

Dissidents in Communist Central Europe: Human Rights and the Emergence of New Transnational Actors. By Kacper Szulecki. London–New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019. 257 pp.

Dissidents in Communist Central Europe, the first monograph in a Palgrave book series exploring the history of social movements in the modern era, fits well into the recent historiography on dissident movements in East Central Europe, which has tended to strive towards more complex understandings of dissent and opposition and move beyond simplistic interpretations of the “communist monolith.” By adopting a transnational perspective, Szulecki contributes to more recent historiographical trends which challenge the traditional understanding of communist regimes as isolated nation states by pointing toward the links, networks, and transfers which existed between the so-called “East” and “West.”

What sets Szulecki’s work apart from other studies on dissident movements in East Central Europe is the type of problem it addresses. It explores the meaning of the term “dissent” itself and the history of this term using theoretical insights from cultural sociology and political science. The word dissident, Szulecki points out, invokes certain meanings; his study traces what these meanings were and where they came from. Chapter 2 provides the conceptual framework of the monograph, while Chapters 3–9 offer empirical analyses of the emergence and development of dissidence in Central European states, more specifically Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and East Germany. Finally, drawing on an array of sources ranging from *samizdat*, *tamizdat*, memoirs, (auto) biographies, and interviews, Szulecki arrives at an analytical category which he dubs “dissidentism,” an -ism which has been adopted and used in non-European contexts, so that today, as he points out, we hear about dissidents in Cuba, Russia, Iran, China, and Belarus.

Szulecki identifies three elements of the “dissident triangle” which he contends are essential to the rise of dissidentism. First, dissidence must be open and public and must find expression in legal and non-violent acts of dissent that risk sanction and repression. Thus, the first necessary condition for the emergence of dissidence was de-Stalinization. As Szulecki points out, dissent in Central Europe grew out of post-totalitarian roots and was not initially anti-Marxist. Moreover, Szulecki highlights that dissidence, unlike resistance, exists in a gray zone between legality and illegality. Instead of breaching the rules of the

system, or employing violence, it works “within” the system, while concurrently challenging the status quo.

The second element of the “dissident triangle” is requisite domestic recognition. In Chapter 4, Szulecki examines the ways in which dissidents become known as names and faces. For instance, the leaders of the Prague Spring became renowned in the domestic scene and beyond. As Szulecki explains, the public activity of dissidents allowed the communist regimes to label them “foreign intruders” and enemies, which in turn seemed to confirm and strengthen the logic of the totalitarian systems. The “public enemy” was a role ascribed to figures like Václav Havel, Jacek Jan Kuroń, and Adam Michnik, and the imminent threat allegedly posed by a clear and present enemy also justified the presence of the secret police, one of the key institutions of a totalitarian society. Almost simultaneously, a “public enemy” at home became a “prominent dissident” abroad. Western recognition, the third element, was pivotal for dissidentism. Drawing on the insights from Michnik and Havel, Szulecki highlights that international attention, achieved through transnational contacts, transformed individual grievances into political activism.

These two elements became increasingly intense as dissenters employed the language of human rights and were given more and more coverage and attention in the Western media. By using the language of human rights, Eastern European intellectual dissenters were able to mobilize international support. Adopting the claim that the concept of dissident was utilized by the West for the non-Western “Other,” Szulecki argues that transnational contacts and international recognition were crucial. In Chapters 5 and 6, he examines the ways in which human rights language was adopted as a lingua franca with which to articulate the goals of dissidents. By 1977, as he explains, all three elements of the “dissident triangle” were present, and it was the opposition in Central Europe that managed to connect them for the first time. A new, transnational actor appeared: the dissident, although being labeled a dissident did not depend solely on the public display of civil courage and self-sacrifice; rather, it was selective. Western newspaper editors and academics selected a few dissident thinkers and fashioned them into a transnational “pantheon” of dissidence which was also entirely androcentric.

One of the merits of the book is that it acknowledges the absence of women in the historiography of dissident movements in East Central Europe. As Szulecki observes, this was due not only to the persistent machismo within the opposition circles, but also to the fashioning of the dissident figure, which was

mainly constructed by the Western media, public, and scholars. Women, however, although absent from the constructed “dissident pantheon,” enabled dissidence to function: Szulecki notes that due to their language skills, women were primary sources of information for the Western media outlets. Furthermore, Szulecki presents a nuanced narrative of the convergences and divergences that existed between the perceptions of dissidents in Central Europe and the Western media and public. Dissidents could at times reject the label “dissident” or could take advantage of it. In any case, the label was rather homogenizing, for it was applied to a diverse array of ideological positions that existed at the time within the democratic opposition in Central Europe. Szulecki highlights the complexities of these strategies, which involved various actors, including interpreters, mainly exiles in the West, who interpreted the ideas and stances of the dissidents and mediated between their home countries and the Western media and public.

On the other hand, because the study draws predominantly on sources which belong to the established traditional canon of dissidents’ writings, such as Havel’s *The Power of the Powerless* and Miłosz’s *The Captive Mind*, it necessarily stays within the framework of the dissident historiography which it aims to revise. Furthermore, it would be beneficial if the study could engage more with its starting point, namely that the idea of the term “dissident,” as we know it today, ought to be traced back to the Central European democratic opposition of the second half of the twentieth century. The study focuses on a “Central Europe” that includes the aforementioned non-Soviet states of the Eastern bloc. The study also refers to “Eastern Europe,” encompassing Russia and state socialist countries in Europe (e.g. Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia,) which, as Szulecki explains, had profoundly different contexts and practices of dissent from their Central European homologues. Yet, it would have served the study well—not least because the book’s underlying claim is that the phenomenon of “dissidentism” is comparable across the world—if the monograph would have included these different contexts, even if asymmetrically. Not only would it serve better to explain the uniqueness of Central European dissidence, but it would also have helped clarify the reasons for which the notion of “dissidentism” travelled around the globe—something that makes the study of the history of social movements relevant in today’s context, in which variations of “illiberal democracy” are now thriving around the world.

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