

Introduction: Subversion, Dissent and Opposition in Communist

Europe and Beyond

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Abstract:

This essay introduces “Between Subversion and Opposition: Multiple Challenges to Communist Rule,” a special issue of *East Central Europe*. It focuses on four broader questions raised by the contributions: the different periodizations associated with communist rule; the meanings attached to different forms of subversion and dissent; the broader transnational contexts in which activists operated—including the role of contacts with activists in the West; and, finally, the different ways oppositional activity has been remembered and represented.

Keywords:

state socialism, dissidents, dissent, opposition, Eastern Europe

Writing in September 1989, the Czech sociologist and dissident Jiřina Šiklová reflected on the difficulty of explaining differences in terms of the political stances and actions under state socialism. In conversations with Western friends, Šiklová noted, there would always come a point when she would be asked: “And what do your communists say? What about trade unionists’ opinions?” In response, she would reply that “they usually think the same as so-called dissidents,” and that “many Communist party officials tell the selfsame political jokes,

and gripe just as much about the incompetence and corruption of our leadership” (Šiklová 1990: 347). Writing at a point of acute crisis for the existing regime in Czechoslovakia, Šiklová noted that it was not so much discontent that served as a demarcation line but rather the “moral stance and the courage with which they [people who are concerned about and with politics] voice their views” (Šiklová 1990: 348). In this context, she emphasized the significance of people in the “gray zone” who had themselves “perceived the errors of the socialist system early on” and had not succumbed to “the lures and the pressures from the establishment,” even if “their political involvement was minimal” (Šiklová 1990: 350–351).

Šiklová’s comments point at the complex ways in which people navigated life under state socialism—a subject that has generated a rich and diverse body of literature (e.g., Fulbrook 2005; Penn and Massino, 2009; Betts, 2010; Koleva 2012; Donert et al., 2022). Just as we can understand that communist regimes were not monolithic or impenetrable, we now also have a more complex picture of dissent in its many forms, from organized and connected acts of opposition through to more mundane forms of everyday resistance. The articles in this special issue focus on some of the many ways the status quo was being subverted and contested across Central and Eastern Europe in the decades before 1989. In doing so, the contributions invite reflection on what might have constituted a “challenge” to communist rule—and the context in which such challenges manifested themselves.

Drawing on examples ranging from petty theft to HIV/AIDS activism, the five essays in this special issue explore a variety of actors and activists, not all of whom intended to come into conflict with the state. They explore ambiguities in how opposition has been labeled and remembered, as well the divisions within activist movements themselves. As a whole, the journal issue deliberately features material that focuses on different levels of inquiry: from local approaches and everyday life, to national settings (specifically the GDR, Poland, and Romania) and transnational processes and connections (both within and beyond the Eastern

bloc). Moreover, taken together, the pieces look “beyond” such challenges both spatially and chronologically. Our introduction highlights that the combination of these perspectives resonates with wider strands in the literature, notably different periodizations associated with communist rule, the meanings of dissent, the broader transnational contexts in which activists operated, as well as the ways they have been remembered.

Chronologies and Periodizations

Expressions and experiences of dissent need to be seen in connection with the wider postwar development of Central and Eastern Europe. From the mid-1950s onwards, de-Stalinization and what was known in the Soviet Union as the “thaw” allowed for greater openness and cultural freedoms across the socialist bloc (Kozlov and Gilburd 2013). This “thaw” also coincided with a renewed official investment in internationalism, which generated a range of contacts within and beyond the “Second World” (Babiracki and Jersild 2016). Yet any spaces for debate and contestation were intrinsically bounded, as demonstrated by the crushing of the uprisings in Hungary and Poland in 1956. The picture is also ambivalent when it comes to later periods. On the one hand, the advent of Leonid Brezhnev, the mid-1960s political trials in the Soviet Union, and the violent suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 heralded a return to authoritarianism and repression; on the other hand, these developments prompted intellectual and popular disillusionment and a separation between “official” and “unofficial” cultures, making it impossible to close down alternative modes of thought (Lovell 2013: 305). Closer investigation of, for instance, the so-called “normalization” period in Czechoslovakia reveals a complex pattern of societal responses that contrasted with the repressive nature of official policies after the Prague Spring (McDermott and Stibbe 2022).

