

Bahro Refuted: Solidarnosc and Proletarian Revolution in Eastern Europe

Mark Gabbert

Volume 11, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt11re04>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Gabbert, M. (1983). Review of [Bahro Refuted: Solidarnosc and Proletarian Revolution in Eastern Europe]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 11, 204–213.

Bahro Refuted: *Solidarnosc* and Proletarian Revolution in Eastern Europe

Mark Gabbert

Neal Ascherson, *The Polish August: The Self-Limiting Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1981).

Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London: New Left Books 1978).

Colin Barker and Kara Weber, *Solidarnosc: From Gdansk to Military Repression* (London: International Socialism 1982).

Stan Persky, *At The Lenin Shipyard: Poland and the Rise of the Solidarity Trade Union* (Vancouver: New Star Books 1981).

Daniel Singer, *The Road to Gdansk: Poland and the U.S.S.R.* 2nd ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press 1982).

IN 1917, THE RUSSIAN WORKING CLASS became the most revolutionary in the world. Decades of ruthless capitalist exploitation and the crisis of World War I had combined to make the proletariat the leading force in the March Revolution. The March days saw the spontaneous creation of institutions of workers' power in the soviets which sprang up everywhere, providing a mechanism for popular control and resistance to an increasingly unpopular provisional government. In the course of 1917, the soviets in St. Petersburg and Moscow increasingly transferred their allegiance to the thoroughly revolutionary Bolsheviks, and when the insurrection of November occurred the majority of urban workers supported Lenin.¹

As we know, soviet democracy was short-lived. Civil war decimated the Russian working class, while revolutionary failure in the West left the Bolsheviks isolated and faced with the problem of building industry from scratch. Stalin's triumph over the Left insured that the task would be carried out with a maximum of repression: Russia became a bureaucratic dictatorship and workers' control came to a brutal end. So far, there has been no sign of significant

¹ For the most recent scholarly account of the relation between the Bolshevik Party and the working class in 1917 see Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: Norton 1978).

Mark Gabbert, "Bahro Refuted: *Solidarnosc* and Proletarian Revolution in Eastern Europe," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 11 (Spring 1983), 204-213.

proletarian opposition to bureaucratic rule beyond the daily sabotage of alcoholism and low labour productivity.

Recent events in Poland have, however, reminded us that things can be different. Though after World War II Eastern Europe was thoroughly Stalinized, the region has been a chronic threat to bureaucratic control. Upheavals in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Poland (1956, 1970, 1976, 1980-81) have shown that the Russian system fares less well when transplanted.

In the West, these East European revolts have inspired a massive scholarship and polemics on both the Left and the Right, but little has emerged from Eastern Europe, particularly from a Marxist perspective. Bureaucratic domination has turned Marxism into a collection of stale ideological dogmas while the censors and the police have cracked down hardest on critiques from the Left. For Marxists in the West this silence on the East European Left has been particularly painful, so when a supposedly Marxist analysis by an East European Communist appears it is welcomed with enthusiasm. This is the more true when the work shows a moral integrity and political commitment which does honour to the communist tradition. Such a book is Rudolf Bahro's *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*.²

Unlike most East European oppositionists, Bahro had spent his entire adult life as a party member, holding bureaucratic positions both in the official press and as an industrial planner. Long distressed by the inadequacies of the East German system, he moved quietly into opposition in 1968 when the Soviet crush-

² Some portions of the following account of Bahro's work originally appeared in my "Marxist Perspectives on Eastern Europe," *Queen's Quarterly*, 87 (1980), 637-48. Bahro was expelled from the East German Communist Party, convicted of espionage and imprisoned for some months. As a result of widespread protest in the West, he was released and emigrated to West Germany where he is active in the ecology and European disarmament movements.

ing of the Prague Spring made it impossible for him to carry on as before. Over a period of several years and in complete secrecy, Bahro produced *The Alternative* — a major theoretical work containing a ruthless critique of the bureaucratic system, an estimate of the prospects for change, and a vision of what a truly socialist future might be.

