

## Chapter 16

## RELUCTANT COLLABORATORS

She gave us everything  
 Sun and Wind, always generous  
 Wherever she was, there was life,  
 We are what we are because of her  
 She never abandoned us  
 Even in a frozen world we were warmed . . .  
 The party, the party, she is always right!  
 And Comrades, so it will always remain  
 Since he who fights for the right, is always right . . .  
 He who defends mankind is always right . . .  
 As raised to life by Lenin's spirit, as welded by Stalin  
 The party, the party, the party

—"The Song of the Party," 1949

This is the difficult thing to explain to people: that song—"the party, the party is always right"—we thought it was really the truth, and we behaved that way.

—Herta Kuhrig, Berlin, 2006<sup>1</sup>

TO THE MODERN ear, or perhaps more accurately to the postmodern ear, the lyrics of "The Song of the Party" ("Das Lied der

Partei"), cited above, are not exactly emotive. On the contrary, they seem absurd, and in the years since East Germany ceased to exist they have been mocked, parodied, and even sung by Mickey Mouse in a YouTube production.<sup>2</sup> Without an intact ideology to support them, the words of the chorus—"The party, the party, she is always right!"—sound not merely outdated but laughable. It is difficult to imagine how anyone could have sung them with a straight face.

But those who sang this song in Stalinist East Germany were not laughing, and the words had certainly been composed in earnest. Their author was a Czech-German communist named Louis Fürnberg, who had fled to Palestine during the war and returned to Prague in 1946. As both a Jew and a former émigré, he had become a figure of suspicion in Czechoslovakia by 1949, and was thus excluded from the party congress of that year. In sorrow—or perhaps with the hope of reversing his status—he composed "The Party Is Always Right." But then he got lucky. Instead of going to jail with Slánský, he was sent to East Germany as a diplomat. His song was performed at the Berlin party congress in 1950, where it was much admired. Eventually, it was adopted as the German party's anthem. After that, "The Song of the Party" was performed regularly, at official and party occasions, right up through the 1980s, often with apparent gusto.<sup>3</sup>

Why? Some sang because they were afraid not to sing. But quite a few of them simply didn't listen to the words or weren't interested in them. Indeed, many of those who clapped at the leaders' speeches, or who mouthed slogans at meetings, or who marched in May Day parades did so with a certain odd ambivalence. Millions of people did not necessarily believe all of the slogans they read in the newspaper, but neither did they feel compelled to denounce those who were writing them. They did not necessarily believe that Stalin was an infallible leader, but they did not tear down his portraits. They did not necessarily believe that "the party, the party, the party is always right," but they did not stop singing those lyrics.

There isn't a straightforward explanation for why they did not resist more openly, though some may now think so. For the extraordinary achievement of Soviet communism—as conceived in the 1920s, perfected in the 1930s, and then spread across Eastern Europe after 1945—was the system's ability to get so many apolitical people in so many countries to play along without much protest. The devastation of the war, the exhaustion of its victims, the carefully targeted terror and ethnic cleansing—all of the elements of Sovi-

etization described earlier in this book—are part of the explanation. Both the memory of recent violence and the threat of future violence hovered constantly in the background. If one person in a group of twenty acquaintances was arrested, that might suffice to keep the other nineteen afraid. The secret police's informer network was ever present, and even when it wasn't people thought it might be. The unavoidable, repetitive propaganda in schools, in the media, on the streets, and at all kinds of "apolitical" meetings and events also made the slogans seem inevitable and the system unavoidable. What was the point of objecting?

At the same time, some of the language the authorities used was very appealing. Reconstruction, though it would have happened faster and more efficiently under a different political system, was clearly moving forward. Though they often overreached, communist authorities did call for a war on ignorance and illiteracy, they did align themselves with the forces of science and technical progress, and they did appeal to those who hoped that society could be remade after a terrible war. Jerzy Morawski, a Politburo member in the 1950s, remembered wistfully that "at the beginning, I was enormously impressed with the enthusiasm. I thought we were going to create a new Poland, different from prewar Poland . . . that we would take care of all of those who had been maltreated in the past."<sup>4</sup> Another Pole, a junior officer at the time, remembered that "work waited for people and not the other way around, Warsaw was being rebuilt, industry was being rebuilt, everyone could study. New schools were built, high schools, and everything was free."<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile the systematic destruction of alternative sources of authority and of civil society, also described in previous chapters, meant that those who questioned the system and its values felt isolated and alone. The satirist and writer Jacek Fedorowicz grew up in a family with grave doubts about the regime, but he had no idea what his classmates thought about communism and never asked them: "The terror was such that one didn't speak of it."<sup>6</sup>

The communists also had a clique of influential supporters in the West, among them intellectual luminaries such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Pablo Picasso, who gave a sheen of legitimacy to communist ideology and made many Eastern Europeans feel they weren't merely Soviet subjects but rather part of the Continental avant-garde. Much of Western Europe was turning to the left, after all, so why shouldn't Eastern Europe do so too? Picasso himself visited Poland in 1948 to attend the World Congress of Intellectuals for Peace. Although he tore off his headset and refused to listen to the transla-

tion when the Soviet guests began insulting existentialism and T. S. Eliot, he did seem to approve of much else.<sup>7</sup> He stayed two weeks, donated some hand-painted ceramics to the National Museum, and sketched a mermaid, the symbol of Warsaw, on the wall of one of the new socialist realist "apartments for the workers" in central Warsaw. Alas the workers became annoyed by the numbers of people who wanted to visit the sketch, and they eventually painted it over.<sup>8</sup>

There were also outright bribes. These came in many forms, from the well-paid jobs and exclusive villas offered to famous writers and artists to the pay raises offered to the German technicians and scientists who agreed to stay in the East. Further down the scale, state employees often had very cheap or free meals, better housing, and ration tickets. At the highest levels, the privileges could be very elaborate indeed, especially by the standards of the time. In 1946, the party secretary in the Hungarian town of Csákerény held a grand dinner in the villa he had confiscated from the local gentry. One guest remembered the evening well:

The villa was illuminated, decorated with torches. On the right side of the entrance, the hunting club stood guard in their uniforms, on the left side stood party youth leaders in blue shirts and red tie . . . [outside] some American limousines were parked beside two Soviet military jeeps, several motorbikes, and some horse carriages. One police car was also there . . . Inside on the long table there was a roasted pig, caviar, and turkey, and also wild boar, pheasant, and studded goose. Strong Meran wine from the confiscated vineyards was poured in crystal glasses from crystal bottles . . .<sup>9</sup>

In Budapest and Berlin, party leaders had the pick of the villas left behind by the displaced bourgeoisie. In Warsaw, the party elite generally spent their time outside the city, in the suburb of Konstancin, where they had their own dining facilities and cinema, and where they were protected by armed guards under Soviet command. According to Józef Światło, the secret policeman who defected in 1953, the garden surrounding Bolesław Bierut's villa was "swarming with men in dark suits and briefcases, or with their hands in their pockets," when Bierut and his mistress were in residence: "They are there just in case 'the masses' want to greet him, God forbid." This description might be overcolorful, but it does have an echo in Joel Agee's memoir of his



childhood spent in the home of his stepfather, an East German writer who also lived in a heavily guarded enclave outside Berlin. Wilhelm Pieck's villa was nearby, as Agee remembered: "Many black limousines stood in front of it, and armored cars and jeeps. A ring of barbed wire surrounded the place, patrolled by guards. You could sense it was best not to go too near it."<sup>10</sup>

Secret police employees could offer other services too. All of Bierut's cooks, waiters, and cleaning ladies were Security Ministry employees, according to Światło, and their salaries were paid from its budget. Other dignitaries enjoyed similarly large staff and similarly large residences. Stanisław Radkiewicz, the security police boss, had an apartment in Warsaw, a villa in Konstancin, and four cars with four drivers to get him back and forth. But even further down the scale, deputy ministers and high-ranking security policemen like Światło "had free apartments with servants, and cars at our disposal" as well as free clothes, shoes, blankets, linen, and even socks, gloves, and briefcases.<sup>11</sup>

There were also outright financial rewards for people willing to work secretly on behalf of the regime, especially if they agreed to switch sides. One of the Stasi's most successful early espionage operations, *Aktion Pfeil*, was made possible because a low-level courier for the West German Federal Intelligence Service (the Bundesnachrichtendienst, or BND) was so easily purchased. The courier, Hans-Joachim Geyer, was a former Nazi party member and had been a BND employee for only a few weeks when he was caught. Under interrogation he immediately pleaded guilty, but declared that "he thought he could be of help . . ."

The Stasi put Geyer on the payroll immediately: his first payment went through on December 12, 1952. Geyer continued to travel to West Berlin to meet his contacts. Every time he reported to the Stasi he presented them with receipts, some of which have been lovingly preserved in the Stasi archive and remain there today. These include, among other things, an optician's bill; six tickets to the circus; and sales receipts for books, sporting equipment, and leather goods. Geyer's Christmas shopping list (presumably presents for family) included chocolate biscuits, coconut, a pair of children's stockings, marzipan, apricots, a new suit, and handkerchiefs.

Apparently he was worth it. Thanks to Geyer, one officer wrote, the Stasi had been able to "arrest 108 BND spies in East Germany" and obtain hundreds of original documents. Although he was eventually brought home in the autumn of 1953 after his cover had been blown, he received multiple med-

als from the East German state, and even after his death the GDR continued to pay a hefty pension to his widow.<sup>12</sup> The Stasi even paid all of his sons' education fees, including medical school tuition. Both eventually became doctors.

Consciously or unconsciously, the Stasi background file on Geyer reveals a good deal about the personality type of someone who could be bribed into cooperation. Geyer, his case managers wrote, "wants to please everybody." In addition, "he is devoted to his wife and children and to the property where he lives. He doesn't drink too much. Nothing immoral can be found out about him." He was "politically indifferent" but "easy to influence," and it was suggested that instructors train him in "logical thinking and the dialectical method." Presumably he went along with that too.

For a select few, the communist system also offered dramatic promotions—the "social advance" described in Chapter 13—and excellent opportunities for those who conformed. The new educational system and the new workplace ideology certainly created losers—teachers and intellectuals with a prewar sensibility, older skilled workers, young people who would not or could not conform—but it created many winners as well. Among them were new teachers and workers who replaced the older ones, new writers who replaced older writers, and new politicians who replaced their elders too. Jacek Kuroń, a Union of Polish Youth activist at the time (and later a renowned dissident), observed the results of the "social advance" policy in his Warsaw neighborhood during the 1950s:

In the ruling committee of the local Union of Polish Youth group one could see it with the naked eye. Who came there? Many young people from the poorest houses in Marymont, from the prewar slums, from shacks built after the war with bricks taken out of the rubble, as well as the former officers' villas in Żoliborz, which had become dormitories for the unemployed and were now slums as well. In fact, the people who came had been, until recently, the absolute lowest rung of society. And everyone knew someone in power. An uncle, a brother-in-law, a friend who had once hung around the neighborhood and was now in the Security Department, the army, the militia, the local or regional party committee . . . Of deep significance was the fact that these young people felt themselves to be in charge. And for a certain period, particularly on the neighborhood level, they were.<sup>13</sup>

The communist regime required very little in exchange for this brand-new sensation of control and power: it just asked the beneficiaries to close their eyes occasionally to contradictions between propaganda and reality. To some, this seemed a very small price to pay for rapid social mobility.

Yet most people in the communist regimes did not succumb to dramatic bribes, furious threats, or elaborate rewards. Most people wanted to be neither party bosses nor angry dissidents. They wanted to get on with their lives, rebuild their countries, educate their children, feed their families, and stay far away from those in power. But the culture of High Stalinist Eastern Europe made it impossible to do so in silent neutrality. No one could be apolitical: the system demanded that all citizens constantly sing its praises, however reluctantly. And so the vast majority of Eastern Europeans did not make a pact with the devil or sell their souls to become informers but rather succumbed to constant, all-encompassing, everyday psychological and economic pressure. The Stalinist system excelled at creating large groups of people who disliked the regime and knew the propaganda was false, but who felt nevertheless compelled by circumstances to go along with it. For lack of a better expression, I'll call them "resistant" or "reluctant" collaborators.

Upon returning from a labor camp in Siberia, for example, Wolfgang Lehmann wanted to get a job in construction in East Germany. Because of his record, he wasn't accepted anywhere. The chief engineer advised him to join the German-Soviet friendship society. He did. For good measure, he got a Russian friend to write a letter certifying that he'd been a good friend to the USSR while in the Gulag. He got the job.<sup>14</sup> Michał Bauer, a Home Army soldier who also spent time in the Gulag, found himself working at a state company a few years later. Every day, the entire staff had to gather to listen to readings from the morning's newspapers. Sometimes he had to preside over these sessions, even though he never had any sympathy for communism at all: "They would say 'Bauer, tomorrow you've got press duty, find a theme' . . . if you didn't do it, you could be thrown out of work."<sup>15</sup>

The musician Andrzej Panufnik also had no love for a system he found "artistically and morally dishonest . . . My musical imagination turned somersaults at the thought of reflecting the 'struggle of the people victoriously marching toward socialism.'" After the war, Panufnik wanted nothing

except to rebuild his country and compose music. But in order to be allowed to do so, he had to join the Union of Polish Composers. And when all union members were ordered to compete to compose a new "Song of the United Party," he was forced to do that too: if he refused, he was told, not only would he lose his post, the whole union would lose the financial support of the state. He wrote a song "literally in a few minutes, setting the ridiculous text to the first jumble of notes that came into my head. It was rubbish, and I smiled to myself as I sent it off to the adjudicators." To his eternal embarrassment, he won first prize.<sup>16</sup>

These examples are by no means unusual. By the 1950s, most people in Eastern Europe worked in state jobs, lived in state-owned properties, and sent their children to state schools. They depended on the state for health care, and they bought food from state-owned shops. They were understandably cautious about defying the state except in dramatic circumstances. And, much of the time, their circumstances were not dramatic, because in peacetime, most people's circumstances are not dramatic.

In 1947, for example, the Soviet military administrators in East Germany passed order number 90, a regulation governing the activity of publishing houses and printers. In essence, the rule said that every printing press must be licensed and that licensed printing presses could only print books and pamphlets that had been approved and stamped by the official censors. Failure to comply with these simple guidelines did not lead to arrest or execution, but could cause the printer to be fined or the printing press to be shut down.<sup>17</sup> The order presented the owner of a printing press in Dresden or Leipzig with a very straightforward choice. He could comply with the law and print only what was permitted. Or he could break the law and lose his printer's license, and therefore his livelihood. For most people, it just wasn't worth it. For those who had a sick wife, a son in a Soviet camp, or an aging parent to support, the incentive to stay within the law was even higher.

But once the Dresden printer had made that compromise, others would follow. He might dislike communist ideology, but when presented with the collected works of Stalin, he would agree to print them. He might dislike communist economics, but when presented with a Marxist textbook, he'd probably go ahead and print that too. Why not? There were no consequences: no one would be hurt or go to jail. But if he said no, then he and his family could have real problems, and someone else would soon print it in any case.

Meanwhile, all across East Germany, other owners of other printing presses were making the same decisions. After a while—with no one being shot and no one going to prison and no one even suffering any particular pangs of conscience—the only books left to read were the ones approved by the authorities. After a little more time had passed, there were no private printing presses anymore either. None of the printers involved would necessarily have considered himself a collaborator, let alone a communist. And yet every one of them had somehow contributed to the creation of totalitarianism. So did everyone who endured a university course in Marxism-Leninism in order to become a doctor or an engineer; everyone who joined an artists' union in order to become a painter; everyone who put a portrait of Bierut in his office in order to keep his job; and, of course, everyone who joined the crowd in singing "the party, the party, the party is always right."

The experience of living in a society that forced everyone to sound enthusiastic all of the time, and that forced many people to say and do things they didn't believe in, eventually had profound psychological consequences. Despite all of the state's efforts, despite the education and the propaganda, many people retained an inner sense of disjunction or discomfort. "I was shouting from a tribune at some university meeting in Wrocław, and simultaneously felt panicked at the thought of myself shouting . . . I told myself I was trying to convince [the crowd] by shouting, but in reality I was trying to convince myself," remembered the writer Jacek Trznadel.<sup>18</sup> Panufnik, the composer, agonized over how and what to write—he couldn't bear the "nineteenth-century musical language" the regime preferred but did not want to be accused of "professing the art of the rotten West" either, especially after his daughter was born. He sought refuge in the restoration of old Polish music from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: "Thus I could help to reconstruct a small part of our missing inheritance, working more as a scholar than as a composer."<sup>19</sup> If the genius of Soviet totalitarianism was its ability to get people to conform, this was also its fatal flaw: the need to conform to a mendacious political reality left many people haunted by the sense that they were leading double lives.

Lily Hajdú-Gimes, a trained Freudian psychoanalyst, was perhaps the first to diagnose this as a problem in patients, as well as in herself. "I play the game that is offered by the regime," she told friends, "though as soon as you accept that rule you are in a trap." Hajdú-Gimes was a member of Hungary's Association of Psychoanalysts, a once influential and largely Jewish community

that had been decimated by the war. Determined to regroup and reintegrate, the association had begun to hold biweekly meetings in March 1945, and a number of its members, including Hajdú-Gimes, had joined the communist party. A few made intellectual efforts to reconcile Freud with Marxism, by examining, for example, the role of economic insecurity in the development of neurosis. The new Ministry of Health permitted the group to open two consulting rooms, and several members joined university medical schools, hoping eventually to have their speciality recognized with its own department. Hajdú-Gimes eventually went to work in the main state psychiatric hospital.

This brief rebirth ended quickly. Freudian psychoanalysis had long been taboo in the Soviet Union—it was too focused on the individual, too accepting of irrational and subconscious behavior, and too uninterested in politics—and so it would have to be banned in Hungary as well. Attacks against the group began in 1948, following the publication of a vicious scholarly article entitled "Freudianism as the Domestic Psychology of Imperialism." Once that had appeared, others began to use terms like "bourgeois-feudalist," "antisocial," and "irrationalist" to describe the profession too.<sup>20</sup> The philosopher György Lukács called analysts "reactionaries" who longed for Anglo-American class dictatorship.<sup>21</sup>

Some psychoanalysts quit the profession altogether. Others sought a middle ground. In an attempt to reconcile themselves to the new order, Hajdú-Gimes and a colleague, Imre Hermann, went beyond their previous attempts at reconciliation and wrote a letter to Lukács agreeing with some of his criticism—"imperialists in their own countries try to make use of psychoanalysis for their own purposes"—but objecting to the latent anti-Semitism in some of the attacks.<sup>22</sup> They received a stinging rebuke: "I would urgently request you, comrades, not to divert important ideological debates to the roadside of common demagoguery." Frightened, the association voluntarily dissolved itself in 1949. Hajdú-Gimes and Hermann signed a declaration that "psychoanalysis is the product of decaying capitalism and anti-state ideology." Books by Freud, Adler, and Jung were banned; Hermann was expelled from his university post; and several analysts were arrested.<sup>23</sup>

After that, Hungarian psychiatrists followed Soviet practice, which mostly relied on the cruder methods of electroshock and insulin therapy—also popular in much of the West, of course—and whose primary goal was to persuade people to conform. One analyst who was in training at this time remembered that "exhaustion" was one of the main postwar diagnoses, and

medically induced sleep one of the main forms of therapy: “Even people who were traumatized because of the concentration camps or the Holocaust were not diagnosed as such . . . there was no talk of trauma, there was a denial because psychoanalysts themselves were in denial.” He thought Hajdú-Gimes, one of his teachers, had also been in denial about her own tragic past. Though she had lost her husband in the Holocaust, she never mentioned it.<sup>24</sup>

She may have been in denial in other ways too. For Hajdú-Gimes, Hermann, and a few other dedicated Freudians continued to practice their true profession in secret. Hajdú-Gimes saw patients at home and even conducted Freudian training sessions in private apartments. In public she accepted the official view of the human psyche as innately conformist. In private, she listened as patients, including Holocaust survivors and children of imprisoned or executed communists, described their very individual and very unique personal demons. One such patient later remembered the experience of psychoanalysis in 1948 Budapest as very strange, since honesty in that period could be dangerous: “I told the whole truth . . . I was also under threat as I was analyzed. I asked myself: Did he know that? Could I rely on him? Would he give me away?” The position of the analyst was no less precarious. After one of Hermann’s patients was sentenced to death during the Rajk trial, he himself was suddenly endangered: if his client mentioned his name, he could be arrested.<sup>25</sup> For Hajdú-Gimes, the strain of living such a life eventually proved too much, especially after the regime executed her son following the 1956 revolution. In 1960 she killed herself.<sup>26</sup>

Hajdú-Gimes’s double life was particularly traumatic, but it was not unique. Antoni Rajkiewicz fought with the “peasants’ battalion” of the Home Army during the war, joined the party afterward, quit in disgust in 1946 and was briefly arrested in 1948. But he was also intelligent and ambitious, he wanted to get a doctorate at one of the most prestigious universities, the School of Central Planning and Statistics, and he wanted to make some positive contribution to his country’s development. He reckoned he could accept some of the party’s ideas—the emphasis on education and scientific progress, for example—even though he rejected others. Besides, there were no other options. He applied and was accepted. He studied with several Russian professors who had been imported to explain central planning to the Poles, using textbooks translated from Russian. He rejoined the party and also began, in his own words, to live a double life: “You had to behave differ-

ently, speak differently, at official meetings and party meetings, and differently among your friends.”<sup>27</sup>

Rajkiewicz, like many young party members, stayed in touch with his friends from the Home Army and freely discussed politics with them too. At the same time, he was careful about what he said when at the university. No one gave him instructions, but “it was possible to intuit, from newspapers like *Trybuna Ludu*, what would be allowed and what would not.” Rajkiewicz was never ignorant of the flaws in the system, and he was not blind to its injustices. But he saw no other way to study, work, and live in communist Poland. Like Wanda Telakowska, he was a positivist who believed in pragmatic solutions and in getting on with things. His “double life” persisted until Stalin’s death, when the circle of people with whom one could speak honestly grew wider.