Recent work on Central and Eastern Europe in the Cold War has, therefore, problematized traditional periodizations that contrast phases of liberalization and repression.

Such work has pointed out that the “thaw” was not universally a period of liberalization—nor was its endpoint in all spheres of life obvious or simultaneous (Bittner 2008: 10–11). Equally, with regard to the Soviet Union, it has been demonstrated that political protest, usually considered to have begun only in the 1960s, was also a feature of the “thaw” era (Hornsby 2013: 1–11), in contrast to accounts that primarily focused on cultural freedoms in this earlier period. Moreover, it is also evident that society and culture in Eastern Europe were connected to and shaped by global trends, which also meant that socialist societies experienced their own countercultural moments in the “socialist sixties” and beyond (Gorsuch and Koenker 2013: 1–5; Fürst 2021). The 1970s—often characterized as the “era of stagnation” and sandwiched between more turbulent decades—have also been the subject of more nuanced studies (Lovell 2013: 304). And finally, it is recognized that 1989, while obviously a fundamental turning point in many ways, was not a watershed in all spheres of life, resulting in “ambiguous transitions” in several cases (on Romania, see Massino 2019). There were also complex legacies for dissent and opposition into the 1990s (Horvath 2005).

Acknowledging such complexities, the articles in this special issue adopt a range of chronological approaches. Richard Millington takes a long view of petty theft in the GDR, analyzing examples from the early 1960s up to the mid-1980s. Likewise, Kim Christiaens and Manuel Herrera Crespo cover a broad timeframe, contrasting Belgian Catholic activists’ engagement with East European dissidents following the Hungarian revolution with their relationships in the “long 1970s.” Charlotte Alston studies scientific networks for the support of Soviet dissidents that were active in the 1980s and continued to mobilize beyond Gorbachev’s reforms: for the key protagonists and their supporters, these reforms did not seem to immediately change things much. Aleksandra Gajowy’s article on Polish AIDS activism focuses on the first decade of the epidemic, from 1985 to 1995, and demonstrates that both activism around and responses to the epidemic retained some key features under both the

communist and post-communist regimes. James Koranyi traces the emergence and development of Romanian German dissident groups in the 1970s and 1980s as well as their subsequent trajectories and disappointments in the 1990s and 2000s. In this respect, both Gajowy and Koranyi highlight that contestation—not just when it came to the political authorities but also to societal attitudes (Gajowy) or former allies (Koranyi)—did not have to end with the collapse of the old political order in or around 1989.

The contributions to this special issue treat their subjects on their own terms and in their own contexts rather than attempting to look back from or think forward to 1989. While Western historiography has often been accused of an over-enthusiastic focus on documenting oppositions (Falk 2016: 32), such groups have also suffered from studies that attempt to prove or disprove the role of specific groups or individuals in the collapse of communism (Acton 1997), adopting a “results-driven” perspective from the vantage point of the dictatorships’ demise. Analyzing challenges to communist rule only in relation to the regimes’ endpoint is problematic for a number of reasons, not least because it removes the context of uncertainty and risk surrounding activism at the time (Bolton 2012: 44–45). Neither do we assume that all the kinds of contestation were oppositional in the sense of wanting to bring down the system. For some protagonists, criticisms were compatible with the socialist project (Laqua and Alston 2021): various actors demanded rights and freedoms that were already guaranteed by their governments on paper. At the same time, a commitment to socialist principles did not preclude the possibility of or need for reform.