At the heart of Bahro's analysis of what he calls Actually Existing Socialism (AES) is the argument that, while it has abolished private ownership of the means of production it has not destroyed an even more fundamental barrier to human development — the division between mental and manual labour. For under AES the general knowledge required for economic and social planning remains a monopoly of bureaucrats just as surely as it is the privilege of capitalists and managers in the West. Workers, on the other hand, are cut off from general knowledge and forced to do the psychologically and intellectually deadening work of routine production. They suffer, therefore, from "subalternity" — the condition of psychological and intellectual narrowness experienced by those whose work provides no opportunity for aesthetic and mental growth.

Subalternity is not, however, the whole story. According to Bahro, though bureaucratic inefficiency and worker apathy mean slow economic growth, AES has enormously expanded the productive forces, resulting in significant growth of education and expertise. This has meant the generation of more intellectual skill and interest than can be used in the productive process itself. Higher productivity therefore creates "surplus consciousness" — a quantity of emotional and intellectual energy remaining beyond the "absorbed consciousness" required for routinized bureaucratic and production work. Surplus consciousness is incompatible with the existing division of labour and provides a potential basis for "emancipatory interests" — the desire for the widest involvement in political, social, and cul-

tural activities, a corresponding escape from subalternity, and the creation of the richly endowed individual required for socialist society. This potential for emancipation is a threat to bureaucratic domination and is recognized as such. The ruling elite therefore struggles to drain surplus consciousness from emancipation toward "compensatory" activities represented chiefly by the drive for higher levels of consumption. Bahro is convinced, however, that rooted as they are in the continuous expansion of the productive forces, the emancipatory interests will in the end shatter bureaucratic rule.

Bahro argues that bureaucratic rule will be broken and socialism established when those motivated by emancipatory interests organize into a new League of Communists committed to cultural revolution. This revolution would mean the transformation of every facet of East European society from the organization of production to education and family life. Its precondition is a deliberate attempt to expand surplus consciousness beyond its present level, to equip every individual psychologically and intellectually both for production and planning work and for the highest levels of synthetic activity represented by art and philosophy.

Expanding surplus consciousness, Bahro argues, requires both increased educational opportunities and abolition of the vertical division of labour. It also means abandoning the compulsion to out-produce the capitalist world, for economic competition with the West means there will never be sufficient wealth for communism and it ignores environmental destruction. Abandoning compulsive growth would permit a surplus of labour time and the shortened working day essential to increased educational opportunities. This must be accompanied by an end to bureaucratic privilege, participation of intellectual workers in production, abolition of piecework, and a general equalization of wages. Further, instead of calculating the plan in monetary terms, resource allocation must be

expressed in units of labour time, allowing workers to see clearly the cost to them of alternate planning decisions.

Bahro recognizes that these economic shifts require a political transformation allowing for popular control. Here he envisions an association of regional communes, each with considerable autonomy but also sending delegates to a general assembly responsible for planning on a national scale. This at last would be Marx's society of freely associated producers in which the free development of each would be the condition for the free development of all.

One must be impressed by both the richness of Bahro's analysis and his powerful vision of a transformed society. Yet, the question arises as to the likely agent of the changes he envisions. Here we come to the fundamental weakness in Bahro's analysis. For in the whole of his work there is no coherent account of the class structure of AES, of any contradiction between the forces and relations of production, or of any resulting class struggle. Instead, surplus consciousness pushes in an almost linear fashion toward liberation, with or without economic breakdown. This is reflected in Bahro's nearly total rejection of the working class as the agent of revolution. In fact, Bahro thinks that emancipatory interests will be strongest among ideologists and specialists — those with considerable general knowledge and hence most humiliated by the present regime. As for workers, they are the chief victims of subalternity; and proletarian unity can be expected to break down on the hard reefs of personal or sectional interest. Bahro concludes that the intelligentsia will lead the emancipatory forces, defended from their narrow corporate interest by a high level of surplus consciousness, revolutionary commitment, and the vigilance of the new League of Communists. It is fair to say, then, that Bahro has abandoned Marx's notion of class and shifted political importance to the relatively privileged layers of the AES.

Bahro's book appeared in West Germany in 1977 and was published in English a year later. Then in 1980 the lid blew off in Poland and the creation of Solidarity opened fifteen months of unprecedented working class self-organization and militancy. Both the causes of Polish developments and the role played by the proletariat called into question Bahro's entire theory of the dynamics of AES and of the revolutionary potential of the working class.