For Rajkiewicz, the split was between his friends and his professional life. For Jacek Fedorowicz, later an actor and cabaret artist, the split was between home and school. Fedorowicz intuitively understood, even as a child, that there were things he was allowed to say in his house, which could not be repeated at school. As a contemporary of his notes, “It seems curious how quickly we learned this code, even in primary school, with almost zero knowledge of politics . . . we knew exactly what could be said in different settings, at school, among close friends and not so close, at home and on holiday.”<sup>28</sup> Like Rajkiewicz, Fedorowicz came from a Home Army family and his father was refused permission to work in Gdańsk, forcing the family to move. His parents reinforced his childish impression of the different rules—even the different definitions of words—which applied at home and at school. Once, when told to take the Scouting oath, he went home and asked his mother whether it was right to swear allegiance to “democracy,” if “democracy” had been brought to Poland by the Russians. She explained to him that there were two kinds of democracy: “real” democracy and “Soviet” democracy. He should admire the former and keep his distance from the latter.

Fedorowicz also picked up clues from children’s books and magazines—clues that had been placed there, unwittingly, by their authors. He was particularly addicted to a children’s magazine called *Świat Przygód* (*The World of Adventure*), which he liked to read because it contained comic strips. But at a certain point, the magazine changed its name to *Świat Młodych* (*The World of Youth*), ceased to be interesting, and stopped printing comic strips. (Presumably comic strips, as a capitalist invention, were deemed ideologi-



cally incorrect.) But as the official world became more boring, he felt an ever greater internal distance from school and an ever greater disinclination to speak honestly when he was there.

Fedorowicz did have some teachers who also kept distance from the regime—he remembered one who would carefully explain that “Marxists think like this” while “we think like that.” Years later, he reckoned that almost everyone had overrated the effectiveness of communist propaganda and as a result overestimated the number of people who supported the system. But like Hajdú-Gimes he also thought it impossible to live in a communist country and not somehow be touched or deformed by the system: tiny compromises, whether the mumbling of a song or the signing of a peace petition, were impossible to avoid.<sup>29</sup>

If anything, the childhood experiences of Karol Modzelewski were even more contradictory and confusing. Modzelewski was born in Russia, the son of a Russian officer and his Polish communist wife. Three weeks after his birth in 1937, his father was arrested, and he was sent to a Russian orphanage, where he lived for several years. But he was removed from the orphanage after his mother remarried. Karol’s new stepfather was Zygmunt Modzelewski, a communist who was the Polish ambassador to the USSR in 1945–47, and later Polish minister of foreign affairs. Modzelewski learned of his biological father’s arrest only in 1954—by accident, from a schoolmate—when he was seventeen years old, and only then did he discuss the true story of his father’s life with his mother.

Years later, he reckoned even that conversation was only possible because Stalin was already dead: “Before, no one told such things to children—there was always a threat that the child would let out the secret. It was dangerous for the child but also for the parents.” Modzelewski’s wife had been expelled from kindergarten at the age of three after Stalin’s death because she told her teacher, “My grandfather says Stalin is already burning in hell.” The teacher sent her home, not as punishment but because the danger to the grandfather and to the school was so great.

So carefully did his parents shield Modzelewski from their own growing doubts about the Polish political system that as a child he was terrified by their occasionally critical comments. After the arrest of General Waław Komar in 1952, in connection with the show trials of the time, he explained to his stepfather, echoing his schoolteachers, that Komar was a spy: “My stepfather shouted at me . . . he never cursed me so much as then. I said that he

had been arrested. My stepfather replied, ‘Arrested does not equal guilty.’ It was a banal truth but at that time I felt it like an earthquake. If he was right, it meant that the authorities are arresting innocent citizens. Who could say this? Only an enemy . . .”

He drew similar conclusions after he once asked about a change to the food rationing system. His stepfather snapped, “It is so that people eat less and work more.” Modzelewski was shocked: “Only the enemy could say something like that . . . I remember that because it was a tremendous stress at the time, I had to deny it somehow in order to decrease the dissonance . . . I did not recognize him as the enemy but he was speaking like one. I remember that feeling even today after all those years that have passed.”<sup>30</sup>

The Modzelewskis were not alone in dealing with difficult information by keeping silent. Krzysztof Pomian, another scion of a communist family, remembered that “it was simply not done to speak about arrests, they were accepted without comment. And since this wasn’t a topic for discussion, it wasn’t a topic for reflection either.” In 1952, he and a Jewish friend sat together and read accounts of the show trials in Prague. The friend asked him what he thought of the Slánský trial and Pomian replied that he didn’t think anything of it: “It’s just another trial.” The friend exploded: “You don’t see that this is an anti-Semitic story?” That was his first conversation with anyone about any of the trials, and it did make him think for the first time too.<sup>31</sup>

Feelings of divided loyalty haunted some who were even closer to the centers of power. Jerzy Morawski, a Union of Polish Youth leader at the time, didn’t doubt in retrospect his own youthful enthusiasm for the communist cause, even in the Stalinist 1950s. But even then he knew that party meetings were, to put it bluntly, boring: “It was all stiff, all of that. And there was an enormous amount of intolerance. Everyone was supposed to agree. Everybody . . . was supposed to think identically, act identically . . . that stiffness destroyed the enthusiasm.”

Later, Morawski became a leading propaganda bureaucrat; more precisely, he was the man who decided which Stalinist slogans would be used in public spaces. But even in this position of high authority, he had mixed feelings about this work: “Something inside me always said that this is not right, it’s aesthetically unappealing . . . but on the other hand, that’s how we win people over.”<sup>32</sup> This may not be an entirely honest recollection—of course, it’s easy in retrospect to say that one was uncomfortable—but the problem of divided feelings was acknowledged by others, even at the time. “People have



become cunning after twelve years of the Nazi regime," one Leipzig professor told a party acquaintance, "and if they suspect that a certain person has anything to do with state power—and this applies to members of the Party as well—they shut their mouths."<sup>33</sup>

Splitting one's personality into home and school, friends and work, private and public was one way to cope with the requirement to collaborate. Others tried what Iván Vitányi called "a brainwashing made by myself." This wasn't quite the same as Oskar Nerlinger's determined effort to transform himself from an abstract painter into a socialist realist, but something more like self-silencing. After the war, Vitányi had been an enthusiastic activist at one of the People's Colleges in Budapest, and an avid student of peasant music and folk dancing. But after objecting to the removal of the Nékosz leadership in 1948, he was expelled from his college and given an internal party trial. He was not, in the end, expelled from the party. But the Rajk affair had begun and a sense of menace had crept into the media. Although he was himself a member of the regime, having taken a job at the Ministry of Culture, Vitányi decided, in his own words, "I shall not think and I shall not deal with the country. I don't know anything, I don't want to know. I want to do my work."

From having been a talkative and even argumentative young man, he became silent. And although he agreed years later that one could debate about whether this "self-brainwashing" was a good tactic or not, "I survived." He behaved as he knew he should in public. He kept his thoughts to himself. He was not arrested. This, at the time, counted as a major professional success.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of remaining silent, others deliberately chose to forget parts of their biography or to ignore, quite consciously, uncomfortable facts. Those were the tactics deployed by Elfriede Brüning, the East German journalist and novelist who had belonged to the communist party before the war—she had even met Walter Ulbricht as a child—and had been jailed by the Nazis. By the end of the war she was living quietly in the country home of her husband's parents, where she joyfully anticipated the arrival of the Russians and celebrated when they finally came.<sup>35</sup>

After the war's end, Brüning threw herself enthusiastically into the work of the cultural life of communist East Berlin. She joined the Kulturbund and went to work for its weekly publication, *Sonntag*, hoping to become a journal-

ist. In one of her first articles, she described riding into Berlin on a truck full of onions and carrots. Arriving in the city, the truck was besieged by beggars and women holding up children: "One carrot for my child, one carrot!" She handed the article in to her editor, who dismissed it: "Give that to *Tagesspiegel*," the West Berlin newspaper, he told her. She looked at him blankly: Did he really want her to give it to *Tagesspiegel*? In the East, he explained scornfully, "we are to radiate optimism." Her article was too negative: it must show the present as it ought to be, not as it was.

Brüning never considered giving her article to *Tagesspiegel* and never considered working for a Western newspaper either. All of Brüning's friends were staying in the East, and she herself belonged, culturally and intellectually, to the communist movement. And so she convinced herself that "optimism" was important, and that in any case what mattered were communism's ultimate goals, not the mistakes made along the way. She disliked many things about the new system: "the personality cult of Stalin . . . the ridiculous banners everywhere . . . slogans like 'Every artificially inseminated pig is a blow to the face of Imperialist warmongers.'"<sup>36</sup> She objected to the ration cards that divided the population into classes and the system of double canteens at workplaces, "one with stew for the workers and one [with better food] for the engineers and heads of departments." But she persevered: "We were steeped in the wish to help the construction, and to convince people who had believed in Hitler not long ago that we wanted the right thing now."

In her autobiography, Brüning makes clear that at some level she continued to believe she had done the right thing. She frequently contrasts the achievements of the East with those of the West: "Didn't we send workers' children to university? Hadn't we liberated women from their immaturity, given them access to all professions, and guaranteed them the same rights as men, including the same wage for the same work—a demand that has not been fulfilled in the Western state until today? We were, that was our belief, the better state . . . we were proud of our alleged independence and thought ourselves to be on the right track."<sup>37</sup>

Brüning learned to rationalize her choices, to put things into a larger context, and to take the long view. But she never convinced herself that black was white, or that there was nothing wrong with the system she had chosen. In 1968, following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, she briefly considered emigrating but did not. In time, she grew friendly with Susanne Leonhard, Wolfgang's mother, who had spent many years in the Soviet Gulag but even-

tually returned to East Berlin. Inspired by Leonhard's life story, Brüning began to interview others who had spent time in the Gulag. After 1989 she published the collected interviews in a book, *Lästige Zeugen* (*Annoying Witnesses*). The words of her preface could be about herself: "For too long they were forced to remain silent, to conceal . . . Therefore, it is high time we let these men and women have their say, they who fell victim to the Stalin era and must finally be granted full justice . . ."<sup>38</sup>

In a 2006 interview, I spoke with Brüning for several hours about her life. We talked about her career, the early days of the Kulturbund, and her life in East Berlin after the war. Among other things, she told me she had known nothing at the time about mass rapes and theft carried out by the Red Army in 1945, and nothing about the mass arrests that followed. I didn't press. But a few days later, she called back. Yes, she had known about some of these things, she said, and she would like to talk about them. We met for a second time.

It was true, Brüning explained, that she had celebrated the liberation. But her pleasure had quickly faded. In the spring of 1945, Soviet soldiers occupied her in-laws' home and began stealing books and other things to sell on the black market. Her husband approached their commander and asked them to stop. In revenge, one of the soldiers planted a pistol in his suitcase. It was "discovered," and Brüning's husband was arrested as a saboteur. Pleading her long membership in the communist party, she managed to obtain his release. But as a result of this incident, her husband turned on communism (and on her) and emigrated to the West. She never remarried.

It was also true, as Brüning had said in our first conversation, that out in the countryside there were no mass rapes. But after the war, she had visited Berlin to find her parents. Not only had she heard a good deal about rape in the city and met many victims, she spent several days hiding from Soviet soldiers who were looking for women in her parents' neighborhood.

A few months after that, Brüning spent some time in the seaside town of Ahrenshoop, where the Kulturbund wanted to set up a writers' colony. But in order to have a writers' colony, the Kulturbund had to get hold of somewhere for the writers to stay. To solve that problem, charges were trumped up against the owners of some of the more attractive seaside villas. Those who were not arrested fled to the West. The cultural bureaucrats moved in.

We did hear about these things, Brüning told me, "but you must understand, I had welcomed the arrival of the Red Army and we wanted to build

socialism—well, even today I sometimes reproach myself—we did not inquire closely enough . . ." Her voice trailed off—and that was all. She had just wanted me to know that she knew.

The splitting of one's personality into public and private, home and school, friends and work was not the only solution for those who wanted to live successful lives in a communist regime. Instead of hiding their mixed feelings, a small and unusual group of people displayed them openly. Instead of feeling conflicted, they tried to play dual roles, staying within the system and maintaining some independence at the same time. This kind of ambiguous role could be played, for example, within the official "opposition" parties, the phony political parties that had been created to replace the real ones after their leaders had fled or been arrested, parties that were loyal to the regime in every way that mattered. East Germans who remained active within the rump Christian Democratic Party were allowed to be publicly religious, although they were expected to adhere to the principles of Marxism-Leninism at the same time. Poles who remained within the rump Polish Peasants' Party were allowed to be advocates on behalf of farmers, as long as their advocacy didn't come into conflict with official policy.

No one in Eastern Europe ever played this particular game with greater skill than Bolesław Piasecki, a politician whose extraordinary career took him from the radical right to the radical left within a decade. Assessments of his life range widely. As early as 1956, Leopold Tyrmand denounced him as a man for whom "all morality in politics is a harmful myth."<sup>39</sup> More recently, one of his biographers called him a "tragic figure."<sup>40</sup> Judgments of Piasecki fall almost everywhere else in between. To some, his is a classic collaborationist story. To others, his life is a tale of survival.

Piasecki's career began in the turbulent 1930s, when as a very young man he made his name as an activist of a faction of the far-right Polish National Radical Party. Known by the name of their publication, *Falanga*—a clear allusion to Spanish fascism—the Falangists believed that they were living through a time of moral and economic crisis. Like the communist parties of that same era, they also believed that Polish society was deeply corrupt, and that the weaknesses of democracy and the "nonsense" of democratic liberalism were to blame. But even though they were anti-Semites, and though they

admired authoritarian regimes in general and Italian fascism in particular, the Falangists were Polish nationalists, and thus, with one or two exceptions, they did not collaborate with Hitler.<sup>41</sup>

Piasecki himself was imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1939. Upon his release, he joined the resistance and eventually the Home Army. In the summer of 1944, just as the Warsaw Uprising broke out, he and his partisan unit were captured by the Red Army in the forests to the east of the city. By November, he was imprisoned in the Soviet occupation force's headquarters, probably in the notorious cellars of Lublin castle. What happened next is a matter of no little controversy.

Most of the sources agree that Piasecki held nothing back. He gave the Soviet officers leading his interrogation an accurate account of his career in the resistance. He also gave away the names, and possibly locations, of many of his Home Army colleagues, though by that time much of that information was already known. He hinted heavily at his own importance. He told his Soviet interrogators that he had been in charge of the "clandestine operations" of the Home Army, and had already been named leader of a new, secret section of the underground. This was an exaggeration. But the tactic paid off.

Piasecki's guards halted his interrogation. They removed him from ordinary military supervision and took him directly to Ivan Serov, the Soviet general who had organized the "cleansing" and pacification of eastern Poland in 1939, and who had been brought back to carry out the same task in the rest of Poland in 1944. Serov had already organized the arrests of General Wilk and General Okulicki, and was trying to find out as much as he could about the Home Army. To Piasecki's immense surprise, Serov was not much interested in Piasecki's Falangist past: like most Soviet officials, he considered anyone who was not a communist to be "far right" by definition, and distinctions between social democrats and radical right-wingers did not concern him. He was far more interested in Piasecki's wartime underground activity, in his alleged "clandestine" connections, in his political views, and in his declared contempt for the London government in exile.<sup>42</sup>

By his own account, Piasecki was pleased to discover that he had much in common with the Soviet general. He admired men of power, he was delighted to talk philosophy, and he had some positive things to say about the new regime. He told Serov that he approved of the communist-dominated provisional government and admired the land reform. He enthusiastically

endorsed the expulsion of the Germans and the acquisition of the Western territories. He lauded the "idea of a bloodless social revolution and the transfer of power to workers and peasants." But he also told Serov that the new communist government was going to have difficulties attracting the loyalty of Poles, with their deep anti-Russian prejudices and their paranoia about occupation. Which, of course, was true.

He offered to help. "I am deeply convinced," he told Serov in a memo, "that through my influence I can mobilize the reluctant strata of society for active cooperation." He promised, in other words, to persuade the patriotic, nationalist elements of the underground to support the new regime. Piasecki's memo was eventually forwarded to Colonel Roman Romkowski, the secret policeman in charge of counterintelligence, as well as to Władysław Gomułka, then the communist party boss.<sup>43</sup>

In the decades afterward, this enigmatic conversation—an exchange between a famously cruel NKVD general and a famously charismatic Polish nationalist—attained an almost legendary status in Warsaw. No one knew at the time exactly what had transpired, but everyone had a theory. In 1952, Czesław Miłosz wrote a fictional version of the encounter in *Zdobycie Władzy* (*The Seizure of Power*), a novel he published after emigrating to the West. Of course, Miłosz's account is imaginary. But as one of Piasecki's biographers points out, Miłosz was in Warsaw in 1945, he would have heard accounts of this famous meeting, and he had himself been tempted into cooperation with the new regime. His account thus has a ring of authenticity, particularly when Kamienski, the Piasecki figure, warns the Soviet general that "you are hated here" and tells him to expect resistance:

"Ah," said the general, leaning his chin on his hands—"you are counting on internal opposition . . . But conspiracy, in our system, is impossible. You know that. Encouraging more murders will just increase the numbers of victims. We are starting to build trains and factories. We have got back the Western territories, which of course were always Slavic, almost to Berlin—and if I'm not mistaken, that was your prewar program. Those territories can only be held with our help. And so?"

Eventually, the general in the novel comes to the point: Kamienski/Piasecki would be set free, even allowed to publish a newspaper, on the condition

that he “recognize the status quo, and help us reduce the number of victims.” Kamiński/Piasecki deliberates, and then agrees. The general, satisfied, leans back and states that he is not surprised:

“You have already understood that anyone who wants to change the world can’t continue to pay lip service to phony parliamentarianism, and you know that the liberal games of merchants were a short-lived bit of excess in human history.”<sup>44</sup>

Whether or not he used those exact words, archival evidence makes clear that Serov really was impressed by Piasecki and apparently hoped to jump-start his political career by naming him mayor of Warsaw. (When reminded of Piasecki years later, Serov is said to have asked, “And so—did he become mayor of Warsaw?”)<sup>45</sup> But Serov left soon afterward for Berlin, along with most of the rest of the Red Army leadership. He never returned to Poland.

That left Piasecki in an odd position. He had clearly obtained a blessing of some kind from the Soviet Union. But Polish communists, who understood the significance of his Falangist past quite well, were more suspicious of him and his motives and did not at first promote his political career; nor did they make him mayor of Warsaw. Still, in November 1945 they allowed him to publish the first edition of communist Poland’s first “official” Catholic newspaper, *Dziś i Jutro* (*Today and Tomorrow*).

