

Jonathan Gast, 2005

Historical Background Paper on 1945 - 1999

HIST 157

Prof. Laurie Van Hook

The Cold War in Europe was not simply an ideological battle as many presume it to have been. Although ideology may have played a key role in the beginning, the USSR and its satellite states trumpeted communism in order to prevent the loss of the Eastern bloc countries from the Soviet sphere of influence. As Ash puts it in his book The Magic Lantern, "Ideology provided a residual legitimation, perhaps also enabling the rulers, and their polit-bureaucratic 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" (Ash 137). An analysis of Soviet actions beginning with post-war Europe to the demise of the USSR in 1989 and the resulting ramifications will exemplify the political repression of the Cold War era, how it ended, and what good and bad results the collapse unleashed. The period from 1945 to 1999 was an internal and external battle against the USSR's control over the governments of Eastern Europe, because throughout its existence the USSR subverted and attempted to subvert communist regimes when they did not fall in line with the dictates of the USSR. That war subsequently ended when the USSR no longer presumed to intervene in the affairs of those countries.

The succumbing of Eastern Europe to communist governments and subsequently control by the USSR began just after the war. During this time communists all over Europe were in a position to gain considerable influence and authority in each country, because due to most communist parties having been banned during the pre-war era, none could be blamed for the failed policy of appeasement. In addition, communists made very effective resistance groups during the war, especially in Southern Europe. This poise gave communist parties a strong anti-fascist face that everyone wanted to see. Once elections were held, communists went for positions in the police, the ministry of justice, and the

ministry of the interior. When around 1947 the Soviets were ready to usurp power from these governments, they had all the right people in the right places to do so. Why these countries could not have just been left to decide their own fates had much to do with the Soviet Union's desire to establish Eastern Europe as a buffer zone to prevent future conflict from reaching the USSR. One might also examine Stalin himself in order to understand the nature of the conflict more precisely. In Henry Kissinger's book Diplomacy, he states: "Stalin returned to his old ways of conducting foreign policy, and demanded payment for his victories in the only currency he took seriously--territorial control"(Kissinger 427). This evaluation reveals Stalin's geopolitically realist attitude toward Europe, and it places doubt on the existence of a purely ideological conflict.

Despite the number of staged elections in Eastern Europe, communists legitimately took power in coalition governments in Czechoslovakia and Hungary one year after the end of the war (Kissinger 443). When economic aid like the Marshall Plan was offered to Western as well as Eastern European countries, Stalin quickly closed his grip on Eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia, having freely elected a communist government that was not under the control of the USSR, was in the process of accepting the Marshall Plan. However, in February 1948, communist dictators overthrew the Czechoslovak government as well as threw the Foreign Minister and founder of the Czechoslovak government, Jan Masaryk, out of an office window to his death (Kissinger 457). Even where communism was genuine, the USSR still took control of the government.

Yugoslavia was another example how communism was taking shape to the dislike of Stalin. Here it was already in the form of a communist dictatorship, but not under the control of Stalin. Tito, the charismatic war time resistance leader in Southern Europe, had

successfully established control over a newly founded Yugoslavia/union of South-Slavs. Because the USSR only began exchanging military liaisons with Tito in 1944, Yugoslavia was able to establish an infrastructure by itself that was strong enough to later disregard the USSR. The split between Tito and Stalin was made apparent after Tito was found to have been supporting communist rebels in Greece against the wishes of Stalin. In 1947 Stalin created the Cominform with its main headquarters in Belgrade in order to formally integrate the communist parties of Europe under Soviet domination (Kissinger 443). In 1948 the Cominform expelled Tito's Yugoslavia from the organization. As a result, Tito turned to the West for economic aid, in return for which he would stop support to the communist rebels in Greece. But another result of the split was what has come to be known as *Stalinization* during the years 1948 through 1953. Because independent-mindedness was seen to hinder Stalin's process of integrating the new communist states into a governable body under the tutelage of the USSR, Stalin purged anyone who did not fit the conformist role that he desired. Reasons for purging certain individuals were as specific as having Western influences or as broad as not being part of the working class. They started with political figures, but soon it permeated through all parts of society. Quotas were even setup in some Eastern European countries. The result of this was a huge detriment to the economy, the bureaucracy, education, and society in general. The broader legacy of Stalinization was its destruction of the legitimacy of the communist party. Because so many true communists were purged during this period, communism, as redefined by Stalin, lost its appeal.

When Stalin died in 1953, it appeared there might have been some hope for these countries. Under Khrushchev the USSR underwent a period of de-Stalinization.

