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English Reactions of the Left to Rudolf Bahro's "The Alternative"

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Title of Source on GHDI: A Communist Idealist Criticizes the "Real Existing Socialism" of the GDR (1977)

Source: Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*. Translated by David Fernbach. © NLB, 1978, pp. 7-14. Originally published in German as *Die Alternative. Zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus* (1977).

Source Narrative:

The Alternative in Eastern Europe (1977), often shortened to *The Alternative*, was written by East German author, dissident, philosopher, and Marxist, Rudolf Bahro (1935-1997). The book was written in secret while Bahro worked on his dissertation about East German VEBs.¹ *The Alternative* is divided into three sections; 1) The non-capitalist path to an industrial society. 2) Anatomy of socialism. 3) Strategy for a communist alternative.¹ The book saw widespread success, but upon its publication Bahro was arrested on charges of "espionage" due to his connection with Western publishers, prompting widespread condemnation of his imprisonment.² Bahro was born in Poland and spent much of his life in the GDR devoted to Leninist and Stalinist views of Socialism.¹ However, he became disillusioned with their views of socialism after witnessing the USSR's invasion of Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring, prompting him to write *The Alternative*.³ Bahro spent the rest of his life in West Germany continuing his work including the publication of the books *From Red to Green* (1984) and *Building the Green*

¹ "Rudolf Bahro." Wikipedia, September 19, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Bahro.

² Minnerup, Günter. "East Germany: Bahro Sentenced to 8 Years in Secret Trial." in *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, pp. 21. London. 1978. Republished by Marxists.org, Accessed 2024 <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/labour-focus-eastern-europe/LFEE-9-vol-2-no-3-1978.pdf#page=21>.

³ "An introduction to Rudolf Bahro (1935 - 1997)." Accessed October 28, 2024. https://www.ohiocitizen.org/rudolf_bahro.

Movement (1986) as well as becoming a founding member of the Green Party (though he later left the party).¹

The publication of *The Alternative* sparked significant discussion amongst notable leftists such as German New Leftist Herbert Marcuse, French Trotskyist Pierre Frank, and leftists from the United States, Czechoslovakia, Italy, and beyond. An array of publications came from leftists who attended the “International Congress on and for Rudolf Bahro” where members of the left from around the world shared their opinions on the book, and called for Bahro’s release from prison.⁴ *The Alternative* received praise for its “frontal attack written in blunt language without reservations.”⁵ And its significant contribution to communist thought and leftist dialogue.⁶ Herbert Marcuse called the book “the most important contribution to Marxist theory and practice to appear in several decades.”⁷ Praise was also echoed by Jiri Pelikan, who described the book as “without a doubt, one of the most significant, stimulating contributions of the last decade to the discussion on the nature of the system in Eastern European countries and on the potential prospects for development of what is called “real socialism.”⁸ Jeffrey Lee Canfield argued that *The Alternative* is one of “the most sophisticated analyses to emerge from the block since the 1950s.”⁹

Yet, despite this praise, the book was also met with significant criticism. Many leftists criticized Bahro’s “utopianism,” and his adherence to Leninist ideology. His use of Leninist principles was criticized by figures like Ivan Szelenyi and Helmut Fleischer. Szelenyi argued that Bahro advocated for a form of “neo-Leninism” or “neo-Bolshevism” through his support of

⁴ Wolter, Ulf, ed. “*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980),” First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

⁵ “An introduction to Rudolf Bahro (1935 - 1997).” in *The Ohio Citizen*. Original publication date unknown. Accessed October 28, 2024. https://www.ohiocitizen.org/rudolf_bahro.

⁶ Radice, Lucio L. “State Socialism” in Wolter, Ulf, ed. “*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980),” First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

⁷ Marcuse, Herbert “Protosocialism and Late Capitalist: Toward Theoretical Synthesis based on Bahro’s Analysis” in Wolter, Ulf, ed. “*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980),” First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

⁸ Pelikan, Jiri “Bahro’s Ideas on Changes in Eastern Europe” in Wolter, Ulf, ed. “*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980),” First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

⁹ Canfield, Jeffrey Lee. “Marxist Revisionism in East Germany: The Case of Rudolf Bahro.” *The Fletcher Forum* 4, no. 1 (1980): 23–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45330979>.

