BENT BOEL

WESTERN EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND DISSIDENCE IN THE SOVIET BLOC DURING THE COLD WAR*

In 1972, Tony Benn, a prominent figure of the British Labour Party, referring to a group of exiled eastern European socialists, stated: 'although I deeply sympathise with their feelings and share many of their ideals I am not at all clear what their role is, and fear that it is likely to be destructive of the détente and *Ostpolitik* in which I believe'.[1] Ten years later he was echoed by the West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt who was 'appalled' that the declaration of martial law in Poland had been 'necessary'[2] while at the same time stating that his heart was with the Polish workers.[3] The issue of the relationship with eastern European dissidents during the cold war was never an easy one for western European socialists and social democrats[4] and it cannot be reduced to a conflict between heartfelt inclinations and coolheaded considerations. During much of the post-war period it confronted them with a dilemma: how to demonstrate their solidarity with the oppressed in the east while pushing for détente between the two

* A slightly different version of this article has been published in French in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 109 (2011), 169-181.

[1] Tony Benn to Hans Janitschek (Secretary General of the SI), 5 May 1972, folder East European Study Group 1972-1974, Study Group on Eastern Europe Questions 1972-1976, Archives of the Socialist International, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (hereafter: SIA IISH).

[2] Nina Dombrowsky, 'Solidarität mit Solidarność? Politische Reaktionen aus der Bundesrepublik auf die Entstehung der "Solidarność" und die Ausrufung des Kriegszustandes in der Volksrepublik Polen 1980–1982', *Deutschland Archiv*, 41 (2008), 68-78, at 68.

[3] Ibid., 72.

[4] In the following the terms 'socialist' and 'social democrat' will be treated as synonymous.

blocs? A number of observers have highlighted Social democratic neglect,[5] some political adversaries even accusing them of having played the role of a pro-Soviet 'fifth column'.[6] Conversely, it has been argued – in the case of the West German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in particular – that it would be appropriate to talk about a dual strategy: the leadership focusing on the communist regimes while lower party levels took care of contacts with the dissidents.[7]

When the Socialist International (SI) reconstructed itself after the second world war, it did so on an overtly anti-communist platform. The declaration of the founding Congress (Frankfurt, 1951) denounced international communism as 'the instrument of a new imperialism' based on 'a militarist bureaucracy and a terrorist police' and the SI voiced its 'solidarity with all peoples suffering under dictatorship, whether Fascist or Communist, in their efforts to win freedom'.[8] Subsequently, the SI reacted to the recurrent crises in the east with condemnations of the repression which systematically ensued (GDR 1953, Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968).[9] Such judgments should not surprise anyone. After the war, western social democrats placed themselves unambiguously on the side of western democracies. They were shocked by the annihilation of their socialist brothers in the east; most of them opted for membership in the nascent Atlantic community; and they clearly sympathized with those who opposed the communist regimes.[10] But to what degree did this sympathy translate into concrete actions?

Several factors hampered social democratic endeavours to help oppositionists in the eastern countries. One such factor was a strong attachment to east-west dialogue. Among the justifications given for the *Ostpolitik* implemented by Chancellor Willy Brandt from 1969 onwards was the belief that

---

[5] Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 330-331; György Konrad (interview with), 'It Does Not Hurt to Apologise', in Hannes Swoboda and Jan Marinus Wiersma, eds., *Politics of the Past: The Use and Abuse of History* (Vienna: Renner Institute, 2009), 65-66.

[6] See for example: Bertel Haarder, ed., *Hvem holdt de med?* (Søborg: Peter la Cours Forlag, 1999).

[7] Gerhard Besier, 'Deutsche Sozialdemokratie und polnische Opposition (1966–1990): Ein Bericht aus den Quellen', in Mike Schmeitzner and Katarzyna Stokłosa, eds., *Partner oder Kontrahenten? Deutsch-polnische Nachbarschaft im Jahrhundert der Diktaturen* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008), 155-178, at 171.

[8] See www.socialistinternational.org/viewArticle.cfm?ArticleID=39&ArticlePageID=12&ModuleID=18 (last visited 12 June 2013).

[9] Vilém Bernard, 'The SI and Eastern Europe', 29 June 1972, folder 1967-1982 and 1972, Socialist Union of Central and Eastern Europe Archives, IISH (hereafter: SE IISH).

[10] Guillaume Devin, *L'Internationale socialiste: Histoire et sociologie du socialisme international, 1945–1990* (Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1993), 31.

only a stabilization of the communist regimes would provide them with the sense of security needed if they were to liberalize internally and open up externally. This view of détente, which could be found in other social democracies as well, logically produced scepticism towards any potentially destabilizing factor in the east, destabilization being more likely to lead to repression and regression than to positive developments. Thus the memory of Soviet interventions in 1953, 1956 and 1968 heavily influenced the social democratic reading of the Polish crisis in 1980–81. Moreover, social democratic parties shared a 'realist' and statist approach to understanding international relations, which led them to focus on 'the powers that be' in the east, i.e., the communist regimes. Thirdly, an ideological factor cannot be ignored. While socialists and social democrats were generally impervious to communist ideology, the idea of a common affinity between the 'enemy brothers' within the 'labour movement', the existence of a common history, and – even if only very partially – their having shared rhetoric, ideological references and symbolism, all created an ambiguity which the eastern régimes were adept at exploiting.[11] From the early 1970s, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union encouraged a dialogue with western social democracies which sometimes took forms (e. g., invitations to congresses, official visits concluding with common communiqués praising the eastern regimes' accomplishments) which would have been inconceivable in a (rather hypothetical) relationship between social democrats and right-wing dictatorships. The belief that an ideological debate with Communists could serve a purpose, that Communists were susceptible to being influenced and to changing, was an important motive for those choosing to give priority to détente from above.[12]

Finally, one should note that on the mental map of the social democrats – as on that of most westerners of all political orientations – eastern Europe was very far away. The fundamental explanation for this was, of course, the iron curtain, which limited the free movement of people, goods, ideas and information between those countries and the west, and the predominant belief that the Wall was there to stay. Any thoughts about the dissidents were brushed aside by the idea that contacts with them were not possible (since these countries were totalitarian), would make no difference (the fate of the iron curtain depended on inter-state relations, not on inter-personal

[11] Bent Boel, 'Danmark og dissidenterne i Østeuropa', in John T. Lauridsen, et al., eds., *Leksikon om Danmark under Den Kolde Krig* (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2011), 188-191.

