
IN THE MARGIN

Between East & West

By Anthony Hartley



FIRST "SAMIZDAT" and then "Charter 88"—is there never to be an end to the British Left's attempt to attract prestige to themselves by an identification with the more risky activities of Russian or Czech

dissidents? The aim of such enterprises, in so far as they have political meaning, is to assist the formation of a Lib-Lab coalition which, by unifying the forces opposed to Mrs Thatcher's government, can break its seemingly durable hold on the voters, but the patrons of this idea have chosen a singularly indirect route to their objective. Anyone who wants a written British constitution will presumably have to wait till the cows come home, and, since no opposition party leader seems to be in favour of anything of the kind, the operation is unlikely to have much success. However, it may continue to provide fodder for political journalists and occasion for deliciously conspiratorial meetings for some time to come.

As for the implication, present in the references to East European conditions, that we all live in a Britain increasingly subject to the fear and oppression usually found in a totalitarian state, Dr Julius Toman, a signatory of the Czech intellectuals' "Charter 77", said what was necessary when he remarked that the adoption of the name was "cheap". He went on: "People here are not oppressed. They are not yet speaking from within some really threatened right."¹

All this seems to be more a product of political frustration than a true perception of Britain today. In media nightmares, no doubt, gallant BBC producers struggle against a merciless bureaucracy, and investigative journalists are dragged screaming from the typewriter by the minions of MI5. But the martyrs of the media will soon wake up and find themselves at home in bed, free to pursue their unhampered careers. They need no *samizdats* or charters to provide what they already have: a good deal of licence to call the quick and the dead over the coals.

The iron rule of Mrs Thatcher apart, it is curious that Brit-

¹ See *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 December 88. It is fair to add that the drafters of "Charter 88" recognise this point: "Conditions here are so much better than in Eastern Europe as to bear no comparison." But in that case why adopt a name which invites one?

ish intellectuals in a spectrum ranging from what was once the Alliance to *Marxism Today* should have chosen to identify themselves with the East European intelligentsia's resistance to tyranny. It is a powerful, if backhanded, tribute to the Russian and Czech dissidents that the very mention of them should be taken to conjure up ideas of freedom and the rule of law.

Such admiration is natural enough. These are men who have suffered for what they believe; it is their close encounters with totalitarianism that give their liberal opinions a strength such views can hardly possess in countries where they have become a cliché. In the West what is called "liberalism" has too often been associated with the soul-searchings and indecision of a cultured élite. A lack of self-confidence, the inability to say boo to a goose—these are the patterns of behaviour that the word "liberal" brings to mind—probably unfairly. In Eastern Europe things are different. Those who have fought for the more robust liberalism of Mill and Tocqueville have said boo to kites and vultures. Their image is that of men ready to fight and, if necessary, die. Of course, we take them seriously. Of course, the word "democracy" on their lips has a different ring from when it is used in, say, a speech from the rostrum at a meeting of the National Union of Students.

Will this living example of fighting liberalism have its effect on us? Can we expect from Eastern Europe a renewal of political sincerity that will find its echo in the West? Political protest—manifestos, leaflets, demonstrations—takes on reality in as much as it is addressed to real evils. It loses significance when trotted out for one trivial complaint after another. The word "hungry" can be used to describe a well-fed individual who has missed his lunch or a starving peasant in the Sahel. But there is little doubt which of these two cases infuses more genuine meaning into it.

IN THE YEARS to come Eastern Europe's intellectual output will affect the West in many ways. This cultural invasion began with clandestine writings. A Kundera or a Solzhenitsyn had all the more impact in that their works came to us painfully and at long intervals. Now the volume of writing from the East is growing, and, as well as novelists and poets, we shall be able to read historians and philosophers writing as they must have written for themselves and a trusted student or two, without the protective camouflage of an assumed Marxism. Soon we shall have a better knowledge of the intellectual vitality seething beneath the surface of Communist orthodoxy.

As these new ideas and alien experiences reach us, what shall we make of them? "Human kind", wrote Eliot, "cannot bear too much reality", and it may be that the flood of testimony from Eastern Europe will confuse and baffle us as much as it stimulates. The years that were necessary to absorb, say, Dostoevsky into the mental world of Western Europe should warn us against possible misunderstandings. How many of those who read Solzhenitsyn have the faintest idea of what his beliefs imply? The millennium of the Russian Orthodox Church was reported as though the Patriarch Pimen

was a slightly more traditional version of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Years ago I came across a series of "Phil-Hellenic" plates in an antique shop in Paris and should have bought them instantly. Alas! they were gone next day. On one of them was painted a scene memorably described as "The virgins of Samothrace interposing their breasts before the bayonets of the savage invaders" (i.e. the Turks). Such exotic images made up the 19th century's view of wars of liberation: Byron at Missolonghi, the Bulgarians being massacred by Bashibazouks, Garibaldi and his Red Shirts, the Austrian General Haynau whipping Magyar women and, subsequently, being chased around the streets of London by Whitbread's draymen. But these exciting pictures had little to do with the reality of the political situations in question. Byron was none too keen on many of the Greek patriots when he came to meet them, and the mind boggles at a possible encounter between Gladstone and a Bulgarian *komitadji*.

