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## The Making of Dissidents: Hungary's Democratic Opposition and its Western Friends, 1973–1998. By Victoria Harms. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2024. pp. 400.

Scholars of East and Central European (ECE) history often complain (with good reason) that many aspects of the region's history have not been given attention or discussed adequately in the international historiography. The history of dissidents under state socialist regimes represents one of the fortunate exceptions. The political, social, and cultural implications of dissent behind the Iron Curtain have been chronicled, celebrated, and analyzed, beginning with the first noticeable signs of dissent in the 1960s. Scholarly interest intensified during the 1980s and has remained more or less steady ever since.[1] In her recent monograph, Victoria Harms makes a strong contribution to this rich historiography, significantly expanding our understanding of the origins of the international focus on dissidents from ECE.

Approaching the wider phenomenon through the example of the Hungarian democratic opposition from the 1970s until the late 1990s, Harms examines a transnational East-West network dedicated to supporting dissidents in ECE, amplifying their voices, and changing the Cold War status quo. Her research relies on over 40 oral history interviews conducted between 2009 and 2016, the archival documents of several human rights organizations and fellowship programs, and numerous tamizdat and samizdat publications. The book offers a polyphonic collective biography of a broad cohort of colorful intellectuals, activists, and publishers who were active on both sides of the Iron Curtain, reconstructing the intricate web of relationships, shared ideas, and material support. By highlighting their similar intellectual and political trajectories, the book shows how these individuals came to form a transnational community that embraced the emancipatory language of liberalism and human rights and played a significant role in the collapse of state socialist regimes.

Importantly, by viewing the "making of dissidents" as a process, Harms analyzes the trans-Atlantic coproduction of the "perception of dissidents as the genuine representatives of their societies" and the authentic voices of the ECE region (p.223). Actors from both inside and outside of the Soviet bloc

1 See, for example, David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); András Bozóki, *Rolling Transition and the Role of Intellectuals: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest–Vienna–New York: Central European University Press, 2022).


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brought their particular capital to this collaborative endeavor. ECE intellectuals articulated ideas that questioned the geopolitical status quo, and their Western supporters had the organizational skills and the social, cultural, and financial capital to build a support network. The former used the resulting "dissident" role to oppose the repressive policies of socialist regimes, simultaneously obtaining a measure of protection against these regimes and galvanizing international public discourse. The latter engaged with dissidents and educated Western audiences to maintain their intellectual independence and demonstrate nonpartisanship in the Cold War. Moreover, as Harms demonstrates, by acting as the spokespeople of the "genuine representatives" and the interpreters of the authentic interpreters, the Westerners built professional identities and academic careers on their "insider knowledge" about the ECE region (p.233).

The book follows the tentative formation, energetic activities, and legacy of the East–West network that formed around the cause of dissidents. Chapter one presents the formative experiences of key actors from the late 1950s to the early 1970s in three distinctive settings: New York, West Germany, and socialist Hungary. Focus on these contexts is complemented later in the book with a discussion of other symbolic sites for dissent, namely the Soviet Union and Poland, and important organizational hubs, like Paris and Vienna. Chapter two examines the circumstances that prompted Western and Eastern intellectuals to discover their mutual interests and shared concerns. Starting from a similar disillusionment in leftist utopian and revolutionary beliefs after 1968, like-minded thinkers came to terms with the new situation by finding allies on the other side of the Iron Curtain. After the Vietnam War, Westerners became invested in highlighting violations of human rights in the Soviet bloc and, thanks to the example of ECE dissidents, discovered the relevance of the Helsinki Final Act. Hungary came into focus at the time due to the socialist regime's actions against Miklós Haraszti and György Konrád, who were soon to become internationally recognized, emblematic figures of the Hungarian opposition.