[12] Egon Bahr, 'Die Deutschlandpolitik der SPD nach dem Kriege', in Dieter Dowe, ed., *Die Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik der SPD in der Opposition 1982-1989* (Bonn: Forschungsinstitut der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1993), 11-40, at 27.

contacts) or might even be counterproductive (because they would likely provoke measures of repression against the dissidents and/or strengthen the 'hawks' in the east).[13]

Thus, it is not surprising that the parties of the SI could give the impression that eastern European dissidents only played a very minor – and somewhat ambiguous – role in their thinking about the Soviet bloc. However, there actually were contacts, foremost so with the exiled, but also with oppositionists in Czechoslovakia, Poland and the GDR.

Eastern European Exiles within the Socialist International

The first encounter between western social democrats and eastern oppositionists took place in the west. Indeed, following the establishment of communist regimes in the east, exiled Soviet bloc socialists and social democrats asked to be affiliated with the SI, which during that same time was struggling to reconstruct itself. Some western parties opposed this, and the solution agreed upon was to establish the Socialist Union of Central and Eastern Europe (SUCEE), the members of which (initially the Bulgarian, Czechoslovak, Hungarian, Polish and Yugoslav parties) were admitted as 'consultative members' and allowed to participate in congresses with the right to speak, but not to vote.

Subsequently the three Baltic parties were also admitted, but the French and the British successfully opposed the admission of the Ukrainian, Georgian, Armenian and Menshevik parties, fearing that such a step might send too belligerent a signal to the Soviet Union. From the outset, then, the 'diplomats' got the upper hand over the 'ideologues'[14] within the SI. In addition to the status of 'consultative member' given to most of its individual members, the SUCEE was accepted as an organization affiliated with the SI, including the right to send a delegation (comprised of two members) to the congresses of the SI. In the end, it does seem justified to conclude that eastern European socialists benefited from a western 'solidarity on the cheap'.[15]

The SUCEE survived until the end of the cold war. But it remained a feeble, poor organization, with a stable but inevitably also ageing leader-

[13] Boel, 'Danmark og dissidenterne'.

[14] Devin, *L'Internationale socialiste*, 197.

[15] *Ibid.*; Michel Dreyfus, *L'Europe des socialistes* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1991), 242. See also Vilém Bernard, 'Report on activities covering the period since the SUCEE conference in 1979 in Stockholm', note, sine dato, folder SUCEE 1967-1982 and 1982, Minutes of the SUCEE conference, 1-2 Nov. 1982, SE IISH.

ship, less and less in touch with the old countries.[16] Within the SI, the feeling spread that the exiles constituted an embarrassing burden, clearly out of touch with the policy of détente. In 1969 the president of the SI, the Austrian Bruno Pittermann, told SUCEE members that he was

> a member of a party which has once been suppressed and from my experience I tell you that the greatest danger for you are not your enemies but those Social Democrats working in legal parties who regard attempts to keep Social Democracy alive in communist countries as useless or even harmful. It is our duty not to write off the Social Democrats in those countries. We must not accept the existing situation ideologically.[17]

Pittermann's warning was justified. There were several attempts – in 1971 and again in 1976 – to suspend the individual affiliation of the eastern exiled parties, allowing only for an indirect affiliation through the SUCEE. The last attempt – a proposal put forward by the SPD's international secretary Hans-Eberhard Dingels – failed to reach a majority by only one vote.[18] Another structure, the Study Group on East European Questions (mainly comprised of eastern exiles),[19] ceased to convene after Willy Brandt became president of the SI in 1976, though it was reactivated in the middle of the 1980s.[20]

The parallel development of détente and of dissidence exacerbated the problem. While détente made the socialists more wary of the eastern affiliates, dissidence raised – and frustrated – expectations among the exiles. There were SI-statements condemning repression in the east, but not that many. Brandt did put the issue of human rights on the agenda, a committee was even established to discuss it, but the situation in the east was largely ignored by this committee. A major dual consequence of Brandt's relaunching of a feeble Socialist International was to turn its attention to the Third World and to avoid sensitive topics. Relations with the east certainly fit into that latter category.[21]

---

[16] Minutes of the SUCEE conference, 1-2 Nov. 1982, folder SUCEE 1967-1982 and 1982, SE IISH.

[17] Minutes of the SUCEE conference, 14-15 June 1969, folder 1967-1982 and 20, SE IISH.

[18] Vilém Bernard to all members of the SI, 21 Sept. 1976, folder SUCEE 1967-1982, 1976, SE IISH.

[19] Bernard, 'The SI and Eastern Europe', 29 June 1972, folder 1967-1982 and 23, SE IISH.

[20] Note 'Meeting of Study Group on Central and Eastern Europe', 4 Dec. 1986, 60 RI (WB) 209, Fondation Jean Jaurès (hereafter: FJJ), Paris.

[21] For a conservative American assessment see Arnold M. Silver, 'The New Face of the Socialist International', report, The Heritage Foundation, October 1981.