Meanings of Dissent

When protest occurred, it was not always disruptive or demonstrative, and the case studies here sit within a broad spectrum of subversive and oppositional activity that ranges from absenteeism at work and alternative lifestyle choices, through reading samizdat, listening to

banned radio stations, or having discussions with friends, to authoring or circulating oppositional material or taking part in organized groups or protests (Falk 2011: 321–322; see also Falk 2003). In his article on petty theft in the GDR, for example, Richard Millington situates this kind of minor criminality at a very early point on this spectrum. He finds that theft of “people’s property” from industry was not frequently a conscious act of opposition, although the ways in which petty thieves interpreted their own acts of theft within the law demonstrated a fluid attitude to the regime’s ideology and an imperative to pursue their own interests (these items “belonged to the people anyway”). Millington’s petty thieves may have been exercising a form of *Eigensinn* (or *Eigen-Sinn*), a term by which Alf Lüdtke (1993) has highlighted the role of self-willed action that encompassed a range of subversive strategies in everyday life. Such cases included daydreaming, taking unscheduled breaks, and other activities that involved ignoring regulated work structures without disturbing them completely. The boundary between *Eigensinn* and open resistance could be fluid and unclear, which has proven to be a fruitful terrain for investigating social histories of life under state socialism (Lindenberger 2022; Port 2013).

The ways that people subverted official rhetoric in private while complying in public (Scott 1990) and the use of jokes and music to challenge state ideology have also been explored (Djaglov 2013; Laqua 2021). The disjunction between public performance and private belief was articulated already in Václav Havel’s “The Power of the Powerless” in 1978: the greengrocer who puts a sign in his window every day calling on workers of the world to unite makes a public statement not that he believes in this slogan, or that he blindly follows authority, but rather that he is a member of society who understands his obligations and his interests and acts accordingly (Havel 1991: 132–133). What he says or does in private is another matter.

At the other end of the spectrum, for active dissident figures, what mattered was the step that it took for the greengrocer to decide not to put out his sign, not to vote in elections,

and to say what he thinks at political meetings—to align his actions with his conscience, to step out of “living within the lie” and attempt to “live within the truth” (Havel 1991: 146). As Roy Medvedev expressed it, a dissident should do “more than simply disagree and think differently; he openly proclaims his dissent and demonstrates it in one way or another to his compatriots and the state. In other words, he doesn’t just complain in private to his wife or close friends” (Medvedev 1980: 1). Setting aside the problematic gender dynamics of this statement, applying labels at this end of the spectrum of resistance and opposition was not so straightforward. While for Western political scientists, describing something as “dissent” essentially legitimized the action (Falk 2016: 24–25), few “dissidents” in Eastern Europe used or liked that term. In the Soviet Union, the label was first applied in a derogatory sense (made more derogatory by the Western origin of the term) by the authorities. Havel distanced himself from it when he said that “the spectre . . . haunting Eastern Europe” was “what in the West is called” dissent (Havel 1991: 127).

Many activists regarded themselves not as anti-communists but as socialist citizens holding their governments to account. This observation applied to some of the scientists featuring in Alston’s contribution, who became the subject of solidarity campaigns in the West. In such instances, internal critique could be compatible with both the politics of solidarity and the human rights discourses that gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s (on this aspect, with regard to the Polish case, see Brier 2021). Jonathan Bolton points out that while social histories have challenged binaries of collaboration and resistance and looked in more detail at how people negotiated life under communist regimes, dissidents themselves have often been “lost in an old paradigm,” in need of studies that recognize the complexity of their identities and organization (Bolton 2012: 23).

