

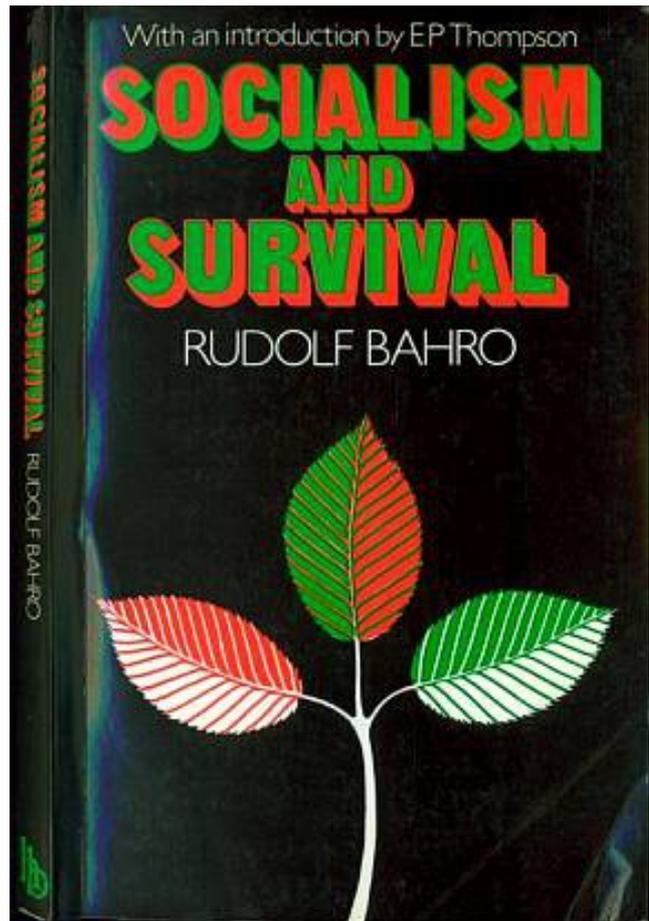
Rudolf Bahro

# Socialism and Survival

Articles, Essays and Talks 1979-1982

Introduced by E. P. Thomson

Sachbuch 1982



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The Alternative in Eastern Europe (Verso/NLB)

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**Rudolf Bahro**

## **Socialism and Survival**

(articles, essays and talks 1979-1982)

introduced by  
**E.P. Thompson**

heretic books 

This volume contains a selection of the texts first collected in book form in *Elemente einer neuen Politik*, together with the previously unpublished 'Conditions for a Socialist Perspective in the Late Twentieth Century', 'Reply to Three Questions from the West German Radio' and 'Who Can Stop the Apocalypse?'

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# Introduction by E.P. Thompson

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For some odd reason, Rudolf Bahro thought it might be helpful if this collection of his recent writings was presented to the English-speaking public by a native.

I am honoured that the lot should have fallen to me, but any extended introduction is unnecessary.

It would only get in the way. **Bahro's reputation is secure.** It rests upon *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, one of the few necessary, original, and truly significant contributions to the political thought of Europe in the **post-War years**.

That book was researched and written in East Germany, in the years 1972 to 1977, **in Bahro's spare time**, while he was working as an industrial administrator or political manager. Educated in the German Marxist (and Communist) traditions, he brought the method of Marx and the principles of Rosa Luxemburg to bear upon the analysis of **'actually existing socialism'**.

I will not describe the book further, since it is, and will long remain, essential reading.

*The Alternative* was published by a **West German trade-union Publishing house**. Bahro was duly arrested, accused of Publishing 'state secrets' (!), and sentenced to eight years' imprisonment. He was correctly treated in prison, got through a great deal of reading (including the Bible, from end to end), began to teach himself French and English, and was eventually released, more than two years later, to West Germany.

The present volume takes up the story at that point. The 'story' is the subsequent development of Rudolf Bahro's political thought. This requires no interpreter, and I will content myself with two comments.

First, Bahro's originality asserts itself in the manner in which he breaks free from every stereotype and disappoints the expectations of most of the reception committees eagerly awaiting him in the 'free West'. To simplify, 'dissidents' from the 'East' are normally received with three kinds of expectation.

First, there are the very well-funded and experienced **Cold War Operators**, supported by Western intelligence: these stand ready to receive and sort the dissenters, grade them by weight, and pass them along the line to visiting fellowships in Western universities or the like. Second, there are the eager (but usually impoverished and materially unhelpful) reception groups of various zealous political movements — some of them Marxist and

Trotskyist — whose hands are held out anxiously to claim the new comer as one of their own. Third, there is a gentler, less calculating, reception network among refugee compatriots and others who simply expect the new comer to lie

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low for a while, to find a new place in life, and who advise an interval for rehabilitation and reflection before attempting any Intervention.