Khrushchev felt that independent thinking was okay, but that the USSR should remain connected to the Eastern bloc through multi-lateral organizations like the Warsaw pact--though Khrushchev abolished the Cominform which was used to facilitate Stalinization. Because Stalinization had destroyed the legitimacy of communism, "leaders of the satellite countries...needed to acquire some nationalistic credentials" (Kissinger 553). This did not stop the USSR from crushing a nationalist and anti-Russian revolt in East Germany in 1953. However, in 1956 Khrushchev gave a speech denouncing Stalin. From this speech followed the short-lived policy of liberalization. Kissinger describes the result of liberalization as "serv[ing] to open the floodgates" (Kissinger 553).

In the Summer of 1956 in Poland, the resentment over Soviet abuses of power and the stagnating economy--which was worse then than it was in the postwar years--led to riots and a desire to reform communism independently. In October the USSR, under the pretense of Warsaw pact army training, moved troops to the Polish border as well as several ships to the port of Gdansk. In response, the Poles offered up a reform leader to Khrushchev, the only survivor of the Stalinist purges, Władysław Gomułka. Khrushchev accepted the new leader of Poland. Except easing the state's grip on the church Gomułka did not implement any reforms. Instead he suppressed the anti-Soviet sentiment. The *floodgates* in this case were closed by the reformer himself, but allowing religious freedom would have a profound impact on the country in the future. As Ash puts it, "The Pope's visit was followed, just over a year later, by the birth of Solidarity, and without the Pope's visit it is doubtful if there would have been a Solidarity" (133).

At the same time in Hungary, the day that Gomułka joined ranks with the Politburo in Poland, student protests broke out in Hungary over Soviet repression. They distributed

demands for freedom of speech, a trial for the former Stalinist dictator Rákosi, "the departure of Soviet troops, and Nagy's return to office" (Kissinger 556). Nagy, who had been expelled from the party, was still a reform communist, and he believed he could make changes and salvage communism in Hungary. At first Nagy gave an ambiguous speech that did not agree with the public, but then he became the symbol of the revolt and declared that Hungary would become a neutral country like Austria. But when the Soviets crushed the revolution, Nagy stood his ground and was eventually captured and executed. Nagy would later become the symbol of the 1989 *refolution* (reform+revolution) in Hungary when he was reburied.

De-Stalinization did not happen as quickly in Czechoslovakia (CZS) as it did in Hungary and Poland. In 1968 a reform battle was taking place within CZS. Brezhnev, the lasting successor to Khrushchev, visited Prague but did not openly support Novotny, the leader of CZS's communist party. Dubček, Novotny's contender, gained power and presented *socialism with a human face*. The reforms were not as far reaching as Nagy's, but they soon went as far as getting rid of the one-party system. The USSR moved its forces to the border of CZS. Fearing unrest in their countries, the Warsaw powers (minus the CZS) got together and drew up a letter which condemned Dubček's reforms. They then intervened militarily and were met with passive resistance. In the Moscow Protocol of 1968 Brezhnev stated the USSR's plans to keep a military presence in CZS. This was an exercise of the Brezhnev Doctrine which gave the USSR the right to intervene where a communist government gives way to a multi-party bourgeois one. Dubček was arrested and expelled from the party, but he lived to be a part of the Velvet Revolution in Prague in 1989, however, his part in it was minimal and more that of a figurehead. As Ash puts it,

"the true leader of this movement, in Prague at least, is Havel not Dubček" (95).

In 1980 Solidarity, a trade union federation, began with a strike in the port city Gdansk. With Lech Wałęsa as its leader the trade union facilitated its own internal elections and was able to broadcast their message of reform to the rest of Poland. Solidarity soon became a political party with approved legal status. But Jaruzelski, a Polish general who had taken over power in Poland, *supposedly* feared intervention by the USSR, so he clamped down on Solidarity. In 1985 Gorbachev assumed control of the USSR, and he sought economic reconstruction and liberal openness in Soviet society. In 1987 Gorbachev made it clear that unity did not mean uniformity, and Eastern bloc countries could pursue their own independent courses of socialism. Ash gives a historical and first-hand account of how the 1989 *refolutions* played out from there. In May 1988 worker strikes broke out chanting, "There's no liberty without Solidarity" (Ash 15). Although the strikes subsided and it seemed like Solidarity was doomed, strikes broke out again in August. This time Polish authorities recognized Wałęsa's sway over the strikes, and so they attempted to bargain with him (Ash 16). On TV Wałęsa triumphed in a debate over the leader of the state run trade unions. From his perception of this debate, General Jaruzelski decided to legalize Solidarity and end the state of war. This led to the 'Round Table' talks which subsequently occurred in other Eastern bloc countries. Ash notes that the most ironic part about these talks is that "it was the authorities who sought early elections, believing that the shorter the campaign the better their own chance to defeat a wholly unprepared opposition" (Ash 17). An important aspect to stress about Ash's accounts is that it was believed reform would be a slow process. Geremek believed that it would be four more years before democratic elections would occur, but in fact it was only months before democratic

elections took place. In June of 1989 Polish elections took place and the first non-communist prime minister was voted into office in Eastern Europe (Ash 19).