From the start, the paper offered harsh criticisms of the then-legal Polish Peasants’ Party and of its leader, Stanisław Mikołajczyk, and it urged Poles to support the communists in their “Three Times Yes” referendum. After that referendum had failed to provide a ringing endorsement for the new regime, Piasecki wrote to Gomułka. The current system, he argued, “should be enriched by the political representation of Catholics.”<sup>46</sup> He also published an interview with Bierut, in which the communist leader declared grandly that “Polish Catholics have no more and no fewer rights than other citizens”—a comment that implied they might even have a right to their own party. Eventually, this came to pass and in 1952 Piasecki founded Pax, a loyal, legal, pro-communist Catholic “opposition” party, the only one that would ever be allowed to exist in communist Poland or indeed anywhere else in communist Europe.

Both Pax and Piasecki existed in a strange, undefined, and ambiguous political space. On the one hand, Piasecki expressed his loyalty to the regime

enthusiastically and often. “Our main goal,” he wrote at one point, “is the reconstruction of a Catholic doctrine with respect to the ongoing conflict between Marxism and capitalism.” At the same time, Piasecki was one of the few people in public life who never quite cut himself off from the traditions of the wartime underground and was never forced to denounce his Home Army comrades. Those in his circle, many of whom had had extensive Home Army careers, never had to renounce their pasts either, and they were never arrested.

All of this was extremely unusual in public life at the time, and it created, in the words of Janusz Zabłocki, one of his former colleagues, “an enclave of freedom” around Piasecki, as well as an aura of mystery. Nobody quite knew why the leader of Pax was exempt from the rules—at one point he even managed to expel a police informer from his inner circle—but everyone saw that he was. Most assumed that “there must have been an agreement at the highest political levels” which allowed Piasecki such leeway—presumably an agreement with Soviet officials—and many hoped that his position would grow even stronger. Zabłocki joined the staff of *Dziś i Jutro* under the influence of this belief. So did Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the Catholic intellectual who would become Poland’s first noncommunist prime minister in 1989. Both men reckoned that Pax would sooner or later play an important role in governing the country.<sup>47</sup> Piasecki himself hoped the same.

Throughout his career, Piasecki’s ambiguous status made everyone uneasy. Perhaps because he did have a separate relationship with Soviet officials, the Polish communists never trusted him. Although he continued to play their game (at one point he offered to send Pax observers to North Korea to promote “peace”), the government left him out of the creation of the union of “patriotic” priests and did not ask him to help negotiate the church–state accord. At the same time, his public Catholicism did not endear him to the church as much as he might have hoped. Cardinal Wyszyński loathed Piasecki, and at one point forbade clergy to subscribe to his publications, which eventually came to include *Słowo Powszechne* (*Universal Word*), a daily newspaper, as well as *Dziś i Jutro*. Wyszyński was particularly infuriated by Piasecki’s management of Caritas, the Catholic charity—Pax took it over after the real organizers were removed—especially when unscrupulous Pax priests were caught selling donated penicillin on the black market.<sup>48</sup> The rivalry between the two men may well have been encouraged by the communist party, of course, which had no interest in seeing Pax and the church



create a united front. In later years the party allowed rival “official” church groups to proliferate precisely in order to create competition among them.<sup>49</sup>

In the end, Piasecki failed in what he apparently set out to do. He never did persuade “reactionary forces” to join the new system. Nor did he persuade the communist party to make Pax an equal partner. He guessed, correctly, that someday the party would hand over power to an opposition grouping of its choice, which is indeed what happened in 1989. But he appeared on the scene too early to take advantage of such a situation himself, and he paid a very high price for trying. In 1957, his teenage son, Bohdan, was kidnapped and murdered, probably by a faction within the Polish secret police, in circumstances that remain murky to this day.

Piasecki did open what seemed, at the time, to be a window of freedom for a few people, and he did ensure that an avowedly Catholic discourse remained part of public life. The books and newspapers published by Pax provided some Catholic education for a generation of readers. More importantly, from Piasecki’s point of view, he survived. At a time when other ex-Home Army officers were dead or in prison, he and his colleagues had their own party, their own newspapers, a stable position within the system. And they had influence in all kinds of places. In 1955, Mazowiecki, Zabłocki, and several others rebelled against his leadership. But after they quit their jobs at *Dziś i Jutro* or Pax, all of them found it difficult to get new jobs elsewhere: every potential employer was warned off by the secret police, and no one wanted them around. All learned a lesson: a fight with Piasecki was dangerously close to a fight with the regime.<sup>50</sup>

Odd though it may sound, newspapers and magazines also provided a way out for reluctant collaborators. Of course, those who wrote about politics had few options in this era. They had to accept the telephone calls from the party brass, listen to instructions, and write as they were told. But others had more leeway. Leopold Unger, a correspondent for *Życie Warszawy* (*Warsaw Life*) in the early 1950s, remembered that even then it was possible to write freely and critically about all kinds of things. The potholes in the streets, for example, or the lack of public buses: “It just wasn’t possible to criticize the system itself.”<sup>51</sup>

Newspapers were not all about politics, even then, and there were other kinds of publications as well. Alexander Jackowski, after trying and failing to find his way in Poland’s Foreign Affairs Ministry in the late 1940s, began

editing a folk-art journal in 1952 “by accident,” as he recalled. He kept that job for forty-six years. During that period, he became a renowned expert in the subject of folk art, which he genuinely came to know and love. He didn’t challenge the system in that job, but he did not need to spend any time defending it.<sup>52</sup>

At some level, the regimes themselves understood the need for apolitical outlets, both for the reading public and for journalists. That’s the best explanation for the East German regime’s decision to begin publishing *Wochenpost* (*The Weekly Post*) in the autumn of 1953. Although the first issue appeared after Stalin’s death, plans for the newspaper had been laid a year earlier. Originally, the idea was Soviet: a senior Red Army general stationed in Berlin felt the East German press was not succeeding in reaching the entire population, especially women. The general approached Rudi Wetzel, a journalist then out of favor with the regime, and asked him for some ideas. Wetzel made a proposal that seemed to come to nothing.

But behind the scenes a discussion had been sparked. Official reports bewailed the “colorlessness and uniformity of material about life in the republic,” as well as the absence of articles on “gardening, medicine, housework.”<sup>53</sup> The East German leadership, ever conscious of how boring its propaganda could be, finally approached Wetzel and proposed that he start a magazine. Their suggestions were identical to those Wetzel himself had made to the Soviet general. And thus *Wochenpost* was born.

From the start, the newspaper tried to be different. Wetzel went out of his way to find journalists who were ambivalent about the regime, at one point even describing the first editorial board as a “journalistic penal colony, full of ex-convicts.” Their articles, at least by comparison to the political tracts found in *Neues Deutschland*, seemed remarkably fresh and entertaining. The first issue, published in time for Christmas, contained gardening hints, light features, and a “women’s page.” The cover showed a child blowing out a candle and the words “To all who are of goodwill.” Later issues would feature travel writing, long pieces of reportage, even articles for children. But the *Wochenpost* never tried to become an opposition newspaper, in any sense of the term, and this may have been part of its appeal. As the journalist Klaus Polkehn has argued, *Wochenpost* was “no more opportunistic than its readers.”<sup>54</sup> The newspaper didn’t push the limits, and neither did they.

Polkehn would have known both his colleagues and his audience very well, since he worked at *Wochenpost* from the very beginning until almost the



very end. Many years later he was still nostalgic about his career there, and it isn't hard to see why. Polkehn was aged fourteen at the end of the war, and aged seventeen when he left school to become a typesetter at a newspaper. He was encouraged in these choices by his father, Hugo Polkehn, a communist and journalist who thought his son should "get experience in real life." After the war, Polkehn senior became editor of *Tribune*, the East German trade union newspaper. But in March 1953 he was suddenly arrested: *Tribune* had made a typesetting mistake in Stalin's obituary. Instead of writing "Stalin was a great friend of peace" a typesetter accidentally set "Stalin was a great friend of war." Both Hugo Polkehn and the typesetter were sentenced to five years in prison, of which they would serve three. At the time of the trial Klaus Polkehn lost his job and was told he would "never work again as a journalist." *Wochenpost* hired him right away.

For the subsequent four decades, Polkehn remained loyal to the newspaper that had given him this second chance. He maintained, until the end, that it had also allowed him an extraordinary amount of freedom within an extraordinarily constrained system. Because of his father, and because he was in any case dubious about many aspects of the regime, he stayed well away from domestic politics. Instead, he became the magazine's travel writer, eventually filing stories from all over the world. Polkehn was allowed to go everywhere, so long as he stayed within certain boundaries. Before he went to Egypt, for example, he was told not to write critically about Anwar Sadat, who was then exporting a lot of cotton to East Germany. But in Cairo, "I got a whole day at the pyramids . . . that was my privilege." At a time when few East Germans could travel at all, that was a great privilege indeed.

There was a price to pay for that kind of freedom. Polkehn, like the other *Wochenpost* journalists, had to learn to read between the lines, to follow the political signals, and above all not to cause "trouble." When I asked him what "trouble" meant, he explained that it would begin with a phone call from someone on the communist party Central Committee, berating you for crossing the invisible lines. Trouble could continue with a reprimand, a meeting, maybe being fired from an excellent job at a relatively open-minded newspaper. Polkehn sought to avoid this at all costs. Only once, when he had violated an unwritten code and written something that crossed one of the invisible lines, did he get the telephone call, and a request: "Please give a written statement, explaining why this article was published." That was enough for him to make sure it never happened again.

He was aware, even then, that he was lucky and that others resented him. He sometimes had letters from readers: "As long as we can't travel, we don't want to read your articles either." Many of his compatriots were wary of journalists in general—they were seen as a part of the communist establishment—and would refuse to be interviewed. But he brushed away the idea that he might have taken part in more open dissent: "It seemed pointless to me." He disliked the dissidents who later became part of East Germany's political scene, finding them "conceited, indecent people." He suspected that some of them adopted their pose of opposition in order to secure an exit visa to West Germany.

Polkehn did contract ulcers, which mysteriously disappeared in the 1990s, after both *Wochenpost* and East Germany had ceased to exist. Perhaps this was not surprising: his life required him to walk a kind of political tightrope, keeping away from all sensitive subjects while producing articles he believed had integrity. But he felt pride in his work, even years later. He loved writing, he loved traveling, and there were modest material advantages as well as intellectual pleasures. His job at *Wochenpost* was relatively well paid, by East German standards. There were two holiday homes, one near Berlin and one by the Baltic Sea, which the journalists were allowed to use every third or fourth year. The newsroom also had access to a tailor's shop and a cobbler as well as a dentist: "It saved time. He was very good." As at almost every workplace in East Germany, there was a very cheap canteen for meals.

Polkehn didn't change anything about the system he lived in, but nor did he feel responsible for its more brutal aspects. He kept well away from the secret police, well away from those in power, and well away from controversy. Like Piasecki, he prospered, flourished, and remained nostalgic for his years as a travel writer. "It was my dream job," he told me.<sup>55</sup>

## Chapter 17

## PASSIVE OPPONENTS

The time had now come when we must listen with devoted expressions to Soviet orders, smiling only with the wrinkles in our bottoms, under our trousers, as did the lackeys of the Byzantine emperors. Heroic gestures would be of no avail; we would have to speak the language of flowers, be patient and cunning, as we had been under Hitler. The essential thing was to survive.

—György Faludy, paraphrasing Jan Masaryk, 1946<sup>1</sup>

A thing is funny when it upsets the established order.  
Every joke is a tiny revolution.

—George Orwell

BY 1950 OR 1951, it was no longer possible to identify anything so coherent as a political opposition anywhere in Eastern Europe. There were a few Poles who kept their pistols hidden in the barn, waiting for a better day, and one or two who were still hiding in the forests. There were some officially tolerated regime opponents like Bolesław Piasecki, whose real views were opaque. There were a few people who were able to criticize the regime's less important decisions in public and were even encouraged to do so, as long as they kept the right tone. As Bolesław Bierut had declared, "There are different kinds of criticism. There is creative criti-

cism and hostile criticism. The first is helpful to our development, the second is an obstacle . . . criticism shouldn't undermine the authority of the leader."<sup>2</sup>

But the remaining Polish Home Army leaders were in prison or in the Soviet Gulag. The Hungarian regime's most powerful opponents were imprisoned in Recsk. East Germany's critics had left or fallen silent. The public sphere had been cleansed so thoroughly that a tourist visiting Warsaw, Budapest, or East Berlin—or Prague, Sofia, or Bucharest—in the early 1950s would have observed no political opposition whatsoever. The press contained regime propaganda. Holidays were celebrated with regime parades. Conversations did not deviate from the official line if an outsider was present.

The tourist might even have assumed that all were united in support of the regime, and various distinguished visitors did indeed form that impression. Upon returning from Warsaw in 1950, one British socialist, the wife of a Labour MP, told a crowd at Trafalgar Square she had seen "no signs of dictatorship" in Poland. On the contrary, she declared, the only "iron curtain" in existence was the one around Great Britain (the British government had just refused visas to Eastern European delegates who had wanted to attend a world peace conference in Sheffield).<sup>3</sup> One of her compatriots, equally impressed with her visit to the East, said that to be in Warsaw was "like changing worlds, like stepping into the sun after being in the rain."<sup>4</sup> Though these were extreme views, they reflected a broader prejudice. The Western notion that the Eastern bloc contained an undifferentiated group of countries with identical regimes and indistinguishable people—"Siberia starts at Checkpoint Charlie"—dates precisely from this era.

And yet there was opposition. But it was not an active opposition, and certainly not an armed opposition. It was rather a passive opposition, an opposition that sought outlets in jokes, graffiti, and unsigned letters, an opposition that was often anonymous and frequently ambivalent. It existed in all classes and among all ages. Sometimes the regime's passive opponents and reluctant collaborators were actually one and the same. Many people felt embarrassed or ashamed by the things they had to do in order to keep their jobs, protect their families, and stay out of jail. Others were appalled by the hypocrisy of public life, bored by the peace demonstrations and parades that impressed outsiders. They were stultified by the dull meetings and the empty slogans, uninterested in the leader's speeches and the endless lectures. Unable to do anything about it openly, they got their revenge behind the party's back.

Not by accident were young people the most enthusiastic of the passive resisters to High Stalinism, if “enthusiasm” is a word that can be used in this context. They were the focus of the heaviest, most concentrated, and most strictly enforced propaganda, which they heard at school and in their youth groups. They bore the brunt of the regime’s various campaigns and obsessions, they were sent around to collect the subscription money, gather signatures, and organize rallies. At the same time, they were less cowed by the horrors of a war they didn’t necessarily remember, and less intimidated by the prospect of prison they had yet to experience.

As a result, examples of low-level opposition among young people abound. Organized protest was relatively uncommon but it was not unknown, and young people sometimes paid a high price to join it. In 1950, twenty-year-old Edeltraude Eckert was arrested for distributing pro-democracy leaflets. She received a twenty-five-year prison sentence, which became a death sentence after an accident in an East German prison factory turned into an infection that killed her. From her cell, and then from her hospital bed, she sent hopeful, optimistic notes home. “The world is so beautiful you just have to believe in it,” she wrote to her mother, a few months before her death.<sup>5</sup>

Jokes, insults, and tricks, often aimed at the somber and humorless youth leaders, were much more common, and there are dozens of examples from the late 1940s and early 1950s. At an election in one of the youth group cells in a Polish mining town, for example, someone wrote in “Adenauer”—then the chancellor of West Germany—as a joke candidate. The ballot was treated as evidence of “enemy tendencies,” and an investigation was conducted into the identity of the author. In a youth workers’ brigade, another young man was reprimanded for composing rhyming couplets. One of the few obscenity-free verses read like this:

Cleanliness prevails in the camp  
When you want to wash yourself there is not a drop of water  
But someone can weep tears over you.<sup>6</sup>

At times these things were taken extremely seriously. Between 1948 and 1951 alone, some 300 East German high-school and university students were arrested and sentenced to hard labor, many for similar pranks. A group of

young boys in Jena received ten years apiece for throwing stink bombs at school officials during a formal celebration of President Wilhelm Pieck’s birthday. By 1950, East German camps and jails held 800 boys and girls under the age of seventeen. Some were being held for having made faces during a lecture about Stalin, or for having scribbled an “F” (for *Freiheit*, or freedom) on city walls at night.<sup>7</sup>

But young people also had some less verbal forms of protest available to them. Just as Western teenagers were beginning to discover that long hair and blue jeans could be an enormously effective means of registering discontent, Eastern European teenagers living under Stalinist regimes discovered that narrow trousers, shoulder pads, red socks, and jazz could be a form of protest too. In different countries, these early “youth rebel” subcultures had different names. In Poland, they were called *bikiniarze*, possibly after the Pacific atoll where the United States tested the first atomic bomb—or, more likely, the Hawaiian/Pacific/Bikini-themed ties that some of the truly hip *bikiniarze* managed to obtain from the care packages sent by the United Nations and other relief organizations. (The truly lucky also got hold of *makarturki*, sunglasses of the kind General MacArthur wore.) In Hungary, they were called the *jampecek*, a word that roughly translates as “slacker.” In Germany—both East and West—they were the *Halbstarke*, or “half strong.” There was a Czech version—the *potapka*, or duck—probably named after the ducktail hairstyle, and even a Romanian version, the *malagambisti*, named after a famously cool Romanian drummer, Sergiu Malagamba.<sup>8</sup>

The fashions adopted by these youth rebels varied slightly from country to country as well, depending on what was actually available in flea markets or from those Western care packages, and what could be made from scratch. Generally speaking, the boys favored narrow, drainpipe trousers (in Warsaw there was a tailor who specialized in making them out of ordinary ones). The girls at first wore tight pencil skirts, though later they switched to the “New Look” then being sold by Christian Dior and copied everywhere else: dresses with small waists and wide skirts, preferably in loud colors and patterns. Both favored shoes with thick rubber soles—a distant echo of the American sneaker—which in Hungary came to be called *jampi* shoes. Brightly colored shirts were popular too, since they contrasted so starkly with the conformist uniforms of the communist youth movements, as were wide ties, often hand-painted. The idea was that shirts and ties should clash. Particularly popular was the combination of a green tie and a yellow shirt, known in Polish as

“chives on scrambled egg.” In Warsaw, Leopold Tyrmand popularized the wearing of striped socks as well. He did so, he once said, to demonstrate “the right to one’s own taste.”<sup>9</sup> He maintained some ironic distance from the *bikiniarze*, who mostly belonged to a younger generation, though in general he approved:

Certainly this was a poor, unwashed, provincial Polish version of the “jitterbug” style . . . It provoked a certain amount of disdain even among those who didn’t fight it, but it also inspired respect for its tenacity, for its battle against the arch-powerful officialdom, for the challenge it threw down to the grayness and total poverty all around.<sup>10</sup>

As in the West, the clothes were associated with music. Like their Western European counterparts, the *bikiniarze*, the *jampecek*, and the others started out as jazz fans, despite—or thanks to—the young communists who went around smashing up jazz records. Once it had been forbidden, jazz music became politicized. Even to listen to jazz on the radio became a political activity: to twiddle the dials of one’s father’s radio in an attempt to catch different stations through the static became a form of surrogate dissent. Radio Luxemburg was weirdly popular, as were the jazz programs on Voice of America later on. This would remain a dissident activity until the communist regimes collapsed forty years later.