The relationship between states and the persons engaging in these acts of contention was also complex and can be difficult to untangle. The idea of public and private transcripts

assumes a complete separation between the public and private sphere, which is not necessarily characteristic of most social interactions. With regard to the GDR, Anselma Gallinat points out that the boundaries between subordinate and superior could be “fuzzy,” as people could be in roles that gave them some authority but still not consider themselves part of the authorities (Gallinat 2005: 293). Especially in “stagnant” late socialist societies, there were reasons for the state to create space for some level of alternate cultural and even political expression. The Ukrainian *shistdesiatnyky* (“sixties-ers,” or people of the sixties) had an ambiguous, in some ways symbiotic relationship with authority—the cultural space they occupied was not completely separate from the official cultural space, and they were encouraged and facilitated by the Ukrainian Komsomol (Yekelchuk 2015). Polly Jones has demonstrated the fluidity between “official” and “underground” literature in the late Soviet Union: the authorities commissioned biographies by and about dissident figures, while even dissidents read good quality, officially published literature (Jones 2019: 1–27). The popular 1973 television series *Seventeen Moments in Spring* was closely supervised by the KGB but nevertheless left room for ironic readings on the part of the intelligentsia (Lovell 2013: 316). By contrast, some social groups chose simply to create their own alternate worlds to live in or to “drop out” of society rather than engaging with or opposing the authorities (Fürst and McLellan 2017; Fürst 2021). Communist states obviously closely monitored opposition, but they could also “fail to register resistance as well as imagine, create and invent it”; the existing order could even, in some cases, be “subtly reinforced even by those ostensibly committing acts of opposition” (David-Fox 2000: 161).

Placing Dissent in a Transnational Context

While also formed within specific geographical, political, and social contexts, Cold War oppositions were often inherently transnational, involving the movement of people, texts, and

ideas in multidirectional processes of “transfer and dissemination, translation and retranslation, amplification and distortion, and ultimately collecting and archiving” (Kind-Kovacs and Labov 2013: 9). James Koranyi’s article draws attention to Romanian Germans, whose history in the twentieth century was shaped by migration (see also Koranyi 2021). The dissidents covered in his piece operated both in Romania and in exile and worked across different languages. Koranyi sheds light on features of an opposition that was not absent but was, as he notes, “cacophonous and difficult to pin down.” Meanwhile, while Aleksandra Gajowy's discussion of HIV/AIDS activism concentrates on Poland, responses to the epidemic occurred within a wider international setting. For Polish LGBT campaigners—who were protagonists in such debates seeking to counter different forms of marginalization—transnational connections had been a feature since the 1980s (Szulc 2018).

These observations draw attention to the role of international contacts and exchanges. Western supporters helped construct the figure of “the dissident,” thus placing different forms of political dissent within a wider framework and narrative (Szulecki 2019). The final two articles focus on the challenges of activism that connected protagonists in East and West, drawing attention to misunderstandings, assumptions, challenges, and distractions involved in building support networks across geographical and ideological boundaries. Kim Christiaens and Manuel Herrera Crespo examine the ways that Belgian Catholic groups mobilized on behalf of East European dissidents. Charlotte Alston’s article explores a similar issue from the point of view of professional networks: the work of scientists internationally to support dissident scientists in the Soviet Union. In both stories, the existence of multiple frameworks through which such solidarity might be expressed is evident. The signature of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 and the proliferation of Helsinki Watch Groups internationally provided one common language to speak about repression and contestation (Snyder 2011; Bolton 2012: 27–28), but there were other frameworks through which solidarity could be expressed too: these

included Christian associations, humanitarian organizations, professional literary and scientific networks, and, in other cases, trades union activism (Brier 2021; Goddeeris 2010).

Moreover, the transnational lines of inquiry pursued in these pieces draw attention to a wider issue, namely the way in which opposition in Central and Eastern Europe related to resistance to repression elsewhere, whether in military dictatorships in Southern Europe and Latin America or under the remnants of colonial rule or neocolonial forms of domination. The article by Christiaens and Herrera Crespo draws attention to such ties between “East–West” and “North–South” activism, tracing both intersections and the ways external support for some forms of oppositional activity at times overshadowed other causes. In this respect, our special journal issue contributes to a scholarship that does not look at the socialist world in isolation but considers its interactions within a global context (Mark et al. 2022; Mark et al. 2019). Recent studies have traced the way activist groups in Central and Eastern Europe engaged with political struggles elsewhere—from the Vietnam War to anti-apartheid activism—and noted the need to consider East–West and North–South campaigns and alliances in terms of their connections and overlaps (Christiaens and Goddeeris 2019; Christiaens 2017; Mark et al. 2019: 173–219). And while Alston’s piece stresses the importance of human rights discourses in the campaigns launched on behalf of Soviet scientists, it is important to note the malleability of human rights discourse, which could also be deployed by communist leaders (Richardson-Little 2020) and which, among different constituencies, coexisted with other framings, including notions of solidarity.

