqueville more than a century ago: the ruling elite’s loss of belief in its own right to rule. A few kids went on the streets and threw a few words. The police beat them. The kids said: You have no right to beat us! And the rulers, the high and mighty, replied, in effect: Yes, we have no right to beat you. We have no right to preserve our rule by force. The end no longer justifies the means!

In fact, the ruling elites, and their armed servants, distinguished themselves by their comprehensive unreadiness to stand up in any way for the things in which they had so long claimed to believe, and their almost indecent haste to embrace the things they had so long denounced as ‘capitalism’ and ‘bourgeois democracy’. All over Eastern Europe there was the quiet flap of turning coats: one day they denounced Walesa, the next they applauded him; one day they embraced Honecker, the next they imprisoned him; one day they vituperated Havel, the next they elected him president.

1848 was called the Springtime of Nations or the Springtime of Peoples: the Völkerfrühling, wiosna łudów. The revolutionaries, in all the lands, spoke in the name of ‘the people’. But the international solidarity of ‘the people’ was broken by conflict between nations, old and new, while the domestic solidarity of ‘the people’ was broken by conflict between social groups - what came to be known as ‘classes’. “Socialism and nationalism, as mass forces, were both the product of 1848,” writes A J P Taylor. And for a century after 1848, until the communist deep freeze, central Europe was a battlefield of nations and classes.

Of what, or of whom, was 1989 the springtime? Of ‘the people’? But in what sense? “Wir sind das Volk,” said the first great crowds in East Germany: we are the people. But within a few weeks they were saying “Wir sind EIN Volk”: we are one nation. In Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, the crowds were a sea of national flags, while the people raised their voices to sing old national hymns. In Hungary and Romania they cut the communist symbols out of the centre of their flags. In East Germany there were, at first, no flags, no hymns. But gradually the flags came out, plain stripes of red, black and gold without the GDR hammer and dividers in the middle: the flag of Western - and before that of united - Germany.

In every Western newspaper commentary on Eastern Europe one now invariably reads that there is a grave danger of something called ‘nationalism’ reviving in this region. But what on earth does this mean? Does it mean that people are again proud to be Czech, Polish, Hungarian or, for that matter, German? That hearts lift at sight of the flag and throat tight when they sing the national anthem?

Patriotism is not nationalism. Rediscovered pride in your own nation does not necessarily imply hostility to other nations. These movements were all, without exception, patriotic. They were not all nationalist. Indeed, in their first steps most of the successor regimes were markedly less nationalist than their communist predecessors. The Mazowieckii government in Poland adopted a decisively more liberal and enlightened approach to both the Jewish and German questions than any previous government, indeed drawing criticism, on the German issue, from the communist-nationalists. In his first public statement as President, Václav Havel made a special point of thanking “all Czechs, Slovaks and members of other nationalities”. His earlier remark on television that Czechoslovakia owes the Germans an apology for the post-war expulsion of the Sudeten Germans was fiercely criticised by - the communists. In Romania, the revolution began with the ethnic Romanian inhabitants of Timisoara making common cause with their ethnic Hungarian fellow-citizens. It would require very notable exertions for the treatment of the German and Hungarian minorities in post-revolutionary Romania to be worse than it was under Nicolae Ceaucescu.

Of course there are counter-examples. One of the nastier aspects of the German revolution was the excesses of popular support for a Party-government campaign against Polish ‘smugglers and profiteers’, and abuse of visiting black students and Vietnamese Gastarbeiter. In Hungarian opposition politics, the fierce infighting between the Hungarian Democratic Forum and the Free Democrats was not without an ethnic undertone, with some members of the former questioning the ‘Hungarianness’ of some members of the latter, who replied with charges of anti-Semitism. Thousands of Bulgarians publicly protested against the new government giving the Turkish-Muslim minority its rights.

