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Looking Backward

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

The more time one spends in the United States, the more difficult it becomes to conjure up Eastern Europe again -- to remember it as it really is, or was during the two years we roamed it. In spirit, Europe is remote enough from this country; and Eastern Europe is not Western Europe. When I look back on our time there, I think almost exclusively of people and places; yet when I attempt here to systematize and summarize, to convert concrete experience into abstract ideas, I feel a great reluctance. So much useless nonsense has been written, so many false theories held and spread, in the attempt to "reduce" this complex region to comprehensible proportions that I am tempted to advise questioners: "If you don't really want to spend a great deal of time trying to understand this area, don't try at all."

For the first thing that must be said about Eastern Europe is that most of the current cliches, catch-phrases and theses which define its public "image" are inaccurate, obsolete or irrelevant. The Iron Curtain has not been iron for years, and part of the remaining mesh is of our making. The Soviet bloc has been disintegrating for a decade, and is not much more of a bloc than the European Free Trade Association. The socialist countries are not socialist, if socialism is defined as democratic control of the economy, the rule of the working class, or "about equality." They are certainly not Communist if Communism means distribution according to need and the withering away of the state. Although the leaders of these countries pay lip-service to "Marxism-Leninism," that amalgam is itself a Stalinist coinage, and there is precious little Marxism in it -- less every year. (Apart from a handful of Polish revisionists, in the party's disfavor, the most serious Marxist scholars are in the West.) The peoples of the Communist countries are the most anti-Communist in Europe (Spain and Greece included), although only some of them are anti-Russian and most of them hate the Germans much more. Eastern Europe itself is only -- at best -- a convenient handle for a group of countries between Germany and Russia whose outstanding characteristic has been and remains diversity. (Budapest and Sofia have less in common than Paris and Rome.)

Cliches excluded, we know in fact very little about Eastern Europe over the last twenty-five years. Partly because of Nazism and Communism, partly because of the general exclusion of Western observers, but mostly (I think) because Eastern Europe contains none of the "world" languages, every fact about the area is shrouded in controversy, contradiction, propaganda claims and counter-claims, and -- most important -- a sparsity of reliable primary sources. When a reporter in Paris writes that "French farmers are restive," the line is based directly or indirectly on hundreds of conversations

and eyewitness reports. When, on the other hand, someone writes from Warsaw that "Polish peasants are restive," the ultimate source may well be a single Western diplomat who has been reading the Communist press and has spoken to three or four Poles (none of them peasants).

In the last analysis, the local press has been the main source of our information about Eastern Europe. Yet, paradoxically, it is only by spending a long time in the area that one begins to understand how to read it. And -- a further paradox -- one always does so on the assumption that there exists another, entire world which that press reflects only rarely, in critical circumstances, in delayed and truncated form, usually for devious motives. (Le pays réel is always there, but hard to find.) Marshall McLuhan argues that the invention of printing forced us to reduce essentially formless ideas and feelings to linear, serial, one-dimensional form (one word after another); I would say with only slight exaggeration that in Eastern Europe, with its Kafka tradition, the process has been reversed and forms of multilayered, multivalent communication developed more intricate than three-dimensional chess or twelve-tone music. Nothing is ever what it seems, or even the opposite.

Does all this call for an attitude of humility, open-mindedness, flexibility and extreme tentativeness in approaching Eastern Europe, its peoples and its problems? I should think so, although that is not the attitude that the West has taken in the 150 years it has been struggling with various forms of "the Eastern Question." It is certainly not the attitude Americans have been taking toward any place in my memory. So, if one rejects canned certainties, one must still propose some sort of guidelines. I would offer only the most obvious, those which even the tourist feels and which experts take (perhaps too much) for granted: Namely, that the peoples of Eastern Europe are old, small, poor, unsettled and nevertheless European.

Old: Nearly all the peoples of Eastern Europe have been in the area for at least a thousand years: that is, since before the coming of the Mongols, Hapsburgs and Ottomans, many centuries before the rise of Prussia and Russia. Christianity came to them before the Great Schism, let alone the Reformation -- both of which they suffered through. Each had, at one time or another, a "great Kingdom" or even "Empire". Yet during the historical nineteenth century (1815-1914) few had independent states; nearly all grumbled under rulers or religious faiths other than their own for even longer periods.

Small: Compared with some 75 million Germans and more than 100 million Russians, the peoples between them are small tribes indeed. The most numerous by far are the Poles, perhaps 30 million, and after them the Rumanians, about 15 million. In the roughly ten-million range are the Magyars, Czechs and Serbs. Then, between six and eight million, come the Greeks, Finns and Bulgarians. After them, the Croats and Slovaks, at about four million. Then -- around a million each -- Slovenes, Macedonians, Albanians, Lithuanians, Moslem Slavs, Letts, Estonians. And, scattered throughout the area, in numbers often as great as "peoples of state," there are -- or were until 1939 -- Germans, Jews, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Ruthenes, Turks and Gypsies. One cannot even begin to compare this historical

hodge-podge with the compact bloc of large Latin, Catholic nations to the West.

