

Bear Witness

Paul Hollander

Dancing Bears: True Stories of People Nostalgic for Life Under Tyranny

By Witold Szabłowski

(Penguin Books, 2018)

The long-term effects of the collapse of communism on the political attitudes of the people who lived under it deserve serious attention, especially in light of the initial hopes these historical events stimulated. Of late these favorable expectations have been replaced by mounting concern over the shift toward authoritarianism, most notably in Russia under Putin, followed by similar trends in Hungary and Poland. The most obvious, if partial, explanation has been the absence of democratic historical-cultural traditions in these countries, as well as the unmet expectations the fall of the communist systems generated among their populations.

Another explanation of these trends, suggested by *Dancing Bears: True Stories of People Nostalgic for Life Under Tyranny*, is that human beings used to living under repressive governments over long periods find it difficult to adapt to their new freedoms, like the dancing bears liberated from their harsh routines. The first half of this book seeks to shed light on the creeping authoritarianism of former communist states by means of a detailed analysis of the behavior of the newly liberated bears. The human ambivalence about or outright rejection of freedom is not exactly a new idea and was a major explanation of the

rise of Nazism put forward by Erich Fromm in his 1941 *Escape from Freedom*; this book might have benefited from some reference to his ideas.

In the second part of *Dancing Bears*, there is no further discussion of the liberated bears and their difficulties. Instead, the author relates his conversations and impressions in former communist countries (Bulgaria, Poland, Albania, and Serbia), former parts of the Soviet Union (Ukraine, Estonia, and Georgia), one remaining communist state (Cuba), and Greece. It is not clear why noncommunist Greece was included, nor for that matter how the other countries were selected—nor why postcommunist Russia was excluded, despite being the most representative setting and breeding ground of the attitudes probed.

There is a good deal of geographic and topical jumping around, presumably reflecting the author's itinerary. The chapter on Cuba relates conflicting views of Castro (still alive at the time of his visit) and the communist system, but does not deal with responses to the system's collapse because it remains in existence. The first of two chapters on Poland concerns a homeless Polish woman who lives on the streets of London, while

the second is about “Hobbits Village,” an attempt to improve the rural economy by a theme park. The chapter on Ukraine is about smuggling between Poland and Ukraine. The single topic of the chapter on Albania is the concrete bunkers Enver Hoxha obsessively scattered around the entire country. The chapter on Estonia deals with the post-Soviet relations between Estonians and the Baltic republic’s large Russian minority. The report from Serbia and Kosovo is mainly about Radovan Karadžić and his admirers. The chapter on Georgia relates conversations with native admirers of Stalin. The report from Greece is completely unrelated to the supposed theme of the book, dealing as it does with the economic crises and the anti-capitalist fervor of radicals and leftists.

In this part of the book, there is no unifying theoretical scheme. The conversations and impressions are very loosely connected to the first half of the book, insofar as Szablowski relates the diverse attitudes of people in some former communist states toward the political changes they experienced. There is no attempt to compare or synthesize these attitudes. Some of the people he talked to supported the communist systems and regretted their demise; others rejected them. These diverse dispositions remain unexplained and unexamined.

The lack of integration of the two parts of the book is not compensated for by the use of identical titles for the two sets of chapters in the two parts of the book. Nor is light shed on the relationship between the chapter titles and their substance, especially in part two. Only the first part of the book addresses in a focused and coherent manner the main theme of the work, the suggested parallels between the bears’ and the humans’ responses to liberation.

Bulgaria is the only former communist country where widespread practices of bear dancing existed, and where attempts were made to “rehabilitate” the bears in a new

natural setting. The origin and main themes of the book are presented in the preface:

The story of the dancing bears was first told me by...a Bulgarian journalist...For years on end...these bears had been trained to dance, and had been treated very cruelly. Owners...taught them to dance by beating them when they were small. They knocked out their teeth, to make sure the bears would never suddenly remember that they were stronger than their keepers. They broke the animals’ spirits. They got them drunk on alcohol...And then they made them perform tricks for the tourists...In 2007, when Bulgaria joined the European Union, the keeping of bears was outlawed. An Austrian organization called Four Paws...opened a special park...and the bears were...relocated here. Gone was the whip, the brutality, the nose ring that—*according to the people from Four Paws—symbolized the bears’ captivity* [my italics]. A unique project began: to teach freedom to animals that had never been free.