In their clothes and in their music, the youth rebels of Poland or East Germany had a lot in common with American rockers and zoot suiters, as well as British teddy boys. But because of the nature of their regimes, their fashion choices had a much deeper political significance than they would have in the West. From the authorities’ point of view, these young hipsters were by definition implicated in black market trading. How else could they have obtained such unusual clothes? They were also by definition admirers of American-style consumerism. Like Western teenagers, they wanted possessions. In particular, they wanted possessions the communist system could not provide, and they went out of their way to get them. One former Hungarian *jampecek* remembered the lengths to which he went to get hold of the thick-soled shoes:

There were dealers in the southern district, three of them. I don’t know their names, Frici somebody-or-other, they brought the stuff

in. I think from Yugoslavia or the South . . . It was a big thing that you could buy it on the side, in instalments. You had to have connections to get hold of it . . . People envied each other for where they’d bought stuff . . .<sup>11</sup>

The regime also suspected that admiration for Western fashions implied an admiration for Western politics. Very quickly, the press began to accuse the youth rebels not just of nonconformism but of propagating degenerate American culture, of plotting to undermine communist values, even of taking orders from the West. At times the youth rebels were called saboteurs or even spies. Perversely, this kind of propaganda had the effect of making these inchoate groups seem, and eventually become, more powerful and more important than they might have been otherwise. One Polish newspaper described American pop culture as “a cult of fame and luxury, the acceptance and glorification of the most primitive desires, the filling of a hunger for sensation.”<sup>12</sup> Other official media equated the *bikiniarze* with “speculators, kulaks, hooligans, and reactionaries.”<sup>13</sup> Jacek Kuroń reckoned that this sort of language actually drew young people to jazz, to “Western” dancing, and to more exotic forms of dress. He argued that the *bikiniarze* became a genuine countercultural movement only after the press began to rail against them: “They were told, ‘You are *bikiniarze*,’ and they responded, ‘We are *bikiniarze*.’ And that gave them the political program that they’d been missing.”<sup>14</sup>

Sándor Horváth, a Hungarian historian who has studied the *jampecek* movement in depth, argues along similar lines that the Hungarian youth subculture was created by newspaper propaganda and not vice versa. In addition, he speculates that the crusade against the *jampecek* was probably inspired by the Soviet drive against “hooliganism,” which took place at the same time. He even questions whether the *jampecek* really existed, in the beginning—or whether the communist authorities, needing something against which to define themselves, had in fact invented them, deriving their description from the “Westerns, gangster films, dime novels and comic books” that made their way across the Hungarian border. In order to promote the character of a “good” communist they needed “bad” capitalists, and the *jampecek* fit the bill.<sup>15</sup>

Once they had been defined as outlaws, these fashionable groups began to attract people who really were looking for a fight. In Poland, there were frequent, serious squabbles between *bikiniarze* and *zetempowcy* (a nickname derived from the Polish acronym of the Union of Polish Youth, ZMP), as



well as between the *bikiniarze* and the police. In 1951, a group of young people from a Warsaw suburb went on trial for alleged armed robbery. *Sztandar Młodych*, the official youth newspaper, described them as “young bandits serving American imperialism,” and claimed they had been dressed in the characteristic narrow trousers and thick-soled shoes. One young communist activist wrote in to *Sztandar Młodych* to complain that he too had been convinced that “admirers of the American lifestyle are hostile to People’s Poland” after having been beaten up by a group of young “hooligans” dressed as *bikiniarze*. He had been wearing his red Union of Polish Youth tie. Krzysztof Pomian, at the time a Union of Polish Youth leader in Warsaw, was also once attacked in a park and beaten up by people he never saw. A schoolmate was arrested for the crime, but later was freed.<sup>16</sup>

The reverse was also true. Young communists, sometimes in tandem with the police, hunted *bikiniarze* in the streets: they would catch them, beat them up, cut their hair, and slash their ties. More than one “official” youth dance party was ruined when *bikiniarze* began to dance “in the style”—meaning the jitterbug—after which they were beaten up by their “offended” peers.<sup>17</sup> Kuroń himself remembers being told by a local party secretary that since the “*bikiniarze* and the hooligans” hadn’t been persuaded by the press, the radio, and the comic caricatures of themselves in posters and books, it was time to get a group of young, healthy workers and go after them: “From that moment, whenever *bikiniarze* jumped onto the dance floor, the young communists hauled them off and beat them up.”<sup>18</sup> Similar situations occurred in Hungary too.

In East Germany, the problem of youthful rebellion was made more acute by the undeniable influence of American radio, which was available not just on crackly, distant Radio Luxemburg but right next door on RIAS (Radio in the American Sector), which was broadcast directly from West Berlin. West German sheet music was also available for dance bands, and to the great consternation of the regime it was very popular. At a German composers’ conference in 1951, an East German musicologist denounced this “American entertainment kitsch” as a “channel through which the poison of Americanism penetrates and threatens to anaesthetize the minds of workers.” The threat from jazz, swing, and big band music was “just as dangerous as a military attack with poison gases,” since it reflected “the degenerate ideology of American monopoly capital with its lack of culture . . . its empty sensationalism and above all its fury for war and destruction . . . We should speak

plainly here of a fifth column of Americanism. It would be wrong to misjudge the dangerous role of American hit music in the preparation for war.”<sup>19</sup>

In the wake of this conference, the East German state took active measures to fight against this new scourge. Around the country, regional governments began to force dance bands and musicians to obtain licenses. Some banned jazz outright. Though the enforcement was irregular, there were arrests. The writer Erich Loest remembered one jazz musician who, when told to change his music selection, pointed out that he was playing the music of the oppressed Negro minority. He was arrested anyway and went to prison for two years.<sup>20</sup>

The regime also sought alternatives, though tentatively. Nobody was quite sure what progressive dance music was supposed to sound like, after all, or where it was supposed to be played. At the German Academy of Art, a learned commission of musicologists came together to discuss the “role of dance music in our society.” They agreed that “dance music must be purposeful music,” which meant it should be only for dancing. But those present could not agree on whether dance music should be played on the radio—“merely listening to dance music is impossible, the listener will forget what its purpose was supposed to be”—and they feared young people would ask for “boogie-woogie” instead of “real” dance music anyway.<sup>21</sup>

In May 1952, the Culture Ministry tried to solve this problem with a competition and prizes to be given to composers of “new German dance music.” The competition failed, as none of the entries were deemed sufficiently attractive by a committee that was probably looking for a modern version of Strauss’s Vienna waltzes. As the new “Dance Commission” of the Central Committee complained, much of the work submitted was based on unprogressive, uneducational themes such as sentimental love, nostalgia, or pure escapism. One song about Hawaii, the committee declared, could just as well be set in Lübeck.

Much of the time, young East Germans responded to this sort of thing with howls of laughter. Some bands openly mocked letters they had received from party officials and read them aloud to audiences. Others simply flouted the rules. One shocked official wrote a report describing the “wild cascades of sound at high volume” and the “wild bodily dislocations” he’d heard and seen at one concert. Inevitably, there were escapes as well. One band, a particularly notable “propagandist for American unculture,” caused a sensation



by fleeing to the West and then immediately beaming its music back into East Berlin on RIAS.

In truth, the problem of Western music and Western youth fashion never went away. If anything, both became even more alluring after the first, sensational recording of “Rock Around the Clock” reached the East in 1956, heralding the arrival of rock and roll. But by that time, the communist regimes had stopped fighting pop music. Jazz would become legal after the death of Stalin, at least in some places. Rules on leisure clothing would relax, and eventually Eastern Europe would have its own rock bands too. As one historian notes, the battle against Western pop music was “fought and lost” in East Germany even before the Berlin Wall was built—and it had been “fought and lost” everywhere else too.<sup>22</sup>

For adults who had to hold down jobs and maintain families in the era of High Stalinism, flamboyant clothing was never a practical form of protest, though a few professions did allow it. Marta Stebnicka, an actress who spent much of her career in Kraków, put a great deal of effort into designing interesting hats for herself in the 1950s.<sup>23</sup> Leopold Tyrmand, the Polish jazz critic with the narrow ties and the colored socks, was an adult style icon too.

But adults who couldn’t or wouldn’t dress up could still play pranks. They could also tell jokes. So ubiquitous and so varied were the jokes told in communist regimes that numerous academic tomes have since been written about them, though the use of jokes as a form of passive resistance in a repressive political system was nothing new. Plato wrote of the “malice of amusement” and Hobbes observed that jokes often serve to make the joke teller feel superior to the objects of his humor. George Orwell observed (as quoted above) that “a thing is funny when it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.” In the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, where there were so few opportunities either to express malice toward authority or to feel superior, and where the desire to upset the established order was both strong and forbidden, jokes flourished.<sup>24</sup>

Jokes also served a wide variety of purposes. The Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovskii probably expressed their main function most precisely when he pointed out that “the simplification of the joke exposes the absurdity of all propaganda tricks . . . In the jokes you can find the thing that has left no trace in the printed sources: the people’s opinion of events.”<sup>25</sup> Certainly jokes

allowed the joke teller to refer aloud to otherwise unmentionable truths, such as the fact that the Soviet Union bought Polish coal and other Polish products far below the international market price:

*Negotiations are going on between Mao and Stalin. The Chinese leader asks the Soviet leader for help: “We need a billion dollars, fifty million tons of coal, and a lot of rice.” Stalin turns to his advisers: “Dollars, okay. Coal, okay. But where will Bierut get the rice?”<sup>26</sup>*

Also the fact that the Polish army, in the 1950s, was led by a Soviet general with a Polish surname:

*Why did Rokossovskii become a marshal of the Polish army?*

*Because it’s cheaper to dress one Russian in a Polish uniform than to dress the whole Polish army in Russian uniforms.*

Or the fact that even artists had to be forced to conform under communism:

*What is the difference between painters of the naturalist, impressionist, and the socialist realist schools?*

*The naturalists paint as they see, the impressionists as they feel, the socialist realists as they are told.*

Or the fact that supporters of the deeply unpopular regime were too embarrassed to admit it:

*Two friends are walking down the street. One asks the other, “What do you think of Rákosi?” “I can’t tell you here,” he replies. “Follow me.”*

*They disappear down a side street.*

*“Now tell me what you think of Rákosi,” says the friend.*

*“No, not here,” says the other, leading him into the hallway of an apartment block.*

*“Okay, here then.”*

*“No, not here. It’s not safe.”*

*They walk down the stairs into the deserted basement of the building.*

*“Okay, now you can tell me what you think of our leader.”*

*“Well,” says the other, looking around nervously, “actually I quite like him.”*

As was the case in so many spheres of life, the communist monopoly on power meant that jokes about anything—the economy, the national soccer team, the weather—all qualified, at some level, as political jokes. This was what made them subversive, as the authorities understood perfectly well, and this is why they went out of their way to quash them. A letter from Budapest youth movement authorities to Hungarian summer camp counselors solemnly warned them to be prepared: campers might well indulge in “vul-

gar” joke-telling sessions. In case such a thing should happen, the counselors should cheerfully participate in these occasions in order to divert the crowd toward more tasteful and politically acceptable forms of humor.<sup>27</sup>

Not all youth leaders were so understanding. In reports sent to the Education Ministry about the general mood of students in Poland, “chants, jokes, rhymes, and graffiti” were judged a sign of “oppositional feelings,” perhaps even evidence of “contact with the underground.”<sup>28</sup> For the wrong joke, told in the wrong place at the wrong time, one could even be arrested, not only in the 1950s but later on as well. This was the premise of Milan Kundera’s 1967 novel *The Joke*, the book that first gained the Czech writer an international audience: its protagonist writes a joke on a postcard to a girl, and is thrown out of the party and sent to work in the mines as a result.<sup>29</sup> In 1961, members of an East German cabaret troupe really were arrested after a performance titled *Where the Dog’s Buried*, which included the following skit:

Two of the actors start dismantling a wall, brick by brick. “What are you doing?” asks a third. “We’re tearing down the walls of the brick factory!” they reply. “Why are you doing that? There’s a shortage of bricks!” the other responds. Exactly, say the two labourers, continuing with their work. “That’s why we’re dismantling the walls!”

The cabaret also featured a bureaucrat who answered every question with a quotation from Walter Ulbricht, “just to be absolutely on the safe side.” It was all rather clumsy, but the authorities were not amused. In the report filed afterward, a local party boss fumed, “the show consisted of provocative defamations of the press, workers, Party officials, and youth leaders.” The actors remained in jail for nine months, during which time several of them were isolated in solitary confinement. Much later, one of them discovered that hundreds of his jokes had been reported to the secret police.<sup>30</sup>

The incident illustrates the distinct absence of a communist sense of humor. It also underlines the delicate balance that had to be struck by satirists, cabaret artists, and others who wanted to perform legally. On the one hand, they had to be funny, or at least pointed and sharp, if they were to attract an audience. On the other hand, they had to avoid telling the jokes that people around them were actually telling or even alluding to the topics that others found so amusing. Official media faced the same dilemma. Hungarian state radio made an attempt at tackling this problem in 1950 with the launch of

a political cabaret. Their aim was clear: “Every good laugh is a blow to the enemy. The new program will radiate the optimistic joy and strength of our society.” The program lasted two months and was then abandoned.<sup>31</sup>

Almost no one in the Eastern bloc wrestled with this problem in the Stalinist period so diligently as Herbert Sandberg, the Buchenwald survivor who became the editor of *Ulenspiegel*, briefly East Germany’s funny satirical magazine. Although the magazine’s offices were originally located in West Berlin and the magazine was first registered under an American license, Sandberg’s superb team of artists and writers all came from the intellectual left, and from the beginning they were close to the Kulturbund and the communist party. Sandberg himself was not at all ideological, however. He regarded laughter as “healing,” and believed he could play a role in reconstructing society if he and his colleagues focused their sharp pens on caricatures of Germany’s Nazi past and its present division.

At least to begin with, *Ulenspiegel* very much reflected Sandberg’s sensibility. The January 1, 1947, issue contained, among other things, a satirical article about Adenauer, a review of an underrated exhibit of children’s books (no one was talking about the exhibit in overserious Berlin because “it’s about fun and love and magic”), and a critical piece about Wilhelm Furtwängler, the conductor who had stayed in Germany during the war and kept silent about Nazi atrocities. There were cartoons criticizing the moribund denazification process (“Are there really no Nazi party members left?”) and much open discussion of the Third Reich. A few months later, Sandberg’s ambivalence about the deepening division of Germany and of Berlin was reflected in the May 2 cover, which showed a blind man standing between the four flags of Berlin’s four occupying powers. The headline—“An Uncertain Future”—did not clearly blame either the Americans or the USSR for the division.

This neutrality could not be maintained for long, and eventually Sandberg had to take sides. As East–West tensions grew, so did communist influence over the magazine’s content. Its satire shifted to focus more sharply on capitalism, on the United States, and on Germany’s helplessness in the face of Western “warmongering.” By December 1947, its Christmas issue cover featured a German child asking, blandly, “Mother, what is peace?” By the spring of 1948, the magazine had lost its American publishing license. In May, the first issue produced under its Soviet license showed several bridges: the ones marked “currency unity” and “economic unity” are still intact; the one marked “political unity” has been blown apart.<sup>32</sup>

Covers mocking Truman, de Gaulle, and Western promises of demilitarization followed, although Sandberg resisted becoming yet another propaganda tool. He took the “wrong” side in the formalism debate, insisting on expressing his admiration for “formalist” artists such as Pablo Picasso. This compromise did not last long. By 1950, the party Central Committee’s cultural department could no longer tolerate anything other than total conformity. As one of its members argued, “We need support by our satirical press in the republic.” The magazine, another declared, was attempting to conform—“We believe that *Ulenspiegel* has constantly and intensively worked on improving itself”—but doubts remained.<sup>33</sup> None of this mattered, because its readership had collapsed. No one wanted to buy a satirical magazine that wasn’t funny, and the authorities shut it down in August. Although it was later reincarnated under the similar name of *Eulenspiegel*, it was never quite the same.

Yet in private, behind closed doors and when they were on their own, even the authorities told political jokes. Günter Schabowski, an East German journalist and later a member of the last East German government, once told a British journalist, “At *Neues Deutschland* we told each other jokes in the canteen. We weren’t blind to the failings of the system, but we convinced ourselves that this was only because it was early days and the class enemy was perpetrating sabotage wherever he could. One day, we thought, all problems would be solved and there wouldn’t be any more jokes because there wouldn’t be anything left to joke about.”<sup>34</sup> There were even jokes about that. For example this one, quite possibly imported from the USSR, and alluding to two of the Soviet Union’s most famous Gulag construction projects:

“Who built the White Sea Canal?”

“Those who told political jokes.”

“And who built the Volga–Don Canal?”

“Those who listened.”

Humor could not always be controlled. Clothing could not always be controlled. As it turned out, religious emotions could not always be controlled either. Some of those in communist Europe organized themselves under

the church’s umbrella in a careful manner, planning and measuring their involvement, calculating the personal price they might have to pay. Józef Puciłowski was part of a Union of Polish Youth section whose leaders made a decision to go, as a group, to a priest for private catechism instruction on a regular basis. The risk paid off: no one in the group ever told the authorities.<sup>35</sup> As a young man, Hans-Jochen Tschiche decided to become a Lutheran clergyman. Although at the time, in the late 1940s, he was able to study in West Berlin, he deliberately went back to work in the East in order to pursue his vocation there. Part of the appeal of the clergy for him was its openness: one was allowed to read a wider range of literature, to discuss material not available to most people in the East, to make contact with Western priests and churches while at the same time avoiding conflict with the regime and being of some help to its victims.<sup>36</sup>

But others did not calculate, did not measure, and did not plan. Occasionally suppressed religious feelings simply burst into the open.

Perhaps the largest spontaneous outburst took place in 1949, in the Polish city of Lublin. It began in the summer, on July 3, when a local nun noticed a change on the face of a Virgin Mary icon in the city’s cathedral. The Madonna—a copy of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, Poland’s most revered icon—appeared to be weeping. The nun called for a priest. He witnessed the miracle too, and both began to pray. Others followed suit. With astonishing speed—this was before telephones were common—the news of the miraculous weeping virgin spread across the city. By evening, the doors of the cathedral could not be closed because of the size of the crowds.

In the days that followed, the news spread farther and pilgrims from all over Poland began to make their way to the cathedral. Of course, there was no public announcement of the miracle, and the regime did what it could to discourage the faithful. The authorities blocked public transportation into the city and placed policemen along the roads to prevent people from getting there, but to no avail, as one eyewitness remembered:

It was in July 1949. Five of us went on foot since they had already stopped selling tickets for the train to Lublin. When we got to the cathedral we stayed there all night and in the morning there were already thousands of people, and at about seven o’clock they began standing in a queue waiting for the cathedral doors to open. After

some time a policeman came and took away the priest but people still waited longer. And then they came again and took the keys to the cathedral and still people waited.

And then a bishop came and told people to go home because the cathedral was not opening, so then people were really shocked and sang and prayed and that went on until afternoon when I went to the side entrance of the cathedral and at first I didn't understand what was happening and then . . . I saw that they were breaking down the doors and I am helping and people are singing and praying and shouting "Don't close our church."

Eventually, he entered. He saw the face of the Virgin Mary light up. Tears of blood flowed down one of her cheeks. "I believe it was a true miracle," he wrote.<sup>37</sup>

Communist officials were stymied. At first, they kept the story out of the newspapers in the hope that it would go away. But as more and more people came, and as the cathedral square filled up with pilgrims, they changed tactics. On July 10 they launched an "anti-miracle action": an extra 500 policemen arrived from Warsaw and Łódź, and the newspapers were given the go-ahead to begin a negative propaganda campaign. The pilgrims were described not as "peasants" (a positive word in the communist lexicon) but rather as a "crowd" or "mob" of "country people," naïve illiterates, even "speculators" or "traders" who could be spotted carrying vodka bottles in the evening. Government authorities solemnly examined the miraculous painting, declared it had been damaged during the war, and said that any apparent markings on the face must be due to humidity. Church leaders, including Cardinal Wyszyński himself, were pressed to declare the miracle false. Fearing that the pilgrims could face terrible repercussions, clergymen told the faithful to go home.

But the faithful kept coming, pitching their tents in front of the cathedral doors. The following Sunday, July 17, the inevitable confrontation took place. Local party leaders organized a demonstration in Litewski Square, in the city center. They denounced "reactionary clerics" through megaphones so powerful they could be heard inside all of the city's churches. Inside one of them, the Church of the Capuchins, the congregation began to sing a hymn: "We Want God!" As mass came to an end and people poured out onto the streets, arrests began. The churchgoers tried to escape from the town center, but

policemen blocked the side streets and herded them into armored trucks—a scene, one historian remarks, not so different from the street arrests the Nazis had carried out in Lublin a few years earlier. Some remained under arrest for a few hours, some for up to three weeks.<sup>38</sup>

By August, the authorities had found a way to fit the event into their overarching narrative. How had it happened that news of the "miracle" had traveled so quickly, even to places hundreds of miles away from Lublin? Who spread this fantastic rumor through the whole country? Polish radio had the answer: the organizers of the "miracle" in Lublin turned out to be reactionary cliques of clerics, acting in concert with enemies of the Polish nation and the People's Republic, along with Voice of America. This, the reporter ominously concluded, was hardly surprising: "Voice of America was very pleased that in Poland people abandoned positive work in the fields, and ordered them to gather in front of the cathedral in indescribable conditions . . . This was not a manifestation of faith. It was an organized demonstration of medieval fanaticism . . . for purposes which had nothing to do with religion."<sup>39</sup>

Eventually, the fuss over the Lublin miracle died down. But it was not the only such event in Stalinist Europe. In the Hungarian village of Fallóskút, two years earlier, a young woman named Klára ran away from a violent husband, spent the night in the fields, and had a dream in which the Virgin Mary told her to look for a spring. She found the spring, and then had a second dream, in which the Virgin Mary told her to build a chapel. Despite her poverty, "belief would be enough" to pay for the chapel, according to the Virgin, and so it proved. Klára convinced others to help, and the chapel was erected beside the spring at the end of 1948. A priest came to inaugurate the building.