Memories and Representation

Finally, this special issue considers conflicting memories of activism, protest, and dissent. Even in 1989, the experience of change was sometimes defined by memories of past upheavals (see e.g., Millington 2014: 150–169). Moreover, notwithstanding the evident change in the political

system, after 1989 questions remained about the extent of the transformation. While leading dissidents—most famously Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa—were central to the post-communist leadership in their countries, in many other cases, the events of 1989 were not characterized by the triumph of communist-era oppositions (Horvath 2005: 2–3). Reflecting on the future trajectories for Czech dissent at the time, Jiřina Šiklová already observed that dissidents might find themselves disoriented and poorly positioned to take a lead, stating that “when we try to open a sticky door, the moment it goes, we lose our balance for a moment” (Šiklová 1990: 358). James Mark (2010) has traced the disappointments and open questions that, in some contexts, have led to the impression that the events of 1989 amounted to an “unfinished revolution.”

Within the context of this special journal issue, the question of memory arises in different ways. Whereas Millington’s study of petty theft is based on the memories of individuals who lived and worked in the GDR, the featured voices hardly insert themselves into wider oppositional narratives. From a different angle, the pieces by Alston and Christiaens and Herrera Crespo focus on Western protagonists whose own policy shifts over time raise wider questions about the discontinuities of such campaigns—a point explicitly addressed by Christiaens and Herrera Crespo when they consider how Western solidarity movements responded to the fall of the dictatorships in 1989 and what this meant for their own solidarity campaigns.

The question of contested memories features most explicitly in Koranyi’s article. He points out that few Romanian oppositional figures were in a position to shape post-1989 politics, though they continued to discuss Romanian affairs from abroad. Romanian Germans filled this space, but heated debates about their actions under communism and whether these constituted collaboration or opposition ensued. Koranyi also highlights the psychological impact for former dissidents who found themselves without a role in the post-communist world.

Koranyi's dissidents were left isolated and indulged in recriminations about their respective roles in communist society and in the dissident movement.. Questioning individuals' conduct under communism was commonplace in the post-1989 world: resistance might be a badge of pride, just as individuals' working lives and organizational memberships might be evidence of an unpalatable closeness to the regime (Gallinat 2017: 4–5).

In her article on art, activism and the AIDS epidemic in Poland, Aleksandra Gajowy further demonstrates that some challenges crossed the 1989 divide. Anxiety and misinformation about the epidemic as well as hostile representations of HIV-positive people were equally a feature of the last days of communism and the early days of capitalism. Gajowy points out that the abrupt political changes that took place in 1989 were not immediately reconciled with social responses. Her article uses artistic responses to HIV/AIDS in the 1990 to draw attention to stigmatization that cut across the change in political system.

The question of memory and presentation underpins the other strands that have been mentioned in this introduction—that is, periodization, contested meanings of activism, and transnational relations. In terms of the first of these three aspects, it is evident that that 1989 (or 1991, in the Soviet case) in many senses did not amount to a clear cut-off point. Second, in terms of the meanings of dissent, shifts in category and blurred boundaries also reflected later constructions. And, finally, the transnational links are important because, perhaps unsurprisingly, retrospective accounts tend to emphasize the more spectacular forms of resistance. By putting very different examples next to each other, this journal issue explores the range of different challenges presented to socialist rule in Eastern Europe as well as the ways they were understood, interpreted, and remembered.

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