

abdication of the apartheid regime, South Africa. (It does not follow that revolutionary conditions potential or actual, will produce successful revolutions.) Nevertheless, this sort of focused discontent with the status quo is today less common than an unfocused rejection of the present, an absence or distrust of political organization, or simply a process of disintegration to which the domestic and international politics of states adjust, as best they can.

It is also full of violence – more violence than in the past – and, what is perhaps equally relevant, full of arms. In the years before Hitler came to power in Germany and Austria, acute though racial tensions and hatreds were, it is difficult to imagine that they would have taken the form of neo-Nazi teenage skinheads burning down a house inhabited by immigrants, killing six members of a Turkish family. Yet in 1993 such an incident shocks but no longer surprises when it occurs in the heart of tranquil Germany, incidentally in a city (Solingen) with one of the oldest traditions of working-class socialism in the country.

Moreover, the accessibility of highly destructive weaponry and explosives today is such that the usual state monopoly of armaments in developed societies can no longer be taken for granted. In the anarchy of poverty and greed which replaced the former Soviet bloc, it was no longer even inconceivable that nuclear arms, or the means of making them, could get into the hands of bodies other than governments.

The world of the third millennium will therefore almost certainly continue to be one of violent politics and violent political changes. The only thing uncertain about them is where they will lead.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

End of Socialism

[The] health [of revolutionary Russia], however, is subject to one indispensable condition: that never (as one day happened even to the Church) should a black market of power be opened. Should the European correlation of power and money penetrate Russian too, then perhaps not the country, perhaps not even the Party, but Communism in Russia would be lost.

– Walter Benjamin, (1979, pp. 195–6)

It is not true any more that a single official creed is the only operative guide to action. More than one ideology, a mixture of modes of thinking and frames of references, coexist and not only in society at large but also inside the Party and inside the leadership. A rigid and codified 'Marxism-Leninism' could not, except in official rhetoric, respond to the regime's real needs.

– M. Lewin in Kerblay, (1983, p. xxvi)

The key to achieving modernization is the development of science and technology . . . Empty talk will get our modernization programme nowhere; we must have knowledge and trained personnel. Now it appears that China is fully twenty years behind the developed countries in science, technology and education . . . As early as the Meiji restoration the Japanese began to expend a great deal of effort on science, technology and education. The Meiji Restoration was a kind of modernization drive undertaken by the emerging Japanese bourgeoisie. As proletarians we should, and can, do better.

Deng Xiaoping, 'Respect Knowledge, Respect Trained Personnel',
1977

1

One socialist country in the 1970s was particularly worried by its relative economic backwardness, if only because its neighbour, Japan, was the most spectacularly successful of the capitalist states. Chinese communism cannot be regarded simply as a subvariety of Soviet communism, still less as part of the Soviet satellite system. For one thing, it triumphed in a country with a far larger population than the USSR, or for that matter any other state. Even allowing for the uncertainties of Chinese demography, something like one out of every five human beings was a Chinese living on mainland China. (There was also a substantial Chinese diaspora in East and South-east Asia.) Moreover, China was not only nationally far more homogeneous than most other countries – about 94 per cent of its population were Han Chinese – but had formed a single, though intermittently disrupted, political unit probably for a minimum of two thousand years. Even more to the point, for most of these two millennia the Chinese Empire, and probably most of its inhabitants who had a view on these matters, had considered China to be the centre and model of world civilization. With minor exceptions *all* other countries in which communist regimes triumphed, from the USSR on, were and saw themselves as culturally backward and marginal, relative to some more advanced and paradigmatic centre of civilization. The very stridency with which the USSR insisted, in the Stalin years, on its lack of intellectual and technological dependence on the West, and on the indigenous source of all the leading inventions from telephones to aircraft, was a telling symptom of this sense of inferiority.*

Not so China, which, quite correctly, saw its classical civilization, its script and social value-system as the acknowledged inspiration and model for others – not least for Japan itself. It certainly had no sense whatever of any intellectual and cultural inferiority, either collectively or of individual Chinese compared to any other people. The very fact that China had no neighbouring states which could even faintly threaten her and, thanks to adopting fire-arms, no longer had any difficulty in fending off the barbarians on its frontier, confirmed sense of

* The intellectual and scientific achievements of Russia between c. 1830 and 1930 were indeed extraordinary, and included some striking technological innovations which backwardness rarely allowed to be economically developed. Yet the brilliant and world significance of a few Russians only makes the broad inferiority of Russia to the West more obvious.

superiority, even as it made the empire unprepared for Western imperial expansion. The technological inferiority of China which became only too evident in the nineteenth century, because it was translated into military inferiority, was not due to technical or educational incapacity, but to the very sense of self-sufficiency and self-confidence of traditional Chinese civilization. This made it reluctant to do what the Japanese did after the Meiji Restoration of 1868: plunge into 'modernization' by adopting European models wholesale. This could and would be done only on the ruins of the ancient Chinese Empire, guardian of the old civilization, and through social revolution, which was at the same time a cultural revolution against the Confucian system.

Chinese communism, therefore, was both social and, if the word does not beg questions, national. The social explosive which fuelled communist revolution was the extraordinary poverty and oppression of the Chinese people, initially of the labouring masses in the great rural cities of central and south China which formed enclaves of foreign imperialist control and sometimes modern industry – Shanghai, Canton, Hong Kong – later of the peasantry which formed 90 per cent of the country's vast population. Its condition was far worse than even the Chinese urban population, whose consumption, per capita, was something like two-and-a-half times higher. The sheer poverty of China is hard for Western readers to imagine. Thus at the time of the communist take-over (1952 data) the average Chinese lived essentially on half a kilogram of rice or grains a day, and consumed rather less than 0.08 kilos of tea *a year*. He or she acquired a new pair of footwear once every five years or so (China Statistics, 1969, Tables 3.1, 15.2, 15.5).

The national element in Chinese communism operated both through the intellectuals of upper- and middle-class origin who provided most of the leadership of all twentieth-century Chinese political movements, and through the feeling, undoubtedly widespread among the Chinese masses, that the barbarian foreigners meant no good to such Chinese individuals as they had dealings with, and to China as a whole. Since China had been attacked, defeated, partitioned and exploited by every foreign state within reach since the middle of the nineteenth century, this assumption was not implausible. Mass anti-imperialist movements with a traditional ideology were already familiar before the end of the Chinese Empire, for instance the so-called Boxer Rising of 1900. There is little doubt that resistance to the Japanese conquest of China is what turned the Chinese communists from a defeated

force of social agitators, which they were in the middle 1930s, into the leaders and representatives of the entire Chinese people. That they also called for the social liberation of the Chinese poor made their appeal for national liberation and regeneration sound more convincing to the (mainly rural) masses.

In this they had the advantage over their rivals, the (older) Kuomintang Party, which had attempted to rebuild a single, powerful, Chinese republic out of the scattered warlord-led fragments of the two-peasant Empire after its fall in 1911. The short-term objectives of the Kuomintang did not seem incompatible, the political base of both was in the more advanced cities of South China (where the Republic established its capital) and their leadership consisted of very much the same sort of educated elite, allowing for a certain bias towards businessmen in the peasants and workers in the other. Both, for instance, contained virtually the same percentage of men drawn from the traditional landlords and scholar-gentry, the elites of imperial China, although the Kuomintang tended to have more leaders with a higher education of the Western type (North Pool, 1966, pp. 378-82). Both movements came out of the anti-imperial movement of the 1900s, reinforced by the 'May movement' of national upsurge among students and teachers in Peking after 1919. Sun Yat-sen, the Kuomintang leader, was a patriot, democrat and socialist who relied for advice and support on Soviet Russia - the only revolution in the world at that time - and found the Bolshevik model of the party and anti-imperialist power - and found the Bolshevik model of the single state-party more suited than Western models for his task. In fact the Kuomintang became a major force largely through this Soviet-type, which allowed them to be integrated into the official national movement and, after Sun's death in 1925, to share in the great northern advance by which the Republic extended its influence into the half of China it did not control. Sun's successor, Chiang Kai-shek (1897-1975), never managed to establish complete control over the country, even though in 1927 he broke with the Russians and suppressed the communists, whose main body of mass support at that time was among the small urban working class.

The communists, forced to turn their main attention to the countryside, now waged a peasant-based guerrilla war against the Kuomintang, on the whole - thanks, not least, to their own divisions and confusions and the remoteness of Moscow from Chinese realities - with little success. In 1934 their armies were forced to retreat to a remote corner of the far north-west in the heroic 'Long March'. These developments made Mao Tse-tung, who had long favoured the rural strategy, into the undisputed leader of the Communist Party in its exile in Yenan, but did not offer an

immediate prospect of communist advance. On the contrary, the Kuomintang steadily extended their control over most of the country until the Japanese invasion of 1937.

Yet the Kuomintang's lack of a genuine mass appeal to the Chinese, as well as its abandonment of the revolutionary project, which was at the same time a project of modernization and regeneration, made them no match for their communist rivals. Chiang Kai-shek never became an Ataturk - another head of a modernizing, anti-imperialist, national revolution who found himself making friends with the young Soviet Republic, using the local communists for his own purposes and turning away from them, though less stridently than Chiang. Like Ataturk, he had an army: but it was not an army with national loyalty, let alone the revolutionary morale of the communist armies, but a force recruited from among men for whom, in times of trouble and social collapse, a uniform and a gun are the best way to get by, and officered by men who knew - as did Mao Tse-tung himself - that at such times 'power grew from the barrel of a gun', and so did profit and wealth. He had a good deal of urban middle-class support, and perhaps even more support from the wealthy overseas Chinese: but 90 per cent of Chinese, and almost all the country's territory, were outside the cities. They were controlled, if at all, by local notables and men of power, from warlords with their armed men to gentry families and relics of the imperial power-structure, with whom the Kuomintang came to terms. When the Japanese set out to conquer China seriously, the Kuomintang armies could not prevent them from doing so: immediately overrunning the coastal cities, where its genuine strength lay. In the rest of China, they became what they had always potentially been, another corrupt landlord-warlord regime, resisting the Japanese ineffectively, if at all. Meanwhile the communists effectively mobilized mass resistance to the Japanese in the occupied areas. When they took over China in 1949, having almost contemptuously swept aside the Kuomintang forces in a brief civil war, they were, for all except the fleeing remnants of the Kuomintang power, the legitimate government of China, true successors to the imperial dynasties after a forty-years interregnum. And they were all the more readily accepted as such because, from their experience as a Marxist-Leninist party, they were able to forge a nation-wide disciplined organization capable of bringing government policy from the centre to the remotest villages of the giant country - as, in the mind of most Chinese, a proper empire should do.

