

worse than, the horrors now taking place in Poland took place, we did not meet to protest and express our indignation, as we are doing tonight. We were so sure who our enemies were (among them, the professional anti-Communists), so sure who were the virtuous and who the benighted. But I am struck by the fact that, despite the rightness of many of our views and aspirations, in particular our sense of the madness of a nuclear war between the superpowers and our hopes for reforms of the many injustices of our own system, we were not responding to a large truth. And we were countenancing a great deal of untruth.

The émigrés from Communist countries we didn't listen to, who found it far easier to get published in the *Reader's Digest* than in *The Nation* or the *New Statesman*, were telling the truth. Now we hear them. Why didn't we hear them before, when they were telling us exactly what they tell us now? We thought we loved justice; many of us did. But we did not love the truth enough. Which is to say that our priorities were wrong. The result was that many of us, and I include myself, did not understand the nature of the Communist tyranny. We tried to distinguish among Communisms—for example, treating "Stalinism," which we disavowed, as if it were an aberration, and praising other regimes, outside of Europe, which had and have essentially the same character.

At the beginning I called the brutal oppression under which the people of Poland are languishing "fascist." This is true in the sense that all the normal pretenses of Communist ideology have been abandoned. The methods and even the language are those of fascism: the demand for "normalization" and "order," the re-legitimizing of anti-Semitism, military rule presented in the guise of a "Committee for National Salvation." The similarities between the Polish military junta and the right-wing dictatorships in Chile, Argentina and other South American countries are obvious. Indeed, future fascist coups d'état will certainly imitate the Polish coup. No despot had ever thought of turning off the phones for an indefinite period, of forbidding the sale of gasoline to all private cars, of stopping the sale of rucksacks and of writing paper, Draconian measures that are not for twenty-four hours but, simply, a new way of life. For the imposition of martial law on December 13 has resulted in a perfect stalemate. It is, plainly, unhivable. And yet, despite the early promises of the government, it cannot be lifted. The present government has not only adopted the standards of fascist rule; it has offered fascist rule a whole arsenal of new techniques.

All this is obvious, or almost, when one uses the word "fascist" to describe the present Polish government. But I mean to use the word in a further sense. What the recent Polish events illustrate is something more than that fascist rule is possible within the framework of a Communist society, whereas democratic government and worker self-rule are clearly intolerable—and will not be tolerated. I would contend that what they illustrate is a truth that we should have understood a very long time ago: that Communism is fascism—successful fascism, if you will. What we have called

fascism is, rather, the form of tyranny that can be overthrown—that has, largely, failed. I repeat: not only is fascism (and overt military rule) the probable destiny of all Communist societies—especially when their populations are moved to revolt—but Communism is in itself a variant, the most successful variant, of fascism. Fascism with a human face.

This, I would argue, must be the starting point of all the lessons to be learned from the ongoing Polish events. And in our efforts to criticize and reform our own societies, we owe it to those in the front line of struggle against tyranny to tell the truth, without bending it to serve interests we deem are just. These hard truths mean abandoning many of the complacencies of the left, mean challenging what we have meant for many years by "radical" and "progressive." The stimulus to rethink our position, and to abandon old and corrupt rhetoric, may not be the least of what we owe to the heroic Poles, and may be the best way for us to express solidarity with them. □

Comments

PHILIP GREEN

There are three main points in the part of Susan Sontag's remarks that constitute her *nostra culpa*. One is partially reasonable, one superficially plausible but in the end quite wrong and the third ridiculous.

Yes, many on the non-Communist left in this country, including contributors to *The Nation*, have often been too hopefully equivocal about Communism; the resulting double standard has done serious damage to the left's reputation and thus to its fortunes as well. But that is no excuse for burying the entire left under that dishonest rubric "we." As a democratic leftist, for example, I decline Sontag's invitation to jump aboard the bandwagon of guilt. My anger at the suppression of liberty in Poland is no more nor less than it was at the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Most of my friends felt the same way that I did then and now, and we never hesitated to speak out.

But, yes, no matter how anti-Communist we were, part of our anger and desolation certainly sprang from a feeling of betrayed hope—hope that out of Communism something much better might emerge. Is it now proven that we have been wrong to be at all hopeful?

On the contrary, most of us also think that the nature of the Eastern European rebellions is precisely what has illuminated a crucial difference between Communism and fascism. The neofascist regimes that Jeane Kirkpatrick is so fond of have been much less successful than Communist regimes at producing revolts of an organized, democratic working class aimed at the creation of economic democracy. These regimes (e.g., Chile's and Argentina's) are built around the violent suppression of organized labor. In Com-

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munist Eastern Europe, on the other hand, the hypocritical Marxism of the ruling elites is an unremitting provocation, in constant danger of being taken seriously by the people. Thus, those regimes have generated three exhilaratingly promising revolts in twenty-five years, none of which was anti-socialist and all of which attempted a welding of Marxism and liberal democracy. These revolts were also *successful* in their own (and our) terms, in the sense that they could only be crushed by direct Soviet intervention or indirect Soviet threats—not by an allegedly “totalitarian” regime forever impervious to change. The very title of Czeslaw Milosz’s book thus betrays the untruth of Sontag’s use of it. Communism does *not* produce “captive minds” any more than does fascism, and these days quite possibly less. It often produces democratic socialist rebels.