Even though the fearful episcopate refused to recognize the miracle, the Virgin nevertheless appeared to Klára several times again in 1949, after which she was sent to a psychiatric hospital and given electric shock treatment. She was released, but then sent back to the hospital once more in 1952 and diagnosed as schizophrenic. In the meantime, many others began to support the chapel, including Klára's repentant husband. Later, in the 1970s, she made two trips to the Vatican in an attempt to secure papal recognition for the miracle. Eventually recognition was granted, though only after her death in 1985.<sup>40</sup>

Fallóskút never attracted the crowds that briefly deluged Lublin cathedral. But the chapel eventually came to play a special role in Hungarian



Gypsy culture. These most passive of all regime opponents demonstrated their belief by quietly making their way to Klára's source, and by quietly observing the miracles the holy water wrought. Several patients with eye trouble were cured by the water. A mute boy was said to have begun to speak. No one who came to pray at the chapel had to say a word about politics, communism, democracy, or opposition. But everyone who came to Fallóskút understood why they were there and why others were not.

Miracles, pilgrimages, and prayer were not the only form of passive opposition the church could offer. However curtailed, persecuted, and oppressed, religious institutions did continue to exist during High Stalinism. However pressured or threatened, not every priest was "patriotic" either, and not every Catholic intellectual was in search of a public career. Those church authorities who were willing to operate discreetly were even able to create unusual living and working arrangements for people who wanted nothing to do with communism at all. Precisely that sort of odd arrangement helped Halina Bortnowska survive High Stalinism with her conscience intact.

Bortnowska, the daughter of a teacher who taught her to "take life seriously," was thirteen when the war ended. She and her mother had escaped from Warsaw during the uprising, and made their way to Toruń. In the spring of 1945 Bortnowska returned to school. Classes had resumed spontaneously. There was no order from above: teachers simply began teaching again, and the children simply wanted to learn. The teachers were the same ones as before the war, and they taught in the same way, using the same textbooks. Not everything was absolutely normal. In May, Bortnowska remembered, or perhaps June, a rumor spread that Russian soldiers were coming to deport Polish children. The teachers sent everyone home from school. But it was a false rumor, and things continued, at least for a time.

Bortnowska's Scouting troop resumed spontaneously too. Led by several young women who had been part of the Szare Szeregi, the Home Army Scouts, the troop set out to make itself useful. They organized aid for refugees then arriving from the east, assisted orphans and children who had been displaced. They behaved as they wanted, and answered to no higher authorities, despite some of the threatening signs around them.

In 1948, things changed. The school director was replaced, and many

of the teachers left as well. The Scout movement in Warsaw was taken over by the Union of Polish Youth leaders, pressure came from above to conform, and the young women instructors decided to disband their troop. "Scouts can't exist in a dishonest organization," they told Bortnowska and her friends. In their case, no one thought of forming a secret or conspiratorial troop: "We understood that there was no point." Bortnowska looked for other outlets. She managed to join Sodalicja Mariańska, a Catholic student group, on the day before it was disbanded. She was too late to work with Caritas as well.

Frustrated, but still determined to stick to her family's principles and her own Catholic ideals, Bortnowska sought other small outlets for rebellion. A turning point came when she and a friend were asked to sign the Stockholm Appeal, one of the many peace petitions that had gone around the school. They signed—and then thought better of it. They went to the school director and asked for their names to be removed. Those who had managed not to sign in the first place went unnoticed. But Bortnowska and her friend, then in their final year of secondary school, "caused a fuss, and attracted attention to ourselves . . . the whole town was talking about it." With that kind of black mark on their records, the possibility of higher education suddenly evaporated for both of them.

She could have gone to work at a factory, and she thought about doing so. But because Bortnowska had friends within religious institutions, there was one more option. She entered the Catholic Institute in Wrocław, and began to study to become a *katechetka*, a teacher of religion in elementary schools. The Catholic Institute, despite its imposing name, was in fact a temporary, unofficial institution, recognized by nobody except the church. Soon after its founding in the city of Wrocław, the institute's buildings were confiscated and it moved to shabby rural premises near the town of Olsztyn.

At the institute, the students studied and taught at the same time. They survived off money from local parishes, free meals from grateful parents, and food donations from churchgoers. They cooked for themselves and cleaned for themselves. They stayed out of the way. "We didn't exist, from the point of view of the authorities," Bortnowska recalled. There was still enough administrative chaos, especially in the former German territories, for them to remain under the radar.

Bortnowska remained at the Catholic Institute until 1956, when things began to loosen up and she was able to apply to a real university and get a



real degree. But for six years, she survived in communist Poland and did not collaborate. During that time she taught the rudiments of religion to school-children, and had enough to eat and somewhere to sleep. She did not pose a threat to the regime, and the regime probably took no interest in her. She played no public role and took no political positions. She had no children and no family, and thus did not have to worry about ensuring their future. Her mother was able to look after herself.

Asked, more than half a century later, whether she'd been afraid during that time, she shrugged. Yes and no, she said. "It's impossible to be afraid all the time. A person gets used to it, you stop paying attention." And so, hidden in the countryside, she did.<sup>41</sup>

For those who could not or would not collaborate, for those unable to find shelter within the church or take comfort in humor, there was one, final, dramatic option: escape.

In this, the East Germans had it easiest. Poles who left Poland or Hungarians who left Hungary left not just their homes and families but their language and culture. For them, to leave the country was to become forever a refugee. After 1949, passport regimes across Eastern Europe were strengthened and borders reinforced, which made even this heartbreaking choice more risky and difficult, since anyone caught crossing the border risked arrest and imprisonment. According to Interior Ministry statistics, only 9,360 Poles crossed the Polish border for any reason in 1951, of whom only 1,980 were traveling to capitalist countries.<sup>42</sup>

For Germans the same choice could be very difficult, especially for those who owned property or had family in the East. But it was not quite so dramatic. West Germany was still Germany, after all, and the national language was still German. The logistics were easier too. Unlike the Poles, who had to find a way across East Germany, Czechoslovakia, or the Baltic Sea to the West, Germans who wanted to leave East Germany in the 1950s had only, in theory, to cross the border into the West.

This apparently simple task did become more complicated as time went on. In the early days, the obstacles were often on the western side of the border. Because the flow of refugees was almost entirely from East to West from the very beginning, the U.S. Army in Bavaria and the British Army in northern Germany initially tried to slow it down. Fearing it would be

overwhelmed by large numbers of refugees, the U.S. Army actually began defending the borders of its occupation zone in March 1945, controlling who could and could not enter. Though these efforts weren't particularly successful—refugees still crossed through forests or found their way around border posts with the help of smugglers and bribable Soviet soldiers—they did help set a precedent. In due course all of the Allied armies in Germany set up border posts and roadblocks, monitored routes leading in and out of their respective zones, and required those crossing "internal" German borders to carry passes and visas.<sup>43</sup>

Inevitably, there began to be border "incidents"—Soviet soldiers shooting into the American zone and vice versa—as well as arguments over where, exactly, the new East–West German border was supposed to be. Nineteenth-century stone markers, which could be stealthily moved at night, became a focus of contention, and a number of towns in the Soviet zone applied to be transferred to the American zone.<sup>44</sup> The Red Army began to establish what would later become a no-man's-land, an area along the border where no one was allowed to live. Later, whole villages in these border areas would be evacuated. A series of Allied negotiations were held to discuss travel problems, and various commissions were set up to find the answers. Rules were created to govern the issuance of passes and permits.

All the while, Germans kept moving from East to West. Between October 1945 and June 1946 some 1.6 million people crossed into the American and British zones from the Soviet zone. By June 1946, the Red Army, not the American army, was demanding a ban on interzonal travel, and American soldiers, not Red Army soldiers, were helping Germans sneak across (by dressing up German women in American uniforms, among other things, a trick that was apparently not hard to see through).<sup>45</sup>

From 1949, the West German authorities also stopped treating people arriving from the East as illegal immigrants. Instead, they came to be regarded as political refugees and victims of communist oppression. They received places in refugee camps and help in finding housing and work. In accordance with these changes, the Soviet authorities also began to enforce stricter controls, sending Red Army troops to patrol their border and build ditches, fences, and barriers.

Berlin remained the exception. Although the city lay inside the Soviet zone, it was not easy to set up an enforceable "border" within it (though the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 would eventually prove that it was

possible). More importantly, the USSR did not at first want the city's division to become official. The Soviet authorities preferred Berlin to remain unified, albeit anchored securely in the East. This anomaly quickly created another odd dynamic, as East Germans began flocking to East Berlin in order to cross the border into West Berlin, and to make their way from there to West Germany by train or air. The mystery and intrigue of Berlin, so attractive to spy novelists and filmmakers, date from this era, when Berlin was the gateway to freedom.

The Berlin blockade of 1948–49 (described in Chapter 11) was designed to end this flow of people, as well as to persuade the Western Allies to abandon the western part of the city. Though the blockade failed in that latter task, the reinforcement of the border within the city did make it more difficult for Berliners to cross. Border police, ostensibly looking for black marketeers, monitored all forms of transportation, checking passports and visas, sometimes arresting would-be refugees.

The real clampdown came in 1952, after the East German government created a special commission to deal with the problem of those “fleeing the Republic.” Naturally, their solutions included propaganda—denunciations of the Western spies who enticed Easterners across the border with false promises of riches—as well as promises of better employment and housing for anyone who came back. The secret police began to collect information about people who had left, the better to understand their motives. Eventually, all remaining crossings along the East–West German border were closed to ordinary traffic, including as many in Berlin as feasible. It was at this point that the East German police and the Red Army began to monitor and block the roads into East Berlin from East Germany as well.

Yet still people fled. Despite all of the border controls, the guns, and the tanks, despite the risk of arrest or capture, nearly 200,000 people—197,788 to be precise—left East Germany for the West in 1950. In 1952, after the border had been newly fortified, the number dropped only slightly, to 182,393. Even then it began to pick up again, and would hover around 200,000 annually until the construction of the Berlin Wall halted the traffic. In total, 3.5 million people, out of a population of 18 million, are thought to have left East Germany between 1945 and 1961.<sup>46</sup>

Of these 3.5 million, some might have become the regime's opponents if they had stayed. Ernst Benda, the young Christian Democratic activist who

slipped over the border after receiving an odd phone message, went on to become a legal scholar, an early supporter of the Free University of West Berlin, and eventually president of the West German Supreme Court. Gisela Gneist, imprisoned in Sachsenhausen for founding a democratic youth group at the age of fifteen, crossed the border after her release. Decades later she helped create the memorial to Soviet prisoners at that camp. Gerhard Finn, arrested as a teenage “Werewolf,” crossed the border and threw himself into the anticommunist movement in West Berlin. Among the émigrés were artists, writers, and musicians of all kinds who, if they had stayed, might well have developed into cultural dissidents.

Not all of the refugees were political. One factory in Köpenick, required to explain its employees' departures, told the authorities that people left because their relatives were in West Germany, because the factory had not granted them a leave of absence to study, because they had debts, and because they thought they could make more money in the West. This was probably an accurate reflection of many émigrés' motives, which were undoubtedly mixed. The last point in particular was surely influential. By the early 1950s, West Germany's economy had left East Germany's economy far behind, as everyone could see.

But not all of those who remained were unhappy, and it is a mistake to imagine that only a sullen, apolitical rump population remained behind after this exodus—or that, as the German scholar Arnulf Baring once wrote, “anyone who showed initiative or was energetic and determined, had either left in time or was thrown out later on.” At least until the wall was built in 1961, those who stayed behind had extra leverage: if not given housing, better wages, or a top job, they could always threaten to leave. Those in certain critical professions—doctors, for example—were showered with privileges designed to persuade them to stay, and some of them reckoned they were better off for it. When, after Stalin's death, her husband told her that changes in regime policy might mean that many who had fled to the West might be coming back to East Germany, Herta Kuhrig, then aged twenty-three, thought: “Oh my God, if they return, we might have to leave our flat.”<sup>47</sup>

Knowing its citizens had a choice, the East German government refrained from cutting wages, and probably kept the police regime lighter than it would have been. Fear of a mass exodus might even help explain why there were no show trials in East Germany.<sup>48</sup> Not all of those who stayed

were admirers of the communist system, but they had assessed the situation, worked out how much compromise would be required and how much passive opposition would be possible. They made what they thought was the best choice for themselves and their families, and then waited to see what would happen next.

## Chapter 18

# REVOLUTIONS

After the uprising of the 17th June  
The Secretary of the Writers' Union  
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee  
Stating that the people  
Had forfeited the confidence of the government  
And could win it back only  
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier  
In that case for the government  
To dissolve the people  
And elect another?<sup>1</sup>

—Bertolt Brech, "The Solution"<sup>1</sup>

ON MARCH 6, 1953, Eastern Europeans, like the rest of the world, awoke to hear stunning news: Stalin was dead.<sup>2</sup>

Across the region, radios played funereal music. Shops closed their doors. Citizens were urged to hang flags from their homes, and millions voluntarily wore black clothes and black ribbons. Newspapers appeared with black borders around the edges, black sashes were placed on Stalin's photograph in offices, and schoolchildren took turns standing as honor guards before his portrait. Delegations from factories and ministries trooped through the offices of Soviet commandants in East Germany, where they signed condolence books in mournful silence. In the town of Heiligenstadt, Catholic churches rang their bells and priests said an "Our Father" in Stalin's name.<sup>3</sup>

Enormous crowds of mourners filled Wenceslas Square in Prague, and tens of thousands gathered around the Stalin statue in Budapest. A moment of silence was observed on Alexanderplatz in East Berlin.<sup>4</sup>

In Moscow, Stalin's acolytes and imitators gathered for his funeral. Bolesław Bierut and Konstantin Rokossovskii, Mátyás Rákosi and Klement Gottwald, Walter Ulbricht and Otto Grotewohl, all of them were there. So were Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej from Romania, Enver Hoxha from Albania, and Vulko Chervenkov from Bulgaria. Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai came from China, Palmiro Togliatti came from Italy, and Maurice Thorez from France.<sup>5</sup> Georgy Malenkov, Lavrentii Beria, and Vyacheslav Molotov gave funeral orations, although they did not, one observer noted, "exhibit a trace of sorrow."<sup>6</sup> Emotions must have run high, however. Gottwald suffered a heart attack after the funeral and died soon after.

Change followed swiftly. By the time of his death, Stalin's colleagues had grimly concluded that things were not going well in the Soviet empire. For many months they had been receiving regular, accurate, and extremely worrying reports from Eastern Europe. The Soviet ambassador to Prague had written of "near-total chaos" in Czech industry in December 1952, for example, along with steep price increases and a dramatic drop in living standards. Following the deaths of Stalin and Gottwald, strikes across Czechoslovakia picked up pace again. In May, thousands of Czechoslovak workers marched three kilometers from the Škoda factory to the city hall in Plzeň, where they occupied the building, burned Soviet flags, and threw busts of Lenin, Stalin, and Gottwald out of the window—a symbolic protest against the defenestration of Jan Masaryk, the former foreign minister, an anticommunist who had been thrown out of a window of the Foreign Ministry in 1948.<sup>7</sup> Strikes also began to spread among tobacco workers in Bulgaria, until then one of the most obedient countries in the bloc. The Soviet Politburo found this particularly disturbing: if hitherto loyal Bulgarian workers were restless, then the rest of the region must be even more unstable.<sup>8</sup>

The news from East Germany was not good either. Despite ever increasing border security, despite police controls and barbed wire, traffic over the internal German border was accelerating. More than 160,000 people had moved from East to West Germany in 1952, and a further 120,000 had left in the first four months of 1953.<sup>9</sup> One report warned of "growing unrest among the [East German] population stemming from the hard-line policies of the GDR leadership."<sup>10</sup> Beria himself penned a very accurate, perfectly clear-eyed analysis:

The increasing number of flights to the West can be explained . . . by the unwillingness of individual groups of peasants to join the agricultural production cooperatives that are being organized, by the fear among small and medium entrepreneurs about the abolition of private property and the confiscation of their possessions, by the desire of some young people to evade service in the GDR armed forces, and by the severe difficulties that the GDR is experiencing with the supply of food products and consumer goods.<sup>11</sup>

Even with the evidence in front of them, the Soviet leaders did not publicly question their own ideology. The ideas of Marxism were still correct—but, they concluded, the people in charge had failed: they had been too harsh, too arbitrary, too hasty, too incompetent. In particular, the East German party bosses had failed. On June 2, the Soviet Politburo summoned Ulbricht, Grotewohl, and Fred Oelssner, the ideology chief, to Moscow to tell them so. For three days, the Politburo lectured their German comrades. They told them to abandon celebrations of Ulbricht's birthday, to liberalize their economic program, and to postpone, indefinitely, the planned announcement of East Germany's imminent transition to "full socialism." This "incorrect political line" was to be replaced by a "New Course." The Germans naturally obeyed. On June 11, *Neues Deutschland* published a statement from the party leadership on its front page, apologizing for the "grave mistakes" of previous years, calling for an end to collectivization and even for the rehabilitation of victims of political trials.

Soviet-Hungarian talks followed a week later. This time, the Politburo attacked Rákosi, along with Ernő Gerő, Józef Révai, and Mihály Farkas. Beria—who had himself personally conducted brutal interrogations in the Soviet Union—led the charge: Rákosi, he said, had initiated an insupportable "wave of repression" against the population, even giving personal directions as to who should be arrested and beaten. Beria's colleagues also accused the Hungarian leader of "economic adventurism." Well aware of "discontent among the Hungarian population," shortages, and economic hardship they ordered Rákosi to step down as prime minister, although they allowed him to remain general secretary of the Hungarian communist party.<sup>12</sup>

They replaced him with Imre Nagy, the little-known agricultural minister. Nagy was also a "Moscow communist" who had lived in the Soviet Union before the war—where, as the historian Charles Gati argues, he had



probably worked as a secret police informer and maintained informal links to some of the Soviet leadership. But he had long favored a more gradual transition to communism and, more importantly, was not Jewish, which the Soviet Politburo seemed to think was an enormous advantage.<sup>13</sup> He set to work designing a New Course for Hungary, and within a few weeks he was ready to announce it. In July he made his first speech to parliament, stunning his party and his country. Nagy called for an end to rapid industrialization, an end to collectivization, and a more relaxed approach to culture and the media. "In the future," the Central Committee would soon declare, "the primary goal of our economic policy will be to raise constantly and considerably the standard of living of the people." Nagy remained a Marxist and described all of his policies using Marxist language—his long, dull, and almost unreadable written defense of the New Course quotes Stalin and Lenin with alarming frequency—but in the context of the time he seemed fresh and very different.<sup>14</sup>

The Soviet Politburo had never intended East Germany and Hungary to make these changes on their own: the liberalization was meant to be instituted across the bloc in order to stem the tide of protest and discontent. Some of them may even have imagined that eventually similar changes would take place in the USSR, where, for a few short years—a period known in the USSR as "the Thaw"—it would also seem as if truly radical change were possible. Certainly in all of their conversations with their Eastern European partners in 1953, the Soviet leaders made it clear that their criticism was intended "not just for a single country but for all the people's democracies."<sup>15</sup> Talks with the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha followed those with Ulbricht and Rákosi. More conversations, plotting more New Courses, were planned for late July. The Politburo also intended to invite the Poles, the Czechs, and the Bulgarians to Moscow, where they would also be told to change direction and make themselves popular—or risk catastrophe.

But catastrophe came anyway, though in a form nobody had expected.

