

The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Empire

BY VLADIMIR TISMANEANU

From Yalta to Glasnost: The Dismantling of Stalin's Empire
By Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, New York: Basil Blackwell, 288 pages, \$32.95

Lighting the Night: Revolution in Eastern Europe, by William Echikson
New York: Morrow, 295 pages, \$22.95



The extraordinary speed of the events that took place in 1989 in East and Central Europe created such an excitement that many saw the crumbling of the Soviet empire as a sort of miracle. But some analysts of the political and social affairs in what was once known as the Soviet "outer empire" had long predicted that this conglomerate of East and Central European colonial states wouldn't hold together without direct Soviet intervention.

Among those analysts were Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér. Former students of Georg Lukács, the patriarch of revisionist Marxism, they were forced to leave Hungary in the 1970s when János Kádár launched a vicious campaign against their humanist critique of "really existing socialism." Today, they teach at

the New School for Social Research in New York City.

Proponents of a radical democracy, rooted in respect for the inalienable rights of the individual, they have produced a seminal contribution to the discussion of Marxism and communism. Their unique blend of intense moral commitment and rigorous political analysis has often challenged the self-righteous mythology of modernized versions of Marxism. While other leftists closed their eyes to the totalitarian horror, Fehér and Heller revealed the imperialist nature of the Soviet system.

Over the years, Heller and Fehér have focused on the inner flaws of communist regimes. In this new collection of some of their best essays, they provide a com-

prehensive and unorthodox interpretation of Eastern Europe's decades-long struggle against communism. For them, the revolution in Eastern Europe wasn't simply a rejection of bureaucratic-collectivist domination but also a search for national self-assertion by countries forcibly turned into Soviet satellites by Stalin at the end of World War II.

The two write with passion. Indeed, the authors confess from the outset that they have participated in the debate among the opposition in Eastern Europe over which strategy will best transcend a system that wished to completely annihilate any source of dissent and criticism. They write to reveal history—not simply to add another academic treatise on the transition from dictatorship to democracy.

For Heller and Fehér, the meaning of the 1989 upheaval can't be captured without reference to what they call "East Europe's long revolution against Yalta." Yalta, of course, was the international arrangement that permitted the establishment of puppet regimes in the countries occupied by the Red Army at the end of World War II. "The anti-Yalta revolution had four distinct phases in eastern Europe," they write. "The first phase took place in the immediate postwar period in which the groundwork of the Stalinist system was laid. The second spanned the three to four years immediately following Stalin's death in 1953. The third, long period included Khrushchev's last years of power and the whole Brezhnev era which, with respect to Yalta alone, showed a remarkable degree of similarity." Finally, the fourth coincided with the spasmodic attempts by the Soviet elite under Mikhail Gorbachev to overhaul the obsolete communist system and to establish a new international arrangement in relations with the West.

The 1956 Hungarian revolution epitomized Eastern Europe's rejection of such a frozen world. At the moment the

prime minister, Imre Nagy, proclaimed Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and his country's neutrality, he defied all the existing rules of the game. The Hungarian insurrection foreshadowed the great turmoil of 1989, the rise of political pluralism, and the complete breakdown of the repressive communist system. Unfortunately, in 1956 the Soviet Union was still controlled by a Stalinist mafia with absolutely no tolerance for spontaneous movements from below.

The authors discuss the meaning of Kádárism, the political and economic system established in Hungary after the crushing of the revolution. They demonstrate that behind the apparent benevolence of the regime, the repressive features of communist authoritarianism were jealously guarded. Unlike many others who, in the 1970s and early 1980s, were enthralled with the Kádár regime's more liberal policies, Heller and Fehér maintained a critical distance that permitted them to anticipate the inevitable collapse of a regime that dissident writer Miklós Haraszti aptly called the "velvet prison."

The book also includes a number of illuminating essays about the sense of Gorbachev's reforms. Initially, Heller and Fehér were extremely skeptical of Gorbachev's intentions. They regarded the new reformist wave in the Soviet Union as an effort to update Khrushchevism. In other words, it was an attempt to preserve the old system by tinkering with its most repellent elements.

Writing about Gorbachev's desperate desire to modernize the Soviet system without really renouncing the Communist Party's hegemonic role, Heller and Fehér conclude, "Gorbachev is truly an heir to the worst illusions of the Khrushchev era. He too keeps squaring the circle, reducing what is a social and political problem to the level of a mere technological dilemma." As the events in Eastern Europe showed, economic reforms can't be successfully implemented in the absence of radical political reforms. While they remain skeptical of Gorbachev's motivations, the authors believe that the process of reform may have gone too far to be stopped.

The real changes in communist

countries couldn't come from voluntary concessions by the corrupt and parasitic bureaucracies that ruled them. The anti-Yalta revolution included a social dimension, a struggle of society against an ossified and blatantly inefficient political and economic system. One can't do full justice here to a book full of historical insights and provocative ideas. With its political and philosophical élan, this book is one of the best and most convincing efforts to explain rationally the development of social and political movements

**Echikson's analysis
shows why change
had to come from
the beleaguered
independent networks
rather than from the
compromised, cynical
ruling party.**

that ended the Yalta system and started the democratic reconstruction of post-communist societies.

An excellent survey of the movements that championed the breakdown of communism is offered by William Echikson in his sympathetic account of the "upheaval in the East" (to quote the headline of the *New York Times* pages dedicated for months to events in the former Soviet Bloc). A longtime correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, now with the *Wall Street Journal*, Echikson has managed to avoid the usual pitfalls of journalistic reports: a fascination with the spectacular and a reluctance to examine complex intellectual and ethical issues readers often find either abstruse or tedious.