First, as in every other previous East European explosion, the basic precondition for the Polish crisis was a failure of the economic system. As Western Marxists have long known,³ AES is a crisis ridden system. The Soviet model, with its highly centralized bureaucratic administration, limited enterprise autonomy, and absence of workers' control may deliver industrialization; but after the initial phase of growth, contradictions begin to emerge leading to declining growth rates and the potential for social unrest.

Why does this happen? First, the central bureaucracy, enjoying privileged access to consumer goods, free from any institutionalized democratic controls, and committed to survival through growth, tends to allocate more resources to heavy industry than to consumption. Thus, bureaucratic planning leads to a potential conflict with workers who desire higher living standards and would allocate more

investment to consumption if they had the choice. Second, there is a contradiction between the interests of enterprise managers and the demands of the plan for efficiency. To meet centrally imposed targets, management conceals productive capacity, overhires, demands inputs in excess of what is technically required, and neglects quality for quantity. This may protect management careers, but it also means waste and inefficiency. Finally, East European workers have neither the socialist incentive of democratic power over the economy and workplace nor the capitalist goad of unemployment to encourage high productivity. Consequently, the pace and quality of production is significantly lower than in the West, resulting in slow growth and technological stagnation.

Operating together, these contradictions tend to lead to a disintegration of the plan. At some point in the planning period, allocated resources are used up, the wage fund is exhausted and still a number of projects remain unfinished and hence utterly useless. Basic structural solutions are impossible: socialist democracy would mean the end of bureaucratic control, while a return to the market guarantees inflation, unemployment, and reemergence of a workers' movement. So planners resort to ad hoc solutions: resources are shifted from consumption to complete unfinished projects in heavy industry; work norms are increased and wages tied to productivity; and commodity prices are increased. This is sometimes combined with a modicum of decentralization and a so-called market socialist attempt to combine the use of economic indicators (for example, enterprise capacity for self-financing) with planning.

The historical fact is that every major crisis of the bureaucratic system has been linked to such a crisis or impending crisis of the economy. Poland is no exception. The upheavals of 1956, 1970, 1976, and 1980-81 all coincided with bureaucratic attempts to increase labour productivity or to shift resources away from consumption

³ There is an enormous literature on the Soviet and East European economic system. Among the Marxist accounts drawn upon here are Antonio Carlo, "The Socio-Economic Nature of the U.S.S.R.," *Telos*, 21 (Fall 1974), 3-86; D.M. Nuti, "The Contradictions of Socialist Economies: A Marxian Interpretation," *The Socialist Register 1979* (London: Merlin Press 1979), 228-73; Michael Ellman, *Socialist Planning* (London: Cambridge University Press 1979); and Chris Harman, *Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe* (London: Pluto Press 1974). For a superb analysis of specifically Polish economic and political problems during the Gierek years see Peter Green, "The Third Round in Poland," *New Left Review*, 101-102 (1972), 69-108.

by increasing prices. Gomulka fell in 1970 when he tried to solve his economic problems by tying wages to productivity and imposing a 30 per cent hike in food prices. Gierek tried to solve these same problems with a strategy of massive foreign borrowing and importation of western technology. The aim was to modernize Polish industry and agriculture and to increase hard currency customers. The plan failed as labour productivity refused to rise, western interest rates skyrocketed, and capitalist recession undermined any possibility of new export markets. In the end, the government returned to its old strategy: food prices would be hiked to reduce domestic demand and to free agricultural production for the export market. Such, in brief, was the economic basis of the proletarian rebellions of 1976 and 1980-81. Whatever role surplus consciousness played in this crisis it was clearly secondary to economic collapse; the reality is that the crisis-ridden Polish economy simply could not deliver Bahro's compensatory goods.

This brings us to Bahro's second major assumption — that of the revolutionary incapacity of workers. If workers are subaltern, lack emancipatory interests, are given to narrow sectoralism and economism, and lust primarily after material comfort then they will not support demands consistent with cultural revolution. Does the Polish situation justify this assumption?⁴

Despite the fact that worker unrest has been triggered by economic crisis, in the period since 1970 the Polish proletariat has moved increasingly beyond the economic class struggle to formulate broad political demands. In 1970 the initial resistance to price increases led to political demands for free elections in trade

unions and workers' councils, trade unions independent of the Party, an end to censorship, and a halt to police repression. Further, contrary to Bahro's fear of corporatism, one is struck by the fierce egalitarianism of proletarian demands for cutting bureaucratic salaries and for abolition of the wage differentials and social distance between mental and manual workers.