Organization, rather than doctrine, was the chief contribution of Lenin's Bolshevism to changing the world.

And, of course, they were more than the empire revived, even though

they undoubtedly benefited from the enormous continuities of Chinese history, which established both how ordinary Chinese expected to relate to any government enjoying the 'mandate of heaven', and how those who administered China expected to think about their tasks. There is no other country in which political debates within a communist system would have been conducted by reference to what a loyal mandarin said to the Ming Emperor Chia-ching in the sixteenth century.* That is what a hard-nosed old China-watcher – the London *Times* correspondent – meant in the 1950s by the claim, shocking to those who heard it at the time, like the present writer, that there would be no communism left in the twenty-first century, except in China, where it would survive as the national ideology. For most Chinese this was a revolution which was primarily a restoration: of order and peace; of welfare; of a system of government whose civil servants found themselves appealing to precedents from the T'ang dynasty; of the greatness of a great empire and civilization.

And, for the first few years, that is what most Chinese seemed to be getting. Peasants raised their output of food-grains by more than 70 per cent between 1949 and 1956 (China Statistics, 1989, p. 165), presumably because they were not yet interfered with too much, and while China's intervention in the Korean War of 1950–52 created a serious panic, the ability of the Chinese communist army first to defeat, then to hold at bay the mighty USA could hardly fail to impress. Planning for industrial and educational development began in the early 1950s. Yet very soon the new People's Republic, under the now unchallenged and unchallengeable Mao, began to enter two decades of largely arbitrary catastrophes provoked by the great helmsman. From 1956 the rapidly deteriorating relations with the USSR, which ended in the clamorous breach between the two communist powers in 1960, led to the withdrawal of the important technical and other material aid from Moscow. However, this complicated rather than caused the calvary of the Chinese people, which was marked by three main stations of the cross: the ultra-rapid collectivisation of peasant farming in 1955–57; the 'Great Leap Forward' of industry in 1958, followed by the great famine of 1959–61, probably the greatest famine of the twentieth century,† and the ten years of 'Cultural Revolution' which ended with Mao's death in 1976.

* Cf. the article 'Hai Tui reprimands the Emperor' in the *People's Daily* in 1959. The same author (Wu Han) composed a libretto for a classical Peking opera, *The Drumbeat of Hai Tui*, in 1960, which, some years later, provided the occasion that sparked off the 'Cultural Revolution' (Leys, 1977, pp. 30, 34).

† According to official Chinese statistics, the country's population in 1959 was 672.07 millions. At the natural growth rate of the preceding seven years, which was

These cataclysmic plunges were, it is generally agreed, due largely to Mao himself, whose policies were often received with reluctance in the party leadership, and sometimes – most notably in the case of the 'Great Leap Forward' – with frank opposition, which he overcame only by launching the 'Cultural Revolution'. Yet they cannot be understood without a sense of the peculiarities of Chinese communism, of which Mao made himself the spokesman. Unlike Russian communism, Chinese communism had virtually no direct relations with Marx and Marxism. It was a post-October movement which came to Marx *via* Lenin, or more precisely Stalin's 'Marxism-Leninism'. Mao's own knowledge of Marxist theory seems to have been almost entirely derived from the Stalinist *History of the CPSU [b]: Short Course* of 1939. And yet below the Marxist-Leninist top-dressing, there was – and this is very evident in the case of Mao, who never travelled outside China until he became head of state, and whose intellectual formation was entirely home-grown – a very Chinese utopianism. This naturally had points of contact with Marxism: all social-revolutionary utopias have something in common, and Mao, no doubt in complete sincerity, seized on those aspects of Marx and Lenin which fitted into his vision and used them to justify it. Yet his view of an ideal society united by a total consensus, and in which, it has been said, 'the individual's total self-abnegation and total immersion in the collectivity (are) ultimate goods ... a kind of collectivist mysticism', is the opposite of classical Marxism which, at least in theory and as the ultimate object, envisaged the complete liberation and self-fulfilment of the individual (Schwartz, 1966). The characteristic emphasis on the power of spiritual transformation to bring this about by remoulding man, though it seizes on Lenin's, and later Stalin's belief in consciousness and voluntarism, went far beyond it. With all his belief in the role of political action and decision, Lenin never lost sight of the fact – how could he have done? – that practical circumstances imposed severe constraints on the effectiveness of action, and even Stalin recognized that his power had limits. Yet without the belief that 'subjective forces' were all-powerful, that men *could* move mountains and storm heaven if they wanted to, the lunacies of the Great Leap Forward are inconceivable. Experts told you what could and could not be done, but revolutionary fervour alone could

at least 20 per thousand per year (actually a mean of 21.7 per 000), one would have expected the Chinese population in 1961 to have been 699 millions. In fact, it was 658.59 millions or *forty millions* less than might have been expected (China Statistics, 1989, Tables T 3.1 and T 3.2).

overcome all material obstacles, and mind transform matter. Hence to be 'Red' was not so much more important than to be expert, but it was an alternative. A unanimous surge of enthusiasm in 1958 would industrialize China immediately, leaping across the ages into the future when communism would immediately come into full operation. The countless little low-quality backyard furnaces by which China was to double its steel output within one year – and did actually more than treble it by 1960 before it fell back by 1962 to less than it had been before the Great Leap – represented one side of the transformation. The 24,000 'peoples communes' of farmers, set up in a mere two months of 1958, represented the other side. They were completely communist, not only in that all aspects of peasant life were collectivized, including family life – communal nurseries and messhalls freeing women from household and child care, and sending them, retrained, into the fields – but the free supply of six basic services were to replace wages and money income. These six services were food, medical care, education, funerals, haircuts and movies. Patently, this did not work. Within months, faced with passive resistance, the extreme aspects of the system were abandoned, though not before it had (like Stalin's collectivisation) combined with nature to produce the famine of 1960–61.

In one way this belief in the capacity of willed transformation rested on a more specific Maoist belief in 'the people', ready to be transformed and hence to take part, creatively and with all the traditional Chinese intelligence and ingenuity, in the great march forward. It was the essentially romantic view of an artist, though, one gathers from those who can judge the poetry and calligraphy he liked to practice, not a very good one. (Not as bad as Hitler's painting, but not as good as Churchill's, in the view of the British orientalist Arthur Waley, using painting as an analogy for poetry.) It led him, against the sceptical, and realistic advice of other communist leaders, to call on the intellectuals of the old China to contribute their gifts freely in the 'Hundred Flowers' campaign of 1956–57, on the assumption that the revolution, and perhaps he himself, had already transformed them. ('Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend!') When, as less inspirational contrived had foreseen, this outburst of free thought proved lacking in unanimous enthusiasm for the new order, Mao's naive distrust of intellectuals was such was confirmed. It was to find spectacular expression in the ten years of the Great Cultural Revolution, when higher education virtually came to a complete stop, and such intellectuals as already existed were massively regenerated by compulsory physical labour in the countryside.* Newcomer

* In 1970 the total number of students in all China's 'Institutions of Higher

Learning' was 48,000; in the country's technical schools (1969) 23,000; and in its 'Reds' Training Colleges (1969) 15,000. The absence of any data about postgraduate programs began to study the natural sciences at Institutions of Higher Learning, and a grand total of ninety began to study the social sciences. This in a country of, at the time, 850 million people (China Statistics, Tables T17.4, T17.8, T17.10).

less, Mao's belief in the peasants, who were urged to solve all the problems of production during the Great Leap on the principle of 'letting all schools [i.e. of local experience] contend' remained unaffected. For – and this was yet another aspect of Mao's thought which found support in what he read into the Marxist dialectic – Mao was fundamentally convinced of the importance of struggle, conflict and high tension as something that was not only essential to life but prevented the relapse into the weaknesses of the old Chinese society, whose very insistence on unchanging permanence and harmony had been its weakness. The revolution, communism itself, could only be saved from degeneration into stasis by a constantly renewed struggle. Revolution could never end.

The peculiarity of the Maoist policy was that it was 'at once an extreme form of Westernisation and a partial reversion to traditional patterns', on which, indeed, it largely relied, for the old Chinese Empire was characterised, at least in the periods when the emperor's power was strong and secure, and therefore legitimate, by the autocracy of the ruler and the acquiescence and obedience of the subjects (Hu, 1966, p. 241). The mere fact that 84 per cent of Chinese peasant households had allowed themselves to be quietly collectivised within a single year (1956), apparently without any of the consequences of Soviet collectivisation, speaks for itself. Industrialization, on the heavy-industry-inflected Soviet model, was the unconditional priority. The murderous absurdities of the Great Leap were due primarily to the conviction, which the Chinese régime shared with the Soviet, that agriculture must both supply industrialization and maintain itself without the diversion of resources from industrial to farming investment. Essentially this meant substituting 'iron' for 'material' incentives, which meant, in practice, the almost unlimited amount of human muscle-power available in China for the technology that was not available. At the same time the countryside remained the foundation of Mao's system, as it had ever since the guerrilla epoch, and, unlike the USSR, the Great Leap model made it the preferred locus of industrialization also. Unlike the USSR, China experienced no mass urbanization under Mao. Not until the 1980s did the rural population fall below 80 per cent.