The weather broke bright and clear in Berlin on June 17, 1953. Nevertheless, many Berliners stepped into the sunshine with trepidation, not sure what the morning would bring. The previous day, East Berlin had witnessed its first major mass strikes since the war. Emboldened by the announcement of the New Course, cheered on by Stalin's death, frustrated by the fact that the

new policies didn't seem to include lower work quotas, Berlin's workers had taken to the streets to protest. Lutz Rackow, an East German journalist, had walked down Stalinallee on June 16 alongside several thousand construction workers. They carried banners—"Berliners, join us! We don't want to be slaves to our work!" Few had dared. But as soon as he got to Stalinallee on June 17, Rackow immediately saw that things were going to be different: "This time people were joining. Not only that, workers were coming into the city from as far as Henningsdorf to join, even though public transportation had been halted and the walk took three hours."<sup>16</sup>

Erich Loest, the novelist who had tried to teach workers to write theater reviews, was on his way into the city that morning from Leipzig and he saw strikers too. But he also saw Soviet tanks and trucks moving north from bases near Schönefeld and Ahlsdorf. They were heading for the center of Berlin at about the same speed as his train. On another train from Leipzig—or perhaps even the same one—the writer Elfriede Brüning saw the same tanks. She was sitting with a colleague, who read aloud a newspaper headline: "Tumult in Bonn," it declared. Her friend laughed, and made a daring joke: "How is it that the government has heard only about the tumult in Bonn and not the uprising in Berlin!"<sup>17</sup>

On the Western side of the city, Egon Bahr, then the chief political editor in West Berlin for RIAS (Radio in the American Sector), was anxiously waiting to hear what was happening. A couple of days earlier, a delegation from East Berlin had come to his office to ask him to publicize their planned strike. He had agreed to broadcast the strikers' demands—they wanted lower work quotas, lower food prices, and free elections, among other things—and he had continued to do so until the radio's American controller, Gordon Ewing, burst into his office and told him to stop: "Do you want to start World War Three?" Ewing told Bahr that American responsibility and American security guarantees ended at the border, and he'd better be clear about that in his broadcasts. As Bahr remembers, "This was the only order I ever got from the U.S. government at RIAS."<sup>18</sup>

On the Eastern side of the city, most of the Politburo had left their homes early and made their way to Karlshorst, where they could hide from the expected crowds. In fact, they wound up spending the entire day there, standing around the office of the Soviet ambassador, Vladimir Semyonov. This was not a voluntary activity. At one point, Ulbricht asked to return home, and Semyonov snarled at him: "And if anything happens to you back in your

apartment? It's all very well for you, but think what my superiors will do to me."<sup>19</sup> It was perfectly clear who was in charge: at lunchtime, the Politburo learned that the Russian authorities had unilaterally imposed martial law on East Germany. The Soviet "state of emergency" would last until the end of the month.

The Politburo were not the only ones who didn't know what to do with themselves on June 17. After watching the march on Stalinallee, Rackow went to his office. But hardly any work was done that day. Journalists wandered about aimlessly, and the chief editor was locked in an office with the party cell leader, unsure what to do or what their line should be. Meanwhile, both Brüning and Loest made their separate ways to a long-planned meeting of the Writers' Association, where no one could talk about anything except the strike. The general secretary of the association put a call in to the Central Committee. Then he made an announcement: the writers should go out and discuss the situation with the workers. "And don't let yourselves be provoked!"<sup>20</sup>

Loest went out, along with a colleague. As a precaution, they put their party badges in their pocket. Brüning waded into the crowd as well. So did the journalist Klaus Polkehn, who had taken the U-Bahn into the center of town and wanted to find out what was going on. By then, tens of thousands of people were walking down Unter den Linden and toward the House of Ministries, the headquarters of the East German government, the outside of which was adorned with *Aufbau der Republik*, Max Lingner's mural.

Walking beside them, Loest saw right away that things were getting out of hand. Dozens of young men, "the fighting type," dominated the scene. "I was standing on the side," he remembered thinking with surprise. "They were on strike, the workers were on strike against the Workers' and Peasants' Party, against myself." A newspaper kiosk was in flames. No Volkspolizei—German policemen—were to be seen. This was deliberate: Ulbricht didn't trust them, and they only arrived later on. But there were plenty of Russian soldiers. They had "immobile faces," Loest remembered, "their caps fastened to their chins, their guns between their legs. Officers were standing beside them, not moving."<sup>21</sup>

These soldiers were merely the advance guard. The real demonstration of Soviet force came later in the morning. Loest was standing at the corner of Unter den Linden and Friedrichstraße when he saw the tanks roll in. A few hundred yards away, Karl-Heinz Arnold, also a journalist, watched the same

tanks through the window of a building on the corner of Leipziger Straße and Wilhelmstraße. From above, he could see the crowd gathering outside the House of Ministries: "The people there were definitely 'eight penny' boys from West Berlin. You give them eight pennies and tell them to go and pick up trouble. They were completely different from the demonstrators on Stalinallee, those were our construction workers."<sup>22</sup>

Hans-Walter Bendzko, a border control officer, was watching the same crowd but from the other side of a barricade. That morning, he had been told to report for special duty and had been sent to the House of Ministries as a security guard. He didn't know who was in the crowd, East German construction workers or West Berlin provocateurs. He only knew that it was not a "normal" demonstration, with banners and slogans, but rather "a dark mass that moved back and forth." "I thought they wanted to storm the ministry, I was afraid that there would be a fight, but I did not know what was going on." When Bendzko heard the tanks, he panicked, thinking, "This is the moment when the Americans will interfere." But as they approached, he saw—with enormous relief—that they were Soviet T-34 tanks, with red stars. Arnold, looking down from his window above, was also relieved: "It was a kind of liberation. It stopped the pressure." Two of the tanks slowly drove into the crowd around the building. People moved aside to let them through. One of them halted in front of the House of Ministries, and, as Bendzko looked on, the commander of Soviet troops in Berlin emerged.

He got out and walked through our cordon to the House of Ministries. And then he came back, got up on the tank, said something which, of course, nobody understood. Maybe he was announcing martial law. Then the tanks turned away again and moved toward Potsdamer Platz. And everybody ran away. Some were caught and arrested . . . The troublemakers started to attack the tanks. One of them got a large beam from among the rubble and put it under the wheel of the tank so the chains wouldn't move.<sup>23</sup>

Some of the tanks began firing when they reached Potsdamer Platz; others had already started shooting on Unter den Linden. Some of the Volkspolizei belatedly began using their pistols. Most people ran away, and hardly any fought back. What was there to fight back with? A few people threw stones, but there wasn't anything else. Some fifty people are thought to have

died that day, though the numbers have never been confirmed.<sup>24</sup> Hundreds were arrested, of whom thirteen were eventually sentenced and executed as traitors. Not all of the victims were demonstrators: in Rathenow, a Stasi functionary died after an angry mob dragged him into the canal and prevented him from getting out again.<sup>25</sup>

In the melee, Polkehn was arrested. He was dragged into a truck, waving his press card to no avail, and taken to Soviet headquarters at Karlshorst. He spent two days there, emerging filthy and hungry but relieved. Most of his fellow prisoners seemed to be there by accident: they had joined the demonstrations out of curiosity, or perhaps naïve conviction. Not all of them were from Berlin. Indeed, demonstrations took place in all of the major cities and industrial centers that day, especially those with a strong communist or social democratic tradition: Rostock, Cottbus, Magdeburg, Dresden, Leipzig, Erfurt, and Halle. In total, about 500,000 people in 373 towns and cities went on strike in about 600 enterprises. Between a million and 1.5 million people took part in demonstrations of some kind.<sup>26</sup>

Nobody was more surprised by the geographic spread of the strikers than Bahr, who had assumed the protests would be confined to Berlin. But he felt a peculiar thrill of responsibility when he heard that some of the demonstrators outside the capital had voiced demands that were the same, word for word, as those he had played on the radio the day before.<sup>27</sup> As it turned out, the Russians had been right in 1945: radio really was the most important mass medium of its time, and the only one that could reach a broad audience. But RIAS's audience turned out to be much broader than the audience of state radio. "June the seventeenth proves how many people listen to RIAS," an angry East German communist argued at a meeting a few weeks later. "We've done so much education and training, but none of it was absorbed."<sup>28</sup>

In Berlin, the appearance of Soviet tanks had ended the demonstrations. But by the time Semyonov sent his first cable to Moscow at 2 p.m., a good deal of damage had been done in the city and across the country. The windows of government offices had been smashed and a bookstore selling Russian books in central Berlin had been ransacked. In the town of Görlitz on the Polish border, a mob of 30,000 had destroyed the headquarters of the communist party, the offices of the secret police, and the prison. In Magdeburg, the party headquarters and the prison had actually been set on fire,

and in factories near Halle workers had overwhelmed the police.<sup>29</sup> There were some more subtle rebellions as well. In one factory, workers struck up a "whistling concert" in order to drown out the propaganda coming out of the sound system.<sup>30</sup>

East Germans reacted to these events in many different ways. Communist sympathizers, as Loest was at the time, were shocked by the idea that the workers could be protesting against the Workers' Party. Günter Schabowski—whose out-of-context comments at a press conference led to the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989—recalls that June 17 "showed us how endangered was the communists" seemingly "immovable and firm creation."<sup>31</sup> Functionaries like Arnold, seeking to explain the situation, sought to blame the violence on troublemakers from West Berlin. Those inclined to make excuses for the regime agreed with them. Though he later became more ambivalent (wondering, in the poem cited in the epigraph to this chapter, whether the government shouldn't "dissolve the people" and elect another), Bertolt Brecht's first reaction was to blame "organized fascist elements" from the West. In a *Neues Deutschland* article published a few days after the riots, Brecht, who was living at the time in Berlin, praised the Soviet intervention: "It is only thanks to the swift and accurate intervention of Soviet troops that these attempts were frustrated."<sup>32</sup>

More careful observers, Polkehn included, knew that many of the people involved in the strikes were dissatisfied workers and innocent bystanders—though even Polkehn, decades later, also thought that Western provocateurs must have been involved, somehow. It was too difficult and demoralizing to believe otherwise.<sup>33</sup> Rackow insisted differently: "It's nonsense that it was a Western plot, nobody believed that. Even those saying it didn't believe it."<sup>34</sup>

The Soviet authorities, with their excellent informer networks and multiple spies, were less surprised by the strikes than some of their East German comrades. They had expected demonstrations on June 17 and had known in advance that they would have to support the East German police. They were not shy about bringing their tanks onto the streets. But they had not expected demonstrations on such a large scale, with such evidently broad support and with such clearly anti-Soviet intentions. One memorandum sent to Nikita Khrushchev mentioned the "abuse," "vulgar insults," and "violent threats" directed at Soviet soldiers and officials, not to mention the stones thrown

at them. "The mass of the population have retained a hatred toward Soviet officials, which has now been inflamed again." The memo concluded: "This hatred was openly on display during the demonstrations."<sup>35</sup>

Initially, the Soviet authorities did not blame the West at all. In his first reports, Ambassador Semyonov spoke about strikers, workers, and demonstrators. Later his language changed, and he began speaking of provocateurs, ringleaders, and rowdies. Eventually, Soviet reports spoke of a "great international provocation, prepared earlier by the three Western powers and their accomplices from the circles of West German monopolistic capital"—though even then they conceded that there was still a "lack of factual material" to justify this thesis.<sup>36</sup>

For the Soviet diplomats and officers in Germany, the "provocation" explanation may have been a face-saving measure, a way to conceal their own failure to predict or prevent the riots. But it also might have been the only explanation that made sense to them. According to their ideology, their education, and their prejudices, this sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen. Not only was it impossible for workers to rise up against the workers' state but Germans were not supposed to oppose any authority at all. Stalin himself had once laughed at the thought of political protests in East Germany: "Revolt? Why they won't even cross the street unless the light is green."<sup>37</sup> But Stalin was dead.

The riots in East Berlin had one immediate and unexpected casualty. Nine days later, on June 26, Khrushchev engineered a dramatic coup against Beria. The Soviet secret police boss was taken by surprise, arrested by his colleagues, jailed, and eventually executed. Khrushchev's motivations were largely personal. He feared Beria's influence over the secret police and probably suspected, no doubt correctly, that Beria held compromising material on all of the Soviet leaders. But instead of saying so openly, he found it convenient to justify his arrest by blaming Beria for the June 17 riots. Although none of the Soviet Politburo members had objected to the New Course, and although all of them had pressed Ulbricht to implement it, they self-righteously deemed the riots evidence of Beria's dangerous "deviationism," his traitorous instincts, his high-handedness, and his arrogance.

Like all Politburo politics, Beria's arrest had an echo in Eastern Europe. The "hardliners" in Germany now attacked the "reformers"—principally Rudolf Herrnstadt, then the editor in chief of *Neues Deutschland*, and Wil-

helm Zaisser, the Stasi boss—for their alleged affiliations with Beria. In Budapest, Rákosi also began to drop knowing hints about Nagy's lack of support in Moscow and his own imminent return to power.<sup>38</sup>

Yet although German communists threw Beria's name around during the angry internal debates that followed the June 17 riots, his supposed influence was not really what was at stake. On the contrary, the argument that began in Germany in the summer of 1953 was part of a much wider debate about the nature of Eastern European communism. Should the regimes liberalize, allow more pluralism, open up debate, and bring back economic freedom? Or should they keep harsh, punitive, and controlling policies in place? Would liberalism lead to chaos? Would a crackdown cause a revolution?

In July 1953, both views were voiced in Berlin. At a stormy, angry Central Committee plenum in July, Anton Ackermann, previously an opponent of Ulbricht, declared that the party's enemies were growing stronger, the media should be more strictly controlled, and "only letters to the editor that have been checked for factual correctness should be published."<sup>39</sup> Another functionary present agreed, calling on the party to "intensify the fight against formalism, in favor of social realism," and to "persuade the masses to develop a love for Soviet art."<sup>40</sup>

But the liberalizers were not defeated altogether. At the same meeting, Zaisser reminded his comrades that the "change of course" had been designed, among other things, to prevent people from fleeing the country, and "June 17 was an even more alarming signal" of mass discontent. Johannes Becher, the former head of the Kulturbund, also spoke out in favor of looser controls on media and culture. Even in the USSR, he said, it would be "unthinkable for a Goethe museum to contain [Free German Youth] posters," as one did in East Germany.<sup>41</sup>

In the wake of the 1953 German riots, the argument between neo-Stalinists and liberalizers intensified in the other Eastern European capitals as well. In Warsaw, Bierut and Władysław Gomułka's battle for personal power had long ago turned into a struggle between neo-Stalinism on the one hand and a more "Polish," less Soviet form of communism on the other. Gomułka's cause received a sudden boost in December 1953 when Józef Światło, a senior secret policeman—the boss of Department X, responsible for watching party members—unexpectedly defected to the West. A few months later, Światło began broadcasting an extraordinary series of reports on the Polish service of Radio Free Europe, describing the privileged lifestyle



of the party elite, the role of Soviet advisers, and the arrest and incarceration of Gomułka in lurid detail. Millions openly tuned in to listen, even in government offices. In its own report on the broadcasts, the Security Ministry noted with alarm that previously reliable informers were now refusing to cooperate and were demanding to know whether Światło would reveal their names.<sup>42</sup> By December, Gomułka had been freed from house arrest.<sup>43</sup>

In Budapest, the party took a radically different turn. Rákosi—still the communist party's general secretary—used the Berlin riots as an excuse to call for renewed “vigilance” and to begin preparing for a comeback. Taking advantage of Moscow's general disorientation, he contrived to reverse the Hungarian New Course. By 1955 he had convinced the Soviet Union to dismiss Nagy from the prime minister's job and to replace him with a more pliant sidekick, András Hegedüs, the former youth leader. Nagy retaliated with an even more vociferous attack on Rákosi's harsh policies.<sup>44</sup> But while these arguments were going on at the very top of society, other things were happening far below.

If the first hint of discontent in Berlin came in the form of construction strikes, the beginning of the end of Stalinism in Poland came in the form of a large party. More precisely, it came in the form of the Fifth Youth and Students' Festival of World Peace and Friendship in the summer of 1955.

Like its predecessor in Berlin, the Warsaw youth festival was designed to be a vast propaganda exercise, a meeting place for Eastern European communists and their comrades from Western Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. Also like its predecessor in Berlin, it was meant to be carefully planned and orchestrated. Advance propaganda and enthusiastic coverage brought hundreds of thousands of Polish spectators to Warsaw for the five days of the festival. They traveled from all over the country to watch the dancing, the theater, and the other attractions—a Hungarian circus, a puppet show, and an opera were all performed on the first day—as well as sporting contests and economic debates.<sup>45</sup>

Yet from the very first day of the events, the crowds in Warsaw were not primarily interested in politics, culture, or even sports. The real attraction was the foreigners. Strolling the streets of the Polish capital for the first time since the war were Arabs in long robes, Africans in native dress, Chinese in Mao jackets, even Italians in striped shirts and French girls in flowered skirts. Maciej Rosalak, a child at the time, remembered the shock:

Gray, sad, poorly dressed people living among ruins and the rubble of streets were suddenly replaced by what seemed to be a different species. The newcomers smiled instead of listening to the static on Radio Free Europe like our parents, and they sang instead of whispering. Warsaw children ran among them and collected autographs in special notebooks. An Italian drew us a picture of his country, shaped like a boot, with Sicily and Sardinia alongside; a Chinese man left mysterious symbols; and a beautiful African wrote her exotic name and tousled our hair . . .<sup>46</sup>

The contrast between Poles and foreigners—especially those from Western Europe, who were culturally similar but so much richer and more open—struck everybody. *Trybuna Ludu*, the party newspaper, quoted a factory worker declaring that the dresses of the French girls were “amusing, happy, and tasteful . . . can't Polish clothes be more beautiful?”<sup>47</sup> The same newspaper also observed the contrast between the unsmiling Polish youth leaders—“we were sad, gloomy, incredibly stiff, uptight”—and their more cheerful foreign counterparts. “It turned out that it was possible to be ‘progressive,’ and at the same time enjoy life, wear colorful clothes, listen to jazz, have fun, and fall in love,” wrote Jacek Kuroń, who had been one of those unsmiling youth leaders at the time.<sup>48</sup> Particularly shocking, many noted, was the sight of young people kissing in public.

The political implications of this nonpolitical experience were clear even at the time. Jacek Fedorowicz, whose cabaret group Bim-Bom played in one of the theaters during the festival, remembered that “suddenly everything had become colorful, in a manner that was unbelievably unsocialist.”<sup>49</sup> It was, he reckoned, “a propaganda mistake: without warning, they had let a crowd of multicolored outsiders into gray Warsaw.” A decade's worth of anti-Western rhetoric was shown to be false: “Young people from the capitalist world were healthy and well-dressed, even though we'd been told that everything there is bad . . .”<sup>50</sup>

Spontaneity, the human quality most vigorously repressed by the communist regimes, suddenly flowered. To the horror of the festival organizers, Poles, Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, and others from the communist bloc actively socialized with one another and with the more exotic visitors, not only in the streets but in private apartments all over the city. Romances, friendships, and drunken evenings unfolded in an uncontrolled and unmon-

itored manner. A student meeting at the library of the University of Warsaw developed into an argument when it turned out that not all of the French delegation were actually communists. For young communists such as Krzysztof Pomian, this was the first experience of open public debate.<sup>51</sup>

Many officially planned events seemed somehow to go wrong too. At the old city Arsenal, young Polish artists put on a show dedicated, of course, to “peace.” But what attracted visitors and garnered attention was not the theme but the extraordinary variation in what was on display. There were many paintings executed in heavy paint and harsh colors. Brushwork was visible. Allegories were obscure. The images were different, unexpected—and abstract and avant-garde. It was the end of an era. After the Arsenal show socialist realism would vanish from the visual arts in Poland forever.

Spontaneity in art led to spontaneity in behavior. At times, crowds grew ugly. When the sound system broke down at one event, the rioting and anger were so great that the sound technicians had to escape to their van and drive quickly away.<sup>52</sup> People complained loudly about the shortage of food, the poor quality of some of the duller events, and the propaganda emitted by the ubiquitous loudspeakers. “In Warsaw, one dances in the name of something, or against something,” one party writer had solemnly declared in his summary of the festival, a sentiment almost everybody else found annoying.<sup>53</sup> There were many tedious performances, from stiff folk dancing to unsmiling waltzes, from which the crowds turned away in droves.

And yet—sometimes the crowds grew spontaneously joyous as well. At one point, the Bim-Bom cabaret group was supposed to have an official meeting with a Swiss delegation. But instead of a stiff exchange of greetings, moderated by a translator and presided over by a Union of Polish Youth official, someone began to play jazz. The young people started to dance. And this time, the cabaret artists and their new Swiss friends were dancing neither for something nor against something. They were dancing just for fun.<sup>54</sup> At that moment—as they did the jitterbug to the jazz music, as they ignored the distressed officials, as they sang along to the songs and paid no attention to their surroundings—the totalitarian dream suddenly seemed far away.