The SUCEE repeatedly expressed its disapproval, notably by criticizing the relative warmth that came to the relations with the eastern regimes. The group's president, the Latvian social democratic leader Bruno Kalnins, denounced those within the SI who according to him had adopted a pro-Soviet stance and behaved as 'useful idiots' for the Communists.[22] The SUCEE deplored the lack of interest in the dissidents, be it verbal (e. g., restraint in the condemnation of repressive measures) or practical (in particular, the fact that dissidents coming into exile in the west were not more often received and taken care of by social democrats). Tactical arguments were put forward: the absence of a wholehearted support for the opposition in the east handicapped the future of democratic socialism in the east, giving ammunition to those who believed that only the far left and the right-winger cared about eastern Europe.[23] Such a reasoning was obviously only of interest for somebody who could perceive of democratization in the east as something which might actually happen one day.

The survival of the exiles within the SI testified to the fact that they were not completely isolated. They had allies in the form of parties which more than others raised their voices to defend the dissidents. The Italians were among the most persistent. In 1970, the former leader of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), Pietro Nenni, told his European comrades:

> At our congresses and at the meetings of our General Council we are voting against oppression in Czechoslovakia. [...] We sign appeals and telegrams but we have not given support to the political and cultural activities of the Czechoslovak resistance and we still do not support it on an all-European level. [...] The source of the movements in the East which keep the flame of the critical spirit alive is a cultural factor of the highest importance. It is a humanist and liberty-loving revisionism which demands equal rights for all, and it is closely connected with the origins of the modern movement of socialism in Europe and all over the world. We have not supported this spirit and we still do not assist it, even though its head remains unbowed and lives on in the clandestine activities of minorities and exiled comrades.[24]

Two years later, during a seminar in Paris, another leading member of the party, Bettino Craxi, launched an appeal to support the clandestine struggle

---

[22] Bruno Kalnins at the SI's Congress, 27 June 1972, folder 1967-1982 and 1972, SE IISH.

[23] Minutes of the conference of the SUCEE, 19-20 May 1979, folder 1967-1982 and 1979, SE IISH.

[24] Bernard, 'The SI and Eastern Europe', 29 June 1972, folder 1967-1982 and 23, SE IISH.

of the opposition in Czechoslovakia.[25] And from 1976 onwards, when Craxi became the leader of the PSI, Italian socialists were consistently engaged in the support of the dissidents. At the same time, they criticized the Germans – just as did the French during the Polish crisis in 1980–1981. In 1977, the Italians blamed the Germans for being responsible for the SI's low profile when it came to supporting eastern European dissidents.[26] However, a new group of exiles, *Listy*, actually did benefit from broad social democratic sympathy.

Contacts with the Czechoslovak Opposition: From *Listy* to Havel

The outrage with which the western socialist left reacted to the crushing of the Prague Spring reflected the hopes which had been raised by the attempt to create a 'socialism with a human face'. western European socialists such as the Austrian social democratic leader Bruno Kreisky or the SFIO in France were very strong in their condemnation of the Warsaw Pact invasion.[27] It is thus not surprising that they gave a friendly welcome to a group of former Prague Spring reformers who went into exile in the west.

The initiative to establish *Listy* was taken by Jiří Pelikán, who was the director of the Czechoslovak Television from 1963 to 1968 and a political refugee in Italy from 1969 onward. In 1970 Pelikán founded the publication *Listy,* first published in Rome and later in a number of other countries.[28] Some of the copies were sold in the west, and the rest were smuggled into Czechoslovakia. Former reform Communists, who all had played a role during the Prague Spring and in its aftermath had gone into western exile, gathered around this group. Among them were Michal Reiman (in West Berlin), Zdeněk Mlynář (Vienna, from 1977), Adolf Müller (Cologne, FRG), Zdeněk Hejzlar (in Sweden), Ota Šik (Switzerland, from 1969), Eduard Goldstücker (exiled in the UK after 1968), Antonin Liehm (first in

---

[25] Jiří Pelikán, 'I socialisti italiani e l'Europa dell'Est', in Alberto Benzoni et al., eds., *La dimensione internazionale del socialismo italiano* (Rome: Edizione associate, 1993), 351. See also Valentine Lomellini, *L'appuntamento mancato: La sinistra italiana e il dissenso nei regime communisti, 1968-1989* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2010).

[26] Besier, 'Deutsche Sozialdemokratie', 159-160.

[27] Oliver Rathkolb, 'International Perceptions of Austrian Neutrality post 1945', in Günter Bischof et al., eds., *Neutrality in Austria* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 8; Communiqué du Comité Directeur du Parti socialiste, 23 Aug. 1968, 403 RI 12, FJJ.

[28] Francesco Caccamo, *Jiri Pelikan: Un lungo viaggio nell'arcipelago socialista* (Venice: Marsilio, 2007), 43.

the US, then in Paris) as well as Jiří and Tomáš Kosta (in the FRG)[29]. This group primarily, and rather eclectically, sought contacts in the western left (in France Pelikán, among others, cooperated with the Lambertist Trotskyists from the *Organisation Communiste Internationaliste*, OCI, which from 1976 onwards published a French version of *Listy*). Initially, some hoped for 'Euro-communist' support. Disappointed, many afterwards moved closer to the social democratic parties.

Pelikán, having in vain attempted to establish a dialogue with the Italian Communist Party (PCI),[30] gradually got involved with the PSI. Pelikán's socialist ties actually went far back. In the mid-1950s, in Prague, he met Craxi (already a socialist) and Carlo Ripa di Meana (then a member of the PCI, but after 1956 he joined the PSI). When Pelikán arrived in Italy, Craxi and Ripa di Meana introduced him to the socialist leader Pietro Nenni.[31] From then on, the PSI would take part in several initiatives taken to support Czechoslovak dissidence. It contributed from the outset to the funding of *Listy*. Moreover, the *Biennale del dissenso* in Venice in 1977 was organized by Carlo Ripa di Meana and was strongly supported by the new leader of the PSI, Craxi.