However much we may be shocked by the record of the twenty Maoist years, a record combining mass inhumanity and obscurantism with the surrealist absurdities of the claims made on behalf of the divine leader's thoughts, we should not allow ourselves to forget that, by the standards of the poverty-stricken Third World, the Chinese people were doing well. At the end of the Mao period the average Chinese food consumption (in calories) ranked just above the median of all countries, above fourteen countries in the Americas, thirty-eight in Africa, and just about in the middle of the Asian ones – well above all South and South-east Asia except Malaysia and Singapore (Taylor/Jodice, 1983, Table 4.4). The average expectation of life at birth rose from thirty-five years in 1949 to sixty-eight in 1982, mainly owing to a dramatic and – except for the famine years – continuous fall in the mortality rate (Lin, 1986, p. 322-24). Since the Chinese population, even allowing for the great famine, grew from c. 540 to c. 950 millions between 1949 and Mao's death, it is evident that the economy managed to feed them – a little above the level of the early 1950s – and it slightly improved their supply of clothing (China Statistics, Table T15.1). Education, even at the elementary level, suffered both from the famine, which cut attendance down by twenty-five millions and from the Cultural Revolution, which reduced it by fifteen millions. Nevertheless, there is no denying that in the year of Mao's death six times as many children went to primary school as when he came to power – i.e. a 96 per cent enrolment rate, compared to less than 50 per cent even in 1952. Admittedly, even in 1987 more than a quarter of the population over the age of twelve remained illiterate and 'semi-illiterate' – among women this figure was as high as 38 per cent, but we should not forget that literacy in Chinese is unusually difficult and only a fairly small proportion of the 34 per cent born before 1949 could have been expected to have acquired it fully (China Statistics, pp. 69, 70-72, 695). In short, while the achievement of the Maoist period might not impress sceptical Western observers – there were many who lacked scepticism – it would certainly have appeared impressive to an Indian or Indonesian one, and it might not have looked particularly disappointing to the 80 per cent of rural Chinese, isolated from the world whose expectations were those of their fathers.

Nevertheless, it was undeniable that internationally China had lost ground since the revolution, and notably in relation to its non-communist neighbours. Its rate of economic growth per capita, though impressive in the Mao years (1960-75), was less than that of Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan – to name the East Asian countries which Chinese observers would certainly keep an eye on. Vast thought

was, its total GNP was just about the same size as Canada's, less than Italy's, and a mere quarter of Japan's (Taylor/Jodice, Tables 3.5, 3.6). The disastrous zigzag course steered by the Great Helmsman since the middle 1950s had continued only because Mao, in 1965, with military backing, launched an anarchic, initially student, movement of young 'Red Guards' against the party leadership which had quietly sidelined him, and intellectuals of any kind. This was the Great Cultural Revolution which devastated China for some time, until Mao called in the army to restore order, and in any case found himself obliged to restore some kind of party control. Since he was plainly on his last legs, and Maoism without him had very little real support, it did not survive his death in 1976, and the almost immediate arrest of the 'Gang of Four' ultra-Maoists, headed by the leader's widow, Jiang Qing. The new course, under the pragmatical Deng Xiaoping, began immediately.

II

Deng's new course in China was the frankest public recognition that dramatic changes in the structure of 'really existing socialism' were needed, but as the 1970s turned into the 1980s it was increasingly evident that something was seriously wrong with all socialist systems that claimed to have come into being. The slowing-down of the Soviet economy was palpable: the rate of growth of almost everything that counted, and could be counted in it, fell steadily from one five-year period to the next after 1970: gross domestic product, industrial output, farming output, capital investment, productivity of labour, real income per head. If not actually regressing, the economy was advancing at the pace of an increasingly tired ox. Moreover, so far from becoming one of the industrial giants of world trade, the USSR appeared to be internationally regressing. In 1960 its major exports had been machinery, equipment, means of transport, and metals or metal articles, but in 1985 it relied for its exports primarily (53 per cent) on energy (i.e. oil and gas). Conversely, almost 60 per cent of its imports consisted of machinery, metals etc. and industrial consumer articles (SSSR, 1987, pp. 15-17, 32-33). It had become something like an energy-producing colony of more advanced industrial economies – i.e. in practice largely its own Western satellites, notably Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic, whose industries could rely on the unlimited and undemanding market of the USSR without doing much to improve their own deficiencies.*

* It seemed to the economic policy-makers at that time that the Soviet market was

In fact, by the 1970s it was clear that not only economic growth was lagging, but even the basic social indicators such as mortality were ceasing to improve. This undermined confidence in socialism perhaps more than anything else, since its ability to improve the lives of ordinary people through greater social justice did not depend primarily on its ability to generate greater wealth. That the average expectation of life at birth in the USSR, Poland and Hungary remained virtually unchanged during the last twenty years before the collapse of communism – indeed from time to time it actually dipped – was cause for serious worry, for in most other countries it continued to rise (including, it ought to be said, in Cuba and the Asian communist countries about which we have data). In 1969 Austrians, Finns and Poles could expect to die at the same average age (70.1 years), but in 1989 Poles had a life expectancy about four years shorter than Austrians and Finns. This may have made people healthier, as demographers suggested, but only because in socialist countries people died who might have been kept alive in capitalist ones (Riley, 1991). Reformers in the USSR and elsewhere did not fail to observe these trends with growing anxiety (World Bank Atlas, 1990, pp. 6–9 and World Tables, 1991, passim).

About this time another symptom of recognized decline in the USSR is reflected in the rise of the term *nomenklatura* (it appears to have reached the West via dissident writings). Until then the officer-corps of party *cadres*, which constituted the command system of the Leninist states, had been regarded abroad with respect and a reluctant admiration, although defeated oppositionists at home, like the Trotskyites and – in Yugoslavia – Milovan Djilas (Djilas, 1957), had pointed out its potential for bureaucratic degeneration and personal corruption. Indeed, in the 1950s, even into the 1960s, the general tone of Western, and especially US comment had been that here – in the organizational system of the communist parties and its body of monolithic, selfless cadres, loyally (if brutally) carrying out ‘the line’ – was the secret of communism’s global advance (Fainsod, 1956; Brzezinski, 1962; Duverger, 1972).

On the other hand, the term *nomenklatura*, practically unknown before 1980, except as part of CPSU administrative jargon, came to suggest precisely the weaknesses of the self-serving party bureaucracy of the Brezhnev era: a combination of incompetence and corruption. And

inexhaustible and that the Soviet Union could secure the necessary quantity of energy and raw materials for a continuous extensive economic growth’ (D. Rosan and K. Mizsei, 1989, p. 10).

indeed, it became increasingly evident that the USSR itself operated primarily through a system of patronage, nepotism and payment.

With the exception of Hungary, serious attempts to reform the socialist economies in Europe had been, in effect, abandoned in despair after the Prague spring. As for the occasional attempts to revert to the old command economies, in a Stalinist form (as in Ceauşescu’s Romania), or in the Maoist form which substituted voluntarism and putative moral zeal for economics (as with Fidel Castro), the less said about them the better. The Brezhnev years were to be called the ‘era of stagnation’ by the reformers, essentially because the regime had stopped trying to do anything serious about a visibly declining economy. Buying wheat on the world market was easier than trying to cure the apparently growing inability of Soviet agriculture to feed the people of the USSR. Lubricating the rusty engine of the economy by means of a universal and omnipresent system of bribery and corruption was easier than to clean and re-tune, let alone to replace it. Who knew what would happen in the long run? In the short run it seemed more important to keep the consumers happy, or, at any rate to keep their discontent within limits. Hence probably in the first half of the 1970s most inhabitants of the USSR were and felt better-off than at any other time within living memory.

The trouble for ‘really existing socialism’ in Europe was that, unlike the inter-war USSR, which was virtually outside the world economy and therefore immune to the Great Slump, now socialism was increasingly involved in it, and therefore not immune to the shocks of the 1970s. It is an irony of history that the ‘real socialist’ economies of Europe and the USSR, as well as parts of the Third World, became the real victims of the post-Golden Age crisis of the global capitalist economy, whereas the ‘developed market economies’, though shaken, made their way through the difficult years without major trouble, at least until the early 1990s. Until then some, indeed, like Germany and Japan, barely faltered in their forward march. ‘Real socialism’, however, now confronted not only its own increasingly insoluble systemic problems, but also those of a changing and problematic world economy into which it was increasingly integrated. This may be illustrated by the ambiguous example of the international oil crisis which transformed the world energy market after 1973: ambiguous because its effects were potentially both negative and positive. Under pressure from the global oil-producers’ cartel, OPEC (the Organization of Petrol-Exporting Countries), the oil price, low and, in real terms actually falling since the war, more or less quadrupled in 1973 and more or less trebled again at the end of the 1970s, in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. Indeed, the actual range of fluctuations was even

more dramatic: in 1970 oil was selling at an average price of \$2.53 a barrel, but in late 1980 a barrel was worth about \$41.

The oil crisis had two apparently fortunate consequences. For oil producers, of whom the USSR happened to be one of the most important, it turned black liquid into gold. It was like a guaranteed weekly winning ticket to the lottery. The millions simply rolled in without effort, postponing the need for economic reform and, incidentally, enabling the USSR to pay for its rapidly growing imports from the capitalist West with exported energy. Between 1970 and 1980 Soviet exports to the 'developed market economies' rose from just under 19 per cent of total exports to 32 per cent (SSSR, 1987, p. 32). It has been suggested that it was this enormous and unforeseen bonanza that tempted Brezhnev's regime into a more active international policy of competing with the USA in the middle 1970s, as revolutionary unrest once again swept the Third World (see chapter 15), and into the suicidal course of trying to match American arms superiority (Maksimenko, 1991).

The other apparently fortunate consequence of the oil crisis was the flood of dollars which now spurted from multi-billionaire OPEC states, often with tiny populations, and which was distributed by the international banking system in the form of loans to anyone who wanted to borrow. Few developing countries resisted the temptation to take the millions thus shovelled into their pockets, and which were to provoke the world debt crisis of the early 1980s. For the socialist countries which succumbed to it – notably Poland and Hungary – loans seemed a providential way of simultaneously paying for investment in accelerating growth and raising their people's standard of living.

