

## The Division of Eastern and Western Europe

The term “Eastern Europe” defined in a number of manners and depends on perspective and personal definition. There exists conflicting views over which countries are listed under Central Europe and which are in Eastern Europe. For example, the United Nations clearly defined Eastern Europe that includes following countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, and Ukraine. However, others define it as the countries allied with the Soviet Union within the Warsaw Pact, which was established in 1955 and dissolved in 1991. Therefore, there is no clear-cut or universally accepted definition. Historically, the term “Eastern Europe” means the countries that are separated by Western Europe by political philosophies.

Although Western and Eastern Europe are bounded by geography, they are sharply diverged by ideological and political differences. As a result, the East and the West have sustained a strained relationship throughout the twentieth century. To this day, tension remains between the East and the West, where an ideological boundary known as the Iron Curtain, has been drawn between the two sides of the continent. This volatile relationship is rooted in the difference in the East’s and West’s development into a nation-state in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and Eastern Europe’s totalitarian past and communist mentality. The oppressive regime and its lack

of freedoms have been internalized into its political identity and prevent the East from forging an amicable rapport with Western Europe and the United States.

The division between the East and West was developed during the Age of Enlightenment, when notions such as social contract and individual liberty laid the foundation for democratic government. The end of the eighteenth century in Europe marked an era of political transformation, where revolutions were staged, which led to progress towards social reform and liberty. It also inspired the French Revolution, and prompted Western powers to adopt such modern notions and become nation-states. Western European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, and developed early on.

The concept of the nation-state in Eastern Europe is rather difficult to describe. The state is a political entity while the nation is a cultural and ethnic institution. Nation-states in Eastern Europe is a twentieth century notion, which did not come into existence until after the First World War. For instance, Poland was divided between Russia, Prussia and Habsburg Monarchy. Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic were constituent countries of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire encompassed the Balkans. Consequently, many of the empires and the monarchies were multiethnic and held a variety of religious faith: Catholic Church, Calvinism, Lutheranism, Eastern Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Unitarianism, Islam and many other religions. Based on these regional differences, they did not carry a sense of national identity, which sharply contrasted to the homogenous western nations. At the same time, Eastern European countries such as Prussia were overwhelmingly autocratic states, where the ruler was still regarded as a divine-right monarch.<sup>1</sup> There was a strong belief in duty, service, and sacrifice

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<sup>1</sup> Spielvogel, Jackson. Western Civilization: A Brief History. 2008. P397

for the king. Prussia retained its absolutist state and initiated minimal reforms at a time when it was the trend for Western European powers to do so. For example, Frederick the Great had kept a strong militaristic view on the rule of law and asserted that “the sovereign represents the state...it is his duty to see, think, and act for the whole community”<sup>2</sup> and that it is necessary [to] silence the fire of the enemy.”<sup>3</sup> This illustrates how Eastern countries have maintained its traditional form of rule and did not compromise on its absolutism, which had carried over into the twentieth century.

The USSR’s authoritarian rule continued throughout the advent of World War II. In 1939, the Soviet Union was under a repressive totalitarian state, led by Joseph Stalin, whose own doctrine had eclipsed the ideologies outlined in Lenin’s pamphlet “What Is to Be Done?” Stalinism was built around a personal cult that is strengthened by loyal supporters. It espoused social democracy and proletariats forming a vanguard party<sup>4</sup> and had desired peaceful co-existence with Western countries before communist revolutions. For instance, in 1953 and 1956, there were uprisings in Germany, Poland, and Hungary, which were suppressed by Soviet military intervention. Stalin’s rule was characterized by leadership under a single leader and party, which rejected the idea of limited government power and individual freedoms. Stalin’s desire to impose communism led to the implementation of an economic policy that is

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2 Frederick the Great. “An Essay on Forms of Government”. 1789.P.41

3 Frederick the Great. “An Essay on Forms of Government”. 1789.P.41

4 Lenin, Vladimir. “What Is To Be Done”. 1902.P.384

distinguished by its heavy industrialization, elimination of private property, and collectivization of agriculture. These were factors that crippled the Soviet Union and led to widespread poverty and discontent, which was the opposite of the wealth that the West enjoyed.

