# Introduction

## *The "Dissident" as a Distinct Cold War Phenomenon*

> A specter is haunting Eastern Europe: the specter of what in the west is called "dissent."
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> —Václav Havel, 1978

In October 1985, human rights activists and intellectuals from the United States, West Germany, Austria, France, and beyond rallied in the Hungarian capital of Budapest to demonstrate their solidarity with their Hungarian friends and East European dissidents. Together, they denounced human rights violations in the Eastern bloc, Western ignorance, and the indefensibility of the Cold War status quo. Internationally renowned intellectuals such as Susan Sontag, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Danilo Kiš, Amos Oz, Alain Finkielkraut, and Western human rights advocates such as Aryeh Neier, Karl von Schwarzenberg, Jeri Laber, and Gerald Nagler attracted the desired media attention so that the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, *Die Welt*, *Le Monde*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Presse*, Radio Free Europe, the *New York Review of Books*, and others duly reported on the meeting. The Western participants squatted down on apartment floors next to their Hungarian friends, among them Hungary's most prominent dissident, György Konrád, who declared those gathered a Cold War "Republic of Letters."

After the regime's halfhearted attempts to ban this "alternative cultural forum," the meeting proceeded with much fanfare. It epitomizes a moment of triumph for the Hungarian dissidents and their Western friends. Recollections and photos of the event in October 1985 bustle with excitement and optimism, enthusiasm for the intellectual debates, and commitment to a common cause:

dissenting from the Cold War status quo. This book explores how this illustrious gathering in Budapest in October 1985 came about; it analyzes the history of the East–West network of dissidents, activists, and intellectuals who organized it, their motivations, mutual influences, and legacies.

To understand the emergence of this network dedicated to supporting dissidents, amplifying their voices, and changing the Cold War status quo, this book investigates how the different actors positioned themselves within the social and political order of their home countries and vis-à-vis the international order from the 1960s to the late 1990s. It examines the relationships, shared convictions, and ideas of intellectuals and activists from East and West who created a network of interconnected groups, journals, institutions, and organizations across the Iron Curtain.

*The Making of Dissidents* focuses on Hungary, the United States, and West Germany to illustrate the background, synergies, practices, and operations of the East–West network. But it is impossible to understand the story of Hungarian dissidents and their supporters in the West without taking the opposition in Poland and Czechoslovakia into consideration. The Polish opposition played a pivotal role and paved the theoretical groundwork for the opposition in the 1980s. Attention is also paid to Yugoslavia and Austria, two nominally neutral and nonaligned countries, whose location and special status facilitated the emergence of this network. Hindsight misconstrued their peripheral locations, rendering them largely invisible in the literature.

This book offers new insights into the motivations that inspired Westerners to support East European dissidents. Altruism and the moral imperative to assist the repressed and marginalized in a foreign country are insufficient arguments to explain Western efforts and investments, especially given the resistance and challenges faced by East Europeans and Westerners, too. Thus, the book aspires not only to analyze the role this East–West network played in the history of East European dissent but also to illustrate the stakes Western friends had in it. Their support and their actions contributed and shaped "dissent" as a distinct phenomenon in the Cold War.

*The Making of Dissidents* examines the transnational context in which dissident ideas emerged, how they were received, amplified, and appropriated in the West. Western supporters facilitated the perception of dissidents as the genuine representatives of their societies, the authentic voices of Eastern Europe. "[Raising] international awareness for [the dissidents'] plight was . . . a constitutive element in the dissidents' political tactics," Robert Brier explains.[1] This book thus argues that the historical phenomenon of dissent

during the Cold War cannot be understood without taking the Western side into consideration.

But neither dissent in the East nor support for dissidents in the West came easy. Especially in the late 1970s the protagonists were confronted with tremendous challenges, including lack of funding and supportive structures, disinterested media, apathetic publics, and hostile regimes.[2] Therefore, the analysis provides answers to questions such as: What motivated intellectuals and activists in the West to engage with East European dissidents? How did they get to know and befriend each other? How did they influence one another and what did they seek to accomplish? Why did Westerners help make dissidents and their ideas better known abroad and how have these ideas been perceived in the West? How did Western supporters justify their opposition to the Cold War status quo and what alternatives did they envision? How did their ideas shape the peaceful revolutions of 1989 and how did they evolve afterward?

