
the last word. More significant is his recognition that we need to be more modest about what politics can accomplish. It would do wonders for our political life if people looked to government to protect commerce, provide economic security, and defend the country, while religious, educational, and community institutions worried about the search for the good.

In any case, if we are to respect both the pleasure and the fear that sexuality evokes in

real people, we ought to recognize the dangers of sincerity and the benefits of hypocrisy. When most people believe that abortion is wrong but also know that they or their children may have to think about one, what can the political system do but look both ways?

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Tattered Velvet

EXIT INTO HISTORY: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe. *By Eva Hoffman.* Viking. 410 pp. \$23

THE BIRTH OF FREEDOM: Shaping Lives and Societies in the New Eastern Europe. *By Andrew Nagorski.* Simon & Schuster. 319 pp. \$23

THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. *By Gale Stokes.* Oxford Univ. Press. 319 pp. \$25

Once upon a time, and not a long time ago it was, Eastern Europe was an almost forgotten place, a great gray swath of territory in the external empire of the Soviet Union. Periodic explosions of discontent were followed by no less periodic repressions and freezes. Then, during the miraculous year 1989, it became a magical territory where hope was rediscovered and the impossible became real. Communism was dismantled, and the nations of Eastern and Central Europe entered a new era. To many in the region and in the West, it appeared as though a new genre of politics was being tested, one based on the values

of dialogue, subjectivity, and human autonomy. "Civil society" was the code word for this antipolitical politics, and Václav Havel, with his celebration of individual rights, its chief spokesperson.

Then, as a few wise prophets had predicted, the past came back with a vengeance. Nationalist passions threatened to destroy the fragile new political democracies, velvet revolutions were followed by velvet divorces, and the region appeared in less rosy colors. Transition ailments, including skyrocketing unemployment and social inequalities, soon led to



widespread nostalgia for an authoritarian order. Idealism was replaced by pragmatism, disenchantment spread, Machiavellian intrigues and arrangements flourished. Meanwhile, the communists themselves have staged a strong comeback. Last summer, the communists, having renamed themselves the Democratic Left Alliance, took 20 percent of the seats of the Sejm, the Polish parliament. Similar prospects loom large in Hungary's forthcoming elections.

Can it be that the Adam Michniks and the Václav Havels were wrong? Does anything remain of the great promises of antipolitics? Will Eastern Europe be able to escape its current predicament and construct workable liberal institutions and procedures?

The questions are disturbing not only because they bear on Eastern Europe's immediate future but also because they touch on the larger issue of the universal validity of liberal democracy and the very possibility of securing pluralist governments in countries that have little democratic "usable past." While they do not address such questions directly, three recently published books shed valuable light on the unfolding story of civic self-reclamation.

In *The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, Rice University historian Gale Stokes offers a needed preamble to the current predicament. His book is an authoritative if somewhat workmanly survey of the dynamics of the Soviet bloc after 1968. In Stokes's telling, the Soviets' prompt suppression of the Czech reformist experiment concluded a chapter in the history of Eastern Europe: the story of the effort to change things from above. Following the debacle of 1968, change was to come from outside the party, from the restored civic associations, or what Czech philosopher Václav Benda called a "parallel polis."

While Stokes describes this grassroots activism and unofficial civic ferment skillfully, he seems to hold to the questionable and somewhat contradictory notion that the revolutions of 1989 were the effect of the gradual

exhaustion of communism's utopian appeals. True, the loss of elite self-confidence was significant, but the genuine force that brought down communism was the collective awareness among the powerless, and primarily among critical intellectuals, of the possible alternative. Indeed, it was the human dimension, Hegel's "negative conscience," that slowly but irresistibly chipped away at the established order. And it is this human dimension that is so essential to the making of the new societies.

In fact, the most perplexing issues confronting postcommunism involve the marginalization of the former dissidents and the vindictiveness of those who did not engage in resistance during the decades of communism but who now posture as apostles of purity and intransigence. A whole political set seems to have left the political scene. Their successors are primarily the former inhabitants of what used to be called the "gray area"—the realm between the communist institutions and the dissident counterculture. Although Havel is still president of the Czech Republic, for example, his position is largely ceremonial, his influence on political decisions minimal. Former dissidents are seen as losers, quixotic characters, dreamers little in touch with the hard realities of postcommunism. At worst, they are attacked as leftists, troublemakers, moralistic preachers. Given this turn of events, one wishes all the more that Stokes's history of the prelude to 1989 provided a closer look at the dissidents and the occupants of the gray area—at both their values and their ways of operating.

In *The Birth of Freedom*, Andrew Nagorski, *Newsweek's* correspondent for Central European affairs, brings us closer to this kind of investigation. Interviewing various members of the new political class, he shows us a group whose ambition is to sever all links to the past, especially to the dissidents. Czech prime minister Václav Klaus, a strong proponent of liberal economics, never formally joined the dissident circles during the communist era. Today, he explains to Nagorski, with

so much practical work to be done, experience as a dissident should not be considered a professional qualification.

Nagorski lets us hear from the dissidents as well. Father Václav Maly, a former Czech dissident now completely devoted to his priestly duties, is more cynical about the aftermath of 1989. Because many people had collaborated with the communists in some way, Maly relates, the dissidents annoyingly personify whatever guilt they have: "It's a covert pleasure to push them out of politics."