It involved several *Listy* people in key roles (the three Czechs: Pelikán, Antonin and Mira Liehm, were – together with the Polish exiled writer Gustaw Herling-Grudziński – nominated as the directors of the Biennale).[32] The PSI, moreover, seems to have given financial support to Pelikán,[33] and in 1979 Craxi had him elected on the PSI's list for the European Parliament – a bold and symbolically highly charged initiative (Pelikán was reelected in 1984).[34]

Solid links had been established between *Listy* and several socialist parties already in the early 1970s. In 1969 Pelikán contacted the SI and from then on a number of socialist parties preferred the company of the

---

[29] Dieter Segert, *Prager Frühling: Gespräche über eine europäische Erfahrung* (Vienna: Braumüller, 2008), 157.

[30] In 1976, he even applied for membership of the PCI, but never received an answer (Pelikán to Segre, 4 Nov. 1976, box 15, Fondo Pelikán, Archivio storico della camera dei deputati).

[31] Andrea Spiri and Victor Zaslavsky, 'I socialisti italiani e il dissenso nell'Est europeo', in Andrea Spiri, ed., *Bettino Craxi, il socialismo europeo e il sistema internazionale* (Venice: Marsilio, 2006), 155-181.

[32] Carlo Ripa di Meana, *L'ordine di Mosca* (Rome: Liberal Edizioni, 2007), 77.

[33] Auskunftsbericht über das antisozialistische tschechoslowakische Emigrantenzentrum "Listy", Dec. 1979, MfS 50631, ZAIG, Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR (hereafter: BStU) Archives, 7.

[34] Jiří Pelikán, *Io, esule indigesto* (Milan: Reset, 1998), 43.

former Prague reformers to that of the post-war exiles.[35] In Stockholm, Hejzlar developed excellent relations with the local social democrats as well as ties with the Danish and Norwegian ones. He seems to have convinced the Scandinavians – the Swedes in particular – to become the main contributors to *Listy*.[36] Mlynář, exiled in Vienna after having been among the initial signatories of the Charter 77, was helped by the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and Chancellor Bruno Kreisky himself. Thanks to the support of the Austrians, but also, it seems, the West German SPD, he started an ambitious research project concerning the Soviet bloc countries. Within the framework of this project the SPD organized a series of annual meetings in Freudenberg with more than 60 eastern European exiles.[37] In October 1977 Brandt met Pelikán and Mlynář,[38] and a meeting two years later seems to have further strengthened the ties, in particular through financial support from the SPD for the activities of the Czechoslovak exiles.[39] Moreover, the Kosta brothers established solid links with the SPD.[40]

As far as the French, and in particular the party leader François Mitterrand, were concerned, friendly relations existed even before November 1972 when the Socialist Party (PS) organized a seminar to discuss the situation in Czechoslovakia.[41] Western European socialists thus helped *Listy* to survive, act, find a public and even have some influence. They published in the *Listy*-journal, they involved *Listy* people in political events (meetings, seminars), and they sometimes took their advice (whether it was the Swedish social democratic leader Olof Palme apparently following the advice of Hejzlar during a SI-meeting regarding the choice of invited dissidents to the SI's congress in Madrid [1980], or even with regard to the

---

[35] Janitschek to Janýr, 2 Jan. 1970, folder Corr. 1969-1970, box Czechoslovakia, SIA IISH.

[36] Gunnar Lassinantti, 'Hågkomster efter Berlinmurens fall', 4 Nov. 2009, available at www.palmecenter.se/Vad-tycker-vi/Artikelarkiv/Tema/Fred/Artiklar/091104 Hagkomstereftermurensfall (last visited 2 May 2012).

[37] Thomas Meyer, '"Der Streit der Ideologien und die gemeinsame Sicherheit": Zur Diskussion um das Streitkultur-Papier von SPD und SED', in Dowe, *Die Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik der SPD*, 57-66, at 61.

[38] Auskunftsbericht über das antisozialistische tschechoslowakische Emigrantenzentrum "Listy", Dec. 1979, MfS 50631, ZAIG, BstU, 10.

[39] Beziehungen der SPD zur ideologischen Diversionsgruppe von Jiří Pelikán, 25 Aug. 1980, X/4234/80, MfS Abt. X, BStU, 809.

[40] Segert, *Prager Frühling*, 162.

[41] François Mitterrand, 'Mardi 25 juillet', *L'Unité*, 28 July 1972; see also: Gianlorenzo Pacini, 'Il socialismo dal volto umano: La straordinaria vita di Jiří Pelikán', *Nuova storia contemporanea* 10, 1 (2006), 117-158, at 151.

texts which were submitted to the East Germans during negotiations between the SPD and the SED on the 'Streitkultur-Papier' in 1987).[42] They also invited them to participate in the SI's meetings (Mlynář, Pelikán, Hejzlar and Müller participated in a meeting of the SI's General Council in September 1978; Hejzlar participated in the Vancouver Congress in 1978; Hejzlar and Pelikán took part in the Madrid Congress in 1980; Pelikán spoke to the SI's General Council in 1982).[43] The closeness of the relationship has been emphasized by Reiman who even mentions a possible affiliation of *Listy* to the SI in 1978–79.[44] While there was no formal affiliation, and while the harmony existing between the two groups should not be exaggerated,[45] the ties were undeniably close. This cooperation reflected the personal development of those involved in *Listy*. But it was also the result of a strategy consciously chosen by the group, at least since October 1977.[46]

It was made possible by a relative ideological proximity, as well as by the fact that *Listy* remained an interesting actor since it maintained good connections to Czechoslovakia. The Prague Spring epitomized the belief in the reformability of the system in the east, and this idea was crucial from the *Ostpolitik's* perspective. Mlynář's social democratic connection in the 1970s could be said to prefigure that of Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s. Hejzlar expressed his wariness concerning what he considered the adventurism of some elements of Solidarność and in that sense he shared the social democratic fear of a destabilisation of the Polish regime (while at the same time warning against a possible instrumentalisation of the SI by the Soviet Union)[47]. And *Listy* had friends in Prague. Charter 77 chose a very different path from that of the Prague Spring, but about half of the first

---

[42] Meyer, 'Der Streit der Ideologien', 61.