Ten years and yet another crisis (1976) later, these beginnings of proletarian politicization came to fruition. The most significant innovation in August, 1980 was the transcendence of factory and industry divisions through the creation of Solidarity as a national trade union. This began the night of 16 August 1980 when representatives from 21 factories arrived at the Lenin shipyard and organized the Gdansk Interfactory Strike Committee (MKZ). By the end of August, the Gdansk MKZ represented 600 factories while 300-400 more were represented through committees in Szczecin, Elbag, Wroclaw, and Bydgoszcz. The MKZs ultimately became the sole authorized negotiators, forestalling government attempts to buy off individual factories through separate wage settlements. Proletarian unity emerged as well in the economic demands made in August 1980. Negotiators insisted that the wages of the lowest paid workers be a priority; that a social minimum be established below which pensions would not be allowed to drop; and that meat be rationed and scarce commodities cease to be sold in special shops.

From the start the workers pushed beyond economism: in the Gdansk accord the unions won the right to a role in determining the allocation of investment between consumption and accumulation, the funding of health, education, and culture, and general price and wage policy, thus revealing the desire of the allegedly subaltern for control over the direction of society as a whole. Throughout Solidarity's existence, the workers' movement attempted to devise the institutional forms for making workers' control a real-

⁴ The following discussion of the period from August, 1980 to December, 1981 is drawn from sources such as *Le Monde*, *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, and *Inprecor*. The resolutions of Solidarity's national congress can be obtained from the Polish Workers Solidarity Committee, Toronto.

ity. During summer 1981 a broad movement for self-management of the economy developed, focusing on the demand for workers' councils to have control of the factories and to hire and fire directors. As the demands for workers' control deepened, factory councils began to spring up until by fall 1981 over 60 per cent of Polish factories had some form of self-management structure.

The same drive for broad democratic control emerged in September and October, 1981 at Solidarity's national congress. Economically, the delegates proposed a reform based on partial re-introduction of the market, the plan and a maximum of workers' control over enterprises coupled with the creation of a national self-management chamber. The aim was, in the words of the resolution, "to abolish the privileges of the bureaucracy and to rule out the possibility of their restoration." Politically, the congress proposed a self-governing republic with free elections to a Sejm (parliament) enjoying real political sovereignty, regional political autonomy, an end to censorship, and access to the media. Had these resolutions been carried out it would have meant an effective end to the bureaucratic monopoly of power and the beginning of a movement toward socialist democracy.

If we take the Polish example seriously, Bahro is simply wrong about the revolutionary potential of workers. But what of the role of intellectuals and their relationship to the workers' movement?

There is no question that, especially after 1976, the proletariat benefitted enormously from the work of the socialist intellectuals who founded the Committee for Social Self-Defense (KSS-KOR). In 1977 workers and members of KOR founded the bulletin *Robotnik (The Worker)* to provide information to workers about strikes and government attacks on labour militants. While KSS-KOR never had more than a few dozen actual members, it was able to mobilize hundreds of activists and in the end to gain support

even from members of the Academy of Sciences. Nor did its importance end with the creation of Solidarity. Indeed, Neal Ascherson goes so far as to credit KSS-KOR with forcing Solidarity to push its demands beyond industry into the realm of politics.

It may be doubted whether Ascherson is correct here, given the long-standing proletarian hostility to censorship, bureaucratic privilege, and party control, not to mention the persistent vigour with which political issues were pursued by Solidarity. In addition, Ascherson himself admits that in the Gdansk negotiations the "experts" discovered they shared a common social milieu and easy relations with their government counterparts. This had the unhappy consequence that a recognition of the party's leading role found its way into the Gdansk accords — a move which caused an uproar among workers and contributed ultimately to a crisis when the courts added a similar clause to Solidarity's statutes. In line with this, Colin Barker and Kara Weber see the intellectuals as fundamentally reformist and a drag on the militancy of the workers' movement. There is some indication that public support from the intelligentsia grew beyond a dissident minority only as the militancy of workers and the likelihood of proletarian success increased.