Had Nagorski included Romania in his research, he would have discovered the same pattern. At first, the few dissidents who challenged the Ceaușescu despotism were praised; then, after the new regime was installed in December 1989, they were marginalized and slandered. Similarly, dissidents in the former East Germany, primarily intellectuals, have become the targets of vicious attacks from people who never lifted a finger to oppose the old regime.

At the same time, ironically, there has been tremendous social pressure to identify and bring to justice those responsible for years of repression. The ambiguities of "de-communization" are extensively analyzed not only by Nagorski but also by Eva Hoffman in *Exit into History*. Both focus on the same story of a Czech dissident who was accused of cooperating informally with the secret police, and who as a result saw his political career destroyed by innuendo and unconfirmed allegations.

Vexing questions abound. For example, should the secret-police archives be allowed to govern the lives of individuals decades after the collapse of communism? Add to this the obvious fact that many of the documents in these archives can be manufactured or doctored. Add further that a reference to a certain name of an individual may simply indicate the date he or she was interrogated—hardly an act of collaboration. Being so obsessed with their wounds, Eastern Europeans may be unable to balance retribution with forgiveness. As Hoffman puts it, they "may be finding the limits of too much remembering after having

learned so well the dangers of too much forgetting."

There is, of course, a genuine need to settle accounts with the past. But as Hungary's president Árpád Göncz has pointed out, this should take place in the form of historical analysis and public discussion, rather than through exceptional and always dangerous forms of "corrective justice." Otherwise, de-communization serves all too easily as a vindictive battle cry for conservatives of old and new stripes, populists obsessed with the purity of the nation, and nationalists caught up in paranoid fantasies of foreign conspiracies. The new elites have to choose, Nagorski says, between governing and settling personal scores. The ghosts of the past will not vanish until lucidly scrutinized; the surprising return of the former communists in Poland may offer the best motivation.

The other serious challenge to pluralism involves the rise of the new ethnocentric movements. This trend is not only the unenviable hallmark of the southeastern part of the region, the Balkans. It also stalks the streets (more quietly, to be sure) of Central Europe. Boulevards have been named after former war criminals, former fascist dictators have received official reburials, and Gypsies, Jews, and liberals are again being scapegoated for past and present troubles. Nagorski examines the case of the Hungarian populist writer and politician István Csurka, whose extreme xenophobic views are served up as anticommunist broadsides. What Csurka abhors are liberal values, pluralism, Western-style institutions—all of which he lumps together as elements of a "Judeo-Bolshevik plot." Although Hungary's ruling Democratic Forum forced him out, Csurka has a growing following. Nevertheless, just as in Russia, these ethnocentric movements—with their salvationist rhetoric and their demonization of foreigners, minorities, and the "corrupt West"—are not likely to attract more than a strong minority in Eastern and Central Europe.

In general, while the threats to democracy are unmistakably present and the new, post-1989 politics has turned out to be less exhilarating—and certainly less pure—than we expected, one should not overreact and see these countries as sliding into new forms of authoritarianism. The old regime, with its despotic structure of repression and ideological pretense, is over. There are numerous encouraging achievements, most especially the disappearance of fear, the greatest force behind submissiveness and passivity. Liberal values have set roots in the region, political parties have developed, and the separation of powers is more than a constitutional stipulation. The media have feverishly expanded, enjoying the discovery of unhindered freedom of expression and opinion. And such segments of “civil society” as independent unions, human rights organizations, and associations committed to opposing bigotry and racism have helped keep alive the ideas and spirit of the dissident groups of the past.

Ironically, one of the greatest hopes for the ultimate success of democracy in these countries may come from the most unlikely of sources: the metamorphosis of the old communist *nomenklaturas* into the new business elites. Nagorski focuses on the case of Ireneusz Sekula, a former Polish minister, indeed a chief economic planner, now turned into a successful business executive representing a Polish-Japanese company. The same story could be documented ad nauseam in all the former communist states. To most people, seeing the former political rulers institutionalize their economic privileges is outrageous. But as they grow rich and benefit from the new order, such new entrepreneurs turn hostile to any return of the past. Cynical as they are, they have already linked their fate to the existence of a market economy.

As for the dissolution of the dissident culture, the fact remains that some of the former

dissidents simply could not cope with the burden of bureaucratic tasks. Others could not tolerate the discipline and hierarchy imposed by party politics. In a way, it is normal that the countries of Eastern Europe are now governed by political figures skeptical of romantic abstractions. As Czech political philosopher Martin Palouš recently told me, it may well be that a “third generation” will soon come to the political fore, one that will reconcile the moral zeal of the first and the pragmatism of the second.

In short, the troubles of the current period, including all the outbursts of rancor and envy, should not lead to a revision of all earlier assumptions about the Velvet Revolution. The point is most poignantly spelled out by Nagorski: “Those opposition movements triumphed because of what was to rank as this century’s major creative intellectual achievements: the development of a nonviolent strategy, an entire philosophy of resistance, that undermined the seemingly invincible military and political might of the Soviet empire.”

Civil society was indeed an intellectual project based on the values of tolerance, trust, and individual freedom. Its objective was to create social energies, to inspire social activism, to stir people up and turn them from subjects of the state into citizens of a true republic. That these republics are less noble and successful than many would have wished is beyond doubt. But that does not alter the fundamental fact that the revolutions were made in the name of generously defined liberal values and not on behalf of nationalism or any other form of populism.

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