then we in effect become the allies of death. ...” So “we must rebel against extinction,” because “by rebelling against it, we can indirectly make it visible.”

A new nuclear eschatology is emerging that seeks to make the unwitnessable extinction visible. Schell’s articles are only the latest in a number of remarkable statements in the past year or so that have dropped like stones on the still surface of our apathy. Nigel Calder’s book Nuclear Nightmares, George Kennan’s speech calling for a voluntary reduction in nuclear armaments and the articles by E. P. Thompson and Roy and Zhores Medvedev in The Nation are flowers of hope plucked from the current danger—as is the resurgence of the European nuclear disarmament movement, which is the subject of Alan Wolfe’s article in this week’s issue. The antinuclear movement in Europe is more than a political protest; it is a protest for life. This is a cause that can enlist realist and idealist alike. For we have a common stake in the endeavor of life, without which all our various interests, creeds and causes are meaningless. As Schell writes, “The purpose of action is not to replace life with politics. The point is not to turn life into a scene of protest; life is the point.”

Option-Dropping

Alexander Haig isn’t saying that the United States will send combat troops to El Salvador. When asked what he means when he pledges to do “whatever is necessary” to keep the Salvadoran government in power, he replies, “We are considering a whole range of options” or “We have not ruled anything out.”” The Secretary of State usually couples these statements with a succinct lecture on why prudent diplomats should never foreclose any possible course of action.

One difficulty with such statements is that they produce an effect that is precisely the opposite of what the Secretary intends. Rather than keeping U.S. options open, they limit them. By constantly suggesting that the United States may send combat troops, he is building up pressure on the Administration to do just that. Having long ago made clear that he views El Salvador as a place where American resolve is being tested, he is making it impossible for the Administration not to send troops if the Salvadoran government appears to be falling.

How do we get out of this fix? It won’t be easy, but the route seems to lie through Congress. Hearings now under way in the Senate and the House on the President’s recent certification that the government of El Salvador is making a significant effort to protect human rights are becoming a forum in which U.S. policy toward that country is being questioned. These hearings are revealing to many members of Congress that President José Napoleón Duarte, the moderate in whom they placed such high hopes, is now nothing more than a public relations front man for the gang of murderers in the Salvadoran military. Each time Haig’s deputies testify before Congress, they discredit themselves and the Administration’s policy by trying to cover up or explain away abuses of human rights. What remains in doubt is whether Congress will build up enough pressure on itself to restrain intervention before the Secretary of State builds up enough pressure on the Administration to send in troops.

ARTICLES.

POLAND AND OTHER QUESTIONS

Communism and The Left

On the evening of February 6 at Town Hall in New York City, various elements of the American left (spanning Gore Vidal and PATCO and including E. L. Doctorow, Kurt Vonnegut and Pete Seeger) came together to show support for Solidarity in Poland and to condemn the martial law regime in Warsaw. The secondary purpose of the meeting was, however, to transcend the hand-wringing platitudes of the Reagan Administration and to create some distance between radical Americans and the evident hypocrisy of “Let Poland Be Poland.” This duality was most eloquently expressed by Carlos Fuentes, who sent a long message culminating in the admonition: “Let Poland be Poland—yes. But let El Salvador be El Salvador.”

This broad consensus was abruptly—some have said rudely—disturbed by a speech by Susan Sontag. With her permission, we reprint her version of the speech so that readers can form their own opinions of it. But those attending the meeting, as well as the Soho News, which reprinted the speech without obtaining the author’s permission, agree that she also said the following:

Imagine, if you will, someone who read only the Reader’s Digest between 1950 and 1970, and someone in the same period who read only The Nation or the New Statesman. Which reader would have been better informed about the realities of Communism? The answer, I think, should give us pause. Can it be that our enemies were right?

Unlike the Reader’s Digest, we are happy to enter the lists about this or any other period of modern history (even periods of history that took place before Sontag was born, and that are thus not covered by her own personal experience and confessional). We also welcome the spirit in which she challenged the left to examine its own record. If the comments beginning on page 231 are any indication, there are few takers for the equation she makes between Communism and fascism, however these overworked terms are defined. But the left should not make the mistake of attacking Russian despotism purely for the sake of symmetry.
The issue of "double standards" is an exceptionally difficult one. Our contributors take up the challenge, both implied and overt.