The evidence does not support Bahro's contention that a significant section of the intelligentsia will play a leading role in the struggle for his cultural revolution, however important the courageous role played by such embattled dissidents as KOR's Jacek Kuron, Adam Michnik and Korol Modzeleski — all presently awaiting trial and possible execution for treason. This need not surprise us. After all, the intelligentsia is a privileged stratum enjoying relatively high living standards and control over its own work and that of others. True, censorship threatens the work of creative intellectuals, while the domination of the plan and politics hinders the work of technocrats and scientists, but these irritations can be

solved short of Bahro's egalitarianism and without abolishing the division of labour from which the intelligentsia derives its privileged position. Raymond Williams is correct when he notes that intellectuals are likely to be implicated in new forms of exploitation and that "socialists committed to the idea of cultural revolution have still to find common cause — and by learning as much as teaching — with those who are *most* subject to appropriation, who alone have fully objective interests in its ending."⁵

So much for Bahro, whose work appeared, after all, two years before the emergence of Solidarity. Since 1980 there have been a number of books which attempt either to explain Polish developments or to give an account of events or both. One of the most readable and sympathetic of these accounts is Stan Persky's *At The Lenin Shipyard*. Persky is a Canadian sociologist, a socialist, and active trade unionist who conceived his book while walking a picket line with striking CUPE workers at Malaspina College in Nanaimo, B.C.

The great strength of Persky's work is its narrative of events and evocation of the personalities and drama of the period from August 1980 to July 1981. Structural analyses, for all their importance, always risk obscuring the reality of accident and personal qualities in determining the outcome of social struggles. Persky's account reminds us how much courage and ingenuity it took the small groups of workers who laid the basis for independent trade unions in the years before 1980, how they were constantly harassed by the police, and how slender were their resources. Persky shows, too, how in the crunch ordinary workers without political experience discovered their talent as speakers and organizers, very often at crucial moments; and he is also able to evoke the atmosphere of confusion and chaos

which always surrounds great social battles. Over all, this is a good account of the texture of working-class life, and the human strength and integrity of working people.

For those interested in analysis, however, Persky is less adequate. He does give a brief account of the history of the Polish workers' movement and a good discussion of the difficult careers of intellectual oppositionists like Jacek Kuron and Adam Michnik. He also makes the very important point that, while Polish workers were hostile to the party and bureaucracy, they accepted social ownership of the means of production but insisted that the economy be democratically controlled. But Persky provides no coherent account of the Polish economic and political system and the book remains primarily descriptive.

Neal Ascherson's *The Polish August: The Self-Limiting Revolution* attempts to be both descriptive and analytical. As an account of events and their historical background, the book is the most complete of those reviewed here, though it really ends in December 1980 and its sketchy treatment of 1981 stops before the declaration of martial law.

Analytically, Ascherson's book is full of interesting insights. He notes, for example, that many of Poland's special problems with bureaucratic inefficiency are due to the relative mildness of Polish Stalinism. This meant the de-Stalinization process was a less thorough housecleaning than elsewhere, allowing the persistence of local cliques, a resistance to reform, and general political sclerosis. He observes, too, that much of the inconsistency of the government's policy toward Solidarity was due to divisions at the top: with Kania bent on conciliation but surrounded by hardliners like Olszowski and Grabski and undermined by the zealotry of local police, no coherent policy could emerge. The result was a regime staggering from confrontation to confrontation, backing down at every point, and in the process losing all credibility.

⁵ Raymond Williams, "Beyond Actually Existing Socialism," *New Left Review*, 120 (1980), 17-18.

