

# DISAPPARTENENZE

Figure del distacco e altre solitudini  
nelle letterature dell'Europa centro-orientale

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THE DEFEAT OF EASTERN EUROPEAN  
EMIGRÉS AFTER 1989<sup>1</sup>

*Guido Franzinetti*

ABSTRACT

In his novel *L'ignorance* Milan Kundera addressed the issue of what happens when an exile returns home, and especially the resentment felt by those who had remained. Another exile, Josef Brodsky, provided a detailed discussion of the topic in his lecture on Auden's poem *September 1, 1939*. Postwar emigration from Eastern Europe needs to be seen as a series of quite distinct waves. In almost all countries of the region émigrés played a very limited role in the collapse of the Communist systems.

KEYWORDS

Émigrés, Eastern Europe, Cold War, 1989, Post-Communism

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1. I would like to thank for their remarks on these topics Lida Kita, Piotr Brożyna and Mikołaj Sokołowski. Years ago, I also learnt from what Jan Jaworski and Gustav Herling did.

## 1. Exiles

The topic of intellectual exiles has been debated for centuries, especially in the literary field and more generally in the history of European culture. As Leszek Kołakowski pointed out in 1985:

More often than not... modern expatriates have been refugees, rather than exiles in the strict sense; usually they were not physically deported from their countries or banished by law; they escaped from political persecution, prison, death or simply censorship.

... Many voluntary exiles from tyrannical régimes cannot rid themselves of a feeling of discomfort. They are no longer exposed to the dangers and deprivations that are the daily lot of their friends –or the entire country with which they identify themselves... it is impossible to draw any hard-and-fast rules to distinguish justifiable from unjustifiable self-exile. It is easy to see that nothing would have been gained had Einstein or Thomas Mann remained in Hitler's Germany or had Chagall not left Soviet-ruled Vitebsk. There are, on the other hand, many people living in the Soviet Union or in Poland whom the rulers would love to ship off to a foreign land but who doggedly refuse to move, choosing instead prison, persecution, and misery. Who would dare to say that they are wrong? Solzhenitsyn and Bukovsky had to be handcuffed and kicked out of their country, thus following the sad route of a couple of hundred prominent intellectuals whom the Soviet rulers banished shortly after the Revolution. Many Solidarity leaders were offered freedom at the price of emigration and they refused; some are in jail again; others probably will be soon. Milan Kundera left Czechoslovakia, and Czesław Miłosz left Poland, and they made their experiences major works of modern literature; Havel stayed in his land, and so has Herbert, and we owe a lot to them. *Doktor Faustus* and Nabokov's novels are fruits of emigration, as are the works of Conrad, Ionesco, and Koestler, yet *Gulag Archipelago* could not have been produced by an exile. No universal standards can be devised to decide in what condition self-exile, if practicable at all, is preferable (Kołakowski 1985: 55-56).

## 2. *Emigration: the individual perspective*

A starting-point for understanding the implications of emigration at an individual level, in a literary form, is offered by Milan Kundera in his novel *L'ignorance* (Kundera 2000). As he points out in his opening remarks, «Loyal to the tradition of the French Revolution, the Communist countries hurled anathema at emigration, deemed to be the most odious treason» (Kundera 2000: 22; 2002: 17). One of the characters, an exile who had come back to Prague five days earlier (following the 'velvet revolution') asks herself why none of the old friends she has met have asked her anything about her life. Kundera provides an explanation in mythical terms:

After killing off the brazen fellows who hoped to marry Penelope and rule Ithaca, Odysseus was obliged to live with people he knew nothing about. And because they believed that all he was interested in was his Ithaca... they nattered on about things that had happened during his absence, eager to answer any question he might have. Nothing bored him more. He was waiting for just one thing: for them finally to say "Tell us!". And that is the one thing they never said (Kundera 2000: 37; 2002: 34).

Obviously, we cannot base ourselves on a literary instance to generalise about the experience of thousands and thousands of individuals who emigrated, and who later may have returned (even if only temporarily) to their country of origin. But we can at least contemplate the possibility that what Kundera writes contains a grain of truth.