The next two chapters demonstrate the significant regional and global impact exerted by the Polish oppositional movement starting in the late 1970s, changing the paradigm for oppositional tactics and also in terms of the international attention directed towards dissidents. Chapter three examines how the Komitet Obrony Robotników (KOR, Workers' Defense Committee) and Polish samizdat culture inspired Hungarian nonconformist intellectuals to develop their own forms of resistance through the launch of samizdat publications and the establishment of the Monday Free University. Chapter four analyzes how the

independent trade union Solidarność and the subsequent imposition of martial law in Poland became a "game changer," especially in galvanizing Western support for dissident movements in ECE. For instance, this manifested in the increased work of the Fondation pour une entraide intellectuelle européenne and the initial philanthropic activity of financier George Soros.

Harms effectively reconstructs the less visible dimension of Western supportive structures, namely the financial conditions and logistical requirements of the transnational network. In a particularly striking way, she shows that, before the mobilizing effect of the Polish example, Western activists hoping to help ECE dissidents were confronted with tremendous challenges, including lack of funding, a disinterested media, and apathetic publics. The initial precarity of these efforts was in stark contrast with the recurring accusations of the socialist authorities and their State Security at the time, who crafted an image of a supposedly massive Western apparatus with unlimited resources inciting local "provocateurs" to undermine the stability of the regimes.

The next three chapters show how the East-West network grew into organizational maturity and follows Hungarian dissidents as they rose to their political zenith in the late 1980s. As a central theme, chapter five highlights the emergence of a transnational ideological consensus around liberal interpretations of human rights and the need to challenge socialist regimes through discursive practices stemming from this paradigm. Thanks to his widely read essay book *Antipolitics*, György Konrád emerged as the most articulate Hungarian dissident to voice this trend for Western readers. Chapter six frames the years 1985 and 1986 as the golden age of the East-West network. It emphasizes the importance of the Alternative Forum in October 1985, which coincided with the official Helsinki review conference in Budapest. Here, the diverse community of Hungarian dissidents was seen as representing all ECE dissident movements on the international public stage.

The book compellingly illustrates how dissidents in the region (and Hungarians in particular) came to prominence through the elevation of "Central Europe," conceptualized as an alternative symbolic geography to the Cold War status quo and to "Yalta Europe," meaning the arbitrary division of the continent during the allied conferences of 1945. The fact that Central Europe, as a political idea, "spoke to and fit into the Zeitgeist of the 1980s" was the outcome of the successful collaborative political communication campaign of a now robust East-West network. Thanks to their efforts, within a discursive universe determined by superpower dichotomy, the world paid attention to

the region (at least for a brief period) not because of a tragedy or labels of backwardness, but due to its positive political potential.

In chapter seven, Harms outlines the dynamic and agonistic implementation of this potential within Hungary in the years of the regime change. Against the backdrop of multiplying civil organizations, mass demonstrations on the streets of Budapest, and the emergence of political parties, the book analyzes the interactions between the formalized Democratic Opposition, their rival oppositional community, i.e., the ethno-populists in the Hungarian Democratic Forum, and the formerly ruling socialist party, which was desperately seeking to transform itself in order to maintain some credibility against the new, politically diverse backdrop. The chapter also highlights the impactful work of intellectuals like Timothy Garton Ash, Jacques Rupnik, and Tony Judt, who were able to communicate successfully to Western audiences that the changes behind the Iron Curtain would usher in a liberal and democratic ECE.

Chapter eight examines the post-socialist period between 1990 and 1998. It follows the sudden disintegration of dissident political projects, the diverging careers of dissidents as most of them left politics, and the persisting yet precarious legacy of the East-West network. In the Hungarian context, the intensification of party conflicts, surging ethnonationalism, and antisemitic attacks soon threw into question both the applicability and popularity of liberal ideas. More broadly, the political aspirations and cultural legacy of the transnational community that formed around ECE dissidents can be unpacked through the symptomatic history of the Central European University. As an institution, CEU represents the crystallization of the East-West network of non-conformist thinkers, made possible with funds provided by George Soros, a long-time supporter of this community. Yet, the failure of the university's initial multi-campus project indicated that the "realization of an autonomous democratic Central Europe, a vision that grew out of the solidarity among the fraternal opposition movements in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, was unrealistic" (p.255). Finally, the attacks against CEU by the Orbán government and the university's relocation to Vienna in 2019 can be interpreted as an open and symbolic rejection of the dissidents' liberal tradition and their Western allies.