These and other insights are, however, gems in an otherwise distressingly confused book. For at times Ascherson does not seem to understand the bureaucratic system at all. In his discussion of the 1970s, for example, he remarks on Gierek's genuine affection for working people and notes with sorrow that Gierek's regime "was a failure so total... and so pathetic that it must frighten anyone who hopes that human beings can combine to chart and accomplish their own improvement..." (106) No one who understood the Gierek bureaucracy's aims or the fundamental class relations of Polish society could make such a comment. Further, for Ascherson the Polish summer was a self-limiting revolution since the workers refused to attack the institutions of party and state. Yet a closer look reveals that whatever the rhetoric, just this bureaucratic monopoly was called into question by the whole series of demands Solidarity made. A more perceptive analyst might have noted the contradiction between proletarian demands and the *claim* that the movement was self-limiting. In any case, men like Jaruzelski saw things clearly enough and concluded in the end that proletarian revolution could only be stopped by force.

If Ascherson had noted more carefully the nature of proletarian demands he would also have avoided another questionable conclusion. After a brief discussion of theories of the social role of the intelligentsia in Eastern Europe, he predicts that the result of a Solidarity victory would be to hand power to the intellectuals. Since, Ascherson argues, the workers had put patriotism above class interest and decided not to seize power as a class, the door was open for the intellectuals to fill the power vacuum. Of course, this fails entirely to take account of the egalitarian and democratic content of working-class demands and of the fact that Polish workers identified their own interests precisely with those of the nation as a whole. It stretches credibility to imagine that such a

working class would be likely to yield ground to yet another privileged stratum.

Finally, the explanatory force of Ascherson's book is blunted by his confused eclecticism. For example, when summarizing the subjective motives of Polish workers, he invokes resistance to political oppression, economic self-interest, and nationalism. However exhaustive this list may be, it will not do to cast historical explanation in motivational terms. Some distinction has to be made between structural causation rooted in economic collapse and immediate motives like nationalism which become operative in such a crisis. What is missing here is any coherent analysis of the link between economic structures, political crisis, and the motivations of workers. This is the root of Ascherson's failure to develop adequately the many important insights the book does offer. One can only regret that Ascherson wrote in such apparent haste and with so little attempt to eliminate confusions and inconsistencies. This is the more distressing given that the book is likely to find a wide audience.

Analytically, labour historians will be better served by Kara Weber and Cofin Barker's *Solidarnosc: From Gdansk to Military Repression*. Members of the British Socialist Workers' Party (International Socialists), the authors take the position that Eastern European societies are state capitalist — that the ruling political bureaucracy exploits labour through control of the state and in competition with capitalist ruling classes in the West. They therefore attribute Solidarity's defeat precisely to its refusal to struggle for state power. From the outset, Solidarity's leadership accepted the strategy of the liberal intelligentsia for a compromise with the existing state as a way both to avoid Russian intervention and gain expanded worker control. But such compromises are virtually impossible in a society where ruling class dominance depends entirely on a monopoly of state power. Instead of holding back the increasingly radical membership, Solidarity's leaders should

have prepared to seize state power through encouraging rank-and-file radicalism and politicizing the police and the military. But while radicals began to see the sterility of compromise as the government continued to stall, they never formulated a clear political program. Similarly, Solidarity's congress developed a sweeping plan for economic and political reorganization but failed to realize that no reform was possible without the seizure of state power. In the end, the policy of self-limitation gave Jaruzelski time to make sure of the military and allowed the economic crisis to deepen, leaving militant workers demoralized and taking the steam out of the workers' movement.

This analysis has a number of advantages. First, for all its many flaws,⁶ the state capitalist thesis at least has the merit of distinguishing the East European system from socialism and arguing that it is a class society based on exploitation. Secondly, the accompanying political analysis is largely correct in its recognition that a revolutionary situation had arisen in Poland without Solidarity having developed the political strategy necessary to exploit it. Whether or not one agrees with the authors that only a Leninist vanguard party could have mobilized Polish workers for victory, it is clear that Walesa's political strategy had little chance of success. The authors conclude that since reformism would have led either to co-optation of the movement or defeat by the military, the risks of preparing for insurrection were justified. Anyway, the Russians would probably not have invaded for the same political reasons that have kept Reagan out of Nicaragua; if they had done, the Polish army would have fought.

There are, of course, problems with this scenario. First, the Polish military and police apparatus would have been extremely hard to disorganize since it enjoys a highly privileged status and is full

of officers with strong Russian links.⁷ Further, the analogy with Nicaragua will not hold: the strategic and political considerations are strikingly different and a Soviet invasion would have been inevitable at the first sign the Polish military had begun to disintegrate. In a showdown the Poles could only have won had they been able to draw in other East European states as allies; otherwise, defeat would have been inevitable and unspeakably costly.