This only made the crisis of the 1980s more acute, for the socialist economies – and notably the free-spending Polish one – were too inflexible to utilize the influx of resources productively. The mere fact that oil consumption in Western Europe (1973–85) fell by 40 per cent in response to the rise in prices, but in the USSR and Eastern Europe by only little more than 20 per cent in the same period, speaks for itself (Köllö, 1990, p. 39). That Soviet production costs increased sharply, while the Romanian oil fields dried up, makes the failure to economize energy even more striking. By the early 1980s Eastern Europe was in an acute energy crisis. This in turn produced shortages of food and manufactured goods (except where, as in Hungary, the country plunged even more heavily into debt, accelerating inflation and lowering real wages). This was the situation in which 'really existing socialism' in Europe entered what proved to be its final decade. The only immediate effective way of dealing with such a crisis was the traditional Stalinist recourse to

strict central orders and restrictions, at least where central planning was still operational (as it no longer quite was in Hungary and Poland). It worked, between 1981 and 1984. Debt fell by 35–70 per cent (except in these two countries). This even encouraged illusory hopes of a return to dynamic economic growth without basic reforms, which 'brought about a Great Leap Back to the debt crisis and further deterioration of economic perspectives' (Köllö, p. 41). This was the moment when Mikhail Sergeyevitch Gorbachev became the leader of the USSR.

III

At this point we must revert from the economics to the politics of 'really existing socialism', since politics, both high and low, were to bring about the Euro-Soviet collapse of 1989–1991.

Politically, Eastern Europe was the Achilles heel of the Soviet system, and Poland (plus, to a lesser extent, Hungary) its most vulnerable spot. After the Prague Spring it was clear, as we have seen, that the satellite communist regimes had lost all legitimacy as such in most of the region.* They were maintained in being by state coercion, backed by the threat of Soviet intervention, or, at best – as in Hungary – by giving the citizenry material conditions and relative freedom far superior to the East-European average, but which the economic crisis made it impossible to maintain. However, with one exception, no serious form of organized political or other public opposition was possible. In Poland the conjunction of three factors produced this possibility. The country's public opinion was overwhelmingly united not only by a dislike of the regime but by an anti-Russian (and anti-Jewish) and consciously Roman Catholic, Polish nationalism; the Church retained independent nationwide organization; and its working class had demonstrated its political power by massive strikes at intervals since the middle 1950s. The regime had long resigned itself to tacit toleration or even retreat – as when the strikes of 1970 forced the abdication of the then communist leader – so long as opposition was unorganized, though its room for manoeuvre shrank dangerously. But from the middle of the 1970s it had to face both a politically organized labour movement backed by a brains trust of politically sophisticated

* The less developed parts of the Balkan peninsula – Albania, southern Yugoslavia, Bulgaria – may be an exception, since communists still won the first multi-party elections after 1989. However, even here the weakness of the system soon became patent.

dissident intellectuals, mainly ex-Marxists, and also by an increasingly aggressive Church, encouraged in 1978 by the election of the first Polish pope in history, Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II).

In 1980 the triumph of the trade union movement Solidarity as, in effect, a national public opposition movement armed with the weapon of the mass strike, demonstrated two things: that the Communist Party regime in Poland was at the end of its tether; but also that it could not be overthrown by mass agitation. In 1981 Church and State quietly agreed to pre-empt the danger of armed Soviet intervention (which was seriously considered), by a few years of martial law under the commander of the armed forces, which could plausibly claim both communist and national legitimacy. Order was re-established with little trouble by the police rather than by the army, but in effect the government, as helpless as ever to cope with the economic problems, had nothing to set against an opposition which remained in being as the organized expression of the nation's public opinion. Either the Russians decided to intervene, or sooner rather than later, the regime had to abandon the key position of communist regimes, the one-party system under the 'leading role' of the state party, i.e. to abdicate. But, as the rest of the satellite governments nervously watched the unfolding of this scenario while mostly and vainly trying to stop their people from also doing so, it became increasingly evident that the Soviets were no longer prepared to intervene.

In 1985 a passionate reformer, Mikhail Gorbachev, came to power as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. This was no accident. Indeed, but for the death of the desperately ill General Secretary and former chief of the Security apparatus, Yuri Andropov (1914–84) who had actually made the decisive break with the Brezhnev era in 1983, the era of change would have begun a year or two earlier. It was entirely evident to all other communist governments, in and out of the Soviet orbit, that major transformations were at hand, though quite unclear even to the new General Secretary, what they would bring.

The 'era of stagnation' (*zastoi*) which Gorbachev denounced had, in fact, been an era of acute political and cultural ferment among the Soviet elite. This included not only the relatively tiny group of self-co-opted Communist Party chieftains at the top of the Union hierarchy, the only place where real political decisions were, or could be, made, but the relatively vast group of educated and technically trained middle classes as well as the economic managers who actually kept the country going: academics, technical intelligentsia, experts and executives of various kinds. In some ways Gorbachev himself represented this new educated cadre generation – he studied law, whereas the classical way up for the

old Stalinist cadre had been (and still surprisingly often remained) from the factory floor via an engineering or agronomical degree into the apparatus. The depth of this ferment is not to be measured by the size of the actual group of public dissidents which now appeared – a few hundreds at most. Banned or semi-legalized (through the influence of brave editors like that of the famous 'thick journal' *Novy Mir*), criticism and self-criticism pervaded the cultural milieu of the metropolitan USSR under Brezhnev, including important sectors of party and state, notably in the security and foreign services. The enormous and sudden response to Gorbachev's call for *glasnost* ('openness' or 'transparency') can hardly be explained otherwise.

Yet the response of the political and intellectual strata must not be taken as the response of the mass of Soviet peoples. For these, unlike the peoples of most European communist states, the Soviet regime was legitimate and entirely accepted, if only because they knew no other and could have known no other (except under German occupation in 1941–45, which was hardly attractive). Every Hungarian over the age of sixty in 1990 had some adolescent or adult memory of the pre-communist era, but no inhabitant of the original USSR under the age of eighty-eight could have had such first-hand experience. And if the government of the Soviet state had an unbroken continuity stretching back to the end of the Civil War, the country itself had an unbroken, or virtually unbroken, continuity stretching back even longer, except for the territories along the western border acquired or re-acquired in 1939–40. It was the old Tsarist Empire under new management. That, incidentally, is why before the late 1980s there was no sign of serious political separatism anywhere except in the Baltic countries (which had been independent states from 1918 to 1940), in the western Ukraine (which had been part of the Habsburg and not the Russian Empire before 1918), and perhaps in Bessarabia (Moldavia), which had been part of Rumania from 1918 to 1940. Even in the Baltic States there was little more open dissidence than in Russia (Lieven, 1993).

Moreover, the Soviet regime was not merely home-grown and domestically rooted – as time went on even the party, originally much stronger among Great Russians than other nationalities, recruited much the same percentage of inhabitants in the European and Transcaucasian republics but the people itself, in ways difficult to specify, fitted themselves into it as the regime adjusted to them. As the dissident satirist Zinoviev pointed out, there really was a 'new Soviet man', even if he corresponded to his (or, insofar as she was considered, which was hardly at all, her) official public image no more than anything else did in the USSR. He/she was at ease in the system (Zinoviev, 1979). It provided a guaranteed

livelihood and comprehensive social security at a modest but real level, a socially and economically egalitarian society and at least one of the traditional aspirations of socialism, Paul Lafargue's 'Right to Idleness' (Lafargue, 1883). Moreover, for most Soviet citizens the Brezhnev era spelled not 'stagnation' but the best times they and their parents, or even grandparents, had ever known.

Small wonder that radical reformers found themselves up against Soviet humanity as well as Soviet bureaucracy. In the characteristic tone of irritated anti-plebeian elitism, one reformer wrote:

Our system has generated a category of individuals supported by society, and more interested in taking than in giving. This is the consequence of a policy of so-called egalitarianism which has totally invaded Soviet society . . . That society is divided into two parts, those who decide and distribute and those who are commanded and who receive, constitutes one of the major brakes on the development of our society. *Homo sovieticus* . . . is both ballast and brake. On the one hand, he is opposed to reform, on the other he constitutes the base of support for the existing system (Afanassiev, 1991, pp. 13-14).

Socially and politically, most of the USSR was a stable society, no doubt partly by virtue of ignorance of other countries maintained by authority and censorship, but by no means only for this reason. Is it an accident that there had been no equivalent of the 1968 student rebellion in the USSR, unlike Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary? That even under Gorbachev the reform movement did not mobilize the young to any great extent (outside some western nationalist regions)? That it was, as the saying went, 'a rebellion of the thirty- and forty-year-olds', i.e. of the generation born after the end of the war but before the not uncomfortable torpor of the Brezhnev years? Wherever the pressure to change came from in the USSR, it was not from the grass-roots.

In fact it came, as it had to come, from the top. Precisely how an obviously passionate and sincere communist reformer came to be Stalin's successor at the head of the Soviet CP on 15 March 1985 still remains unclear, and will remain so until Soviet history in the last decades becomes a subject for history rather than accusation and self-exculpation. In any case, what matters are not the ins and outs of politics in the Kremlin, but the two conditions which allowed someone like Gorbachev to come to power. First, the growing, and increasingly un concealed, corruption of the Communist Party leadership in the Brezhnev era could

not but outrage that section of the party which still believed in its ideology, in however oblique a fashion. And a Communist Party, however degenerate, without some leaders who are socialists is no more likely than a Catholic Church without some bishops and cardinals who are Christians, both being based on genuine systems of belief. Second, the educated and technically competent strata which actually kept the Soviet economy running were keenly aware that without drastic, indeed fundamental change it would inevitably founder sooner or later, not only because of the built-in inefficiency and inflexibility of the system, but because its weaknesses were compounded by the demands of a status as a military superpower, which a declining economy simply could not support. The military strain on the economy had actually increased dangerously since 1980 when, for the first time in many years, the Soviet armed forces found themselves involved directly in a war. They sent a force into Afghanistan to establish some sort of stability in that country, which since 1978 had been governed by a local communist People's Democratic Party, split into conflicting factions, both of which antagonized local landlords, Moslem clergy and other believers in the status quo by such godless activities as land reform and rights for women. The country had been quietly in the Soviet sphere of influence since the early 1950s, without raising Western blood-pressure noticeably. However, the USA chose or purported to regard the Soviet move as a major military offensive directed against the 'free world'. It therefore (via Pakistan) poured money and advanced armaments without limits into the hands of fundamentalist Moslem mountain warriors. As was to be expected, the Afghan government with heavy Soviet support, had little trouble in holding the major cities of the country, but the cost to the USSR was inordinately high. Afghanistan became – as some people in Washington undoubtedly intended it to be – the Soviet Union's Vietnam.