—The Editors

SUSAN SONTAG

We meet here tonight to express our solidarity with the people of Poland, now languishing under the brutal oppression of what one can only call—if that word has any meaning—a fascist regime. To protest the infamy of the Jaruzelski junta is not a difficult position to take. No sentiment could be more mainstream. "Solidarity with Poland, solidarity with Solidarity" is a call launched by dozens of governments in the rich world, a call that has resounded in public meetings held since mid-December in every major city in Western Europe and a few in North America. It is legitimate to ask: What is the point of our meeting? To add our voice to the chorus of indignation? I do not offer this hypothesis with irony. That may be indeed just what we are doing—and quite rightly so. But it is my understanding that those who have organized tonight's meeting, and most of those who are speaking here, have a somewhat different purpose. It is, of course, to express our condemnation of the crushing of the democratic movement in Poland. But it is also to distinguish ourselves from others in the chorus of virtuous indignation, to stake out a different kind of support for Poland than that tendered by, say, Reagan and Haig and Thatcher.

With this purpose I am wholly in agreement. Otherwise I would not be speaking here. One of the many excellent reasons for detesting the Reagan Administration is the utter hypocrisy of its support for the Polish democratic movement. Being a citizen of this country, I cannot help but single out Reagan—Reagan the union-buster, Reagan the puppet master of the butchers in El Salvador. But it is worth remembering that the entire economic and political leadership of capitalist Europe and North America bears great responsibility for what has happened in Poland. Poland was not just done in by a fascist coup engineered by the Soviet Union—using Russian-authorized tanks with Polish rather than Russian markings. Banks and tanks did Poland in, to use my friend Joseph Brodsky's formulation. The Polish debt continues to be refinanced by the Western governments, grain continues to be sold to the Soviet government, the French government—most eloquent of all the hypocrites—signs a vital commercial treaty with the Soviet government a few weeks after the Polish elections. In other words, business continues as usual. Landing rights may be denied to Aeroflot and Lot at Kennedy Airport, tourism opportunities for Polish diplomats stationed here may be restricted, cultural exchanges may be pared . . . That is the kind of retaliating the Western democracies are prepared to make for the enslavement of Poland. That . . . and a lot of rhetoric.

We tonight are adding our rhetoric to the avalanche of good words about Poland—but, as I say, in the hope of distinguishing our position from the official hypocrisies. I would also hope, however, that we do not let our sense of whom we oppose on our side of the frontier between capitalism and Communism lead us into certain hypocrisies and untruths.

I have the impression that much of what is said about politics by people on the so-called democratic left—which includes many people here tonight—has been governed by the wish not to give comfort to "reactionary" forces. With that consideration in mind, people on the left have willingly or unwittingly told a lot of lies. We were unwilling to identify ourselves as anti-Communists because that was the slogan of the right, the ideology of the cold war and, in particular, the justification of America's support of fascist dictatorships in Latin America and of the American war on Vietnam. (The story, of course, starts much earlier, in Europe in the late 1920s, with the rise of fascism, whose principal war cry was anti-Communism.) The anti-Communist position seems already taken care of by those we oppose at home.

I want to challenge this view.

There are many lessons to be learned from the Polish events. But, I would maintain, the principal lesson to be learned is the lesson of the failure of Communism, the utter villainy of the Communist system. It has been a hard lesson to learn. And I am struck by how long it has taken us to learn it. I say we—and of course I include myself. I can remember reading a chapter of Czeslaw Milosz's The Captive Mind in Partisan Review. When it came out in 1953, I bought the book—a passionate account of the dishonesty and coarseness of intellectual and cultural life in Poland in the first years of Communism, which troubled me but which I also regarded as an instrument of cold war propaganda, giving aid and comfort to McCarthyism. I put it on my student's bookshelf. Still a student (though an unofficial one) twenty-seven years later, in 1980, on the eve of my first visit to Poland, I took down my old copy of The Captive Mind from the shelf, re-read it (for the first time) and thought, and thought only: But it's all true. And in Poland, I was to learn that Milosz had, if anything, underestimated the disgrace of the Communist regime installed by force in his country.

I have asked myself many times in the past six years or so how it was possible that I could have been so suspicious of what Milosz and other exiles from Communist countries—and those in the West known bitterly as 'premature anti-Communists'—were telling us. Why did we not have a place for, ears for, their truth? The answers are well known. We had identified the enemy as fascism. We heard the demonic language of fascism. We believed in, or at least applied a double standard to, the angelic language of Communism. Now we take another line. Now it seems easy to do so. But for many decades, when horrors exactly like, no, far
worse than, 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 anticommitists), so sure who were the virtuous and who the tainted. But I am struck by the fact that, despite the rights 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-legitimating 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 compliances 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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