The rich tapestry of interlinked narratives and the lively, unique voices of the protagonists provide a fascinating read for those intimately familiar with ECE and Hungarian history. However, the rich (at times overly rich) level of detail, the numerous characters, and the sheer number of threads to the story could become overwhelming and confusing for non-specialist readers. More

concerningly, because the book wishes to give voice to a group of intellectuals and to reconstruct their microcosmos, it often defaults to a pronounced, celebratory emic perspective, adopting the conceptions, categories, and outlook of the chosen protagonists. This occurs to the detriment of a more detached analysis of the wider geopolitical and social context in which the dissidents and their Western allies acted.

Most relevant from the perspective of a more contextualized understanding of the East-West network, the book does not engage seriously with the dimension of the "mainstream" and of the "official," i.e., the categories against which the dissidents defined themselves. The Cold War status quo is treated as a static condition, defined by and benefiting only the superpowers and regime officials. Yet, current research on détente and the reimagined "porous" Iron Curtain has revealed a rich constellation of trans-systemic interactions and cultural exchanges beginning in the late 1950s.[2] Far from static, these exchanges gradually increased over time and, through their practices and organizational models (fellowship programs, international workshops, etc.), they significantly influenced the transnational collaborative endeavors that sustained ECE dissidents.

Furthermore, a more pointed examination of the Cold War agenda of US foreign policy could have offered a more nuanced understanding of Washington's position towards dissidents behind the Iron Curtain. As the US sought to undermine the socialist regimes over the long term in part through cultural diplomacy and economic relations, the "disruptive" behavior of dissidents was likely seen as counterproductive by US policymakers and even many of the private or public actors who were invested in the smooth operation of the official exchanges with Soviet bloc countries. A similar insight could have been gained through more thorough investigation of socialist Hungary's "opening up" to the West since the 1960s. This would reveal not a monolithic, single-minded "regime" (as the dissident discourse, understandably, framed it), but a diverse composite of governmental and professional stakeholders, from ministries to research institutes and universities, all interested in lucrative and aboveboard collaborative undertakings with Western partners. Closely related to this, the book's analysis would have benefited from a thorough consideration of the state-condoned, yet mostly bottom-up gradual Westernization of the country, especially through the

2 See Oliver Bange, Poul Villaume, eds., *The Long Détente: Changing Concepts of Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1950s–1980s* (Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2017); Ludovic Tournès and Giles Scott-Smith, eds., *Global exchanges: scholarships and transnational circulations in the modern world* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018).

societal embrace of US popular culture and consumerism.[3] An assessment of the widening access to tourist trips and Western consumer and cultural goods in socialist Hungary would have contributed to a richer understanding of the social marginalization (and also the pronounced elitism) of dissident thinkers before the late 1980s.

Nonetheless, readers interested in a deep dive into the internal dynamics and self-perception of the East-West dissident network will find the book valuable. While it certainly has strong competition within the rich literature on ECE dissident movements and thinkers, it stands out by delivering a balanced, multi-focal transnational history of a remarkable and fearless community and by carefully reconstructing the complex processes undergirding its activities. Perhaps most importantly, while examining the dissident discourses and practices of an era long thought to be past, due to the reappearance of authoritarian measures both in Central Europe and the US, and the increasing attacks against the basic liberal values that the Hungarian opposition embodied and fought for, Harms's book has acquired an unfortunate timeliness. Her empathetic study of creative oppositional thinking, non-violent, integrative resistance methods, non-radical, consensus-building political goals, and the required moral steadfastness will undoubtedly be edifying for all of us.

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3 Róbert Takács, *Hollywood behind the Iron Curtain* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2022).