“vanguardism.”¹⁰ Fleischer, on the other hand, criticized Bahro’s understanding of history, which, in a Leninist fashion, views history as a series of predefined tasks to be solved—often failing to “separate the reality from the ideal.”¹¹ Fleischer asserted that this flawed understanding of history led Bahro to a “utopian” solution to the problems of “actually existing socialism.”¹¹ Hillel Ticktin argued that while Bahro helped to unite the left and to detach Stalinism from Marxist, he was ultimately unable to separate himself from Soviet ideology due to the resources available to him in the GDR. A connection that Ticktin argued led Bahro to an apologetic view towards the crimes and internal contradictions of the USSR.¹² Herman Weber echoed this view, finding Bahro to be inherently biased towards the Leninist state-owned economic model while underestimating the problems and power of bureaucratic institutions.¹³ Notable Trotskyist Pierre Frank supported Bahro for his “program” and its profound fight to go beyond “actually existing socialism” but criticized many aspects of Bahro’s ideology. Frank argued that it failed to recognize that a workers’ party must be the party of the workers, discounted the worker’s abilities to understand communism, and has too strong a belief in the notion that Marxism is only for the intelligentsia.¹⁴

These critics draw attention to the diverse array of discourse, commentary, and critique *The Alternative* received. What stands out in analyzing the numerous opinions and publications about the book is the significant discourse it sparked—a point acknowledged by even its critics, many of whom considered it a necessary and important contribution to leftist thought and ideology. Another key point is how authors who praised the publication often found areas of disagreement and criticism, while those who critiqued the book often found aspects to agree with

¹⁰ Szelenyi, Ivan. “Whose Alternative?” in *New German Critique*, no. 20 (1980): 117–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487709>.

¹¹ Fleischer, Helmut “Bahro’s Contribution to the Philosophy of Socialism” in Wolter, Ulf, ed. “*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980),” First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

¹² Ticktin, Hillel. 1979. “Rudolf Bahro: A Socialist without a Working Class.” in *Critique 10* (1): 133–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03017607908413248>

¹³ Weber, Hermann “The Third Way: Barro's Place in the Tradition of Anti-Stalinist Opposition” in Wolter, Ulf, ed. “*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980),” First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

¹⁴ Frank, Pierre “Was ‘Actually Existing Socialism’ Historically Necessary?” in *Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980),” First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

and praise. Further highlighting the unique and poignant dialogue and discussion of leftist ideology and theory initiated by *The Alternative*.

Annotated Bibliography in Alphabetical Order

Andrews, Edmund L. "Rudolf Bahro Is Dead at 62; Dissident in Both Germanys." in *The New York Times*. New York. December 11, 1997.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/11/world/rudolf-bahro-is-dead-at-62-dissident-in-both-germanys.html>.

Upon Bahro's death, Andrews wrote a eulogy summarizing the life and career of Rudolf Bahro. In it, he describes Bahro as "one of East Germany's more prominent dissidents..." who "later became an equally iconoclastic figure in West German politics." He describes Bahro's ideology of socialist reform rather than abandonment, his famous book "The Alternative", his arrest and release in East Germany, his role in the formation of the Green Party, and his decision to leave the party.

"An introduction to Rudolf Bahro (1935 - 1997)." in *The Ohio Citizen*. Original publication date unknown. Accessed October 28, 2024. https://www.ohiocitizen.org/rudolf_bahro.

A summary of the distinguished life of Rudolf Bahro, containing excerpts and opinions on his works and beliefs. Within it "The Alternative" is described as "a frontal attack written in blunt language without reservations, "ultimately ending with a few excerpts from Bahro's works and interviews, specifically *From Red to Green* and *Building the Green Movement*.

