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KACPER SZULECKI
Dissidents in Communist Central Europe. Human Rights and the Emergence of New Transnational Actors
(Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 242 pp.

The book *Dissidents in Communist Central Europe: Human Rights and the Emergence of New Transnational Actors*, written by Kacper Szulecki, Polish professor, and researcher at Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, was published in 2019. As one of the few books to focus on such a topic, the piece dissects the conception and evolution of the phenomenon of "dissidentism" and its dimensions, in the context of Central European regimes during the Cold War.[1] The author aims to provide the readers with a detailed narrative and analysis of four specific Central European states, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and East Germany, and the manifestations of dissidents and dissidentism in those countries. Szulecki makes use of historical sources, letters, and journals belonging to famous dissident figures, analyzing all four cases in parallel. The book consists of ten parts, the first being the Introduction, while the following nine chapters are set in chronological order.

In the introductory chapter, Szulecki reviews the previous studies on dissidents, and the use of the first empirical study of the concept of "dissidentism." In relation to the latter, the author also provides a triangular scheme – "the dissident triangle," as he calls it – which requires open, legal, and nonviolent action, Western attention, and domestic recognition (3). The author tests this scheme on the cases of the four Central European states which are subjected to the investigation.

Kacper Szulecki further explains why, in the context of "dissidentism," he prefers a transnational approach to an international one, while putting an emphasis on the several layers of such an approach, like that of cross-border exchanges, contacts, face-to-face meetings, and the spreading/

[1] Bernard Ivan Tamas, *From Dissident Party to Party Politics – The struggle for democracy on post-Communist Hungary* (New York: East European Monographs, 2007); Ilya Budraitskis, *Dissidents among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics, and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia* (London: Verso, 2022); Peter Reddaway, *The Dissidents: A Memoir of Working with the Resistance in Russia*, 1960-1990 (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

circulation of ideas and texts. His theoretical ground is diverse, with the author deriving his ideas from the fields of cultural sociology, political science, cultural, and media studies. As he suggests, his goal is "to produce theoretically grounded historical narratives of the emergence and evolution of dissidentism" (6). Lastly, the author denotes that his methodology is rooted in the Weberian tradition of interpretive social science, followed by a categorization of the sources he used, and an overview of the structure of the book, which ends the introductory chapter.

Moving forward, in the first chapter of the book, Szulecki tackles the process of defining the word "dissident." His analysis is based on three elements: the historical roots of the term, the meanings/contexts which were used by the Westerners, and the meaning and definition dissidents themselves approved of or dismissed (21). After tracing the Latin roots of the word, and its use in the 1920s by the American press, the author ends with five dimensions (plus two variations) of the definition; thus, a dissident could be: (1) a former Communist dissenting from the party's line; (2) a solitary moral oppositionist; (2a) a solitary member of a minority group, a non-conformist outsider; (3) a person fighting for human rights in an authoritarian country; (4) a general label encompassing most political opposition activity; (5) a rebel; (5a) a non-conformist intellectual (24).

Presenting those dissident meaning variations with their different concepts, uses, and interpretations, the author proposes his own broad definition: "public and deliberate manifestation of political disagreement" (30) for the common good. Lastly, by continuing with the terminology assessments, the author points out that in the context of understanding, conceptualizing, and categorizing the term of dissidentism with the phenomenon per se, one shall note that the actions of defiance must be nonviolent, and they should be followed by repressive measures and/or sanctions, or otherwise they would be categorized as protests. The author ends the chapter with the aim of further providing his readers with a new analytical framework on the phenomenon of dissidentism (32).

In the second chapter, Szulecki points to the distinction between anti-communists and revisionists, who manifested as political oppositionists inside communist Eastern Europe. It is further highlighted that after Stalin's death, "the space for internal critique opened" (41). Revisionism

is mentioned as a heresy in faith since it maintained and preached anti-totalitarian beliefs, and not anti-Marxist ones (41-42). Lastly, the chapter narrates the events of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and the evolution of the matters that took place in Poland and Czechoslovakia, in relation to revisionists and neo-positivists, and to the revolutionary 1968 spring experienced by both of them.