But what could the new Soviet leader do to change the situation in the USSR, other than to end, as soon as possible, the Second Cold War confrontation with the USA which was haemorrhaging the economy? This, of course, was Gorbachev's immediate objective, and his greatest success, for, within a surprisingly short period, he convinced even sceptical Western governments that this was indeed the Soviet intention. It won him a huge and lasting popularity in the West, which contrasted strikingly with the growing lack of enthusiasm for him in the USSR, to which he eventually fell victim in 1991. If any single man ended some forty years of global cold war it was he.

The aims of communist economic reformers since the 1950s had been to make the centrally planned command economies more rational and

flexible by the introduction of market pricing and calculations of profit and loss in enterprises. The Hungarian reformers had gone some way in this direction, and, but for the Soviet occupation of 1968, the Czech reformers would have gone even further: both hoping that this would also make it easier to liberalize and democratize the political system. This was also Gorbachev's position* which he naturally saw as a way of restoring or establishing a better socialism than the 'really existing' one. It is possible, but very unlikely that any influential reformer in the USSR envisaged the abandonment of socialism, if only because this seemed quite impracticable politically, although elsewhere trained economists who had been associated with reform began to conclude that the system, whose defects were first systematically analysed in public from within in the 1980s, could not be reformed from within.†

IV

Gorbachev launched his campaign to transform Soviet socialism with the two slogans of *perestroika*, or restructuring (of both economy and political structure), and *glasnost*, or freedom of information.‡

There was what turned out to be an insoluble conflict between them. The only thing that made the Soviet system work, and could conceivably transform it, was the command structure of party/state inherited from the Stalinist days. This was a familiar situation in Russian history even in the days of the Tsars. Reform came from the top. But the party/state structure was at the same time the chief obstacle to transforming a system which it had created, to which it had adjusted, in which it had a large vested interest, and to which it found it hard to conceive an alternative.§

* He had publicly identified himself with the extremely 'broad' and virtually social-democratic position of the Italian Communist Party even before his official election (Montagni, 1989, p. 85).

† The crucial texts here are by the Hungarian Janos Kornai, notably *The Economics of Shortage* (Amsterdam, 1980).

‡ It is an interesting sign of the interpenetration of official reformers and dissident thinking in the Brezhnev years, that *glasnost* was what the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn had called for in his open letter to the Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1967, before his expulsion from the USSR.

§ As a Chinese communist bureaucrat told the writer in 1984 in the midst of a similar 'restructuring': 'We are reintroducing elements of capitalism into our system, but how can we know what we are letting ourselves in for? Since 1949 nobody in China, except perhaps some old men in Shanghai, has had any experience of what capitalism is.'

It was far from the only obstacle, and reformers, not only in Russia, have always been tempted to blame 'the bureaucracy' for the failure of their country and people to respond to their initiatives, but it is undeniable that large parts of the party/state apparatus greeted any major reform with inertia concealing hostility. *Glasnost* was intended to mobilize support within and outside the apparatus against such resistance. But its logical consequence was to undermine the only force which could act. As has been suggested above, the structure of the Soviet system and its *modus operandi* were essentially military. Democratizing armies does not improve their efficiency. On the other hand, if a military system is not wanted, care must be taken that a civilian alternative is available before it is destroyed, otherwise reform produces not reconstruction but collapse. The USSR under Gorbachev fell into this widening chasm between *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

What made the situation worse was that in the minds of the reformers, *glasnost* was a far more specific programme than *perestroika*. It meant the introduction, or re-introduction, of a constitutional and democratic state based on the rule of law and the enjoyment of civil liberties as commonly understood. This implied the separation of party and state, and (contrary to all development since the rise of Stalin) the shift of the locus of effective government from party to state. This in turn implied the end of the single-party system, and of the party's 'leading role'. It also, obviously, meant the revival of the Soviets at all levels, in the form of genuinely elected representative assemblies, culminating in a Supreme Soviet which would be a genuinely sovereign legislative assembly, granting power to, but capable of controlling a strong executive. That, at least, was the theory.

In fact, the new constitutional system was eventually installed. The new economic system of *perestroika* was barely sketched out in 1987-88 by the half-hearted legalization of petty private enterprise ('cooperatives') - i.e. of much of the 'second economy' - and by the decision in principle to allow permanently loss-making state enterprises to go bankrupt. In fact, the gap between the rhetoric of economic reform and the reality of an economy visibly running down widened day by day.

This was desperately dangerous. For constitutional reform merely dismantled one set of political mechanisms and replaced it with another. It left open the question of what the new institutions would do, though the processes of decision would presumably be more cumbersome in a democracy than in a military command system. For most people the difference would merely be that, in one case, they had a genuine electoral choice every so often and had the choice in between of listening to opposition politicians criticising the government. On the other hand, the

criterion of *perestroika* was and had to be not how the economy was run in principle but how it performed every day, in ways that could easily be specified and measured. It could only be judged by results. For most Soviet citizens this meant by what happened to their real incomes, to the effort needed to earn them, to the quantity and range of the goods and services within their reach, and the ease with which they could acquire them. But while it was very clear what the economic reformers were against and wished to abolish, their positive alternative, a 'socialist market economy' of autonomous and economically viable enterprises, public, private and cooperative, macro-economically steered by 'the centre of economic decision-making', was little more than a phrase. It simply meant that the reformers wished to have the advantages of capitalism without losing those of socialism. Nobody had the slightest idea of how, in practice, the transition from a centralized state command economy to the new system was to be made and – equally to the point – how what would inevitably remain a dual state and non-state economy for the foreseeable future would actually work. The appeal of the ultra-radical Thatcherite or Reaganite free-market ideology to young intellectual reformers was that it promised to provide a drastic but also an *automatic* solution for these problems. (As might have been foreseen, it did not.)

Probably the nearest thing to a model of transition for the Gorbachev reformers was the vague historical memory of the New Economic Policy of 1921–28. This had, after all, 'yielded spectacular results in revitalizing agriculture, trade, industry, finances, for several years after 1921' and had restored a collapsed economy to health because it 'relied on market forces' (Vernikov, 1989, p. 13). Moreover, a very similar policy of market liberalization and decentralization had, since the end of Maoism, produced dramatic results in China, whose rate of GNP growth in the 1980s surpassed only by South Korea, averaged almost 10 per cent per annum (World Bank Atlas, 1990). Yet there was no comparison between the desperately poor, technologically backward and overwhelmingly rural Russia of the 1920s and the highly urbanized and industrialized USSR of the 1980s, whose most advanced industrial sector, the military-industrial-scientific complex (including the space programme), in any case depended on a market consisting of a single customer. It is safe to say that *perestroika* would have worked rather better if Russia in 1980 had still been (like China at that date) a country of 80 per cent villagers, whose idea of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice would be a television set. (Even in the early 1970s some 70 per cent of the Soviet population watched television for an average of one-and-a-half hours a day) (Kerblay, pp. 140–41).

Nevertheless, the contrast between Soviet and Chinese *perestroika* is not entirely explained by such time-lags, nor even by the obvious fact that the Chinese were careful to keep their central command system intact. How far they benefited from the cultural traditions of the Far East, which turned out to favour economic growth irrespective of social systems, must be left for twenty-first-century historians to investigate.

Did anyone in 1985 seriously suppose that, six years later, the USSR and its Communist Party, would have ceased to exist, and indeed that all other communist regimes in Europe would have disappeared? To judge by the complete lack of preparation of Western governments for the sudden collapse of 1989–91, the predictions of the imminent demise of the West's ideological enemy were no more than the small change of public rhetoric. What drove the Soviet Union with accelerating speed towards the precipice, was the combination of *glasnost* that amounted to the disintegration of authority, with a *perestroika* that amounted to the destruction of the old mechanisms that made the economy work, without providing any alternative; and consequently the increasingly dramatic collapse of the citizens' standard of living. The country moved towards a pluralist electoral politics at the very moment that it subsided into economic anarchy: for the first time since the inception of planning, Russia in 1989 no longer had a Five-Year Plan (Di Leo, 1992, p. 100 n). It was an explosive combination, for it undermined the shallow foundations of the USSR's economic and political unity.

For the USSR had increasingly evolved towards a structural decentralization, its elements held together primarily by the all-Union institutions of party, army, security forces and the central plan, and never more rapidly than in the long Brezhnev years. *De facto* much of the Soviet Union was a system of autonomous feudal lordships. Its local chieftains – the Party Secretaries of the Union republics with their subordinate territorial commanders, and the managers of the great and lesser production units, who kept the economy in operation – were united by little more than their dependency on the central party apparatus in Moscow, which nominated, transferred, deposed and coopted, and by the need to 'fulfil the plan' elaborated in Moscow. Within these very broad limits the territorial chieftains had considerable independence. Indeed the economy would not have functioned at all but for the development, by those who actually had to run institutions with real functions, of a network of lateral relations independent of the centre. This system of deals, barter arrangements and exchanges of favours with other cadres in similar positions was another 'second economy' within the nominally planned whole. One might add that, as the USSR became a more complex industrial and

urban society, the cadres in charge of the actual production, distribution and general care of the citizenry had diminished sympathy for the ministries and the purely party figures who were their superiors, but whose concrete functions were no longer clear, apart from that of feathering their nests, as many of them did in the Brezhnev period, often in the most spectacular manner. Revulsion against the increasingly monumental and all-pervasive corruption of the *nomenklatura* was the initial fuel for the process of reform, and Gorbachev had fairly solid support for *perestroika* from the economic cadres, especially those from the military-industrial complex, who genuinely wanted to improve the management of a stagnant and, in scientific and technical terms, paralytic economy. No one knew better than they how bad things really had become. Moreover, they did not need the party to carry on their activities. If the party bureaucracy were to disappear, they would still be there. They were indispensable, it was not. Indeed, they were still there after the collapse of the USSR, now organized as a pressure group in the new (1990) 'Industrial-Scientific Union' (NPS) and its successors, after the end of communism, as the (potentially) legal owners of the enterprises which they had commanded without legal property rights before.