What are the prospects for such a general East European uprising? Many analysts rightly emphasize the uniqueness of the Polish situation: the long nationalist tradition, the strength and autonomy of the Church, the particularly inept and corrupt bureaucracy, the inefficiency of Polish agriculture. No doubt these factors have had an impact, while their absence elsewhere has made it easier for bureaucrats to atomize the working class and carry off their ad hoc economic maneuvers. In *The Road to Gdansk*, however, Daniel Singer argues that the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe as a whole are entering a period of crisis loaded with revolutionary potential.

Much of Singer's book focuses on the Soviet Union. Like Bahro, Singer is aware of the enormous expansion of Soviet education and with it the numbers of the intelligentsia and the sophistication of workers. Like Bahro, he also notes the discontent of the intelligentsia with the limited opportunities provided by the system. But Singer thinks intellectuals will be more likely either to be co-opted or to promote economic reform based on a re-introduction of the market. In his view, more important than the expansion of education is that the Soviet economy is suffering serious declines in productivity and a drying up of labour reserves. Since the system depends on economic growth, reform of the economy is essential. If, as

⁶ For a critique of the State Capitalism thesis see Carlo, "Socio-Economic Nature of the U.S.S.R."

⁷ For the status of Poland's military and police apparatus see Jacques Sapir's excellent "L'appareil militaire-policiier, instrument du parti," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Janvier 1982), 6.

is likely, such reform reintroduces market mechanisms leading to unemployment and inflation, then the Soviet workers' movement will be reborn. Thus, though the struggle will be a long one, full of inconsistencies and setbacks, Singer is optimistic about the prospects for proletarian revolution in the whole Soviet bloc.

Singer's treatment of Poland is actually a series of essays bringing the story to a close in January, 1982. Lucid and well written, Singer's interpretation is, however, a bit ambiguous. He implies that an historic compromise between the party and Solidarity was both possible and necessary, but that the party dropped the ball by failing to share power, thus making economic reform impossible. This forced Solidarity to devise its own reform programs, the high point of which was the national congress. Singer rightly points to the confused nature of some of the congress decisions and to the way demands for economic self-management and political reform looked like a bid for power. Yet, he notes, Walesa backed away from the program and towards compromise once again in his November negotiations with Jaruzelski. Still, Singer's argument also implies that compromise was virtually impossible from the beginning: if,

as he says, Kania and Jaruzelski disagreed with hardliners only over tactics and the reform movement within the party never had a chance, then what hope was there for power sharing?

Singer concludes by reaffirming his original thesis: despite its peculiarities, the Polish case is not unique. Economic crisis will deepen in Eastern Europe and political turmoil will result. Solidarity's significance is, therefore, to have "opened a breach through which all of the workers of Eastern Europe, including the Russians, will sooner or later emerge as the subjects of their own history." (272)

When one thinks of the political and ideological barriers to the proletarian revolution Singer anticipates, it is easy to accuse him of wishful thinking. Yet everything indicates that he is correct about the looming economic crisis and its potential political impact. And if the Russian proletariat is repoliticized, the impact will be tremendous. At one point Rudolf Bahro asks who will intervene against a Moscow Spring or a Russian Dubcek. After Solidarity it is appropriate to ask a different question: who, indeed, will intervene against the Soviet working class once it has been mobilized by economic crisis into rediscovering the tradition of 1917?

Blue Collar Workers Conference

A Steering Committee was formed at the 1981 business meeting of the Fourth Conference on Blue Collar Workers and Their Communities. The elected members of the Committee were mandated to deal with problems related to setting up the Fifth Conference, scheduled to be held in Spring 1983 at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. The Steering Committee held an emergency meeting on 1 September 1982. Because of unresolved difficulties between the Canadian Union of Educational Workers and Ryerson's Sociology Department (which was to have organized and hosted the Conference), the Steering Committee decided to postpone the Fifth Conference until Spring 1984. Since this problem surfaced recently, the Committee reasoned that it would be impossible at this late date to shift the Conference to another site. See page 352 also.