[43] Hejzlar to Carlsson, 23 Jan. 1981, folder SI Czechoslovakia 1980-1982 (1078) and 1981, SIA IISH; Auskunftsbericht über das antisozialistische tschechoslowakische Emigrantenzentrum "Listy", Dec. 1979, MfS 50631, ZAIG, BstU, 7.

[44] Segert, *Prager Frühling,* 162.

[45] Jiří Pelikán complained several times about what he considered to be the lack of social democratic support to Soviet bloc dissidents (Pelikán to Irmgard Hutter, folder 36, box 17; Pelikán, 'Alcuni appunti sui rapporti est-ovest per la riunionie del bureau dell' IS a Parigi 24.9.-25.9.1981', folder 38, box 7; Pelikán to Craxi, 8 Jan. 1989, folder 10, box 15, Fondo Pelikán).

[46] According to a note from the GDR secret services: Auskunftsbericht über das antisozialistische tschechoslowakische Emigrantenzentrum "Listy", Dec. 1979, MfS 50631, ZAIG, BstU, 10. Zdeněk Mlynář may have played a crucial role in this development (Peter Gowan, interview with the author, April 2009).

[47] Hejzlar to Carlsson, 9 Sep. 1981, folder 1152a. Poland 1981 and Jan 1982, subfolder Poland Jan.-Nov 1981, SIA IISH.

signatories were former reform Communists (among them were the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Jiří Hájek, the future Minister of Foreign Affairs Jiří Dienstbier, as well as Professor Jaroslav Šabata and Mlynář).[48] Western social democrats also had Czechoslovak contacts outside the *Listy* circles. There were individual cases such as Jean Pronteau, a former Communist, but member of the PS from 1973, who became a close friend of the historian Karel Bartošek in the mid-1960s.[49] Jan Kavan, exiled in London (from 1969) and a member of the Labour Party, played a crucial role in informing the west about what was going on in the east, notably by founding the press agency Palach Press (1974), and in organizing throughout the 1970s (and afterwards) clandestine transportation of publications between Czechoslovakia and the west.[50]

More revealing of social democratic policies were the relations established with independent socialists in Czechoslovakia. In 1977, the leadership of the SPD asked the parliamentarian Jürgen Schmude to get in touch with the 'socialist Czechoslovak opposition'.[51] In the late 1970s three of the key SI leaders (Brandt, Palme and Kreisky) corresponded with socialist Czechoslovak dissidents. These exchanges were invoked by the authorities in Prague when they decided to jail Jiří Müller and Rudolf Battěk.[52] Subsequently, the SI got heavily involved in the efforts to free Battěk. Véronique Neiertz, the French Socialist party's international secretary, was particularly active, but in the end it was Brandt who obtained Battek's slightly premature release by making his visit to Gustáv Husák in 1986 conditional on that release.[53] One should also mention the close relations that existed between the exiled social democrat Přemysl Janýr and the SPÖ[54].

From 1977 on, domestic opposition developed in Czechoslovakia, first with Charter 77, then with the VONS (Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted, 1978). From the outset, the Socialist International

---

[48] Petr Uhl, 'Après 1948, chez nous, très peu de personnes voulaient le capitalisme ou un retour au capitalisme', paper presented at 'Un autre printemps', conference held in Brussels, 21-22 Nov. 2008.

[49] Suzanne Bartošek, interview with the author, 14 Nov. 2007.

[50] Jan Kavan, interview with the author, June 2005.

[51] Thomas Mirow to Pelikán, 1 June 1977, folder 10, box 15, Fondo Pelikán.

[52] PL Aktuell (deutschsprachiger Pressedienst von Pravo lidu, Freier tschechoslowakischer Pressedienst), 5 Mar. 1982, 1-82.

[53] Peter Glotz, *Von Heimat zu Heimat: Erinnerungen eines Grenzgängers* (Berlin: Econ, 2005), 303-304.

[54] See for example Fischer to Kreisky, 9 May 1977, box 1, ČSSR, VII.1; Janýr to Kreisky, 16 Feb. 1987, box Promi I-Ja, Kreisky Archives.

expressed its support.[55] Max van der Stoel, Dutch social democratic Minister of Foreign Affairs, was in 1977 the first western leader to meet with a Charter 77 speaker, the philosopher Jan Patočka.[56] As early as 1977 Brandt established an informal contact with Charter 77 (his wife met among others Jiří Hájek in Prague)[57] and in 1980 the Socialist International started focusing on Charter 77, though without establishing any kind of formal relationship. In 1980, the SI invited Charter 77 to its Congress, an invitation which was renewed several times during the 1980s.[58] Obviously no chartist got permission to leave Czechoslovakia to attend the Congress, but the exile Jiří Lederer did speak on Charter 77's behalf (in 1980).

In the late 1980s, relations between westerners and eastern European dissidents intensified. This general pattern applied to the social democrats as well. However, it is clear that if there was any kind of coordination between the western parties, any such coordination which might have existed would have been informal and would not have involved everybody. In 1986, when a delegation of the Danish Social Democratic party planned its visit to Prague and tried to meet with Charter 77 people, it did not know where to find them and asked the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs for help - in vain though. Only in 1988 – and thanks to the assistance of the non-aligned (END-inspired) peace group *Nej til Atomvåben* (No to Nuclear Weapons) – could such an encounter take place.[59]

On the other hand, there were continuous relations with the SPD parliamentarian Gert Weisskirchen (SPD) and later also with one of the SPD's leading figures, Peter Glotz.[60] Towards the late 1980s, contacts were more frequent; it actually became difficult for a western leader to go east and ignore the opposition. In September 1988 the French socialist Minister of Foreign Affairs Roland Dumas met dissidents in Prague. The most high-

---

[55] Interview mit Václav Havel, 'Jeder, der mich grüßt, wird identifiziert', *Der Spiegel,* 48 (1978), 27 Nov. 1978, 180, 182.