Nevertheless, corrupt, inefficient and largely parasitic as the party command system had been, it remained essential in an economy based on command. The alternative to party authority was not the constitutional and democratic authority, but, in the short run, no authority. This is indeed what happened. Gorbachev, like his successor, Yeltsin, shifted his power-base from party to state, and, as constitutional president, legally accumulated powers to rule by decree, in some instances powers greater in theory than any earlier Soviet leader had formally enjoyed, even Stalin (Di Leo, 1992, p. 111). Nobody took any notice, outside the newly established democratic, or rather constitutional-public assemblies, the People's Congress and the Supreme Soviet (1989). Nobody governed or, rather, obeyed in the Soviet Union any more.

Like a crippled giant tanker moving towards the reefs, a rudderless Soviet Union therefore drifted towards disintegration. The lines along which it was to fracture were already drawn: on the one hand the system of territorial power-autonomy largely embodied in the state's federal structure, on the other the autonomous economic complexes. Since the official theory on which the Union had been constructed was one of territorial autonomy for national groups, both in the fifteen Union Republics and in the autonomous regions and areas within each,* national-

* In addition to the RSFSR (Russian Federation), by far the largest territorially

ist fracture was potentially built into the system, although, with the exception of the three small Baltic States, separatism was not even thought of before 1988, when the first nationalist 'fronts' or campaign organizations were founded in response to *glasnost* (in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Armenia). However, at this stage, even in the Baltic States, they were directed not so much against the centre as against the insufficiently Gorbachevist local communist parties, or, as in Armenia, against neighbouring Azerbaijan. The object was not yet independence, although nationalism was rapidly radicalised in 1989-90 under the impact of the rush into electoral politics, and the struggle between radical reformers and the organized resistance of the old party establishment in the new assemblies, as well as the frictions between Gorbachev and his resentful victim, rival and eventual successor, Boris Yeltsin.

Essentially the radical reformers looked for support against the entrenched party hierarchies to the nationalists in the republics and, in doing so, strengthened these. In Russia itself, the appeal to Russian interests against the peripheral republics, subsidized by Russia and increasingly felt to be better off than Russia, was a powerful weapon in the radicals' struggle to eject the party bureaucracy, entrenched in the central state apparatus. For Boris Yeltsin, an old party boss from the command society, who combined the gifts of getting on in the old politics (toughness and cunning) with the gifts for getting on in the new (demagoguery, joviality and a sense of the media), the way to the top lay through the capture of the Russian Federation, thus allowing him to by-pass the institutions of Gorbachev's Union. Hitherto, in effect, the Union and its chief component, the RSFSR, had not been clearly distinct. In transforming Russia into a Republic like the others, Yeltsin *de facto* favoured the disintegration of the Union, which a Russia under his control would in effect supplant. This is, indeed, what happened in 1991.

Economic disintegration helped to advance political disintegration, and was nourished by it. With the end of the Plan, and of party orders from the centre, there was no effective national economy, but a rush, by any community, territory, or other unit that could manage it, into self-protection and self-sufficiency, or bilateral exchanges. The commanders of the great provincial company towns, always used to such arrangements, bartered industrial products for foodstuffs with the heads of the regional collective farms, as - a dramatic example - the Leningrad Party chief,

and demographically, there were also Armenia, Azerbaijan, Byelorussia, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

Gidaspov, dealt with an acute grain shortage in his city by a phone-call to Nazarbayev, the Kazakhstan Party boss, who arranged a swap of cereals for footwear and steel (Yu Boldyrev, 1990). But even this kind of transaction between two of the top figures in the old party hierarchy in effect treated the national system of distribution as irrelevant. 'Particularisms, autarchies, relapses into primitive practices seemed to be the real results of the laws which had liberalized local economic forces' (Di Leo, p. 101).

The point of no return was reached in the second half of 1989, bicentenary of the outbreak of the French Revolution, whose non-existence or irrelevance to twentieth-century politics French 'revisionist' historians were busy trying to demonstrate at the time. The political breakdown followed (as in eighteenth century France) the calling of the new democratic, or largely democratic assemblies in the summer of that year. The economic breakdown became irreversible in the course of a few crucial months between October 1989 and May 1990. However, the eyes of the world at this time were fixed on a related, but secondary phenomenon: the sudden, and once again unpredicted, dissolution of the satellite communist regimes in Europe. Between August 1989 and the end of that year communist power abdicated or ceased to exist in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and the German Democratic Republic – without so much as a shot being fired, except in Romania. Shortly thereafter the two Balkan states which were not Soviet satellites, Yugoslavia and Albania, also ceased to be communist regimes. The German Democratic Republic was soon to be annexed to Western Germany, and Yugoslavia was soon to break up into civil war. The process was watched not only on the television screens of the Western world, but also, with great care, by the communist regimes in other continents. Though they ranged from the radically reformist (at least in economic matters), as in China, to the implacably old-style centralist, as in Cuba (chapter 15), all presumably had doubts about the Soviet plunge into unrestricted *glasnost*, and the weakening of authority. When the movement for liberalization and democracy spread from the USSR to China, the Beijing government decided, in mid-1989, after some obvious hesitations and lacerating internal disagreements, to re-establish its authority in the most unambiguous manner, by what Napoleon, who also used the army to suppress public agitation during the French Revolution, had called 'a whiff of grapeshot'. The troops cleared a mass student demonstration from the capital's main square, at a heavy cost in lives, probably – though no reliable data were available at the time of writing – several hundreds. The massacre of Tienanmen Square horrified Western public opinion, and undoubtedly lost the Chinese Communist Party most of what little

legitimacy it may still have had among the younger generations of Chinese intellectuals, including party members, but it left the Chinese regime free to continue the policy of successful economic liberalisation without immediate political problems. The collapse of communism after 1989 was confined to the USSR and the states in its orbit (including Outer Mongolia, which had chosen Soviet protection over Chinese domination between the world wars). The three surviving Asian communist regimes (China, North Korea and Vietnam) as well as remote and isolated Cuba, were not immediately affected.

v

It seemed natural, particularly in the bicentenary year of 1789, to describe the changes of 1989–90 as the East European revolutions, and, insofar as events which lead to the complete overthrow of regimes are revolutionary, the word is apposite, but misleading. For none of the regimes in Eastern Europe were *over-thrown*. None, except Poland, contained any internal force, organized or not, which constituted a serious threat to them, and the fact that Poland contained a powerful political opposition actually guaranteed that the system there was not destroyed from one day to the next, but replaced by a negotiated process of compromise and reform, not unlike the way in which Spain made the transition to democracy after the death of General Franco in 1975. The most immediate threat to those in the Soviet orbit came from Moscow, which made it clear that it would no longer rescue them by military intervention, as in 1956 and 1968, if only because the end of the Cold War made them strategically less necessary to the USSR. If they wanted to survive, in Moscow's opinion, they would be well advised to follow the line of liberalization, reform and flexibility of the Polish and Hungarian communists, but, by the same token, Moscow would not compel the hardliners in Berlin and Prague. They were on their own.

The very withdrawal of the USSR underlined their bankruptcy. They remained in power merely by virtue of the void they had created around them, which had left no alternative to the status quo except (where this was possible) emigration or (for a few) the formation of marginal dissident groups of intellectuals. The bulk of the citizens had accepted things as they were, because they had no alternative. People of energy, talent and ambition worked within the system, since any position requiring these things, and indeed any public expression of talent, was within the system or by its permission, even in entirely non-political fields like pole-vaulting

and chess. This applied even to the licensed opposition, mainly in the arts, which was allowed to develop in the decline of the systems, as dissident writers who had chosen not to emigrate, discovered to their cost after the fall of communism, when they were treated as collaborators. No wonder that most people opted for the quiet life, which included the formal gestures of support for a system nobody except primary school children believed in, such as voting or demonstrating, even when the penalties for dissidence were no longer terrifying. One of the reasons why the old regime was denounced with such fury after its fall, especially in hardline countries like Czechoslovakia and the ex-GDR, was that

the great majority voted in the sham elections to avoid unpleasant consequences, though not very serious ones; they took part in the obligatory marches . . . The police informers were easily recruited, won over by miserable privileges, often agreeing to serve as the result of very mild pressure' (Kolakowski, 1992, pp. 55-56).

Yet hardly anyone believed in the system or felt any loyalty to it, not even those who governed it. They were no doubt surprised when the masses finally abandoned their passivity and demonstrated their dissent — the moment of amazement has been caught forever on the videotape of President Ceausescu, in December 1989, confronting a crowd that booed instead of loyally applauding — but they were surprised not by the dissidence, only by the action. At that moment of truth, the East European government ordered its forces to fire. All abdicated quietly, except in Romania, and even there resistance was brief. Perhaps they could not have regained control, but nobody even tried. No groups of communist ultras anywhere prepared to die in the bunker for their faith, or even for the far-from-unimpressive record of forty years' communist rule in a number of these states. What should they have defended? Economic systems whose inferiority to their Western neighbours leaped to the eye, which were running down, and which had proved to be unreformable, even where serious and intelligent efforts at reform had been made? Systems which had plainly lost the justification that had sustained their communist cadres in the past, namely that socialism was superior to capitalism and destined to replace it? Who could any longer believe that, though it had not looked implausible in the 1940s or even

1950s? Since communist states were no longer even united, and sometimes actually fought each other with arms (e.g. China and Vietnam in the early 1980s), one could no longer even speak of a single 'socialist camp'. All that remained of the old hopes was the fact that the USSR, the country of the October revolution, was one of the two global superpowers. Except perhaps for China, all communist governments, and a good many communist parties and states or movements in the Third World, knew well enough how much they owed to the existence of this counterweight to the economic and strategic predominance of the other side. But the USSR was visibly shedding a politico-military burden it could no longer carry, and even communist states which were in no sense dependencies of Moscow (Yugoslavia, Albania) could not but realize how profoundly its disappearance would weaken them.

