

Running Scared

Every country in the East has its own post-Communist problems. But they all share the discovery that things had gotten much worse than anyone realized.

Dismantling Communist structures has aggravated economic and social difficulties, demolishing old forms of organization and authority without yet being able to replace them. But the extent of collapse revealed how shaky it all was, how much was stripped away, left to rot from within, emptied of resources.

An American with senior government experience remarked recently that it was a massive intelligence failure by the West. He was referring particularly to East Germany, which had been considered the one relatively successful Communist economy, and it too turned out to be a sump pit.

It is hard to fault intelligence, though. There weren't secrets to steal. The leaders didn't know themselves. The most carefully planned, informant-ridden, intrusive regimes knew far less about their own societies than the casual, variegated West does about itself.

Then what were we so worried about? Why did the free world feel so threatened, not only by the Soviet arsenal but also by subversion?

A Western cold-war conspiracy to fight what seemed imminent danger is coming to light in Europe. It is already rocking the Italian Government and will touch many others. There was, it is revealed, an organized underground, provided with hidden arms depots, prepared to launch guerrilla wars and resistance in the event of invasion from the East or overthrow of democratic governments from within.

There were different epic names for the operations — "Gladio" in Italy (manned by secret gladiators), "Rose in the Wind" in France, "Red Fleece" in Belgium. They were sometimes directed, but generally coordinated, by NATO with participation of the C.I.A. and British secret service.

Former C.I.A. Director William Colby has confirmed some of this in recent interviews with Italian journalists. They also reported that meetings of the clandestine groups were held as recently as a few weeks ago in Brussels, though several governments claim it all ended by the 80's.

The Italian Government has said there were 139 caches of clandestine arms, explosives and communications equipment of which 127 were recovered years ago. They haven't accounted for the rest.

But Rome has been scandalized because a junior judge in Venice, investigating the operations, has is-

sued a subpoena to the President of the Republic, Francesco Cossiga, who had served as Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior. Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, who has been in most governments for the last 40 years, refused opposition demands for a parliamentary commission.

The suspicion in Italy, Belgium and other countries is that the groups were used for domestic political purposes, possibly even terrorism to justify government crackdowns and defense preparedness. We are just hearing the beginnings of this. Sweden and Spain were also affected. No doubt there were Communist offensive conspiracies. But the question now is why democracies felt so weak, or if these were counterplots to undermine democratic governments in the name of anti-Communism.

The "Red menace" was taken deadly seriously by many rational people. One reason perhaps was U.S. demobilization at the end of World War II when Europe was still ravaged and chaotic, while Stalin managed to conceal the weakness of the Soviet Union. He did expect to take

A Western cold-war conspiracy.

over most of Western Europe.

But his real weapon was ideological and intellectual. It is hard now to understand the Communist appeal in the postwar period. The Communists had the allure of early and vigorous anti-Fascism when many had ignored the Nazis or collaborated.

They promised a brave new world after the horrors of the Depression and war, with a moral vision of justice. They preached that money, not Moscow, was the root of all evil, and the frenetic crusade against Moscow only seemed to confirm their argument. Jean-Pierre Chevenement, now French Defense Minister, was among the many who responded proudly, "I am anti-anti-Communism."

All that is gone, dust, like medieval disputes about the sex of angels. What is left? Just money, material well-being? It was never enough, and it isn't the reason the West won the long struggle so dramatically. Freedom, consent were the bulwarks, and they proved their strength. When they are undermined, it is from within. The things we do running scared are what hurt us most. □

The Washington Post _____
 The New York Times A 29
 The Washington Times _____
 The Wall Street Journal _____
 The Christian Science Monitor _____
 New York Daily News _____
 USA Today _____
 The Chicago Tribune _____

Date 14 NOV 1990