[56] Max van der Stoel, 'Principles and Pragmatism: Twenty-Five Years with the Helsinki Process', *OSCE Yearbook* 2000, 25-33, at 26-27.

[57] Brandt to Mitterrand, 7 June 1977, 403 RI 12, FJJ.

[58] Vilém Prečan, 'An Annotated List of Charter 77 Documents, 1977–1986', available at www.osaarchivum.org/greenfield/repository/osa:ef32ebea-624b-4329-8ac7-0dbb4701f354 (last visited 12 June 2013).

[59] Lasse Budtz, *Her stod vi af – Fodnoterne der skabte historie* (Copenhague: Fremad, 1998), 238 and 299.

[60] Wilhelm Knabe, 'Westparteien und DDR-Opposition: Der Einfluss der westdeutschen Parteien in den achtziger Jahren auf unabhängige politische Bestrebungen in der ehemaligen DDR', in Deutscher Bundestag, eds., *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission 'Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland'*, Vol. VII/2 (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 1995), 1184.

profile meeting was the breakfast which President Mitterrand had in December 1988 with Václav Havel and other dissidents[61].

Poland: Tempered Cordiality

Poland was the country in the Soviet bloc where the population most often and most successfully rebelled: in 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, and 1980-81. However, it was only during the 1970s that western social democrats started establishing links with Polish oppositionists. Apparently, the Swedes were pioneers, since a delegation comprising a leader of the party came to Poland and met oppositionists even before the establishment of the KOR (Committee for the Defence of Workers, 1976), probably in 1974 or 1975.[62] The strong Polish emigration to Sweden, parts of which did become politically involved, played an important bridging role. In particular, Maria Borowska, exiled in Sweden from 1969 onwards and involved in the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP), seems to have played a key role in getting the leading circles of that party involved in support for Polish oppositionists.[63] Thus not only did the Swedes support the KOR, but they suggested that the group obtain the status of 'consultative member' of the SI – a proposal which was, however, declined by the Polish group which preferred to avoid such an overtly political label.[64]

The contrasted reactions of western European socialists to the Polish crisis constitute the best known episode in the history of the SI's attitude towards the opposition in the eastern countries. Such reactions were generally cautious – and that is valid for all western governments, which had not forgotten past Soviet interventions. However, Solidarność, or more precisely the declaration of martial law by General Wojciech Jaruzelski in December 1981, did reveal a split between those who favoured moderation (notably the SPD and the SPÖ), and those who were inclined towards a tougher stand (notably the French PS, the PSI and the Dutch). Thus, a first official statement, signed by Willy Brandt and Bernt Carlsson (respectively

---

[61] Roland Dumas, *Le Fil et la pelote: Mémoires* (Paris: Plon, 1996), 373-374.

[62] Mieczysław Grudziński, interview with the author, 8 Dec. 2008. A forthcoming book by Klaus Misgeld et al. will shed more light on Swedish support for the opposition in Poland during the cold war.

[63] Gunnar Lassinantti, interview with the author, 22 June 2009.

[64] Robert Brier, 'Expanding the Cultural History of the Cold War: Poland's Democratic Opposition and the Western Left, 1976–1980', paper presented at 'Cold War Interactions Reconsidered', the 9th Annual Aleksanteri Conference held at the University of Helsinki, 29-31 Oct. 2009. It is anyhow doubtful whether that would have been accepted by the SPD: in 1980 Willy Brandt opposed inviting the KOR to the SI's Congress in Madrid.

president and secretary general of the SI) was disavowed by a majority of SI member parties who then agreed upon a more forceful condemnation of the coup.[65]

Once calm had returned to Poland, the question was which attitude to adopt in relationship to Solidarność, which was now pushed underground. Trade unions and numerous other groups got involved in supportive actions which were far from being solely humanitarian. The role of western social democratic parties in such solidarity activities was modest. In France, for instance, where sympathy for Solidarność was particularly strong, the PS refrained from getting involved in organizing help. This may not be surprising since it was at that time leading the government. But even the so-called 'second left', sometimes called anti-totalitarian left, present within the party, does not seem to have played any significant role in assisting the Poles. Michel Rocard, the political figurehead of this segment of the left and a strong sympathizer of Solidarność, had no dissident contacts in eastern Europe, and thus not in Poland.[66] The first secretary of the party, Lionel Jospin, met Adam Michnik in Warsaw in 1970 when he was a courier for the Trotskyist organization OCI and he also met Solidarność representatives in Paris. But he does not seem to have maintained any contact with oppositionists in Poland.[67]

In 1983, however, Pierre Joxe, leader of the socialist group in the French National Assembly, met Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Bronisław Geremek during a visit to Warsaw.[68] The following year Mazowiecki and Geremek met socialist senators from Italy together with a French socialist delegation. On that occasion the two Poles regretted that no SPD leader had sought to get in touch with the Polish opposition.[69] In December 1985 Brandt came to Warsaw to visit general Jaruzelski, but he did not go to Gdańsk in order to meet Lech Wałęsa. However, he did meet Mazowiecki

---

[65] For an analysis of western reactions to the Polish crisis, see Helene Sjursen, *The United States, Western Europe and the Polish Crisis* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

[66] Michel Rocard, interview with the author, 24 Nov. 2005. On France see Bent Boel, 'French Support for Eastern European Dissidence, 1968-1989: Approaches and Controversies', in Poul Villaume and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *Perforating the Iron Curtain: European Détente, Transatlantic Relations and the Cold War, 1965–1985* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010), 215-241.