In any case, in Europe as in the USSR, the communists, who had once been sustained by the old convictions, were now a generation of the past. In 1989 few under sixty could have shared the experience that linked communism and patriotism in several countries, namely the Second World War and Resistance, and few under fifty could even have firsthand memories of that time. The legitimizing principle of states was, for most people, official rhetoric or senior citizens' anecdote.* Even party members among the less-than-elderly were likely to be not communists in the old sense, but men and women (alas, far too few women) who made careers in countries that happened to be under communist rule. When times changed, and if they were allowed to, they were ready at a moment's notice to change their coats. In short, those who ran the Soviet satellite regimes had lost their faith in their own systems, or had never had it. While the systems were operational, they operated them. When it became clear that the USSR itself was cutting them adrift, the reformers (as in Poland and Hungary) tried to negotiate a peaceful transition, the hardliners (as in Czechoslovakia and the GDR) to stand pat until it became evident that the citizens no longer obeyed, even if the army and police still did. In both cases they went quietly when they realised that their time was up, thus taking an unconscious revenge on the propagandists of the West who had argued that this was precisely what 'totalitarian' regimes could never conceivably do.

They were replaced, briefly, by the men and (once again, far too rarely) women who had represented dissidence or opposition, and who

* Even so passionate an opponent of communism as the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn had his career as a writer established through the system, which permitted/encouraged the publication of his first novels for reformist purposes.

* This was obviously not the case in Third-world communist states like Vietnam, where liberation struggles had continued until the middle 1970s, but there the civil divisions of the liberation wars were probably also more vivid in people's minds.

had organized, or perhaps better, successfully called for the mass demonstrations which gave the signal for the old regimes' peaceful abdication. Except in Poland, where Church and the trade unions formed the backbone of opposition, they consisted of a few often very brave intellectuals, a stage-army of leaders which briefly found itself at the head of peoples: often, as in the 1848 revolutions which come to the historian's mind, academics or from the world of the arts. For a moment dissident philosophers (Hungary) or medieval historians (Poland) were considered as presidents or prime ministers, and a dramatist, Vaclav Havel, actually became President of Czechoslovakia, surrounded by an eccentric body of advisers ranging from a scandal-loving American rock musician to a member of the Habsburg high aristocracy (Prince Schwarzenberg). There was a tidal wave of talk about 'civil society', i.e. the ensemble of voluntary citizens' organizations or private activities, taking the place of authoritarian states, and about the return to the principles of revolutions before Bolshevism had distorted them.* Alas, as in 1848, the moment of freedom and truth did not last. Politics, and those who ran the affairs of state reverted to those who usually occupy such functions. The *ad hoc* 'fronts' or 'civic movements' crumbled as rapidly as they had risen.

This also proved to be the case in the USSR, where the collapse of party and state proceeded more slowly until August 1991. The failure of *perestroika* and the consequent rejection of Gorbachev by the citizenry were increasingly obvious, though not appreciated in the West, where his popularity remained justifiably high. It reduced the leader of the USSR to a series of backstairs manoeuvres and shifting alliances with the political groups and power groups that had emerged from the parliamentarisation of Soviet politics, which made him equally distrusted by the reformers who had initially rallied round him – whom he had indeed made into a state-changing force – and the fragmented party bloc whose power he had broken. He was and will go into history as a tragic figure, a communist 'Tsar-Liberator' like Alexander II (1855–81) who destroyed what he wanted to reform and was destroyed in the process.†

* The author recalls one of those discussions at a Washington conference in 1991, brought down to earth by the Spanish ambassador to the USA, who remembered the young (at that time mainly liberal communist) students and ex-students feeling much the same after General Franco's death in 1975. 'Civil society', he thought, merely meant that young ideologues who actually found themselves, for a moment, speaking for the whole people, were tempted to see this as a permanent situation.

† Alexander II (1855–81) freed the serfs and undertook a number of other reforms, but was assassinated by members of the revolutionary movement, which for the first time became a force in his reign.

Charming, sincere, intelligent and genuinely moved by the ideals of a communism which he saw corrupted since the rise of Stalin, Gorbachev was, paradoxically, too much of an organization man for the hurly-burly of democratic politics he created; too much of a committee man for decisive action; too remote from the experiences of urban and industrial Russia, which he had never managed, to have the old party boss's sense of grass-roots realities. His trouble was not so much that he had no effective strategy for reforming the economy – nobody had even after his fall – as that he was remote from the everyday experience of his country.

The contrast with another of the post-war generation of leading Soviet communists in their fifties is instructive. Nursultan Nazarbayev, who took charge of the Asian republic of Kazakhstan in 1984 as part of the reform drive, had (like many other Soviet politicians, and unlike Gorbachev and practically any statesmen in non-socialist countries) come into full-time public life from the factory floor. He shifted from party to state, becoming President of his Republic, pushed forward the required reforms, including decentralization and the market, and survived both the fall of Gorbachev, of the party of the Union, none of which he welcomed. After the fall he remained one of the most powerful men in the shadowy 'Community of Independent States'. But Nazarbayev, always the pragmatist, had systematically pursued a policy of optimising the position of his fief (and its population), and had taken the utmost care that market reforms should not be socially disruptive. Markets yes, uncontrolled price-rises decidedly no. His own preferred strategy was bilateral trade deals with other Soviet (or ex-Soviet) republics – he favoured a Central Asian Soviet common market – and joint ventures with foreign capital. He had no objection to radical economists, for he hired some from Russia, or even non-communist ones, for he brought in one of the brains of the South Korean economic miracle, which showed a realistic sense of how really successful post-Second World War capitalist economies actually worked. The road to survival and perhaps to success was paved less with good intentions than with the hard cobbles of realism.

The last years of the Soviet Union were a slow-motion catastrophe. The fall of the European satellites in 1989, and Moscow's reluctant acceptance of German reunification, demonstrated the collapse of the Soviet Union as an international power, let alone as a superpower. Its utter inability to play any role in the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990–91 merely underlined this. Internationally speaking, the USSR was like a country comprehensively defeated, as after a major war – only without a war. Nevertheless, it retained the armed forces and the military-industrial

complex of the former superpower, a situation that imposed severe limits on its politics. However, though the international debacle encouraged secessionism in the republics where nationalist sentiment was strong, notably the Baltic States and Georgia – Lithuania tested the waters with a provocative declaration of total independence in March 1990* – the disintegration of the Union was not due to nationalist forces.

It was due essentially to the disintegration of central authority, which forced every region or sub-unit of the country to look after itself, and not least, to save what it could from the ruins of an economy sliding into chaos. Hunger and shortage lie behind everything that happened in the last two years of the USSR. Despairing reformers, mainly from among the academics who had been such obvious beneficiaries of *glasnost*, were pushed into an apocalyptic extremism: nothing could be done until the old system and everything about it was destroyed utterly. In economic terms, the system must be completely pulverised by total privatisation and the introduction of a 100 per cent free market immediately and at whatever cost. Dramatic plans for doing this in a matter of weeks or months (there was a 'programme of five hundred days') were proposed. These policies were not based on any knowledge of free markets or capitalist economies, though they were vigorously recommended by visiting American and British economists and financial experts, whose opinions were not, in turn, based on any knowledge of what actually went on in the Soviet economy. Both were correct in supposing that the existing system, or rather, while it existed, the command economy, was far inferior to economies based primarily on private property and private enterprise, and that the old system, even in a modified form, was doomed. Yet both failed to confront the real problem of how a centrally planned command economy was, in practice, to be transformed into some version or another of a market-dynamised economy. Instead they repeated first-year-economics-course demonstrations of the virtues of the market in the abstract. It would, they argued, automatically fill the shelves of shops with goods withheld by producers at affordable prices, once supply and demand were allowed free play. Most of the long-suffering citizens of the USSR knew that this would not happen, and when, after it ceased to exist, the shock liberation treatment was briefly applied, it did not. Moreover, no serious observer of the country believed that in the year

* Armenian nationalism, though provoking the breakdown of the Union by reclaiming the region of Mountain Karabakh from Azerbaijan, was not crazy enough to desire the disappearance of the USSR, but for whose existence there would be no Armenia.

2000 the state and public sector of the Soviet economy would not still be substantial. The disciples of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman condemned the very idea of such a mixed economy. They had no advice to offer about how it was to be operated, or transformed.

Yet, when it came, the final crisis was not economic but political. For virtually the entire Establishment of the USSR, from the party, the planners and scientists, the state, to the armed forces the security apparatus and the sporting authorities, the idea of a total break-up of the USSR was unacceptable. Whether it was desired, or even conceived of by any large body of Soviet citizens outside the Baltic States, even after 1989, we cannot tell, but it is not likely: whatever reservations we have about the figures, 76 per cent of voters in a referendum of March 1991 voted for maintaining the USSR, 'as a renovated Federation of sovereign and equal Republics, in which the rights and liberty of every person of whatever nationality are fully safeguarded' (*Pravda*, 25/1/91). It was certainly not officially part of any major Union politician's policy. Yet the dissolution of the centre seemed inevitably to strengthen the centrifugal forces and to make the break-up inevitable, not least because of the policy of Boris Yeltsin, whose star rose as Gorbachev's waned. By now the Union was a shadow, the republics the only reality. At the end of April, Gorbachev, supported by the nine major republics,* negotiated a 'Treaty of Union' which, somewhat in the manner of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, was intended to preserve the existence of a central federal power (with a directly elected federal president), in charge of the armed forces, foreign policy, the coordination of financial policy and of economic relations with the rest of the world. The Treaty was to come into force on 20 August.

For most of the old party and Soviet establishment, this treaty was yet another of Gorbachev's paper formulas, doomed like all the others. Hence they regarded it as the gravestone of the Union. Two days before the Treaty was due to come into force, virtually all the heavyweights of the Union, ministers of defence and interior, head of the KGB, vice-president and prime minister of the USSR and pillars of the party, proclaimed that an Emergency Committee would take over power in the absence of the President and General Secretary (under house arrest on vacation). It was not so much a coup – nobody was arrested in Moscow, not even the broadcasting stations were taken over – as a proclamation that the machinery of real power was once again in operation, in the

* i.e. all except the three Baltic states, Moldavia and Georgia, as well as, for obscure reasons, Kyrgyzstan.

confident hope that the citizenry would welcome, or at least quietly accept, the return to order and government. It was not defeated by a revolution or rising of the people either, for the population of Moscow remained quiet, and the call for a strike against the coup went unheeded. As in so much of Soviet history, it was a drama played by a small body of actors over the heads of the long-suffering people.

