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Observations on a Visit to Eastern Europe

On a visit to Eastern Europe last week, it was so refreshing to hear the Eastern Europeans speak out openly against Communism. They clearly understood, in a way that most Americans do not, that Communism itself is the enemy, not just the dictators who were recently so unceremoniously dislodged.

In pinpointing the start of the liberation of Eastern Europe, many local citizens credited President Ronald Reagan's widely-quoted phrase that the Soviet Union is an "evil empire." As that descriptive phrase reverberated behind the Iron Curtain, the captive peoples were encouraged that an American President spoke words which they dared not utter.

I asked one member of Parliament to Hungary how long it has been since anyone believed in Marxism-Leninism. She replied, "Nobody believes in Marxism-Leninism; I have never met anyone who believes in Marxism-Leninism."

I asked another member of Parliament in Hungary what he thought of the prevailing American policy that Gorbachev is good for the West because of his moderate policies of change, and that the United States should aid him politically and financially in order to keep him in power because the alternative might be worse. The Hungarian called this policy "disgusting and ignorant."

Calling Gorbachev "a great historical loser" who is gracefully retreating before the forces of history, this Hungarian leader predicted that no amount of money could keep Communism in place in the Soviet Union because the empire is crumbling from within.

But wouldn't the fall of Gorbachev leave a power vacuum at the top? "There is already a vacuum of power," this Hungarian political leader said, adding that Gorbachev is just desperately trying to hold on to what he has.

Of all the East European countries, Hungary is the farthest along the road of joining the world market, and U.S. businessmen are rushing to meet the challenge. Already $350 million in U.S. investment is locked in, and the commercial officer at the U.S. Embassy in Budapest expects the total to rise to $1 billion within a few more months.

Czechoslovakia is not yet ready for either the U.S. investor or the U.S. tourist. King Wenceslas Square in Prague, where last year 400,000 demonstrators toppled their Communist bosses, is today busy with Czechs peacefully going about their daily lives. The crowded stores have little of quality to sell and have not learned to be customer friendly.

I stood in a typical Communist line for one hour to buy a little crystal. For the Czechs who stood in line ahead of me, such hour-long queues are nothing out of the ordinary and they were not impatient.

The taxi drivers, who seem to be the only entrepreneurs to surface in Czechoslovakia, are openly anti-Communist. In answer to the question, what do you think of Gorbachev, a typical reply is: “He is a little bit better than Brezhnev (making a quarter-inch gesture), but Gorbachev is still a Communist and I don’t like him.”

The transition from a tightly controlled, planned and regulated Socialist economy to a free market will be very difficult. The neo-Communists who have changed their name to Socialists are hoping that the uncertainty, dislocations, unemployment, and inflation will cause the people to turn back to the security of a managed cradle-to-grace economy.

In the 1945 partition of Berlin, Communist East Berlin was given most of the beautiful historic buildings, including the museums and opera house along the Avenue Unter den Linden. They are in sharp contrast to the pathetically poor rest of the city.

A surprise sight in East Berlin is the Grand Hotel, one of the most lavish hotels of the world, built in the opulent 1900s grandeur like the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco. The Grand has an immense vaulted lobby and a stunning staircase rising several flights, a spacious mezzanine where patrons can enjoy high tea in royal style with live concert music, all glittery with gold leaf and brass appointments.

No, this is not a relic of the royal extravagance; it was built by the East German Communist government only three years ago as a place for the Party elite to distance themselves from the proletariat. At rates starting at $176 and rising to $2,564 per day for suites, obviously no East German could afford to stay there except the subsidized Party bosses, and no Westerners came until after the German unification drive began last year.

Seeing the Berlin Wall is an experience that every American should have. It's the supreme monument for the failure of Communism and to the yearning of men to be free – a yearning so passionate that they will risk any danger to reach freedom. The Wall proves that, even in the 20th century, men will still say, "Give me liberty or give me death."