[67] Lionel Jospin, *Lionel raconte Jospin* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), 39; lettre, Jospin to Talko, 11 Mar. 1986, 449 RI 2, FJJ; note de Geneviève Domenach Chich, 29 Apr. 1985, 449 RI 6, FJJ.

[68] Jean-Bernard Raimond, *Le regard d'un diplomate sur le monde* (Paris: Félin, 2010), 71.

[69] Dorota Dakowska, 'Die Arbeit der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Polen zwischen 1971 und der friedlichen Revolution', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 45 (2005), 325-352, at 343.

in Warsaw and back in the FRG he initiated an exchange of letters with Wałęsa.[70] Craxi had visited Jaruzelski in May 1985 and while he handed his host a letter concerning Michnik and other political prisoners, he does not seem to have taken advantage of this opportunity to meet oppositionists.[71]

In Denmark the Polish crisis provoked for the first time ever a conflict between the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and the Social Democratic Party on a major foreign policy issue. LO criticized the cautious attitude of the party in 1981–82.[72] Among the Scandinavians, the Swedes went the furthest in their expression of support. Palme stated his sympathy for the struggle of the Polish people in order to obtain its fundamental trade union rights, and also voiced his hope for 'democratization in eastern Europe'.[73] Generally, however, it is noteworthy, that the SI's member parties' relations with the Polish opposition, which really did threaten the communist regime, were clearly more complicated than those entertained with the opposition in Prague, which gathered only a tiny group. On the Czechoslovak side western socialists easily found their kindred spirits – at least among the exiles. This seems to have been more difficult with the Poles.

The German Democratic Republic: The Preserve of the SPD?

Within the SI, the GDR was essentially the responsibility of the SPD. That, however, did not in itself make it an important issue for the SPD. The West German social democrats were slow at building their relations with the East German opposition. One parliamentarian, Gert Weisskirchen, played a key role in these endeavours from the early 1980s. Another one,

---

[70] Bernd Rother, 'Willy Brandts Besuch in Warschau im Dezember 1985', in Friedhelm Boll, Wiesław Wysocki, Klaus Ziemer, eds., *Versöhnung und Politik: Polnisch-deutsche Versöhnungsinitiativen der 1960er-Jahre und die Entspannungspolitik* (Bonn: Dietz, 2009), 329-344; Bernd Rother, 'Zwischen Solidarität und Friedenssicherung: Willy Brandt und Polen in den 1980er Jahren', in Friedhelm Boll and Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, eds., *Nie mehr eine Politik über Polen hinweg: Willy Brandt und Polen* (Bonn: Willy-Brandt-Studien, 2010), 220-263.

[71] Spiri and Zaslavsky, 'I socialisti italiani', 178-179.

[72] Bent Boel, 'Denmark: International Solidarity and Trade Union Multilateralism', in Idesbald Goddeeris, ed., *Solidarity? Western European Trade Unions and the Polish Crisis, 1980-1982* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, Harvard Cold War Studies Series, 2010), 219-242.

[73] Klaus Misgeld, 'Solidaritet med Solidaritet: Den svenska arbetarrörelsen och demokratirörelsen i Polen omkring 1980', *Arbetarhistoria* 120, 4 (2006), 24-31, at 29.

Freimut Duwe, was also influential because of his editorial responsibilities within the publishing house Rowohlt Verlag and he had friendly relations with East German dissidents already in 1976. But officially, it took another decade for more serious contacts to develop. In 1987, the party leadership asked a group of parliamentarians (Weisskirchen, Jürgen Schmude, Horst Sielaff) to get in touch with the opposition in the GDR. And it put pressure on the GDR authorities requesting that they tolerate such exchanges. Other party officials, amongst them Erhard Eppler, Hans-Jochen Vogel (SPD's leader from 1987), Johannes Rau, Diether Posser and Hans Büchler, met oppositionists close to the church, Rainer Eppelman in particular.[74]

Paradoxes

After this brief overview of the relations between social democrats and dissidents we may identify at least three paradoxes. The first one might seem banal, but it has to be mentioned: western European socialists, whose history and ideals were closely associated with the democratization of European societies, and who were for a long time a privileged target when dissidents addressed the west,[75] for the most part did very little to help oppositionists in the east. In many parties it is possible to identify a few individuals who did go east to meet the dissidents, but they often did so in an individual capacity rather than as official representatives of their party, and in any case they were a tiny minority. The overall picture gets somewhat rosier if one includes 'the socialist area' – trade unions, foundations, intellectuals gravitating around the parties – but there, as well, one has to conclude that those going out of their way to meet the dissidents were few and far between.

One may argue, admittedly, that without the policy of détente promoted by social democrats, dissidents would not have benefitted to the same extent from the very modest room for manoeuvring which they did acquire in the aftermath of the Helsinki Final Act. And that Kreisky, Brandt and other social democrat leaders did conduct a quiet diplomacy in the direction of the communist authorities to alleviate the situation of persecuted dissi-

[74] Horst Ehmke, *Mittendrin: Von der Großen Koalition zur Deutschen Einheit* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1994), 393; Reinhard Weisshuhn, 'Der Einfluss der bundesdeutschen Parteien auf die Entwicklung widerständigen Verhaltens in der DDR der achtziger Jahre: Parteien in der Bundesrepublik aus der Sicht der Opposition in der DDR', in *Materialien*, 1902-1903.