As the quote indicates, the author believes that it was only according to the Four Paws organization that the nose ring symbolized the bears’ captivity. The reader may wonder what the alternative, more benign interpretation of that practice could be. Could the nose rings have symbolized a warm, caring attitude on the part of the bear trainers? The author’s skepticism is all the more misplaced given that the Four Paws activist tells him in great detail about the mistreatment of the bears, including their pain while performing. (The bow to the fiddle of the bear trainer was “attached to the chain at the end of which was the bear’s nose” and the bear’s dance was a response to the movements of the chain. As the informant concludes, “Their lives were one long, constant, pain.”)

The author's inclination to suggest some sort of moral equivalence between the inexcusable mistreatment of bears and the well-intentioned if not altogether successful efforts of the animal rights idealists is regrettable and puzzling. While he seems to take at face value the self-serving claims and protestations of the bear trainers, who lived off the bears, he makes fun of the idealists who sought to provide a healthy and pain-free environment for them, creating what he describes with heavy irony as the "bears paradise." He repeatedly quotes the former bear trainers without any apparent skepticism, accepting their justification of the mistreatment of the bears:

"I would never have hit a bear. And certainly not Vela. . . . Just the thought of it brings tears to my eyes. . . . So in that case how did I train her? Easy. Just took her a short way out of the village, brought out my *gadulka* [musical instrument] and some candy, started to play and tried to persuade her to stand on her hind legs. When she did, she got a piece of candy. . . . The only time I had to hurt her was when I stuck the ring through her nose. . . . I heated a metal bar red hot. I said 'This'll hurt for a while, little one, but it's got to be done. Otherwise you and I won't get along.' . . . There was no alternative. . . . First I stuck the red-hot bar into her nose. She struggled terribly. She howled. . . . I am not surprised. A bear has a very sensitive nose. . . . Vela's departure was the greatest tragedy of [my wife's] life. She believed we'd been done a major injustice. They had taken away a member of our family."

We learn of another bear keeper that

as soon as the bears left [he] began to fall ill. . . . It's not hard to guess that if someone has practiced a single profes-

sion all his life, it's hard for him to come up with anything new overnight. Even if we regard his work as barbaric, it's impossible to deny that Dimitar had a profound relationship with Misho. But Four Paws only thinks about the animals. . . . "Grandpa died last year, of longing. Longing for Misho," says Veselina.

This romanticized view of bear keepers contrasts with a more skeptical view of the do-gooders of Four Paws. One of them, "when he talks about bears, becomes emotional and gesticulates—even his facial expressions show total commitment. It is not the same when the conversation comes down to the human level. . . . Ivanov brushes off my questions about human beings [the bear keepers] with a telling silence."

The author seems to share the skepticism of the residents of the local town about the rehabilitation project. They resent the money spent on the bears given their own poverty and many unmet needs, including firewood, clothing for their children, and health care. Residents of the area, 90 percent of whom could not afford dental care, were especially irked that the bears were getting regular treatment from a visiting German dentist. They were similarly outraged upon finding that the bears' diet included strawberries, which they we could not afford for their children.

The purpose of eventually releasing the bears to the wilderness could not be realized because these bears "are toothless and suffer from cataracts and emotional problems." Hence it was decided that the liberated bears had to be sterilized. The author dwells at some length on the failure of the attempted rehabilitation of the bears:

The fact is that despite these excellent conditions; despite the honey, strawberries, nuts, hibernation kennels, hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in the

park...despite the personal commitment of Brigitte Bardot...despite the support of other influential animal lovers...despite all this: to this day, almost all bears still dance. When they see a human being, they stand up on their hind legs and start rocking from side to side as if they were begging, as in the past, for bread, candy, a sip of beer, a caress, or to be free of pain.

What are we supposed to conclude? That the bears should have been left to their trainers, with the ring in their nose and a life of pain and servitude? And, by analogy, that the transformation of former communist states into floundering democracies was also pointless because human beings prefer oppression to the burden of making autonomous choices? Surely we cannot draw such far-reaching conclusions from the discontent of an undetermined portion of the population in postcommunist countries.

Moreover, the parallels between people liberated from communism and the newly pampered bears in their miniature welfare states are deeply flawed. Postcommunist sys-

tems did not create a new, superior welfare state that shielded their citizens from every difficulty in life. They offered little protection or security. People were left alone to make their choices, to compete, and survive under a harsh capitalism that allowed great new inequalities to develop.

This book offers little help to understand better why some former communist states are becoming more undemocratic, their authoritarian leaders more popular, and many of their citizens disenchanted with the post-communist era and nostalgic for old times. On the positive side, the author does provide some vivid and often humorous snapshots of conditions in some of these countries and of the diverse and often conflicting responses of their citizens to new frustrations and disappointments.

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