Following the victory of the Allies, whose country members comprised of the United States, United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union, they were confronted with a devastating realization that Europe lay in ruins. The Western countries and the Soviet Union disagreed on their visions for postwar Europe. For instance, the United States and the United Kingdom wanted to liberate countries in Eastern Europe and allow them “democratic freedom” and “self-determination.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, the United States introduced the Marshall Plan, whose purpose was to “help Europeans in drafting a Europe-wide plan for recovery”<sup>6</sup>. The Soviets came into this realization: “The Europeans wanted American help, and were willing to let Washington lead”<sup>7</sup> Fearing anti-Soviet attitudes in free elections and having his power undermined, Stalin opposed these plans. As a result, his protégé Molotov announced that “the Soviet Union would not participate in the plan”<sup>8</sup> He was determined to maintain authoritarian rule and to impose communism and his influence was deeply embedded into Soviet politics. As a result, his

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5 Spielvogel, Jackson. Western Civilization: A Brief History. 2008. P537

6 Hitchcock, William I. The Cambridge History of the Cold War. P157.

7 Hitchcock, William I. The Cambridge History of the Cold War. P157.

8 Hitchcock, William I. The Cambridge History of the Cold War. P157.

successors retained the Stalinist mindset of exercising complete control, creating a struggle within Russia to grant its people basic freedoms. By the end of World War II, diplomacy between the Soviet Union and its western counterparts had deteriorated, creating an ongoing rift between them.

The Marshall Plan was implemented in 1948 and the sixteen European nations that participated saw economic growth, with the exception of the Soviet Union. It led to the creation of the German state and a “capitalist European economic revival” that signified the division of Europe. This discord between the East and West gave birth to the Cold War, which marked the division of Europe into two distinct geo-political blocs: it separated capitalist Western Europe and the Soviet-controlled Eastern European satellite states that were ruled by communist regimes. The communist society in the Eastern bloc emphasized that the individual does not exist; there is not one person, but a group of people. A person works for the interest of the people and never for himself. This type of government is exemplified in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s novella “Matryona’s Place,” written in 1959. Having been imprisoned for ten years for denouncing Stalin, Solzhenitsyn uses “Matryona’s Place” as a vehicle to criticize Soviet government. His title character depicts an idealized Russian peasant who selflessly gave up herself, her house, and her life for the collective group and martyrs herself for communism. By doing so, Solzhenitsyn illustrates the detriments and oppression of such a political system and how it has stripped people of their independence. Zdeněk Mlynář describes the devastating effects of communism, which had led to the “wretched living standard of [the] Soviet people” in which “[they] scarcely had enough to eat.” He attributes these issues to the war and the “terrible backwardness of czarist Russia,”<sup>9</sup> which has inhibited the nation from progressing forward.

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<sup>9</sup> Mlynář, Zdeněk. Nighfrost in Prague. 1968. P.10

The revolutions of 1989 marked the collapse of Communist order in Eastern Europe. Growing discontent with the regime, revolutions spread in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and East Germany, signaling the end of the “Stalinist totalitarian system”<sup>10</sup> and eventually the Cold War. In the aftermath of the revolutions, Eastern European states were granted independence. Even with the eradication of communist rule in the East, it did not indicate a smooth and immediate transition to democracy. Democracy, although it has several models, is universally defined as a form of government that enables the free and equal practice of political self-determination and popular sovereignty, elements that are lacking in Eastern European states.

Modern issues, such as the Chechen Wars in Russia, prevent it from forging amicable relationships with the West and are impediments to Russia’s potential to be an ally of the United States and the European Union. This problem highlights Russia’s and its former satellite states’ inability to transform to civic nations and are painful setbacks for the country’s economic, social, and political stability.

The division today is less clear cut and relations between the East and West have gradually improved. However, the stigma of the East’s communist past and slow transition to building a democratic state has hindered it from integrating with the West, which does not bode well for the future relations between Eastern and Western Europe.

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10 Garton Ash, Timothy. The Magic Lantern. 1989. P.1