In the third chapter, the author shifts his lenses to the prominent figures of the 1960s dissidentism, and to the phenomenon of emergence of names and faces. Jacek Kuron, Adam Michnik, Petr Uhl, Václav Havel, Milan Kundera – these, along with some other dissident names, are presented as individuals who had played a crucial role in the oppositionist movements (65-66). Moreover, three acts of modern dissidentism are assessed by the author, and an understanding of the first real dissident act (as Szulecki declares it) – the Open Letter by Kuron and Karol Modzelewski – is provided.

Moving on to the fourth chapter of the book, the author presents the landscape after the events of 1968. The transnational stage of dissidence is also explored, in accordance with the role the exiles had after that specific year. A part of the chapter is also dedicated to the circulation of the dissidents' texts and ideas, and the way in which these were published (samizdat and tamizdat) (93). The chapter ends with a reference made to the Helsinki Act of 1975, and the subsequent and consequent implementation of human rights in the (political) agenda.

Chapter five of the book dives more into the cases of the dissident groups, such as KOR in Poland, and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia. Focusing on their moment of inception, 1967-77, Szulecki narrates the story and the circumstances in which these two movements in question emerged, as well as their plans for action. An important highlight is made here, that both groups presented themselves as transparent and open from the beginning (121, 126).

Continuing the case study, in chapter six, Szulecki analyzes and presents the movements established after the implementation of the Helsinki Accords, namely Vons in Czechoslovakia, and ROPGiO in Poland. Furthermore, he argues on how the Western media molded the dissident image, following the theoretical basis of Edward Said's

seminal piece, Orientalism.[2] An important factor highlighted by the author is the absence of women. The latter had played a crucial role in the oppositionist movements, but they were generally disregarded as important or active figures (156).

Chapter seven deals with the terms and definitions the dissidents themselves accepted as being representative, but which, at times, were interpreted in different ways. Using once again his historical narration tools, Szulecki presents the transnational contacts and exchanges between the dissident groups across Central Europe (170) to be included as acts of dissidentism as well. More specifically, the author presents the historical meetings that took place between KOR and Charter 77, at the border between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Another point is made about the dissidents, who, compared with other oppositionists, were in a safer position as public figures (171), having attracted mainly indirect forms of repression (173).

In the second to last chapter, the author presents the generalization, as he calls it, of the dissident figure. With his focus still on Czechoslovakia and Poland, Szulecki argues that the generalization enabled new groups to adopt and make use of the dissident label (188). Finally, as we move closer to the 1989 events, he maintains that dissidentism moves from a non-governmental activity to an openly political sphere (191).

In the last part of the book, Szulecki notes that while in the previous chapters his focus had gone mainly on empirical materials, in this section he proposes an ideal typical model of dissidentism (207). Moreover, he goes over the dissident triangle again, and simultaneously highlights that once the critique towards dissidents began increasing, a loss in their credibility and fame was noted, thus analyzing the trajectory of the movement, all the way from its rise to becoming a mainstream and criticized phenomenon.

Before concluding, it is worth looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the book, at least as perceived in this study and review of the piece in question. It goes without doubt that Szulecki, based on concepts of political sociology and political science, offers to his readers a thorough insight into the phenomenon and layers of dissidentism in

[2] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

Communist Central Europe, backing up his analysis of dissidentism, dissidents, and dissent with unique materials – from letters and journals to newspapers from the Cold War period. Being one of the few books to provide such a study on the matter, the readers get to understand not only the history behind dissidentism, but also the history of communism, as manifested in East and Central Europe. A weaker point of Szulecki's piece is represented by the often-repetitive details and ideas maintained by the author throughout the book, an aspect that, at certain points throughout the lecture, creates an interruption in the flow of events and ideas.

To conclude, within this context, a final point of this research is to propose a continuation of the study of these specific social movements (i.e., dissident movements during and after the Cold War), with concern to how they influenced the democratic transitions in their respective countries, and in general, to the importance they held in the process of democratization of those states. Nevertheless, this source-based piece is a must-read for anyone interested in and willing to dissect the study of dissident movements across Central Europe, conferring a unique insight into the rise of social movements, as a phenomenon.

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