Echikson uses a more ambitious and certainly more thorough approach. Unlike Heller and Fehér, his account is highly personal. He gives us his story of how communism fell apart. His story focuses on the social origins of the upheaval rather than on petty squabbles within the

communist bureaucracies. In this respect, both books emphasize the role of independent social movements in the disintegration of the once apparently monolithic bloc. Both insist that underneath the facade of unanimous acquiescence to the status quo there were deep-seated forces that expressed what Václav Havel called "the independent life of society."

Actually, even the experience of the Budapest school of critical Marxism, with the disappointments it encountered trying to reform Marxism from within, played an important role in the maturing of the democratic opposition in Hungary. Before leaving their native country, Heller and Fehér were central figures within this school, together with authors such as Mihály Vajda, György and Maria Márkus, György Bence, and János Kis. Some joined Heller and Fehér in immigrating to the West. Others, such as Kis, remained in Hungary and founded networks of independent thought and action.

Kis is now chairman of Hungary's Alliance of Free Democrats, the country's second largest political party. The Free Democrats' political program is pluralistic and liberal. Given the prominence so many of these intellectuals have attained, Echikson's fascination with the nuclei of civil society—voluntary, nongovernmental groups and associations—in Central Europe was totally legitimate. Indeed, he was one of the few Western journalists to understand that political change in the region would be sweeping, rapid, and all-embracing.

Echikson's analysis shows why this change had to come from the beleaguered independent networks rather than from the compromised, cynical ruling parties. These new movements embodied a different understanding of politics, one rooted in universal human values and respect for individual rights. Students of Eastern Europe will discover in Echikson's book insightful comments and information about the meaning of civil society in Eastern Europe. (The term, now fashionable, was initially considered obscure and even irrelevant. Echikson mentions that his editors at the *Christian Science Monitor* refused to let him use it. But he persevered in watching the movements from

below and their major activists.)

Echikson pays special attention to dissidents such as Polish historian Adam Michnik, Czechoslovakian playwright (now President) Václav Havel, and Hungarian writer Miklós Haraszti. What is original and refreshing about this book is its rich collection of information about the underground groups and movements in the region and Echikson's ability to highlight their role in their societies' awakening. He details, in a perceptive and thought-provoking manner, the rise of new political formations from the larger matrix of civil society. For him, the collapse of communism was caused by the growing chasm between the decaying official institutions and the mounting movements from below who represented the real interests and aspirations of the people.

Echikson claims that when the ruling elites have accepted their defeat, civil society has exhausted its revolutionary potential, and the time for the revival of political parties that would propose alternative strategies for social change has arrived. "When Eastern Europe's communist rulers accepted the principle of a multi-party state, the need to create conventional standard political parties replaced the slow, step-by-step construction of Civil Society. The opposition assumed power. People who were conditioned to think only of what they didn't want now had to think of what they wanted. They could no longer just be against. They had to be 'for' something. Civil Society was a product of living in defeat. A new political structure and strategy were needed to manage victory."

Echikson is right. Civil society represents a prerequisite for the reinvention of politics in countries where the system tried for decades to make the individual fearful and obedient. At the same time, one cannot categorically separate the new stage from the old: Civil society is also a methodology for society's self-organization—the construction of a social space that escapes governmental controls.

Today, as these countries engage in building free markets and unbinding the individual, the development of solid and

viable civil societies remains an actual component of democratization. This is even more urgent in countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, where the opposition to communism was less articulate than in Central Europe and where the former Communist parties have managed to preserve their domination even after the 1989 upheaval.

Structured along thematic lines, the book shows the author's skill in comparing different cultures and political traditions. Particularly exciting is the section dealing with the resurrection of old passions long repressed by communist rule. Echikson concludes his book in a moderately optimistic tone. He thinks that, at least in countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, the

leaders of the new Eastern Europe are people of great integrity and dedication. Although many dangers are looming in that region, including the rise of populist and ethnocentric movements, one cannot forget that these societies have learned much from their experience of totalitarian dictatorships.

There are strong nationalist passions in East and Central Europe, to be sure, but there is also a powerful desire to create free and prosperous societies.

Vladimir Tismaneanu teaches politics at the University of Maryland, College Park, and is a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. He is completing a book on Eastern Europe after communism.

Generation Gaps

BY KARL ZINSMEISTER

Beyond the Boom: New Voices on American Life, Culture & Politics
 Edited by Terry Teachout, New York: Poseidon Press, 215 pages, \$18.95

Observers faced with the task of reading flows in American culture often do so by slicing off significant subpopulations for detailed examination. One favorite cut is by age—"generations" have long been viewed as crucial dividing lines for understanding social behavior and attitudes. But the recent track record of generation-based social theorizing is not very inspiring. An egregious example pertains to the '60s kids. We were told over and over that they were unlike anything the human race had produced previously, yet in middle age they've turned out to be mostly indistinguishable from other Americans.

Part of the problem with the 1960s generation-break blather was selective focus. The 10 percent who shredded draft cards, mixed them with hashish, rolled the by-product in their bras, and burned the whole concoction in a water pipe were put forth as representative. The regular-guy stiffs who joined the Marines, had children and then actually raised them, took jobs or created them, converted to



The *Beyond the Boom* bunch shares the "thirtysomething" tendency to whine.

Good News Christianity, and went deer hunting were, as usual, invisible to the people writing about over-affluent, greening, tuned-out Americans from their graduate school command posts.

Another part of the problem was that people not only can but almost always do change their minds about the world as