Meanwhile in Hungary Imre Nagy, the hero of 1956, was reburied. Ash stresses how Hungarians lived under the rule of Kádár, the man who was responsible for Nagy's execution and the lies fed to the public in newspapers, TV programs, and school books (Ash 47). The family members and friends of Nagy created the Committee for Historical Justice in order to identify the unmarked grave of Nagy and hold a burial ceremony for him. Demonstrations broke out as a result of a memorial at his unmarked gravestone, and new Party leaders felt they needed to readopt Nagy to gain legitimacy (Ash 48). Party leaders allowed a reburial of Nagy, and a funeral was held at Heroes' Square on the 16th of June 1989. The scene was set with Hungarian flags with the sickle and hammer cut out from the center, like the ones the protestors in 1956 had (Ash 49). The result of the funeral was the toppling of the leader Grósz by a cabinet of four (Ash 56). Following that, roundtable talks chaired by Mátyás Szűrös, the President of Parliament, took place between three main groups of people: the party, opposition parties, and non-Party organizations (Ash 57). On October 18th, the parliament passed amendments to the constitution which were agreed upon at the round-table, officially making Hungary a democratic republic.

Protests played an even larger part in the breakdown of East Germany. With the Hungarian-Austrian border open, East Germans fled through this pathway to get to West Germany--some went to the West German embassy in Prague (Ash 66). But the frontier was closed by Party leader Erich Honecker who endorsed China's use of repression against protestors. Yet despite brutal repression, spontaneous protests broke out several times during September and October, and eventually Krenz replaced Honecker. Borders were

subsequently opened, and the Party resigned (Ash 69). Years of repression and division caused the people to chant "Wir sind EIN Volk"--we are ONE people--instead of the national anthem's "Wir sind das Volk" (Ash 72).

In Prague, the process was the shortest, taking only just under a month, but Ash's detailed account makes it seem the most complicated of the *refolutions*. Here the center stage was taken by the writer Václav Havel in the Magic Lantern. Students and actors proclaimed a general strike. A Civic Forum was created in which various opposition groups banded together to make demands of the government. Protests continued throughout this time at Wenceslas Square (Ash 91). Gorbachev even pushed the *refolution* on by denouncing the 1968 invasion (Ash 141). Eventually, the communists voted themselves out of power, realizing, as Ash puts it, "We have no right to preserve our rule by force. The end no longer justifies the means" (Ash 142)! For Europe, this meant a time of throwing off the one-party repression that had been forced on them for years, but it also had other implications. Older problems resurfaced.

In Germany there was popular support for a "campaign against Polish smugglers," as well as black students and guest workers (Ash 144). Ash makes note of possible ethnic problems as a result of the revolutions. Although it occurred after the writing of Ash's book, the breakup of Yugoslavia was the realization of such racial problems. After the death of Tito, Slobodan Milošević was able to secure his presidency by stealing votes from the different districts. Milošević voiced an ethnically nationalistic rhetoric which led the different Yugoslav republics to seek autonomy. In 1991 Croatia and Slovenia seceded, creating a war between Croatian forces and Serbian forces. Germany pushed through the recognition of Croatia and Slovenia in 1991, Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992, and Macedonia

in 1993, in order to stabilize the war. The UN sent forces to maintain the peace in Bosnia, but they had no mandate to do so. Eventually, as the UN stepped out of the process and the US stepped in, negotiations were reached in the Dayton Accords in 1995 which split Bosnia into a Muslim-Croat federation and a Serb Republic. War broke out again between Kosovo and Serbia in 1999. NATO bombed Belgrade as a result, and Kosovo was made a UN mandate. The ramifications of repressed peoples freeing themselves also meant the renewal of old ethnic hatred.

With the fall of the USSR several other countries declared their independence in Europe. This shows that the means no longer justified the ends. One could not have a communist society if it were brought about by repression, because the result would simply be a one-party dictatorship. One could make the realist argument that Stalin only ever intended on using the Eastern bloc as a subservient buffer zone. Perhaps communism was always just a pretense. But by 1989, nothing could revive communism, because the USSR had redefined it. And although the *refolutions* in Eastern Europe appear to have succeeded, one notes that it was not a success everywhere, especially as old ethnic resentment has been played up again for political ends.