

Detlef Pollack and Jan Wielgohs (eds.), Dissent and Opposition in Communist Eastern Europe: Origins of Civil Society and Democratic Transition. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. xxvii + 294pp., £55.00, h/b

Intellectual dissidence and mass protest under communism were a well-established area of interest for the Soviet and East European Studies during the Cold War. However, research focused on dramatic episodes, such as the 1956 Hungarian Revolution or Poland's Solidarity movement in 1980-1, and the activities of internationally visible dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov or Václav Havel. Insights produced were inevitably fragmented and partial and were often rapidly overtaken by subsequent developments. The role of dissent and opposition to communism was briefly celebrated during the 'Revolutions of '89', which propelled many former dissidents to power. However, as dissident-politicians were pushed aside by technocrats and politically astute ex-apparatchiks, Western research agendas moved on to the bigger issues of democratization and Europeanization. Since 1989 researching the social and political history of the communist era – including the phenomena of opposition and dissent – has thus largely become the province of local historians and social scientists, now able to investigate the period freely and access previously closed archives.

Pollack and Wielgohs' new collection seeks to synthesise such scholarship into a systematic comparative overview by presenting a set of structured national case studies by historians and sociologists from Eastern Europe. These include relatively well-researched opposition and dissident movements of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, East Germany and the Russian heartland of the USSR as well as less familiar cases of Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia, Slovenia and Croatia. As well as offering succinct, research-based overviews of opposition and dissent from the establishment of communist regimes until their demise, the book also addresses their social significance under communist regimes and their role in their collapse. A subsidiary theme is the extent to which Western social science theories – and, in particular, social movement theory – can meaningfully be applied to opposition and dissidence in communist Eastern Europe.

The book's editors and contributors adopt a pragmatic but innovative definition of their subject which situates the intellectual dissent, human rights activism and embryonic civil society projects of late communism in longer historical context. The book thus distinguishes 'resistance' – activity directed at removing communist regimes by armed force, revolution or mass protest – from 'dissidence, defined as the development of discourses critical of official ideology and the carving out of spheres of communication outside regime control. 'Opposition' is understood to mean specifically *political* forms of resistance by parties and political groupings, which usually characterised the first and very last years of communist rule.

Although in some cases over-condensed, the individual country studies are well-structured, clearly written and have a combination of expertise and breadth that will make them informative to all but the most well versed country specialist. Few other general

collections of this type would, for example, highlight so clearly the origins of pockets of Bulgarian opposition in 1970s and 1980s or the extent of Russian human rights activism in the provinces. More generally, what emerges from these chapters is both the continuity and sheer diversity of dissent and opposition in the region. In addition to the movements such as Charter 77 and KOR and the iconic years of 1956, 1968 and 1980, these included doomed campaigns of guerrilla resistance during 1950s (Poland, Estonia, Romania and Croatia); the underground and exile activities of historic bourgeois parties; spontaneous localised eruptions of peasant or worker discontent; non-conformist literary and artistic movements; the 'colonisation' of local communist party apparatus by national elites in Estonia, Slovenia and (abortively) Croatia; the emergence in more liberal regimes of New Social Movements; and in some case the role of Catholic and protestant Churches or ethnic minority communities as foci for wider opposition.

The contributors adopt a sometimes inconsistent mix of disciplinary perspectives. Viktor Voronkov and Jan Wielgohs, for example, take an essentially sociological perspective, analysing Soviet dissent essentially the response of specific age cohort to Khrushchev's 'Thaw'. Others study such as Mate Szabó's chapter on Hungary use the language of social movement theory. Ivan Bernik by contrast, discusses Slovenia's exit from communism, despite the presence of many New Social Movements, in terms of transition theory. Oldřich Tůma's chapter on Czechoslovakia takes yet another approach, drawing primarily on the research of Czech contemporary historians

This is, however, an inherent problem for collections of this type. More disappointing is the editors' failure to provide a framework of comparative analysis capable of drawing contributors' insights together or making sense of such diverse patterns of dissent and opposition. Although as the editors note such 'differences are of greater social-scientific interest' (p. 231) than generalisations, their conclusions consists largely of just such a *general* review of patterns of opposition across the region. Although a sophisticated survey, it breaks little new ground in its interpretation. The only comparative explanation offered for variation is the broad notion that communist regimes shaped their own oppositions backed by references to Kitschelt's well-worn typology of communist regime types (pp. xvi, 252) and Ekiert's decade old work on post-Stalinist re-equilibrium (p. 239). Given, the rich empirical material marshalled in the case studies, this is, to say the least, a missed opportunity. The editors' conclusions on the (limited) applicability of social movement theory to dissent and anti-communist opposition show a similar lack of innovation. Although solid and well-argued, they lag behind work by US scholars, such as Maryjane Osa or John K. Glenn (both briefly referenced, but never engaged with), who have developed social movement theory through detailed case studies of protest and civic mobilisation in the region

Despite these shortcomings, *Dissent and Opposition in Communist Eastern Europe* is timely and valuable collection, whose lucid, wider ranging case studies will make it of interest both to academic and student readers

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