If one looks slightly further ahead, there are obviously potential conflicts over other remaining minorities: notably the Hungarians in Romania, the Romanians in the Soviet Union (Moldavia), the Germans in Poland, Romania and the Soviet Union, and gypsies in several countries. There are the potential political uses of anti-Semitism. There is the difficulty of finding a combination of Czecho- and -Slovakia fully satisfactory to both Slovaks and Czechs. And there are the outstanding frontier questions, above all that of the post-1945 German-Polish frontier on the Oder-Neisse line.

Yet compared with Central Europe in 1848 or 1918/19 this is a relatively short list. Most nations have states, and have got used to their new frontiers. Ethnically the map is far more homogeneous than it was in 1848 or 1918: as Ernest Gellner has observed, it is now a picture by
Modigliani rather than Kokoschka. The historical record must show that 1989 was not a year of acute national and ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe west of the Soviet frontier. Quite the reverse: it was a year of solidarity both within and between nations. At the end of the year, symbolic and humanitarian support for the people(s) of Romania came from all the self-liberated states of East Central Europe. A springtime of nations is not necessarily a springtime of ‘nationalism’.

In any case, what was most striking was not the language of nationhood. That was wholly predictable. What was striking was the other ideas and words that, so to speak, shared the top billing. One of these was ‘society’. In Poland, a country often stigmatized as ‘nationalist’, the word most often used to describe the people as opposed to the authorities was not ‘nation’; it was *spoleczenstwo*, society. In Czechoslovakia the word ‘society’ was used in a similar way, though less frequently, and here it could not simply be a synonym or euphemism for ‘nation’ because it covered two nations. In both cases, it was as meaningful to talk of social self-determination as it was to talk of national self-determination.

Everywhere stress was laid on the self-conscious unity of intelligentsia, workers and peasants. Of course in part this unity was created by the common enemy. When communist power had been broken, and real parliamentary politics began, then conflicting social interests were robustly articulated. Thus probably the most distinctive and determined group in the new Polish parliament was not communists or Solidarity, left or right, but peasant-farmers from all parties, combining and conspiring to advance their sectional interests.

Another concept that played a central role in opposition thinking in the 1980s was that of ‘civil society’. 1989 was the springtime of societies aspiring to be civil. Ordinary men and women’s rudimentary notion of what it meant to build a civil society might not satisfy the political theorist. But some such notion was there, and it contained several elements. (In the East German case, the actual word was probably imported from West Germany, but the fact remains that they chose this rather than another term.) And the language of citizenship was important in all these revolutions. People had had enough of being mere components in a deliberately atomised society: they wanted to be citizens, individual men and women with dignity and responsibility, with rights but also with duties, freely associating in civil society.

There is one last point about the self-description of the revolution which is perhaps worth a brief mention. As Ralf Dahrendorf has observed, Karl Marx played on the ambiguity of the German term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, which could be translated either as civil society or as *bourgeois* society. Marx, says Dahrendorf, deliberately conflated the two ‘cities’ of modernity, the fruits of the Industrial and the French Revolutions, the bourgeois and the citizen. I thought of this observation when I read one of the mass rallies in Leipzig called for solidarity with the *bürgerliche Bewegung* in Czechoslovakia. The bourgeois movement! But on reflection there seems to me a deeper truth in that apparent malapropism. For what most of the opposition movements throughout East Central Europe and a large part of ‘the people’ supporting them were in effect saying was: Yes, Marx is right, the two things are intimately connected - and we want both! Civil rights and property rights, economic freedom and political freedom, financial independence and intellectual independence, each supports the other. So, yes, we want to be citizens, but we also want to be middle-class, in the sense that the majority of citizens in the more fortunate half of Europe are middle-class. We want to be *Bürger* AND *bürgerlich*! Tom Paine, but also Thomas Mann.

So it was a springtime of nations, but not necessarily of nationalism; of societies, aspiring to be civil; and above all, of citizens.

TIMOTHY GARTON ASH’s *We the People: The Revolutions of 1989* was released in Australia in June by Granta Books. This extract is reproduced by arrangement with Granta Books.