But not quite. Thirty, even ten years earlier, the mere proclamation of where power really lay would have been enough. Even as it was, most citizens of the USSR kept their heads down: 48 per cent of the people (according to a poll) and — less surprisingly — 70 per cent of party committees, supported the 'coup' (Di Leo, 1992, pp. 141, 143n). Equally, to the point, more governments abroad than cared to admit it, expected the coup to succeed.* Yet the old-style reassertion of the power of party/state relied on universal and automatic assent rather than counting heads. By 1991 there was neither central power nor universal obedience. A genuine coup might well have succeeded over most of the territory and population of the USSR, and, whatever the divisions and uncertainties within the armed forces and security apparatus, enough reliable troops for a successful *putsch* in the capital could probably have been found. But the symbolic reassertion of authority was no longer enough. Gorbachev was right: *perestroika* had defeated the conspirators by changing society. It had also defeated him.

A symbolic coup could be defeated by a symbolic resistance, for the last thing the plotters were prepared for or wanted was a civil war. Indeed, their gesture was intended to stop what most people feared: a slide into such a conflict. So, while the shadowy institutions of the USSR fell into line with the plotters, the barely less shadowy institutions of the Russian Republic under Boris Yeltsin, just elected as its President by a substantial majority of voters, did not. The plotters had nothing to do except throw in their hand, after Yeltsin, surrounded by some thousands of supporters come to defend his headquarters, defied the embarrassed tanks camped in front of it, for the benefit of the world's television screens. Bravely, but also safely, Yeltsin, whose political gifts and capacity for decision contrasted dramatically with Gorbachev's style, immediately seized his opportunity to dissolve and expropriate the Communist Party and take over for the Russian Republic what remained of

the assets of the USSR, which was formally ended a few months later. Gorbachev himself was pushed into oblivion. The world, which had been ready to accept the coup, now accepted the much more effective counter-coup of Yeltsin, and treated Russia as the natural successor to the dead USSR in the United Nations and elsewhere. The attempt to save the old structure of the Soviet Union had destroyed it more suddenly and irrevocably than anyone had expected.

However, it had solved none of the problems of economy, state and society. In one respect it had made them worse, for the other republics were now afraid of their big brother Russia as they had not been of the non-national USSR, especially since Russian nationalism was the best card Yeltsin could play to conciliate the armed forces, whose core had always been among the Great Russians. Since most of the republics contained large minorities of ethnic Russians, Yeltsin's hint that the frontiers between the republics might have to be renegotiated, accelerated the rush total separation: the Ukraine immediately declared its independence. For the first time populations used to the impartial oppression of all (including Great Russians) by central authority had cause to fear oppression from Moscow in the interests of one nation. In fact, this put paid to the hope of maintaining even a semblance of union, for the shadowy 'Commonwealth of Independent States' which succeeded the USSR soon lost all reality, and even the last survivor of the Union, the (formerly successful) United Team which competed at the 1992 Olympic Games, beating the United States, did not seem destined for a long life. Thus the destruction of the USSR achieved the reversal of almost four hundred years of Russian history, and the return of the country to something like the dimensions and international standing of the era before Peter the Great (1672–1725). Since Russia, whether under the Tsars or as the USSR, had been a great power since the middle of the eighteenth century, its disintegration left an international void between Trieste and Vladivostok, which had not previously existed in modern world history, except briefly during the Civil War of 1918–20: a vast zone of disorder, conflict and potential catastrophe. This was the agenda for the world's diplomats and military men at the end of the millennium.

VI

Two observations may conclude this survey. The first is to note how superficial the hold of communism proved to be over the enormous area it had conquered more rapidly than any other ideology since Islam in its

* On the first day of the 'coup' the Finnish government's official news agency reported the news of President Gorbachev's arrest briefly without comment (halfway down page 3 of a four-page bulletin. It only began to express opinions when the attempt had evidently failed.

first century. Though a simplistic version of Marxism-Leninism became the dogmatic (secular) orthodoxy for all citizens between the Elbe and the China Seas, it disappeared from one day to the next with the political regimes that had imposed it. Two reasons may be suggested for this historically rather startling phenomenon. Communism was not based on mass conversion, but was a faith of cadres or (in Lenin's terms) 'vanguard guards'. Even Mao's famous phrase about successful guerrillas moving among the peasantry like fish in water, implies the distinction between the active element (the fish) and the passive (the water). Unofficial labour and socialist movements (including some mass communist parties) might be coextensive with their community or constituency, as in coalmining villages. On the other hand, all ruling communist parties were, by choice and definition, minority elites. The assent to communism of 'the masses' depended not on their ideological or other convictions but on how they judged what life under communist regimes did for them, and how they compared their situation with others'. Once it ceased to be possible to insulate populations from contact with, or even knowledge about, other countries, these judgments were sceptical. Again, communism was essentially an instrumental faith: the present having value purely as a means of reaching an undefined future. Except in rare cases – for instance patriotic wars, where victory justifies present sacrifices – such a set of beliefs is better suited to sects or elites than to universal churches, whose field of operation, whatever their promise of ultimate salvation, is and must be the everyday range of human life. Even the cadres of communist parties began to concentrate on the ordinary satisfactions of life once the millennial aim of earthly salvation, to which they had dedicated their lives, moved into an undefined future. And – typically enough – when this happened, the party provided no guidance for their behaviour. In short, by the nature of its ideology communism asked to be judged by success, and had no reserves against failure.

But why did it fail, or rather break down? It is the paradox of the USSR that, in its death, it provided one of the strongest arguments for the analysis of Karl Marx, which it had claimed to exemplify. Marx wrote in 1859:

In the social production of their means of existence human beings enter into definite, necessary relations independent of their will, productive relationships which correspond to a definite stage in the development of their material productive forces . . . At a certain stage of their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the existing productive relationships,

or, what is but a legal expression for these, with the property relationships within which they had moved before. From forms of development of the productive forces these relationships are transformed into their fetters. We then enter an era of social revolution.

Rarely has there been a clearer example of Marx' forces of production coming into conflict with the social, institutional and ideological superstructure which had transformed backward agrarian economies into advanced industrial ones – up to the point where they turn from forces into fetters of production. The first result of the 'era of social revolution' thus initiated was the disintegration of the old system.

But what would replace it? Here we can no longer follow the nineteenth-century optimism of Marx, who argued that the overthrow of the old system must lead to a better one, because 'mankind always sets itself only such problems as it can solve'. The problems which 'mankind', or rather the Bolsheviks, set themselves in 1917 were not soluble in the circumstances of their time and place, or only very incompletely soluble. And today it would take a high degree of confidence to argue that in the foreseeable future a solution is visible for the problems arising out of the collapse of Soviet communism, or that any solution that may arise within the next generation will strike the inhabitants of the former USSR and the communist Balkans as an obvious improvement.

With the collapse of the USSR the experiment of 'really existing socialism' came to an end. For, even where communist regimes survived and succeeded, as in China, they abandoned the original ideal of a single, centrally controlled and state-planned economy based on a completely collectivised state – or cooperatively owned economy virtually without a market. Will this experiment ever be renewed? Clearly not in the form developed in the USSR, or probably in any form, except in conditions of something like a total war economy, or some other analogous emergency.

This is because the Soviet experiment was designed not as a global alternative to capitalism, but as a specific set of responses to the particular situation of a vast and spectacularly backward country at a particular unrepeatable historical conjuncture. The failure of revolution elsewhere left the USSR committed to build socialism alone, in a country in which, by the universal consensus of Marxists in 1917, including the Russians themselves, the conditions for doing so were simply not present. The attempt to do so produced remarkable achievements – not least the ability to defeat Germany in the Second World War – but at quite enormous and intolerable human cost, and at the cost of what proved eventually to be a dead-end economy and a political system for which there was nothing to

be said. (Had not George Plekhanov, the 'father of Russian Marxism' predicted that the October revolution could lead at best to a 'Chinese Empire coloured red?') The other 'really existing' socialism, emerging under the wings of the Soviet Union, operated under the same disadvantages, though to a lesser extent, and with - compared to the USSR far less human suffering. A revival or rebirth of this pattern of socialism is neither possible, desirable, nor - even assuming conditions were to favour it - necessary.

How far the failure of the Soviet experiment throws doubt on the entire project of traditional socialism, an economy essentially based on the social ownership and planned management of the means of production, distribution and exchange, is another question. That such a project is economically rational in theory has been accepted by economists since before the First World War, though, curiously enough, the theory was worked out not by socialists but by non-socialist pure economists. That it would have practical drawbacks, if only through bureaucratisation, was obvious. That it had to work, at least partly, through *prices*, both market pricing and realistic 'accounting prices', was also clear if socialism was to take account of the wishes of consumers rather than telling them what was good for them. In fact, socialist economists in the West who thought about these matters in the 1930s, when the subject was naturally much debated, assumed a combination of planning, preferably decentralized, with prices. To demonstrate the feasibility of such a socialist economy is not, of course, to demonstrate its necessary superiority to, say, some socially juster version of the Golden Age mixed economy, still less, that people would prefer it. It is merely to separate the question of socialism in general from that of the specific experience of 'really existing socialism'. The failure of Soviet socialism does not reflect on the possibility of other kinds of socialism. Indeed, the very inability of the dead-end economy of Soviet-type central command-planning to reform itself into 'market socialism', as it wanted to, demonstrates the gap between the two kinds of development.

The tragedy of the October revolution was precisely that it could only produce its kind of ruthless, brutal, command socialism. One of the most sophisticated socialist economists of the 1930s, Oskar Lange, returned from the USA to his native Poland to build socialism, until he came to a London hospital to die. On his death-bed he talked to the friends and admirers who came to visit him, including myself. This, as I recall, is what he said:

If I had been in Russia in the 1920s, I would have been a

Bukharinite gradualist. If I had advised on Soviet industrialization, I would have recommended a more flexible and limited set of targets, as indeed the able Russian planners did. And yet, as I think back, I ask myself, again and again: was there an alternative to the indiscriminate, brutal, basically unplanned rush forward of the first Five-Year Plan? I wish I could say there was, but I cannot. I cannot find an answer.