"Rudolf Bahro." Wikipedia, September 19, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Bahro.

The English article begins with Bahro's early life and explains the evolution of his ideology after the Polish October and Hungarian Revolution. It devotes a section to "*The Alternative*" dividing the book into three parts. The first is a historical analysis of socialist development within the USSR, the second is an analysis of existing socialism, and the third is his solutions to the problems of existing socialism and his path forward. The next section includes the aftermath of his book including Bahro's imprisonment. It also includes quotes of praise from notable leftists such as Herbert Marcuse, Ernest Mandel, and Lawrence Krader, as well as a critical view from Rudi Dutschke. The rest of the page is devoted to Bahro's life after his release from prison, including his work with the Green Party, his rift with the left, and his attempt to save the GDR.

Minnerup, Günter. “East Germany: Bahro Sentenced to 8 Years in Secret Trial.” in *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, pp. 21. London. 1978. Republished by Marxists.org, accessed November 19, 2024.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/labour-focus-eastern-europe/LFEE-9-vol-2-no-3-1978.pdf#page=21>.

In this newspaper article, Minnerup describes the trial of Rudolf Bahro following the publication of his book *The Alternative*. Bahro was arrested on “espionage” with Bahro’s connection to the EVA, the publishers of *The Alternative* being cited as evidence against him. Furthermore, the article highlights that Bahro himself does not wish to be exiled to the West, but would rather stay in the GDR to fight for his ideology. Minnerup argues that Bahro’s biggest hope is that Western Communist parties who have begun organizing and condemning his imprisonment, will be able to rally enough support to pressure the GDR into Bahro’s release.

Wolter, Ulf, ed. “*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980),” First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

Bahro’s imprisonment sparked global outrage and attention, an “International Congress on and for Rudolf Bahro” was organized by European leftists from a diverse school of thought to call for Bahro’s release, and reflect upon *The Alternative*. This book contains translations of the papers written for this congress and reflects a diverse range of leftist reactions to Rudolf Bahro’s philosophy. Among these perspectives include that of the French Trotskyist Pierre Frank, the notable German New Leftist Herbert Marcuse, and a wide range of other leftists from the United States, Czechoslovakia, and Italy.

Weber, Hermann “The Third Way: Barro's Place in the Tradition of Anti-Stalinist Opposition” in Wolter, Ulf, ed. “*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980),” First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

Herman Weber was a German communist and professor of political science and contemporary history. Weber utilizes his historical background to criticize Rudolf Bahro’s *The Alternative* for failing to analyze “the historical reality of real existing communism” and instead focusing purely on theory. He also utilized his historical understanding of

communist movements, to use figures such as Ernst Bloch, Robert Havemann, and Wolfgang Harich to explain the outside factors that he believes influenced Bahro's ideology. In particular, he argues that Harich Havemann and his Harich group and Bahro's ideology fall under the same banner of "democratic communism" and serve to counter the communist states and challenge their bureaucratic dictatorship. Ultimately, Weber concluded that while Bahro goes further than previous thinkers and economists, he remains stuck in a bias towards a state-owned economy, and fundamentally underestimates the problems and power of bureaucratic institutions.

Marcuse, Herbert "Protosocialism and Late Capitalist: Toward Theoretical Synthesis based on Bahro's Analysis" in Wolter, Ulf, ed. "*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980)," First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

Herbert Marcuse was a German author and leading figure in the "New Left." He claims that Rudolf Bahro's *The Alternative* "Is the most important contribution to Marxist theory and practice to appear in several decades." Whose criticism of "proto-socialism" goes beyond existing socialist states and into the governments of late capitalist countries as well. He supports Bahro's rejection of the Marxist-Leninist model of revolution, his definition of class relations, the role of the intelligentsia in the revolution, and his explanation of how socialism can function if it is implemented differently. Lastly, he highlights Bahro's video that a new economy should be founded as an "economy of time" rather than labor time, supporting the idea of "Freedom *within* the realm of necessity."