Bahro disappointed all three sets of expectation. Like someone leaping from a moving train, he hit the ground running, but running in his own direction. He had no interest in taking part in Gold War games. This is partly because he refuses both 'sides' — the very notion of 'sides' is specious. He does not nourish bitterness against the GDR, and he often insists that there are large (if hidden) constituencies to address on 'the other side'. It is partly also because the malaise which he had identified in Eastern Europe he found also in the West.

Bahro did not identify himself with any of the eagerly awaiting Marxist groups. But he did not repudiate or denounce them either. He acknowledged the socialist tradition, and the tradition of Marx, but he went on to challenge some of its most sacred categories (including that of 'class', and of humankind's relation to nature), or the relevance of those categories in the present. He identified himself with the new ecological movement, the 'Greens', and he sought to bring the different socialist fractions together into a more generous 'Socialist Conference'. He came from the GDR with a prophetic sense of urgency, and by deliberate choice he allowed himself no time for 'rehabilitation' or reflection. He chose to think in public and on his feet. This book is the product of these public exchanges.

My second comment is this. Bahro's vision, which does not refuse the utopian mode (it was sad also to note that in 'actually existing socialism' a writer could be imprisoned for the passion of his socialist utopianism) is fresh and original. And yet, in a surprising way, it is traditional also. When I read the third and final section of *The Alternative*, I was astonished to find, on page after page, a reincarnation in modern dress of some of the essential preoccupations of William Morris in his socialist writings of the 1880s. Yet Morris's socialist essays were unknown to Bahro. It is encouraging to know that this vision, fresh and with new additions, wells up once again.

Since Rudolf Bahro completed most of the essays which make up this book he has been increasingly committed (and distracted from his primary themes) by the urgent work for European nuclear disarmament. He has played an outstanding part in advising the peace movement in West Germany and in assisting us all in our relations with Eastern Europe. **It is good to have him as a friend and colleague. #**

## Preface to the German Edition

When I first arrived in the West, some people — even people who were familiar with my writing and had not just heard of me through the media — were worried or actually disappointed that I did not prefer at first to maintain a cautious silence, while analysing things carefully and in particular keeping aloof from political parties. I should as it were have withdrawn from the fray and tried — guided by books, personal discussion and the experience of daily life — to get to know the situation here as well as I understood conditions in East Germany before pronouncing on them. It was only to be expected, of course, that my immediate political involvement would not merely be physically and mentally exhausting, but would also bring with it a loss of innocence as far as the internal politics of West Germany are concerned.

After everything that led up to my arrival, however, it would not only have been difficult, but in my view inappropriate, had I not shown myself from the start as the political person that I am and remain. For the sake of the cause I had committed myself to, I needed first of all to correct the image that the mass media had presented of me. I was never an ‘East German dissident’ in the sense that even the supposedly serious press liked to portray me. I hadn’t arrived in the West just to insult the GDR from a safe distance, or to confirm the self-righteous prejudices of people who like to sit around and casually compare the two social systems.

The common prejudice cultivated by reactionaries here shares to a remarkable degree the view of the political bureaucracy in the GDR that criticism of its regime is necessarily directed at the liquidation of the East German state, if not of the entire society. What was understood in the case of the Czech reformers of 1968, or at least realistically accepted — that they did not seek to destroy the foundations on which they stood, but simply to transform the institutional superstructure and achieve a socialism with a human face — is only conceded to the opposition in the GDR by an enlightened minority, chiefly on the left. And anyone whose

When the threats of nuclear war and ecocatastrophe put human existence in question, there is no time for traditional dogmas. Rudolf Bahro writes as a socialist who finds his humanist values embodied today in the ecology and peace movements. These have the potential to grow together into an overall 'movement for conversion in the metropolises' in which all forces of emancipation will find a place. In today's extreme situation, Bahro looks to a mobilisation of human energies of the kind generally associated with religion more than politics. **Socialism and Survival** will raise many socialist hackles, but it offers help and encouragement to the growing number who share Bahro's own priorities.

*The Alternative in Eastern Europe* brought Rudolf Bahro imprisonment and expulsion from his East German homeland, but also an international reputation: in E.P. Thompson's words, 'one of the few necessary, original, and truly significant contributions to the political thought of Europe in the post-War years'. Now prominent in the West German peace movement, no one could be better qualified to bring together the two great themes of contemporary politics: **Socialism and Survival**.

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**SOCIALISM AND SURVIVAL**

RUDOLF BAHRO