[75] We will not discuss the complex motivations (a mix of ideological affinity and tactical considerations) of this 'targetting' of the western social democratic and euro-communist left on part of a segment of the Soviet bloc dissidents during the 1970s and sometimes even into the 1980s.

dents.[76] However, even Egon Bahr, the *Ostpolitik*'s main architect, has admitted that social democrats did not take the dissidents seriously enough. They underestimated both the symbolic aspect of supporting them and the importance of showing the dissidents that they were on their side.[77] Social democrats will state that right-wing parties may have done even less to meet dissidents on the other side of the iron curtain. Such an excuse is hardly satisfactory, but it should attract our attention to a salient fact, namely, the extremely modest role which the big established western political parties played in the face-to-face contacts with Soviet bloc dissidents. Those in western Europe who went east to help the dissidents were generally marginal groups from extremely diverse backgrounds: far leftists (notably Trotskyists), eastern European exiles, some free spirits and after 1980 the non-aligned (END-inspired) peace groups (to which of course should be added the special but obviously crucial case of Solidarność, backed by a wide array of forces, and in particular by western trade unions).[78] The social democratic paradox is thus, in fact, one shared with the major part of European democrats, right and left.

Secondly, there was 'the SPD paradox'. This party, which more than any other has been accused of neglecting the dissidents, seems to be the one which had the most contacts with them, at least from 1985 onward. It may be argued that those contacts came late in the day and were modest in comparison to the importance given to exchanges with the communist regimes.[79] But we still have not seen any concrete evidence demonstrating that other socialist parties – the French and the Italian, for example – had more face-to-face dissident contacts in eastern Europe during this period. This will certainly not satisfy those critics of the SPD who find that Weisskirchen and others, at best, served as alibis, whose actions moreover were often hampered by the party leadership, and that more could have been expected from this party, considering its history, ideals, resources and the fact that many dissidents were (East) Germans. One could, however, note that the SPD seems to have been the only party in the west which itself has initiated a critical examination of its past and to have admitted that errors were committed.

---

[76] See Kreisky to Strougal, 21 Apr. 1977, VII.1. ČSSR, box 1; Brandt to Kreisky, 10 May 1978, box ČSSR Materialien Menschenrechte, ex-box 1097; Dienstbier to Kreisky, 29 May 1980, box 7, Kreisky Archives.

[77] Egon Bahr, 'Die Deutschlandpolitik der SPD', 32.

[78] Bent Boel, 'Mai 68, la France et "les porteurs de valise" de la guerre froide', *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 94, 2 (2009), 66-75.

[79] Some would add that considering the strong German interest for Eastern Europe it would be surprising if there was no 'spill-over' benefitting the dissidents.

Thirdly, there is 'the Craxi paradox'. Craxi presided as prime minister (1983–1987) over a 'radical divorce' between politics and morale in Italy,[80] but he was, as far as the Soviet bloc countries were concerned, a proponent of a line which may be termed 'moral', namely, that of a support for the dissidents in the Soviet bloc. He was among the socialists, and more generally among western leaders, one of those who most eagerly expressed his sympathy for eastern European dissidents, and both Havel and Wałęsa have voiced their gratitude to him.[81] That his policy to a large degree was dictated by domestic political considerations, just as was the case with the 'anti-totalitarian left' in France,[82] is obvious. But his solidarity with the dissidents also does seem to have been nourished by an intimate conviction held for many years and fortified by old friendships.[83]

Finally, while it might seem odd that the Socialist International, a transnational political organization, proved unable to agree on substantial transnational activities to support Soviet bloc dissidents, this failure is hardly surprising. Given the overall restraint shown by western social democrats at the national level, it would have been quite remarkable if a weak organization such as the SI[84] had been able to muster agreement, to mobilise resources and to coordinate help for the dissidents. Nevertheless, the transnational dimension is crucial when we want to understand western European social democratic relations with eastern European oppositionists.

First, key contacts with eastern European exiles (the most important examples being SUCEE and *Listy*) took place within the framework of the Socialist International. Second, the SI actually managed to agree on a common declaratory diplomacy (i. e., occasional resolutions condemning human rights violations in the east). Third, such common resolutions were sometimes followed up by actions taken by the individual parties. Fourth, there are examples of common or coordinated activities by smaller groups of SI member parties (e. g., exchanges with independent Czechoslovak socialists and the campaign to free Rudolf Battěk). Fifth, it seems likely that the member parties (bilaterally or within the SI framework) exchanged information about the dissidents in the east and that there were common endeavours other than those recorded in this article. More research is

[80] Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents 1980–2001* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 150.

[81] Lech Wałęsa, 'Intervento', in Spiri, *Bettino Craxi*, 219-222.

[82] Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Anti-totalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

[83] Ripa di Meana, *L'ordine di Mosca*, 159-166.

[84] Devin, *L'Internationale socialiste*, 360.

obviously needed about social democratic relations with the dissidents in general, and their transnational dimension in particular.

In conclusion, it is difficult to opt for either the neglect or the dual strategy thesis when trying to evaluate social democratic polices vis-à-vis eastern European dissidents during the cold war. Not just because it is difficult to generalize from one party to another, and even sometimes for a single party – the British Labour Party, just to name one example, was extremely heterogeneous in many respects. But also because the numerous cases of support for the dissidents do indicate that it would be unfair to term the social democrats 'indifferent' to the dissidents' fate. And that, on the other hand, it is problematic to talk about a dual strategy since the parties generally focused on the ruling communist regimes and opted for a *Realpolitik* which left very little room for the dissidents (considered as a negligible – and sometimes irresponsible – force).

That being said, the observation of the Hungarian dissident Miklós Vásárhelyi, according to which western European social democrats only knew of two attitudes towards the east during the cold war – an *Ostpolitik* reflecting an acceptance of the status quo (SPD) or the instrumentalization of the issue of the dissidence for domestic political uses (PSI) – seems to be only partially justified.[85] There were, indeed, within the social democratic movement in the west individuals who very sincerely wanted to and concretely tried to assist the dissidents. What is striking however, to limit ourselves to the sole examples of Weisskirchen (a pacifist) and Craxi (favouring the euro-missiles), is the diversity of their motives and political orientation.

[85] Miklós Vásárhelyi, *Verso la libertà: Due interviste a cura di Federigo Argentieri* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 1999), 114.