In the summer of 1955, Union of Polish Youth members were slipping away from their dull rallies to dance with Mexican communists and French fellow travelers. By autumn, their Hungarian counterparts had begun to breathe

life into their turgid League of Working Youth meetings too. These efforts had begun on a very small scale, when a group of young staff members at the Hungarian National Museum decided to organize a literary and political discussion group. They asked one of their friends, a poet named István Lakatos, to lead them. Lakatos opened the debates with a lecture on the Hungarian Enlightenment. He read from the works of Hungary’s most prominent Enlightenment poet, György Bessenyei. In conclusion, he called upon the group to endorse Enlightenment values, albeit 200 years late, and they decided there and then to form a society, the “Bessenyei Circle.”

It was a tiny, elite, and somewhat esoteric effort. But it was nevertheless a matter of concern for the League of Working Youth, for whom any spontaneously organized group was a threat. A few years earlier, they would have banned a group dedicated to Enlightenment values. But Stalin was dead, and angry debate about Nagy’s “New Course” was still raging. They decided to replace the group’s leaders and to channel their efforts toward more politically correct, contemporary topics. Fatally, they also decided to name the group after Sándor Petőfi, the young poet of the 1848 revolution, whom they thought more appropriate to a progressive society than the “bourgeois” Bessenyei. Thus was born the Petőfi Circle, a debating club whose ostensibly academic discussions quickly became open debates about censorship, socialist realism, and central planning. Initial discussion topics included the peasants’ revolt of 1514 (a pretext for a debate on agricultural policy) and an analysis of Hungarian historiography (a pretext for a debate about the falsification of history in communist textbooks).<sup>55</sup> The choice of name quickly proved “double-edged,” as one Hungarian writer put it: Petőfi had been a revolutionary fighting for Hungarian independence and the group bearing his name soon felt empowered to become revolutionary too.<sup>56</sup>

Changes had been taking place in other regime institutions at the same time. At *Szabad Nép*, the communist party’s hitherto reliable newspaper, reporters had become restless. In October 1954, a group of them, sent to cover life in the country’s factories, returned wanting to write about faked production statistics, falling living standards, and workers who had been blackmailed into buying “peace bonds.” In a published article, they declared that “though the life of the workers has changed and improved a great deal in the last ten years, many of them still have serious problems. Many are still living in overcrowded and shabby apartments. Many have to think twice about buying their children a new pair of shoes or going to an occasional

movie!" The following day, the reporters got the dreaded phone call from the Politburo member responsible for *Szabad Nép*: "What do you mean by this article? Do you think we will tolerate this agitation?" Instead of backing down, the editors held a three-day staff conference, at which one reporter after another stood up and called for honest reporting, supported Nagy's reforms, and attacked senior party officials as well as their own editors. Several of these overly honest reporters lost their jobs, including Miklós Gimes, the son of Lily Hajdú-Gimes, the Freudian psychiatrist who had practiced in secret. But a precedent had been set.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile, the Hungarian Writers' Association—the group responsible for imposing political correctness on Hungarian prose and poetry—also began to reexamine its previous views, to discuss taboos, and to welcome back its banned members. By the autumn of 1955 this formerly hard-line group even felt brave enough to issue a statement protesting against the dismissal of pro-Nagy editors from their posts, demanding "autonomy" for their association and objecting to the "anti-democratic methods which cripple our cultural life."<sup>58</sup>

Most of these new or newly re-formed groups, clubs, and debating societies quickly came to be dominated by disillusioned young communists and former communists, mostly in their twenties and thirties. This was a generation that wasn't supposed to be revolutionary—or rather counterrevolutionary—at all. Old enough to have been traumatized by war, young enough to have studied in communist institutions, many were products of the "social advance" promised by the communist system and many had already enjoyed rapid promotion and early success. Tamás Aczél, active in the Writers' Association debates, had been named chief editor of the party's publishing house at the age of twenty-nine, and by the age of thirty-one had received both the Stalin Prize and the prestigious Kossuth Prize for his work. Tibor Meráy, another Writers' Association activist, had also received a Kossuth Prize, at the age of twenty-nine.<sup>59</sup> István Eörsi, also an active member of the Petöfi Circle, had been a published poet from a very young age too.

At the same time, many in this generation had been personally affected by the destruction of civil society, the terror, and the purges that had ended just a few years before. All of them knew what it meant to be forced to play the "reluctant collaborator." Tibor Déry, one of the leaders of the new Writers' Association, had watched as his once celebrated works of fiction had been attacked and barred from publication as insufficiently ideologically correct.<sup>60</sup>

Gábor Tánczos, the leader of the Petöfi Circle, had been an idealistic graduate of Györfly College, one of the Hungarian People's Colleges, until its abrupt and brutal closing in 1949. Another People's College graduate, Iván Vitányi—the music critic who had "brainwashed" himself after being expelled from the party in 1948—spoke about folk art and music at some of the early public meetings of the Petöfi Circle.<sup>61</sup> One account describes the early meetings of the circle as "reunions" of activists from Nékosz, the People's College movement, and Mefesz, the short-lived university students' union that had been forcibly submerged into the League of Working Youth in 1950. At some of their early meetings they even sang songs together, just as in the old days.<sup>62</sup>

In particular, these young (or youngish) intellectuals were all deeply disturbed by what they now knew had been the unjust arrest, imprisonment, and torture of their colleagues. In 1954, Nagy had begun to rehabilitate political prisoners, and they were slowly trickling back to Budapest from prison, from Reck, and from exile. Béla Kovács, the Smallholders' Party leader, came back from the Soviet Union along with several colleagues in 1955.<sup>63</sup> József Mindszenty was released from prison and placed under house arrest in a castle outside Budapest. Even Noel Field was rehabilitated that year. Aczél and Meráy have described the deep emotions many Hungarian writers felt when they encountered old friends who had been in prison, suffering, while they were penning socialist realist fiction and winning prizes: "They were ashamed of what they had written and of what they had not written. Now they looked with disgust upon the volumes that they had once upon a time caressed with their eyes—the volumes that had won them the recognition of Kossuth Prizes; and they had no other desire than to unwrite them."<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, many were also seeking to justify themselves, to make up for the damage they had caused, and to put their left-wing projects back on track. But this was 1956, not 1989, and not everybody was yet convinced communism was doomed to fail. As Eörsi put it, "They wanted to rehabilitate, together with their own guilty person, the credibility and the good scientific reputation of Marxism too."<sup>65</sup> Many turned back to the original texts of Marxism for inspiration and instruction, in Poland as well as in Hungary. Karol Modzelewski, a student radical at the time—he was part of a group of activists who took over the Union of Polish Youth at the University of Warsaw in 1956—explains this dynamic very well: "We had learned that if a political system is bad, what should one do? Start a revolution. And we were taught, through all of those years, how to make a revolution . . . The workers

should do it, with the help of the intellectuals who bring the revolutionary consciousness to the working classes."<sup>66</sup>

Modzelewski and his colleagues soon began agitating in Polish factories, hoping to create a more equitable economic system, just as Marx had advised: "It was like a myth turning into real life."<sup>67</sup> Hungarian intellectuals had the same idea, and for the same reason. As Eörsi wrote later, "That is the common trap of all quasi-revolutionary systems: the people begin to take seriously the real message of the officially declared ideology and the nationalized heroes of the system."<sup>68</sup>

Paradoxically, ties between workers and intellectuals were reinforced by their experience of mistreatment under communism. These two social groups had been the most heavily targeted and manipulated by communist propaganda in the previous decade, and as a result, they had the most profound sense of disjunction and disaffection. If anything, Hungarian workers were even angrier than Hungarian students and Hungarian intellectuals. While writers and journalists felt guilty, the workers felt betrayed. They had been promised the highest possible status in the "workers' state," and instead they had poor working conditions and low pay. In the immediate postwar period, they had directed their anger at state factory bosses. But now they were inclined to blame the state itself. Miners in the 1950s "denounced the system and grumbled that despite the difficulty of their work the pay was low," while industry workers in general believed they were exploited by "a bloodsucking government."<sup>69</sup> Though *Szabad Nép* had been scared away from reporting too closely on factory life a year earlier, the previously moribund Writers' Association magazine, *Irodalmi Újság* (*Literary Gazette*), now picked up this theme quite frequently, printing interviews and letters from workers, such as this one from a blacksmith:

How many times have I been obliged to accept the opinion of others, one which I perhaps don't share. As that opinion changes, it's demanded that mine change equally. And that makes me feel sick, sicker than if I'd been beaten. I'm a man, I too. I also have a head which I use to think. And I'm not a child. I'm an adult, who gives his soul, his heart, his youth and his energy for the construction of socialism . . . I do it willingly but I want to be considered like an adult who lives and knows how to think. I want to be able to speak my thoughts without having anything to fear—and I want to be heard as well . . .<sup>70</sup>

The Petöfi Circle meetings proved an excellent forum for interactions between the rejuvenated young intellectuals and their radicalized working-class counterparts. In the winter of 1955 the major Budapest factories began sending regular delegations to the meetings, and the demand for tickets soon exceeded supply, forcing the circle to meet at larger premises. The meetings were open and informal, even raucous at times, and they touched on issues of industrial and economic reform that were of interest to many. Still, they might well have become nothing but a forum for criticism and complaints, had greater events not intervened.

Unexpectedly, Khrushchev, now the general secretary of the Soviet communist party, was the man who pushed the students, the workers, and the Petöfi Circle participants much further and faster than they had ever expected to go. On February 24, 1956, with no forewarning, Khrushchev stood up in front of the Twentieth Party Congress and denounced "the cult of personality" that had surrounded the late Stalin:

It is impermissible and foreign to the spirit of Marxism-Leninism to elevate one person, to transform him into a superman possessing supernatural characteristics, akin to those of a god. Such a man supposedly knows everything, sees everything, thinks for everyone, can do anything, is infallible in his behavior. Such a belief about a man, and specifically about Stalin, was cultivated among us for many years.<sup>71</sup>

This was Khrushchev's famous "secret" speech—though thanks largely to the Soviet Union's Eastern European friends, it did not remain secret for long. Polish officials leaked it to Israeli intelligence, which leaked it to the CIA, which handed it to *The New York Times*, which published it in June.<sup>72</sup> But even before that, Eastern European communists were poring over it for clues to Khrushchev's thinking. The Soviet leader had lauded Lenin, attacked Stalin, and deplored the arrests and murder of Soviet party members and military commanders during the purge years of the 1930s, but his mea culpa was not complete. He had not mentioned other arrests and other crimes such as the Ukrainian famine, for which he himself was partly responsible. He had not called for economic reforms or institutional reforms. He had certainly not apologized for anything the Soviet Union had done in Eastern Europe, and he offered no clear proposals for change.



Nevertheless, it was in Eastern Europe where the most dramatic reactions ensued. The speech literally killed Bierut. The Polish leader went to Moscow for the Twentieth Party Congress and—like Gottwald at Stalin's funeral—died there of a stroke or a heart attack, presumably brought on by the shock. Lower down the hierarchy, many previously loyal party members were stunned. "People had trouble believing it," remembered a Pole who was a junior army officer at the time. "The revelations about Generalissimo Stalin, leader of half the world . . . it was incredible."<sup>73</sup>

Others were energized, even radicalized by the speech. At the end of May, a few months after the Twentieth Party Congress, the Petöfi Circle organized an open public discussion titled "The Twentieth Soviet Party Congress and the Problems of Hungarian Political Economy." Very quickly, that discussion turned into an "all-out denunciation of Rákosi's megalomania; his policies of senseless industrial construction, forced industrialization, the proposed new Five-Year Plan and the lack of realism of his agricultural policy."<sup>74</sup> In early June, György Lukás, Hungary's most famous Marxist philosopher, praised "independent thinking" and called for a "dialogue" between theologians and Marxists.

Two weeks later, a half-forgotten figure from the recent past stood up and gave the most devastating denunciation of all. On the evening of June 27, Júlia Rajk, aged forty-four and only six months out of prison, took the podium in a large, neoclassical meeting room in the very heart of Budapest. "I stand before you," she told hundreds of members of the Petöfi Circle, "deeply moved after five years of prison and humiliation":

Let me tell you this: as far as prisons are concerned, Horthy's jails were far better, even for communists, than Rákosi's prisons. Not only was my husband killed, but my little baby was torn from me . . . These criminals have not only murdered László Rajk. They have trampled underfoot all sentiment and honesty in this country. Murderers should not be criticized, they should be punished.<sup>75</sup>

The audience applauded, whistled, stamped its feet. A few nights later, another Petöfi Circle audience—by now expanded to 6,000 people, many standing outside on the street—gathered to discuss freedom of the press. They ended their meeting chanting, "Imre, Imre, Imre, Imre." They were calling for the ousting of Rákosi—and the return of Imre Nagy.

They got half their wish. In the middle of July, Anastas Mikoyan, one of Khrushchev's closest confidants, paid an emergency visit to Budapest. Once again, the Politburo had received from Yuri Andropov, then the Soviet ambassador to Hungary (and general secretary of the communist party thirty years later) disturbing reports of enemy activity in Hungary, of spontaneous discussions, of revolutionary youth. Mikoyan was sent to fix the problem. In the car on the way from the airport, he told Rákosi that "in the given situation" he must resign on grounds of ill-health. Rákosi did as he was told and flew to Moscow for "medical treatment," never to return: he spent the final fifteen years of his life in the Soviet Union, most of it in distant Kirghizstan.<sup>76</sup> But Mikoyan did not replace him with Nagy. Instead, the Politburo chose Rákosi's faithful sidekick, the conservative, unimaginative, and, in the final analysis, incompetent Gerö.<sup>77</sup>

More than fifty years have now passed since October 1956. Since then, the events of that month have been described many times, by many great writers, and there is no space here to summarize all of their work in detail.<sup>78</sup> Suffice it to say that between July and October, Gerö tried desperately to mollify his countrymen. He rehabilitated fifty Social Democratic leaders who had been imprisoned. He effected a reconciliation with Tito. He reduced the size of the Hungarian army.

After much agonizing, he also allowed Júlia Rajk to hold a funeral for her husband. On October 6—the anniversary of the execution of thirteen generals who had led the Hungarian Revolution of 1848—Júlia and her son, László, stood solemnly, dressed in black, beside her husband's coffin, waiting for Rajk to be reburied in Kerepesi cemetery alongside Hungary's national heroes. Tens of thousands of mourners were in attendance at what was by all accounts a bizarre event. "It was a cold, windy, rainy autumn day," one remembered. "The flames of the large silver candelabra darted about in a wild *danse macabre*. Mountains of wreaths lay at the foot of the biers." Funeral orators praised Rajk—himself a murderous secret police boss, responsible for thousands of deaths and arrests as well as the destruction of Kalot, the other youth groups, and the rest of civil society—and denounced Rajk's killers in the harshest possible terms: "He was killed by sadistic criminals who had crawled into the sun from the stinking swamp of a 'cult of personality.'"<sup>79</sup> Jenő Széll, the party official who had been so doubtful about

the communist party's optimistic approach to elections, remembered the funeral as "ghastly":

It started pouring with rain—not a cloudburst but enough to get us all thoroughly soaked. And beforehand, what a huge streaming crowd of people with grim faces! . . . People came, acquaintances looked at each other and greeted one another, but they didn't as usual form little groups to gossip . . . Everyone here was looking to see who would be in the leadership from now on.<sup>80</sup>

That evening, a few scattered demonstrations broke out. Some 500 students gathered around a statue of Hungary's first constitutional prime minister, who had been executed by the Austrians in 1849. Though these meetings broke up peacefully, the city remained wary: "The solemn formalities of the funeral had reminded people, instead of making them forget, that *fundamentally* nothing had changed."<sup>81</sup>

The importance of the Rajk funeral was not immediately understood in Budapest, and it was certainly not understood in Moscow. On the contrary, in the first weeks of October the Kremlin's attention was firmly fixed not on Hungary but on Poland, which was also descending into political turmoil. In June, 100,000 workers had gone on strike in the city of Poznań. Like the East Germans before them, they had begun by demanding better pay and less rigorous work norms, but had rapidly started calling for "an end to dictatorship" and "Russians out." They were dispersed, brutally, by the Polish army: some 400 tanks and 10,000 soldiers fired on the strikers, killing several dozen people, among them a thirteen-year-old boy. Hundreds more were wounded. But Poles didn't blame their compatriots for the violence. The Poznań deployment had been supervised by Marshal Rokossovskii after all, a Soviet citizen of Polish origin, and the orders to fire were issued by his deputy, also a Soviet citizen. The chief of the general staff was at that time a Soviet citizen too, as were seventy-six other senior "Polish" army officers.<sup>82</sup> Inside the Polish communist party, a vocal group now began to call for the removal of the Soviet officers for good. In October, the Polish United Workers' Party took the unilateral decision not merely to grant full rehabilitation to the de facto leader of that group, Gomułka, but to make him first party secretary.

Alarmed, Khrushchev arrived in Warsaw on October 19. The visit was unplanned: he intended to prevent Gomułka from taking power. To under-

line his point, he also ordered Soviet troops based elsewhere in Poland to start marching toward Warsaw immediately. According to several accounts, Gomułka responded with his own threats. He became "rude," he blamed Soviet officers in the Polish army for creating public anger, and he declared that if put in charge he could easily control the country without Soviet interference. More importantly, he also ordered Interior Ministry troops and other armed groups who were loyal to him, and not to the Soviet-dominated army, to take up strategic positions around Warsaw where they prepared to defend him and his new government. A violent clash pitting Polish troops loyal to Gomułka against Polish troops loyal to Soviet commanders—the latter backed up by the Red Army—suddenly seemed possible.<sup>83</sup>

Khrushchev blinked first. "Finding a reason for an armed conflict [with Poland] right now would be very easy," he told colleagues on October 24, "but finding a way to put an end to such a conflict later on would be very hard."<sup>84</sup> He decided reconciliation was the best policy—and eventually agreed to recall Rokossovskii, his deputy, and several other Soviet officers. In return, Gomułka promised loyalty to Moscow in matters of foreign policy and swore not to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact.

Khrushchev might well have pushed for more. But he was once again distracted from Poland by events in Budapest, where reports of Gomułka's return to power gave Hungarians hope of reinstating Nagy as well. Rajk's strange funeral had removed any remaining barriers of fear: it was as if Stalinism had been symbolically buried along with his corpse. All during October, local Petőfi Circles had been forming across the country. Colleges and high schools formed their own democratic governing bodies and debating clubs too. The media reported all of this activity with gusto. One radio station interviewed some high-school "parliamentarians," who said they "would like to travel and study contemporary Western literature." They also thought university admissions should be decided by exams, not by party connections. Events in Poland were also reported with enthusiasm. When hundreds of thousands turned out in Warsaw to cheer Gomułka, one Hungarian journalist declared that "the trend of democratization has the full support of the large masses and, what is more important, the working-class."<sup>85</sup>

Inspired by this news, 5,000 students crammed into a hall at Budapest Technological University on October 22 to vote themselves out of the League of Working Youth and to form their own organization. From 3 p.m. until

midnight they wrote a manifesto, a radical document that eventually became known as the Sixteen Points. Among other things, it called for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary, free elections, freedom of association, economic reform—and the restoration of March 15, the 1848 anniversary, as a national holiday.<sup>86</sup> The students also agreed to meet the following day beneath the statue of General József Bem, a Polish commander who had fought with the Hungarians in 1848, and to demonstrate there in favor of their demands and in support of Polish workers.

Twenty-four hours later, there were at least 25,000 people in Bem Square and thousands more in the streets flowing out of it. They had marched to the Polish general's statue from all over the city, in some cases sent on their way by recitations of a Petöfi verse said to have inspired the revolution of 1848:

Arise Hungarians, your country calls you.  
Meet this hour, what'er befalls you.  
Shall we free men be, or slaves?  
Choose the lot your spirit craves.