There’s a further crucial distinction that follows from this. It can be put simply: as a democratic leftist, I have benefited from both the critical and the reconstructive analyses of many ex-Communists. I’ve never encountered either by an “ex-fascist.” Fascists or their *caudillo*-style imitators totally reject the democratic world view. Communists allege that they embrace it and then horrendously betray it. Over the years, many of them discover what they’ve done and begin the painful process of change. They become democrats, often in the name of “authentic Marxism.” Can we imagine a fascist becoming a democrat in the name of “authentic Hitlerism” or “authentic National Socialism”? Thus, though the antidemocratic triumphs of what Rudolph Bahro calls “really existing socialism” are the only triumphs that have so far occurred in the name of socialism, democratic socialism remains on the agenda—and more so rather than less so because of Poland! It would be otiose even to state that the obverse is true with fascism.

Finally, I don’t know which émigrés Sontag could find only in the antidemocratic *Reader’s Digest*. I do know, though, that she could have learned many other “truths” from that magazine, such as that “International Communism,” China not excepted, is a monolithic conspiracy directed from Moscow; that she herself was not an opponent of the Vietnam War but rather an agent of the Kremlin; and all the other formulations of the “professional anti-Communists.” At least the émigrés and dissidents *The Nation* has published over the years, and whose books it has reviewed frequently and often favorably, are democrats. Contrarily, American or Russian, the right is anti-democratic. Its truths, such as they are, are always encapsulated in a larger lie. If Susan Sontag really needed to learn from the right, that was her problem, not ours. □

DIANA TRILLING

In 1950, writing about the Hiss case in *Partisan Review*—this was before the McCarthy period, with its epochal division between anti-Communists and anti-anti-Communists—I asked whether anyone was prepared to say

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when it was too late to come to an understanding of the true nature of Communism. It was plain, I think, that I believed that it was never too late.

The flurry over Susan Sontag’s recent remarks about Communism in Poland indicates that today, more than thirty years later, with Hungary and Czechoslovakia behind us, with the Twentieth Party Congress behind us, with the Cultural Revolution and the “boat people” and Laos and Cambodia behind us, with Daniel and Sinyavsky and Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov behind us, with Afghanistan behind us, it is still a major shock to hear of an important defection from the ranks of intellectual sympathizers with Communism. It apparently still constitutes an act of moral courage to see and admit the obvious.

In obedience to my own instruction, I welcome Miss Sontag into her new difficult life as an anti-Communist. I must nevertheless admit that I should feel more secure about her future political course if her language rang fewer bells from the Stalinist past. Miss Sontag (mistakenly) calls Communism a variant of fascism; we recollect that Stalinism called democratic socialism a variant of fascism. Miss Sontag accuses Communism of having borrowed much of its virtue from its opposition to fascism; her own statement rests heavily on antifascism to validate her anti-Communism. Reductively, Miss Sontag speaks of “professional anti-Communists” without telling us how they are to be distinguished from the amateurs; just so, Stalinism presented anti-Communism as one of our better-paid lines of work.

Especially when she writes about Reagan, Miss Sontag allows the weary rhetoric of Communist invective to substitute for political truth. She calls Reagan a hypocrite in his foreign policy. Reagan is no more a hypocrite in his foreign policy than in his domestic concern for the rich. Indeed, I’ve never known a President more disarmingly sincere in his purposes.

No, it is not the “when” of Miss Sontag’s recognition of the evils of Communism that bothers me. It is the “how.” □

ARYEH NEIER

Like Susan Sontag, I read Czeslaw Milosz’s *The Captive Mind* in the 1950s. My reaction was different. Milosz seemed to me then to be telling the truth about Communism. I don’t recall a time when I had a different view of Communism.

There have been many times since the 1950s when I have been angry at friends and colleagues on the left who have seemed willfully to ignore or to try to explain away Communist tyranny. That anger has been tempered, however, by the awareness that mainstream American anti-Communists have given anti-Communism a terrible name. I find it uncomfortable to associate with their anti-Communism, and while this has not deterred me from frequently and vehemently expressing my own anti-Communist views, it has forced me to exercise care about when and where I do so. I have expressed these views in the pages of this magazine, but I would not care to in the *Reader’s Digest*.

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