Fleischer, Helmut "Bahro's Contribution to the Philosophy of Socialism" in Wolter, Ulf, ed. "*Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980)," First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

Helmut Fleischer was a German philosopher and prisoner of war in the USSR during WWII. Fleischer uses his background in philosophy to judge Bahro through "*philosophical synesis*" with an interest in Bahro's "*theoretical conceptual framework*" ultimately questioning "What new does he contribute to theorizing on socialism, what existing limitations to theory does he surmount, and what limitations does he not surmount." He

finds that Bahro's understanding of history, in a Leninist fashion, views history as a series of predefined tasks to be solved, often failing to "separate the reality from the ideal." In this realm, he argues that Bahro's theory relies upon an "action-reaction paradigm" failing to consider the outside factors that have shaped the history of existing socialist states. This ultimately results in him arguing that Bahro's premise of criticizing actually existing socialism is wrong, which results in his conclusion, or third part of his book "Strategy for a communist alternative" is utopian, with a fundamentally flawed foundation.

Radice, Lucio L. "State Socialism" in Wolter, Ulf, ed. *Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980), First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>. Lucio Lombardo Radice was an Italian mathematician and professor, as well as a member of the Italian Communist Party, and author. Radice found that Bahro's critique makes a profound contribution to communist thought with his parallels between existing socialist states and the "Asiatic" mode of production. Radice supports Bahro's argument that the historical shadow of the "Asiatic" mode of production on tsarism had a profound impact on the USSR. He also praises Bahro's "unshaken faith" in socialism even inside of "state socialism." Despite this, Radice argues that "state socialism" is undergoing a breakdown that is delayed by the party-state and therefore unable to survive without a serious transition towards a new form of socialist governance.

Frank, Pierre "Was 'Actually Existing Socialism' Historically Necessary?" in Wolter, Ulf, ed. *Revival : Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980), First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

Pierre Frank was a French activist in the revolutionary movement, who was once the secretary of Leon Trotsky, he was also the editor of the Fourth International. He supports Bahro's call for a "cultural revolution against actually existing socialism." He believes that where Bahro is the most profound is in the fact that his "program" holds onto Marxism and Socialism, fighting to go beyond "actually existing socialism." Highlighting his idea that economically downdraught nations must liberate themselves through

revolution rather than the imitation of rich nations. However, despite this Frank has serious reservations about Bahro's ideology, arguing that it fails to recognize that a workers' party must be the party of the workers, it discounts the worker's abilities to understand communism, and it has too strong a belief in the notion that Marxism is only for the intelligentsia. Lastly, he argues that Bahro never answers the question of how the two worlds (communist and capitalism) can unify, calling attention to the fact that Bahro never answers the most pressing question in Germany, the question of reunification.

Pelikan, Jiri "Bahro's Ideas on Changes in Eastern Europe" in Wolter, Ulf, ed. "*Revival: Rudolf Bahro Critical Responses* (1980)," First edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177557>.

Jiri Pelikan, until 1968 was the general director of Czech television, a delegate to the Czech parliament, and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. As such his opinion on Bahro's work largely lies in Pelikan's involvement in Prague Spring, and his opinions on its violent suppression. Pelikan believes that "Rudolf Bahro's *The Alternative* is without a doubt one of the most significant, stimulating contributions of the last decade to the discussion on the nature of the system in Eastern European countries and on the potential prospects for development of what is called "real socialism." However, despite this praise, he also believes that Bahro underestimates the consequences of the crushing of the Prague Spring on the wider communist world and in existing socialist states. Argues against Bahro's lack of faith in democracy and belief in a vanguard party, claiming that the movements towards democratic reform lie at the heart of a communist alternative, as it did in Czechoslovakia. Lastly, he argues that Bahro fails to understand the role of the intelligentsia in the Prague Spring. However, he does agree with Bahro on the dangers of nationalism within communist states and the importance of collaboration and solidarity with socialist movements and governments of other countries.

