

Off The cuff

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Counter Revolution!

THE CELEBRATIONS marking the fall of the Berlin Wall reminded me of our Young Communist League branch meetings in August 1961. It was then over a couple of weeks that letters were read to us by the chairman of the branch from our comrade in Berlin, Charlie, describing his participation during the early hours of August 13th in the hurried construction of the Anti-Fascist Rampart. Loyal East German workers, soldiers, policemen, Combat Groups of the Working Class, and Party members had responded to the emergency call to turn out in the middle of the night to help close roads, and build the makeshift fences that preceded the concrete wall, and were intended to defend the people and economy of the German Democratic Republic from the evil designs of Western militarists and warmongers. Charlie had been our branch secretary before he left to take up a job with a radio station in East Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic, and we were excited by his on-the-spot reports.

We knew, of course, that the West had been sabotaging the economy of the German Democratic Republic since its foundation in 1949. We YCL'ers had been told in detail how the West had manipulated exchange rates and wages to encourage workers in East Berlin to work in the West and live in the East – thereby benefitting from the GDR's lavish welfare benefits, but starving the East of skilled labour. This was the reason that much reconstruction and development was delayed in the East while the parasitic West glowed and glittered.

Like most Stalinist arguments this ludicrous account of relations between East and West was rich in superficially plausible detail and had sufficient internal coherence to convince those inured in the Manichean

logic of the international class struggle of the fifties and early sixties. It's true that Trotskyites and the New Left were scathing – they had, after all, freed themselves from the delusional verities of the 'Stalin School of Falsification', but those of us in the Young Communist League, the autonomous youth organization of the Communist Party of Great Britain, remained unequivocally committed to the side of the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Democracies; we knew exactly whose side we were on in the Cold War, and if this meant ensuring that the citizens of the GDR continued working and living in the East then so be it.

All this got more and more confusing as time passed and one's horizons widened to embrace the radical enthusiasms of the sixties and early seventies. It was during these years that the resurgence of Trotskyism melded with support for 'The Wretched of the Earth' to produce a rejection of the Soviet Bureaucracy, Joseph Stalin and all his works, *at the same time* as the dictatorships led by Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung, Ho Chi Min, Pol Pot and Fidel Castro won enthralled if somewhat conditional support from all and sundry on the British left. The terror and revolutionary violence, which characterised these dictatorships, was sadly regretted, enthusiastically supported, or quietly ignored; there were many responses short of outright condemnation. These revolutionary governments were all deeply flawed, all of us could agree, but they served revolutionary societies and certainly deserved our solid support. These positions were often facilitated by widespread ignorance of the actual conditions prevailing in Cambodia, in China, Vietnam, or Cuba, but it was an ignorance inspired by a prior commitment to revolutionary change, rather than a simple lack of information about famines, public executions, death squads and prison camps.

In the *Walter Mitty* world of the radical left in the sixties and seventies we found few, if any, difficulties in supporting dictatorships and revolutionary terror while simultaneously denouncing Stalin and the Gulag. This was further complicated by the fact that even if you

thought that Russia was 'State Capitalist' or simply 'a degenerated workers' state', when it came to any conflict between Russia and the West the universal tendency on the left was to side with the 'Soviet working class' against American or British imperialism. Even those whose slogan was "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but International Socialism", when 'push came to shove', when the 'stick was bent', and the nature of the 'conjunctural crisis' was thoroughly analysed, could always be relied upon to support Stalinist, Maoist, or Castroite dictatorships against Western democracies.

It is from this historical perspective that it is worth considering the response of those of us on the left during the Great Counter-Revolution of 1989. In our confused way we were democrats of a sort. We wanted workers' control; we wanted popular control of the state, the economy, and the media. Even if, for some of us, this might involve revolutionary repression and the popular democratic dictatorship of the working class or of the masses, most people on the radical left in Britain thought of themselves as popular democrats.

So it was with some dismay that we encountered the Great Counter-Revolution of 1989. Mikhail Gorbachev, like King Louis XVI almost exactly 200 years earlier, unwittingly began the process that unravelled his world and his regime. *Openness* and *restructuring* irretrievably wrecked the Soviet Communist Party's dictatorship, and disrupted central economic planning, opening the way for the dissolution of its network of dependant peoples' democracies and the rapid dismemberment of the Soviet Union.

The drama opened with the collapse of the German Democratic Republic in November 1989 and presented those of us on the radical left with the most perplexing of problems. Of course, we welcomed the end of Erich Honecker's dictatorship, but did that mean that we were also welcoming the restoration of capitalism? As communism collapsed and Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu were shot in Bucharest, the masses in Eastern Europe resolutely refused to

demand workers' control and the establishment of socialist democracy. What they wanted, it seems, was some sort of capitalism. They'd had enough of socialism *with* or *without* 'a human face'. They wanted free speech, a free press, multi-party democracy, the restoration of private property and capitalist enterprise. Of course, they got more of this, perhaps, than they had bargained for, but they did not want socialism.

So, we found ourselves welcoming the collapse of Europe's Stalinist dictatorships and *ipso facto* welcoming the restoration of capitalism from the Baltic to the Adriatic and from Berlin to Vladivostok. Some socialists opposed the break up of the Soviet Union, because they believed in the existence of an entity known as "the Soviet working class" for whom the dissolution of the communist empire would be a "bad thing". Others still, wanted Yugoslavia kept in one piece and, failing that, found reasons to support Russia's historic ally, *gallant little Serbia*, against the depredations of Croats, Bosniaks, Kosovars, and their NATO allies. However, the overwhelming response was one of confusion. The collapse of communism revealed a complete absence of any support for socialism in Russia and Central Asia, and in Eastern and Central Europe.

Twenty years on, despite oligarchs, gangster capitalism, and serial economic crises, there appears to be little or no appetite in the former peoples' republics for anything approaching socialism. Capitalism has triumphed and, if it is threatened at all, it is by a resurgence of corporatism and nationalism rather than by ideas of economic democracy or workers' control.

Most people and most organisations on the left have been gripped either by amnesia, or by some bizarre process of recalibrating what democracy might actually mean when it comes to supporting dictatorships in Havana or elsewhere. What is clear from this tortured history is the necessity to fight for social solidarity, without finding reasons to endorse dictatorship, well intentioned or otherwise.