As in Poznań the previous June, many were shouting “Russians go home!” As in Berlin three years earlier, the crowd sacked a Russian bookstore along the way and set its contents alight. One group broke off and headed for the radio station. There they laid siege to the building and demanded, “We want the radio to belong to the people!” When the station kept playing bland music, they began ramming the building with a radio truck. By nightfall, the crowd had moved on to Hero Square, where a giant bronze statue of Stalin had been erected four years earlier. After a few futile attempts to pull the statue down with ropes, a platoon of workers arrived with heavy machinery—the cranes were borrowed from the city's public transportation department—and metal-burning equipment. They hacked away, the crowd chanted, and the statue began to shake. Finally, at precisely 9:37 p.m., Stalin fell.<sup>87</sup>

The Soviet leadership reacted with dismay, inconsistency, and confusion to the events in Budapest, as did the Hungarian regime. Gerö panicked, called Ambassador Andropov, and begged for Soviet tanks. Khrushchev sent tanks and then withdrew them. Nagy at first tried to pacify the crowds, initially telling them to go home and let the party elders deal with it. But when

Khrushchev changed his mind and sent Red Army troops pouring back over the border, Nagy switched sides, announced Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, and called on the United Nations to defend Hungarian neutrality.

The Western powers were equally at sea. The Hungarian service of Radio Free Europe, based in Munich and staffed by angry émigrés, egged on the revolutionaries. But despite his earlier calls for the “rollback” of communism and the “liberation” of Eastern Europe, the hawkish American secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, could do no better than send the Soviet leaders a message: “We do not see these states [Hungary and Poland] as potential military allies.”<sup>88</sup> At the time, the CIA had but a single agent inside Hungary, and he lost contact with the agency after the second Soviet invasion.<sup>89</sup>

In twelve brief days of euphoria and chaos, nearly every symbol of the communist regime was attacked. Statues were torn down and red stars removed from buildings. The citizens of Sztálinváros, having been coerced into naming their city after Stalin, spontaneously decided to change it back again. Along with about 8,000 other political prisoners, Mindszenty was released from the medieval castle where he had been kept in solitary isolation. Young Hungarians took over the national radio and renamed it Radio Free Kossuth, a name that echoed Radio Kossuth, the station on which the Hungarian communists had broadcast liberation propaganda during the war. “For many years our radio has been an instrument of lies . . . It lied by night and by day, it lied on all wavelengths,” they declared. “We who are before the microphone now are new men.”<sup>90</sup>

Across the country, radical workers borrowed an idea from Yugoslavia and began forming “worker councils,” which began to take over factories and expel the management.<sup>91</sup> Instead of fighting the revolutionaries, Hungarian soldiers deserted the army in droves and began distributing weapons to their fellow citizens. One of the first senior officers to defect, Colonel Pál Maléter, was quickly named Nagy's new defense minister. The Budapest chief of police, Sándor Kopácsi, also switched sides and joined the revolutionaries. Across the country, mobs lynched secret policemen and broke into secret police archives. Curious crowds broke into Rákosi's villa too, and grew furious when they saw the luxurious furniture and carpets.

The aftermath was equally chaotic and appallingly bloody. General Ivan Serov—the man who had “pacified” Warsaw and Berlin, and who had since been promoted to the leadership of the KGB—personally supervised the

arrests of Maléter and Nagy. The latter had sought asylum in the Yugoslav embassy, was promised safe passage to Belgrade, and then betrayed. Both men were eventually executed, not on the orders of Khrushchev but on the command of János Kádár, the Hungarian leader who then ruled the country for the subsequent three decades. Miklós Gimes kept up the resistance throughout November, as did many of the factory workers, before he too was arrested and eventually executed. Between December 1956 and the summer of 1961, 341 people were hanged, 26,000 people were put on trial, and 22,000 received sentences of five years or more. Tens of thousands more lost their jobs or their homes.<sup>92</sup> Even so, strikes and protests continued across Hungary throughout December and January, especially in the factories. Mindszenty sought refuge in the American embassy, where he remained for fifteen years. Some 200,000 Hungarians fled over the border and became refugees. György Faludy, the poet who had been imprisoned in Reck, was one of them: "I had a wife and young son. I was afraid that if I stayed I would break, join the Communist party in order to survive and protect my family."<sup>93</sup>

Across the rest of Eastern Europe and around the world, the Hungarian Revolution helped alter the international perception of the Soviet Union for good, especially in the Western communist parties. After 1956, the French communist party fractured, the Italian communist party broke away from Moscow, and the British communist party lost two-thirds of its members. Even Jean-Paul Sartre attacked the USSR in November 1956, though he retained a weakness for Marxism long afterward.<sup>94</sup>

The excellent reporting from Hungary in 1956 helped create this reaction: some of the best journalists of their generation were in Budapest during the revolution, and arguably some of the best war photographers of all time. But the agonizing images were made more powerful by the fact that they had been so unexpected. Until it actually happened, few analysts—even fiercely anti-Soviet analysts—had believed that revolution was possible within the Soviet bloc. Both communists and anticommunists, with a very few exceptions, had assumed that Soviet methods of indoctrination were invincible; that most people believed in the propaganda without question; that the totalitarian educational system really would eliminate dissent; that civic institutions, once destroyed, could not be rebuilt; that history, once rewritten, would be forgotten. In January 1956, a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate had predicted that, over time, dissidence in Eastern Europe would be worn down

"by the gradual increase in the number of Communist-indoctrinated youth."<sup>95</sup> In a later epilogue to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote that the Hungarian Revolution "was totally unexpected and took everybody by surprise." Like the CIA, the KGB, Khrushchev, and Dulles, Arendt had come to believe that totalitarian regimes, once they worked their way into the soul of a nation, were very nearly invincible.

They were all wrong. Human beings do not acquire "totalitarian personalities" with such ease. Even when they seem bewitched by the cult of the leader or of the party, appearances can be deceiving. And even when it seems as if they are in full agreement with the most absurd propaganda—even if they are marching in parades, chanting slogans, singing that the party is always right—the spell can suddenly, unexpectedly, dramatically be broken.



## EPILOGUE

And so it was necessary to teach people not to think and make judgments, to compel them to see the nonexistent, and to argue the opposite of what was obvious to everyone . . .

—Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*

FOR MORE THAN thirty years, right up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the communist leaders of Eastern Europe kept asking themselves the same questions they had posed after Stalin's death. Why did the system produce such poor economic results? Why was the propaganda unconvincing? What was the source of continuing dissent, and what was the best way to quash it? Would arrests, repression, and terror suffice to keep the communist parties in power? Or would more liberal tactics—a measure of economic freedom or a modicum of free speech—prevent future explosions more effectively? What changes would the Soviet Union accept, and where would the Soviet leadership draw the line?

Different answers were given at different times. After Stalin's death none of the regimes were as cruel as they had been between 1945 and 1953, but even post-Stalinist Eastern Europe could be harsh, arbitrary, and formidably repressive. Władysław Gomułka's Poland started out with liberal ambitions and popular enthusiasm, but quickly grew sclerotic, conservative, and eventually anti-Semitic. János Kádár began his reign in Hungary with a series of bloody reprisals, but later tried to win legitimacy and popularity by allowing

some free enterprise, travel, and trade. In the buildup to the Prague Spring in 1968, Czechoslovakia enjoyed a real cultural flowering—writers, directors, and playwrights won international acclaim—but after the Soviet invasion, the Czechoslovak government became one of the most thuggish in the entire bloc. In 1961 East Germany built a wall to keep its citizens in, but in the 1980s the regime quietly started allowing dissidents to leave in exchange for hard currency from the West German government. Both Romania and Yugoslavia tried at different times to carve out individual roles in foreign policy, distancing themselves from the rest of the Soviet bloc, but not necessarily in very meaningful ways.

Though always staying within the framework laid down by the Soviet Union, various Eastern European governments experimented by increasing the role of cooperatives or restraining the church, raising the numbers of secret policemen or allowing more freedom in the arts. Sometimes, the liberal reforms stayed in place: the Polish communists abandoned socialist realism after 1956, for example, and Hungary legalized joint ventures in the 1980s. At other times liberalization ended with violence. At the time of the Prague Spring, the Czechoslovak communist party under the leadership of Alexander Dubček called for evolutionary reform, a decentralized economy, and a democratized political system. Soviet tanks rolled into Prague and crushed the reform movement a few months later, and Dubček was removed from power. In August 1980, the Polish communist party legalized the Solidarity trade union, a grassroots movement that eventually grew to 10 million workers, students, and intellectuals. That experiment ended a year and half later, when the Polish communist party declared martial law, banned Solidarity, and put tanks on the street as well.

Over time, the nations of Eastern Europe began to have much less in common. By the 1980s, East Germany had the largest police state, Poland the highest church attendance, Romania the most dramatic food shortages, Hungary the highest living standards, and Yugoslavia the most relaxed relationship with the West. Yet in one narrow sense they remained very similar: none of the regimes ever seemed to realize that they were unstable by definition. They lurched from crisis to crisis, not because they were unable to fine-tune their policies but because the communist project itself was flawed. By trying to control every aspect of society, the regimes had turned every aspect of society into a potential form of protest. The state had dictated high daily quotas for the workers—and so the East German workers' strike against high daily

quotas mushroomed quickly into a protest against the state. The state had dictated what artists could paint or writers could write—and so an artist or writer who painted or wrote something different became a political dissident too. The state had dictated that no one could form independent organizations—and so anybody who founded one, however anodyne, became an opponent of the regime. And when large numbers of people joined an independent organization—when some 10 million Poles joined the Solidarity trade union, for example—the regime's very existence was suddenly at stake.

Communist ideology and Marxist-Leninist economic theory contained the seeds of their own destruction in a different sense too. Eastern European governments' claims to legitimacy were based on promises of future prosperity and high living standards, which were supposedly guaranteed by "scientific" Marxism. All of the banners and posters, the solemn speeches, the newspaper editorials, and eventually the television programs spoke of ever faster growth. And although there was some growth, it was never as high as the propaganda made it out to be. Living standards never rose as quickly and dramatically as they did in Western Europe either, a fact that could not be hidden for long. In 1950, Poland and Spain had very similar GDPs. By 1988, Poland's had risen about two and half times—but Spain's had risen thirteen times.<sup>1</sup> Radio Free Europe, travel, and tourism all brought home this gap, which only grew larger as technological change in Western Europe accelerated. Cynicism and disillusion grew along with it, even among those who had originally placed their faith in the system. The smiling communist youth cadres of the 1950s gave way to the sullen, apathetic workers of the 1970s, to the cynical students and intellectuals of the 1980s, to waves of emigration and discontent. The system always had its supporters, of course, particularly after some Eastern European governments began to borrow large sums from Western banks in order to maintain higher levels of consumption. Its beneficiaries went on paying it lip service, and those who had benefited from communist social promotion policies continued to advance through the bureaucracy. Although some Eastern Europeans were later nostalgic for communist ideas and idealism, it is noteworthy that no post-1989 political party has ever tried to restore communist economics.

In the end, the gap between reality and ideology meant that the communist parties wound up spouting meaningless slogans they themselves knew made no sense. As the philosopher Roger Scruton argues, Marxism became so cocooned in what Orwell once called "Newspeak" that it could not be

refuted: "Facts no longer made contact with the theory, which had risen above the facts on clouds of nonsense, rather like a theological system. The point was not to believe the theory, but to repeat it ritualistically and in such a way that both belief and doubt became irrelevant . . . In this way the concept of truth disappeared from the intellectual landscape, and was replaced by that of power."<sup>2</sup> Once people were unable to distinguish truth from ideological fiction, however, they were also unable to solve or even describe the worsening social and economic problems of the societies they ruled.

Over time, some political opponents of the communist regimes came to understand these inherent weaknesses of Soviet-style totalitarianism. In his brilliant 1978 essay, "The Power of the Powerless," the Czech dissident Václav Havel called upon his countrymen to take advantage of their rulers' obsession with total control. If the state wanted to monopolize every sphere of human activity, he wrote, then every thinking citizen should work to create alternatives. He called upon his countrymen to preserve the "independent life of society," which he defined as including "everything from self-education and thinking about the world, through free creative activity and its communication to others, to the most varied, free, civic attitudes, including instances of independent social self-organization."<sup>3</sup> He also urged them to discard false and meaningless jargon and to "live in truth"—to speak and act, in other words, as if the regime did not exist.

In due course, some version of this "independent life of society"—"civil society"—began to flourish in many unusual ways. The Czechs formed jazz bands, the Hungarians joined academic discussion clubs, the East Germans created an "unofficial" peace movement. The Poles organized underground Scout troops and, eventually, independent trade unions. Everywhere, people played rock music, organized poetry readings, set up clandestine businesses, held underground philosophy seminars, sold black market meat, and went to church. In a different kind of society, these activities would have been considered apolitical, and even in Eastern Europe they did not necessarily constitute "opposition," or even passive opposition. But they did pose a fundamental—and unanswerable—challenge to regimes that strove, in Mussolini's words, to be "all-embracing."

"You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs."<sup>4</sup> That grim motto, sometimes incorrectly attributed to Stalin, sums up the worldview of the men and

women who built communism and who believed that their high-minded goals justified human sacrifice. But once the omelet finally begins to fall apart—or, more accurately, once it becomes clear that the omelet was never cooked in the first place—how do you put the eggs back together again? How do you privatize hundreds of state companies? How do you re-create religious and social organizations disbanded long ago? How do you get a society made passive by years of dictatorship to become active again? How do you get people to stop using jargon and speak clearly? Though often used as shorthand, the word "democratization" doesn't really do justice to the changes that took place—unevenly and unsteadily, faster in some places and much slower in others—in post-communist Europe and the former USSR after 1989.

Nor does democratization really define the kind of changes that need to take place in other postrevolutionary societies around the world. Many of the twentieth century's worst dictators held power using the methods described in this book, and consciously so. Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi's Libya directly adopted elements of the Soviet system, including a Soviet-style secret police force, with direct Soviet and East German assistance. Chinese, Egyptian, Syrian, Angolan, Cuban, and North Korean regimes, among others, have all received Soviet advice and training at different times too.<sup>5</sup> But many didn't need explicit advice in order to imitate the Soviet Union's drive to control economic, social, cultural, legal, and educational institutions as well as political opposition. Until 1989, the Soviet Union's dominance of Eastern Europe seemed an excellent model for would-be dictators. But totalitarianism never worked as it was supposed to in Eastern Europe, and it never worked anywhere else either. None of the Stalinist regimes ever managed to brainwash everybody and thus eliminate all dissent forever, and neither did Stalin's pupils nor Brezhnev's friends in Asia, Africa, or Latin America.

Yet such regimes can and did do an enormous amount of damage. In their drive for power, the Bolsheviks, their Eastern European acolytes, and their imitators farther afield attacked not only their political opponents but also peasants, priests, schoolteachers, traders, journalists, writers, small businessmen, students, and artists, along with the institutions such people had built and maintained over centuries. They damaged, undermined, and sometimes eliminated churches, newspapers, literary and educational societies, companies and retail shops, stock markets, banks, sports clubs, and uni-

versities. Their success reveals an unpleasant truth about human nature: if enough people are sufficiently determined, and if they are backed by adequate resources and force, then they can destroy ancient and apparently permanent legal, political, educational, and religious institutions, sometimes for good. And if civil society could be so deeply damaged in nations as disparate, as historic, and as culturally rich as those of Eastern Europe, then it can be similarly damaged anywhere. If nothing else, the history of postwar Stalinization proves just how fragile civilization can turn out to be.

As a result of this civilizational damage, postcommunist countries required far more than the bare institutions of “democracy”—elections, political campaigns, and political parties—to become functioning liberal societies again. They also had to create or re-create independent media, private enterprise and a legal system to support it, an educational system free of propaganda, and a civil service where promotions are given for talent, not for ideological correctness. The most successful postcommunist states are those that managed to preserve some elements of civil society throughout the communist period. This is not an accident.

Here, once again, the history of the Polish Women’s League is worth retelling. By 1989 the organization was utterly moribund at the national level. In the early 1990s it more or less collapsed altogether: no one needed a women’s group that provided propaganda for a communist party that no longer existed. But in the late 1990s, once again in the city of Łódź, a group of local women decided that some of the functions that the league had originally been designed to perform were still necessary. And so the league regrouped, reorganized, and refounded itself—now for the third time—as an independent organization. As in 1945, its leaders identified a set of problems no one else seemed able to solve, and they set about addressing them. Initially, the league offered free legal clinics for women who could not afford legal advice. Later it branched into assistance for unemployed women; job training, advice, and services for single women with children; help for alcoholics and drug addicts. At Christmas, the league began to organize parties for the homeless in Łódź. Its website now carries a straightforward motto: “If you have a problem, come to us, we’ll help you or we’ll point you in the right direction.”<sup>6</sup> It is a much smaller organization, but its character is charitable, just as it was in the past.

In part, the new Women’s League succeeded because its leaders, like oth-

ers in Poland, were so eager to copy Western European models. Though they themselves had never worked for a charity or a nonprofit organization, the league’s leaders certainly knew what these legal entities were. Polish law by then accommodated their existence, and the Polish political class welcomed them, just as they welcomed independent schools, private businesses, and political parties. This made Poland different from Russia, where hostility to independent organizations remains strong, even a generation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and where the legal environment is still not conducive to their formation or their funding. The Russian political elite still considers independent charities, advocacy groups, and nongovernmental organizations of all kinds suspicious, by definition, and uses both legal and extralegal means to restrain them.<sup>7</sup>

In Poland the legal framework not only accommodated the existence of independent organizations but also permitted them to raise funds. At first, the Women’s League had petitioned the government for money to support their projects because that was how they had been supported in the past. In an era of economic restructuring, they had only minimal success. But Łódź is a city of textile mills, and textile mills employ women. The Women’s League approached the new mill owners and convinced a few of them to help. Donations began to come in, the organization stayed alive. In 2006, seventeen years after the fall of communism, the Łódź Women’s League became a registered private charity. As it turned out, the modern Polish Women’s League needed not only energetic and patriotic volunteers but also an intact legal system, a functioning economic system, and a democratic political system in order to thrive.

Some of the energy and the initiative to start these projects also came from a sharp consciousness of the organization’s communist and pre-communist history. One of the new leaders, Janina Miziołek, had spent time as a very small child in one of the shelters set up by the Women’s League in train stations. Others who had been active in the league in the communist period sought to retrieve something useful from the organization’s wreckage: if they could remove the politics, some of them told me, perhaps they could really do something useful. They remembered what had gone wrong, and they were anxious to fix it.

The women of Łódź were clearly motivated by history, though not by history as it is sometimes used or abused by politicians. They were inspired



not by state-sponsored celebrations of past tragedies or national programs of patriotic reeducation but rather by stories they remembered, or stories they knew from someone else who had experienced them. They were motivated by the history of a particular institution in a particular place at a particular time.

What was true in Łódź is true everywhere else in the postcommunist and the post-totalitarian world. Before a nation can be rebuilt, its citizens need to understand how it was destroyed in the first place: how its institutions were undermined, how its language was twisted, how its people were manipulated. They need to know particular details, not general theories, and they need to hear individual stories, not generalizations about the masses. They need a better grasp of what motivated their predecessors, to see them as real people and not as black-and-white caricatures, victims, or villains. Only then is it possible, slowly, to rebuild.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BECAUSE THIS BOOK took more than six years to research and write, because it required work in archives across Europe, and because it relies on sources written in a wide range of languages, it would not have been possible without the support, advice, and assistance of an extraordinarily generous group of people and institutions. I'd like to thank, first of all, Gary Smith at the American Academy in Berlin and Mária Schmidt of the Terror Háza Múzeum and the Institute of the Twentieth Century in Budapest. In Germany and Hungary they were not only my hosts but also my primary advisers on people, sources, and culture. I'd also like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Scaife Foundation; the Smith Richardson Foundation; Chris DeMuth, formerly of the American Enterprise Institute and now at the Hudson Institute; and Paul Gregory of the Hoover Institution Russia Summer Workshop, as well as Richard Sousa and Maciej Siekierski of the Hoover Institution Archives, the world's best place to study the history of communism. All of them provided generous material support for my work at different times and in different ways.

As noted in the introduction, I was helped in translation, logistics, and research by two extraordinary people, Attila Mong in Budapest and Regine Wosnitzka in Berlin. Both contributed immeasurably to my understanding of the history of their respective countries, as well as their respective transportation systems, weather patterns, and cuisine. In addition, I was aided in Warsaw at different times by Piotr Paszkowski, Lukasz Krzyzanowski, and Kasia Kazimierczuk. I am extremely grateful to all of my interviewees—"time witnesses," as they are called in Germany—who are mentioned by name in the list that follows.

Among the many other historians, scholars, and friends who offered advice and suggestions, I'd like to thank, in Poland, Andrzej Bielawski,