Poor: Eastern Europe was the first "underdeveloped area" to come to Western attention in the nineteenth century. With the exception of Bohemia, nearly all of it had slumbered through the three hundred years of economic modernization which began in Italy and the Low Countries. The Eastern European peoples remain poor in comparison with the West, even if one discounts the drabness peculiar to Communism. Some are poor even compared with more advanced former colonies: Algerians were richly amused when the Yugoslavs offered them technical aid.

Yes, Russia, Rumania and Yugoslavia (though not the others to any great extent) have substantial natural resources which, if they were properly exploited, developed and administered, might bring those nations up to Western standards within, perhaps, two or three generations. But that has been true for a hundred years! Despite great efforts by all sorts of "economic men," from Western capitalists to Soviet commissars, the gap does not close. Eastern Europe makes progress in one field only to fall behind elsewhere: If it now has some steel mills, it has trouble with wheat and meat; if it finally masters coal production, oil and natural gas have become more important; Communism develops Slovakia at the cost of ruining Bohemia, and so on.

It is true that Eastern Europe suffered the most in both world wars: yet it is also true that both wars started there -- partly because national pride has always mattered more there than economic achievement, and national pride is a luxury possible only to numerous and powerful peoples. Living in Eastern Europe, experiencing almost daily its inefficiencies, apathies, disorganizations and economic anomalies, one came to understand only too easily the temptation the region offered to the Germans. I don't mean Hitler and Himmler, but the Germans who came before: the Krupps and Siemenses with their great enterprises, as well as the Volksdeutsch in towns and villages from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Even now, the area continues to live off many of their old works, and cries out for more of them.

Yet, on the other hand, one also begins to understand the resentment of the East Europeans, and particularly of the Orthodox Slavs, at the German penetration. For it is the glory as well as failure of these peoples that they do, after all, value the spirit more than material gain. ("We want your love, not your money," as one Serb put it.) In this sense, and others, the peoples of Eastern Europe are still, by and large, pre-capitalist in their outlook; students of Max Weber may note that the major exceptions are the Czechs and Magyars, both deeply involved in the Reformation.

Unsettled: Most of East Europe's present boundaries were fixed in 1918, the Polish frontiers in 1945. Yet the questions of East European security, and of its place in Europe and the world, remain unsettled. Not only such "small" questions as the Oder-Neisse frontier, Transylvania, Macedonia, Bessarabia, etc. remain "open"; but the larger question of how to exist between Germany and Russia remains to be answered. So does the question of East Europe's place

in the international division of labor. Rumania's defection from Comecon marks the failure of the attempt (begun with Stalin's rejection of the Marshall Plan) to create a sealed, protected Eastern market in which satellite industry could thrive. Now, the East European countries are gradually returning to the world market, though their prewar money-earners (produce and raw materials) have been neglected by Communism and few of their new industries are competitive. They face real problems: The Yugoslavs, who have tried hardest to carve out a place for themselves, have succeeded to the slight extent that they have only through lavish subsidies, consumer belt-tightening, intensive (and expensive) political lobbying, and generous Western credit; and the other Eastern countries do not have a beautiful Dalmatian Coast with which to balance their foreign exchange.

Europeans: "Asia," said Metternich, "begins at the Landgasse"-- the highway leading east from Vienna. Europe, says General de Gaulle, extends "from the Atlantic to the Urals." Both statements are true in the sense that such nations as Poland and Rumania are different from France and Germany. But so, in other ways, are Scandinavia, the Iberian peninsula, and even the British Isles. One must actually spend time in such cities as Budapest, Prague, Warsaw and even Leningrad to realize how European they remain, despite the vicissitudes of the last two decades. The unnatural division of Europe is the cause and symbol of the cold war; and the overcoming of this division should be the primary concern of men of good will everywhere. I recall the late Mayor of Berlin, Ernst Reuter, once saying that a united democratic Germany was worth 100 divisions. By this token, an "open," evolving Eastern Europe is worth many a moon rocket. As to how to bring this about, I should think an appropriate text may be found in Aesop's fable of the north wind and the sun.

This, then, is Eastern Europe reduced, I fear, to obvious banalities. For the complex, ever-changing, fascinating realities, one must go there personally as I did and imbibe the "music" which means far more than the words. I might never have done so without the aid, encouragement and sympathy of the Institute -- to which, and to you, I shall be forever grateful.

Sincerely yours,

  
Anatole Shub

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