Our own judgments are likely to suffer from similar misunderstandings when we survey what is going on in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe today. One of the most obvious features of the scene is a clash of resurgent nationalisms, whose explosive symptoms are beginning to appear all over the Balkans as well as in the Soviet republics. The Serbs appear to be on the brink of provoking an Albanian insurrection in the region of Kosovo; Romanians are outraging Hungarians by the demolition of their Transylvanian villages; Bulgars are oppressing Turks in the south-east of that country. So the old 19th-century dance goes on. As for the Soviet Union, in addition to the dispute between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, nationalism is flaring in the Baltic republics, in Georgia and in the Muslim areas of the country.

IT IS SOMETHING of an irony that, whereas in the West we tend to regard our own national feelings as somewhat archaic and out-dated, we should welcome nationalism in Eastern Europe as a sign of vitality and rediscovered identity. In Poland or in Hungary national feeling gave the peoples of those countries something to cling to during years of oppression and misery. None the less, incidents like the struggle over Nagorno-Karabakh cost innocent lives, and the fierce antagonisms now once again manifesting themselves all over Eastern Europe, as the pressure from the Soviet Union lightens, could kindle fires that it would be difficult to put out. The gap between Eastern and Western Europe is particularly wide when it comes to the intensity with which a country's cause is sustained. The remark of a BBC official during the Falklands War that he was not "in the patriotism business" would

² Professor Ernst Nolte has got himself into trouble in Germany by comparing Stalin's atrocities with Hitler's. Perhaps they were both so utterly appalling that there is little point in setting one against the other. What can be said is that the standards of civilisation in Germany had previously been so high that the depth of National Socialist regression came as an unparalleled shock.

not be understood in Moscow or in Warsaw. In Western Europe we can take our country's identity for granted until someone rouses the patriot in us. In Eastern Europe 19th-century nationalism, as well as 19th-century liberalism, is alive and kicking.

IN THESE DAYS of "interdependence" and "supranational authority" it is as well not to forget the strength of the bonds that have been forged, over the centuries, between peoples and their habits of government. Nations, after all, are not kept in existence by rational calculations of advantage, but by shared historical experience and an emotional attachment to tradition. A country is a sentimental entity, and it is dangerous, in Burke's words, to consider it as "nothing but a *carte-blanc*, upon which a man may scribble whatever he pleases". To tamper with the roots of national identity may produce a sudden and violent reaction. But this is hardly a conclusion which the signatories of "Charter 88" will draw from their study of Eastern Europe. Evidently they are inveterate scribblers.

If we are to compare our lot with that of the peoples of Eastern Europe, we must be aware how appalling their historical experience is—even set alongside our own memories of two world wars. How are Russian intellectuals to come to terms with what went on under Stalin? In Western Europe only the regressive barbarism of Nazi Germany poses this problem of interpretation.² So far, the official version is that what happened was the fault of a mad and bad dictator; sooner or later it will have to be admitted that Lenin created the apparatus of repression which Stalin used. The 250,000 corpses newly discovered in one of five mass graves near Minsk in White Russia—the only one to be opened so far—do indeed require some historical explanation. Previous Russian rulers had been harsh and brutal, and one at least (Ivan the Terrible) a maniac. But what happened in the Soviet Union cannot be explained in terms of one man's character, important though this may have been. The most irrelevant view on this is that of Trotsky. It was the Revolution, tainted from the start, which intensified many of the worst tendencies in Russian history. Russians must now rethink their history. To do so will be extraordinarily painful—one of those "extreme experiences" around which Dostoevsky based his novels, a torture for the soul, a knife in the heart.

It is this heavy past which separates Western from Eastern Europe, admire its culture and its dissidents as we may. It is this too which makes the evocation of their experience by the signatories of "Charter 88" or the editors of *Samizdat* less than appropriate. Only by a powerful effort of imagination can we understand what the Soviet Union and the states that border it have suffered. If we can make that effort, we shall be left speechless with pity and terror. Then, as the Bible puts it, we should be silent for half an hour. It is no theme for the chattering classes.

LETTERS

Philosopher of "Hope"

J. P. STERN'S altogether justified demythologising of Ernst Bloch on "hope" ("Philosopher of 'Hope'", ENCOUNTER, July-August 1988) recalls the fuller, more positive, yet finally even more devastating critique of Bloch by Josef Pieper in *Hope and History* (Burns & Oates, 1969). Before Bloch, Pieper had already published his penetrating treatise *On Hope* (1935, Eng. trans. 1986) and Bloch from the start was criticised bitterly by his fellow German Marxists for getting involved in a religious theme. Better than anyone, Pieper appreciated the majesty of Bloch's theme, which shines even through its disfigurement by ideological bias.

