

End or Beginning?

David Walsh

THE RECENT FLURRY OF INTEREST generated by Francis Fukuyama's article on the end of history has been a unique phenomenon. Rarely does the national press interest itself in the quasi-philosophic musings of a (by his own admission) obscure intellectual. It says something about the times we live in that such an interest has been aroused. Fukuyama's writings have been seized upon because of a sense that they are somehow strangely relevant to the sweeping changes now taking place within the Communist bloc.

This is certainly the case. The intellectual framework in which we have viewed the world for more than fifty years is no longer adequate. Our world-view was shaped by the conflict between ideological totalitarianism and liberal democracy. That struggle seemed irrevocable. If one form of totalitarianism was defeated (as in Fascism or Nazism), there was another to take its place (Communism in its multiple varieties). The conflict itself was the constant that endured. Freedom and democratic government on one side, repression and state terror on the other.

But now, without preparation or warning, all of this has changed. 1989 will go down as the watershed year in which the irreversible nature of the changes has become universally clear. Not only have we passed the point of no return in the political arrangements in the countries of Eastern Europe but, more importantly, the nature of Communism itself has undergone a profound transformation.

This is evident in a wide variety of ways. The widely touted economic and political reforms in the Soviet Union and elsewhere are only a symptom of the sea-change taking place. Communist states have always had the capacity to adapt to changing political conditions. And much of the skepticism of recent years has arisen from this well-founded

awareness. But what makes the present "reforms" different is that they are not merely tactical adjustments. They arise from an inner disintegration of the Communist movement itself. A profound loss of confidence in Communism has occurred and there seems to be no possibility of restoring it.

The events, accelerating toward a breathtaking culmination in the symbolic collapse of the Berlin Wall, have revealed the extent of the inner dissolution. Without firing a shot Eastern Europe has been liberated and the peoples of the Soviet Union are not far behind. The precipitous nature of these events has been their most astonishing feature. Admittedly, these were not popular regimes. But even without the backing of Soviet troops, the Communist parties of Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria possessed formidable power. Party members controlled all the key pressure points within the

"What has occurred is, not the realization of the economic failure of Communism, but the natural and inevitable exhaustion of a sense of waiting for an event that is perpetually postponed."

societies. Yet they gave up virtually without a struggle, with the exception of Romania (where the grip of ideology appeared to have retained its vitality a bit longer).

No, something utterly new has occurred. Communism has lost its stridency, its militance, its sense of a world mission. When Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union would no longer export revolution and went on to renounce such attempts in the past, it was clear that we were dealing with a new type of Soviet leadership. All of the evidence has continued to point toward the same conclusion. Indeed, one begins to wonder, not whether Gorbachev can survive, but whether the Communist Party of the Soviet Union can long have a future. The only basis for its claim to legitimacy is that there is no comparable organization capable of govern-

David Walsh is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Politics at The Catholic University of America.