On a different level, we could take in consideration a more engaged illustrations of the (individual and collective) drama of emigration. A case in point is the lecture given by Josef Brodsky in 1984, in New York, at Columbia University. It consisted in a minute and intense reading of Auden's poem *September 1, 1939* (Brodsky 1984). Auden was reflecting on the meaning of his

abandonment of his country. As Auden himself said later, one of his reasons for leaving Britain «was precisely to stop [himself] writing poems like *September 1, 1939*». He called the poem «a hangover from the UK. It takes time to cure itself» (Mendelson 1977: xx). But Brodsky remembers –in 1984– that 1 September 1939 is the date of the invasion of Poland. As he says, it «is first and foremost a poem about shame» (Brodsky 1984: 338). He also writes: «The war, you see, began over the British guarantees of Polish independence. That was the *casus belli*. Now it's 1981 [sic], and where is that Polish independence today, forty years later? So strictly speaking, World War II was in vain. But I'm digressing» (Brodsky 1984: 313). We are now in 2015, and we know that history went differently. But Brodsky did not know that. Posterity always knows better.

### 3. *Emigration as a social and political fact*

Eastern European emigration is also a social and political fact. First of all, in the case of Eastern Europe (and first and foremost the satellite states of the Soviet bloc) we must take into account successive waves of emigration, which differed quite considerably. Emigration (or non-return) after the end of World War II is one thing. There are then the waves of emigration (and return migrations) after 1956 (Hungarian Revolution) and 1961 (creation of the Berlin Wall), post-1968 (Poland, Czechoslovakia), post-Ostpolitik (Poles travelling to West Germany), post-*stan wojenny* (1981 and after). This is a very incomplete list. But it is essential not to treat these waves as an undifferentiated flow, if we want to understand their meanings and implications. We could start from the nuanced perspective offered by the semi-émigré Sławomir Mrożek, in his play *Emigranci* (published in Poland in 1974, and subsequently performed in Polish theatres from the end of the 1970s onwards) (Mrożek 1974; 1990).

Let us return to Kundera's novel (in which the author, as usual, speaks through his female characters). Irena and her hu-



sband emigrated in 1969, encountering a marked lack of understanding on the part of Western progressives. They have thus worked out the following explanation:

Horrible as it may be, a fascist dictatorship will disappear when its dictator does, and therefore people can keep up hope. Communism, which is sustained by the enormous Russian civilisation, is an endless tunnel for a Poland, a Hungary (not to even to mention an Estonia!) a tunnel with no exit. Dictators are perishable, Russia is eternal. The misery of the countries we come from lies in the utter absence of hope what determines the unhappiness of the countries from which we come (Kundera 2000: 17; 2002: 12).

We can put aside the facile comments which we could make on the (lack of) foresight which these remarks reveal. (Once again, posterity knows better.) This formulation of Kundera's novel captures quite effectively a widespread assumption of people living in Eastern Europe: the feeling of living in a closed world, devoid of hope. How many Eastern Europeans can honestly say that they have never felt that way?

Of course, in hindsight everything looks different. Social scientists can and will find innumerable symptoms which foreshadowed what nowadays seems the inevitable end of the Cold War. But men (and women) live their lives in real time.

#### *4. The defeat of the émigrés after 1989*

In Eastern Europe postwar émigrés played a significant role only in two cases: in the very last stages of the dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia, and in the Baltic states (and even this assessment is debatable). In all the other countries the émigrés did not play a significant role in any other countries of origin. Communism collapsed; Communists abdicated. They were not overthrown. Ultimately, they were outvoted.

If we want to make a generalisation, we could say that as a category political émigrés always lose in the political arena of their countries of origin. They lose because (in the eyes of their fellow countrymen) they have committed the unforgivable sin of not having been there (in the long years of their exile). For those who remained, émigrés can appear to have exercised «politics without responsibility» (Buruma 2001). This may well be an unfair judgement, but is what many people have thought and still think.

None of this means that the political and cultural activities of Eastern European émigrés were futile; they performed a crucial role. But it does mean that it turned out to be a thankless task.

In the May 1981, Czesław Miłosz was allowed to visit Poland for the first time since his defection to the West. At a meeting held at Warsaw University, someone asked him how did it feel to be 'back home'. He answered coldly: «I have not come back home». 'Home' would have meant for him Wilno, not Warsaw. Coming back home is never easy; sometimes impossible. This is what exile is about.

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