Pieper also solved a problem that evidently baffles Stern: how can one authentically hope for what is certain? Bloch's error—slightly but significantly different—lay in thinking that we can really hope for what is within our power and for what we shall inevitably achieve through our own resources. But Pieper and Stern are both right to deride Bloch's hapless correlation of that age-old symbol of hope, "Jerusalem", with Moscow and Lenin. *Ubi Bloch, ibi illusio.*

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Serbian-Albanian Conflict

I READ with much interest the article "Nationalism as Disease and Cure", subtitled "The Albanians in Yugoslavia", written by Anton Logoreci (ENCOUNTER, July-August 1988). The author discusses, on the face of it, the problem of nationalism in the modern world, but does not suggest any cure. I am prompted to add some comments to his article, for very important reasons.

While facts quoted by the author are unquestionable, the article is more remarkable for the facts omitted. Mr Logoreci is correct in citing, at the beginning of his article, the repression of Kosovo Albanians between March 1981 and May 1986. The only point he omits is that since 1966 the government, police and judiciary have been in the hands of the Albanians. Most of the Albanians imprisoned since the outbreak of disorders in 1981 were condemned by Albanian judges. It may be

concluded that the demonstrations and subsequent subversion were not motivated by foreign (allegedly Serb or federal oppression) but by other objectives.

MR LOGORECI completely ignores the fact that since 1966 thousands of criminal offences have been committed by the Albanians against the Serbs—murder, rape, physical injury, arson, destruction of property and livestock. Since the disorders of 1981 the press has been allowed to report incidents, but what happened previously is unknown. We do know that since 1966 about 200,000 Serbs have had to abandon their homes in Kosovo under duress, and to emigrate to other parts of Yugoslavia.

Mr Logoreci states that the Albanians living in Kosovo first experienced a spell of national and cultural freedom under Italian and German occupation from 1941 to 1944—which is both paradoxical and wrong. What about Albanians in Albania, did they share the same fate?

All Albanians were originally Christians. However, after the Turkish conquest in the 15th century, the great majority became Muslim, while the Serbs, Macedonians, and Greeks remained Christian. As Turkey was a religious and not national state, Muslim Albanians became fully-fledged citizens, enjoying all rights—exemption from taxes, the right to bear arms and to own big feudal estates—while the Christians were the deprived population, subject to heavy taxation and, of course, unarmed. The Albanians felt the Muslim culture and civilisation to be their own, and many of them occupied the highest positions in the Turkish army and administration. It is therefore grossly misleading to pretend that the Albanians in Kosovo experienced for the first time national and cultural freedom only under Italian and German occupation.

Mr Logoreci also refers to "old hostility between Serbs and Macedonians aggravated by civil war". This assertion is untrue. There was no hostility between the Serbs and Macedonians during the civil war and the present relations between them are confident and very friendly, as all students of Yugoslav affairs will know. But there is serious conflict between the Macedonians and the Albanians.

I read also the following lines: "As the group which had suffered most under Serbian rule, the Albanians. . . ." Why does Mr Logoreci not tell us what the Serbs suffered under Ottoman and Albanian rule until 1912? He may quote some impartial sources, like consular reports and foreign writers. Why does he not tell us that during World War II many Albanians joined Italian and Ger-

many Albanians joined Italian and German armed forces, and even a full SS division? They committed atrocious crimes against the Serbian and Montenegrin population in Kosovo. He does mention, however, that Albania, which could count on sympathy from Kosovo Albanians, sided with Stalin against Yugoslavia in 1948. Is it surprising that the authorities exercised a tight grip over this border region?

Mr Logoreci is right when he says that the Albanian population was poor and uneducated until the first part of this century. But, whose fault is it? Albanians emerged as a primitive, underdeveloped ethnic group at the end of the Ottoman empire, like the rest of the population living under Turkish rule. They were loyal subjects of the empire throughout, while the Serbs and the Greeks won their freedom at the beginning of the 19th century, and consequently made substantial economic and cultural progress.

Mr Logoreci rightly quotes in conclusion that "the true state of relations among the nationalities was never frankly discussed and little effort was made to inform either the Serbs or the Albanians of the legitimate interests of . . . the other community".

The true state of relations between them is war, which has lasted for several centuries. Even the Serbs, except this writer, are reluctant to recognise it.

Having achieved complete national emancipation and obtained home rule under a Serbian "republic" in Yugoslavia, the Albanians had the opportunity to end the secular war. They did not.

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Logoreci Replies

M. VASIC says that in my article ("Nationalism, as Disease and Cure", ENCOUNTER, July-August 1988) I discuss the problem of nationalism but suggest no cure. He is, of course, right. My whole purpose was to describe, not to prescribe. I have tried in particular to describe and analyse the treatment of the problem of nationalism by the Soviet and Yugoslav Communist leaders during the past 50 years or so. It would have taken far more than one article to deal, for instance, with the highly complex history of Serbian-Albanian relations to which he refers.

The Communist parties of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and other countries promised to solve the problem of nationalism with a magic wand once and for all. It's self-evident that they have done no such thing. Political and cultural repression, coupled with the phoney doctrines of "proletarian internationalism" and "brotherhood and unity",