Ticktin, Hillel. 1979. "Rudolf Bahro: A Socialist without a Working Class." in *Critique* 10 (1): 133–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03017607908413248>

Hillel Ticktin is a South African Marxist theorist and economist who argues that *The Alternative* failed in its objective because it did not change the economy of Eastern

Europe.¹⁵ He argues that this is for two reasons: Firstly, Bahro failed to create a new political economy that would counter the USSR. And secondly, his book contains numerous contradictions. He posits that this is because Bahro fails to recognize the contradictions inherent in the USSR due to the limitations of the resources available to him in the GDR. He also attributes Bahro's apologetic views towards the crimes of the USSR. Despite these critiques, Ticktin ultimately concludes that Bahro is an important figure, who helped to detach Stalinism from Marxism and helped to unite the left.

Miliband, Ralph. "A Commentary on Rudolf Bahro's *Alternative*." *The Socialist Register* pp. 274-284, July 1979. Republished on Marxists.org, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/miliband/1979/07/bahro.htm>.

Ralph Miliband, a British sociologist, Marxist, and member of the New Left, presents a critical analysis of Bahro's *Alternative*, writing that despite Bahro's imprisonment, which he hopes will end, criticism of the book is still warranted.¹⁶ In this vein, Miliband rejects the majority of Bahro's ideas as insufficient, including Bahro's concept of a "League of Communists." Despite this Miliband does give support to Bahro for his belief in socialist reformism over abandonment, his view on the contradictions within socialist nations, and the importance of the intelligentsia to work with the working class. Ultimately, Miliband does not view Bahro's vision as adequate and finds it to be a more "utopian" solution than a pragmatic one.

Canfield, Jeffrey Lee. "Marxist Revisionism in East Germany: The Case of Rudolf Bahro." *The Fletcher Forum* 4, no. 1 (1980): 23–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45330979>.

Jeffery Lee Canfield gives historical context, and a concise summary of Bahro's *The Alternative*, as well as giving a critical analysis of Bahro's ideology. Canfield concludes that "Bahro has significantly narrowed the rift between theory and praxis and breathed fresh life into Marxism-Leninism." Arguing that despite its "utopian" vision and orthodox view of Western Capitalism, *The Alternative* is one of "the most sophisticated analyses to emerge from the bloc since the 1950s." Further highlighting that Bahro's "revisionist" theory of Marxism crossed various strains of thought, ultimately creating

¹⁵ "Hillel Ticktin." Wikipedia, June 7, 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_Ticktin.

¹⁶ "Ralph Miliband." Wikipedia, October 22, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Miliband.

new debate and creativity inside the left. Something he hopes will ultimately continue inside of the GDR despite Bahro's flee to the West.

Szelenyi, Ivan. "Whose Alternative?" in *New German Critique*, no. 20 (1980): 117–34.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/487709>.

Ivan Szelenyi is a Hungarian-American sociologist who offers his view on power in Eastern Europe, and his beliefs on the present and future of socialism from the view of the powerless.¹⁷ He concurs with Bahro's approach in *The Alternative* to not argue about "what Marx really said" and agrees with the notion that the Bolshevik dictatorship inherently fails the working class. However, he disagrees with what he calls Bahro's neo-Leninism or neo-Bolshevism for its promotion of "vanguardism," which he views as contrary to "sociology from below." Further criticizing Bahro's apologist for the Soviet Ideology and the USSR's proto-socialism, and his idea that the working class cannot form a revolution without the role of intellectuals. In this Szelenyi argues that when reading *The Alternative* we must ask the question *Whose Alternative*, or, whose interests does this align with? In contrast with Bahro, he also argues that East European societies are socialist, even if they did not lead to the workers owning the means of production. Ending the paper with his criticisms of other Leftist thinkers, and providing his view on what *The Alternative* might be.

¹⁷ "Iván Szelényi." Wikipedia, September 3, 2024.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iv%C3%A1n_Szel%C3%A9nyi.