For reasons that will become clear in the course of the analysis, this book focuses on the Institute for the Humanities at New York University, the *New York Review of Books*, the US Helsinki Watch Group, the West German publishing houses Rotbuch and Suhrkamp, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service) artist-in-residence program, the Paris-based Fondation pour une entraide intellectuelle européenne (Foundation for Intellectual Support in Europe), the Institut für Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM, Institute for Human Sciences) in Vienna, the International Helsinki Federation, the Paris-based tamizdat journal *Magyar Füzetek*, the Jan Hus Educational Fund, the Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik, George Soros's inchoate Open Society Fund and its Hungarian branch, the Soros-MTA Foundation. Publishers such as Robert Bernstein, Roger Straus, and Siegfried Unseld, human rights advocates like Annette Laborey, Aryeh Neier, Karl von Schwarzenberg and Jeri Laber, intellectuals like Susan Sontag and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and the academics István Deák, Jacques Rupnik, and Tony Judt, as well as Timothy Garton Ash form the core of this network in the West.

The story of this book follows the evolution of the East–West network from 1973 to 1998 in roughly chronological order. Broadly, the story is divided into four periods: (1) the formative experiences of key actors from the late 1950s to the early 1970s; (2) the emergence of a transnational East–West network in the late 1970s and early 1980s; (3) the network's consolidation, internationalization, and golden age in the mid-1980s; and (4) the challenges the network faced during and after the regime change in 1989 and its legacies.

For several reasons, the year 1973 marked the beginning for the East–West network: in Hungary, reforms were rolled back and a crackdown on domestic critics launched, which ended their commitment to the leftist critiques and socialist reforms that have been associated with the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. Moreover, the Paris Peace Accords ended the US war in Vietnam, rendering further opposition to the US military campaign in Southeast Asia obsolete. The uneasy peace settlement left a void for intellectuals, who were critical of America's role in the Cold War. Simultaneously, Western intellectuals lost faith in the revolutionary independence movements in what was then called the Third World. These developments ushered in an ideological reorientation on either side of the Iron Curtain that became a premise for the East–West encounter and subsequent alliance that at its core would be centered on "universal" human rights and classic liberalism.

*The Making of Dissidents* concludes with the third round of free, democratic elections in 1998, when Hungary's accession to NATO was imminent and preparations for membership in the European Union underway. By that time, most dissidents, who had entered politics in 1989 and 1990, had become disillusioned and left the political spotlight. The attempt to translate dissident ideas into party and parliamentary politics had largely failed. Their Western friends had adapted to the new geopolitical realities; many built academic careers on the expertise they had gained in and through the East–West network. Some organizations successfully adapted their mission to the new circumstances, while others shut down. Westerners often pursued new but related interests, salvaging their ideological convictions into the post-1989 era.

## Main Arguments

Hungary offers unique insights into the intellectual opposition to state socialism in Eastern Europe and the dissidents' friends on the other side of the Iron Curtain. However, the country is often overlooked in the literature on resistance in the Eastern bloc, except for the 1956 Revolution. It is dwarfed by the dissident and opposition movements in Poland and Czechoslovakia. In the larger Cold War narrative, the János Kádár regime has been perceived as paternalistic and relatively benevolent. Compared to the Soviet and East German, the Polish and Czechoslovak regimes, the Kádár regime's oppression of civil liberties and human rights is usually downplayed or ignored. Because of goulash communism's comparatively high levels of prosperity, considerable liberties, and the absence of mass protests, Hungary was known as the proverbial "happiest barrack in the Eastern bloc." Apart from a few exceptions,

which the book addresses, authorities mostly refrained from the use of brute force. After the trials in 1973, critics were not arbitrarily incarcerated or forcibly exiled; they were coerced into "voluntary" emigration, surveilled, and harassed, and they could not pursue employment of their choice. Although the threat remained (as two cases in the early 1980s illustrate), it seemed that in Hungary, dissidents' safety and well-being were not acutely endangered. Westerners could travel to Hungary almost freely, and even several dissidents could travel abroad *and* return home. For these reasons, this case study contributes new perspectives into the organization of Western support, public perceptions, representation, and communication strategies.

Hungary's reputation abroad put dissidents into a peculiar bind: to underline their repression and credibly appear as one of Eastern Europe's oppressed opposition movements, they allied and publicly expressed their solidarity with their jailed and harassed Polish and Czechoslovak counterparts. Together with their Western supporters, the Hungarian dissidents used their fight for the rehabilitation of the 1956 Revolution to undermine the Kádár regime's legitimacy and "liberal" reputation. The violation of Hungary's sovereignty and the execution of the 1956 prime minister and several cabinet members represented such a gross violation of *their* human rights, that thirty years post facto it still mobilized Western moral outrage and elevated the Hungarians' opposition to the rank of their counterparts in neighboring countries.

Historical accidents and the Westerners' ideological predispositions led to their encounter and then friendships with East European dissidents in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Their positions in publishing and academia facilitated the reception, albeit selective, of dissident ideas in the West. They aided the perception of the so-called cosmopolitan (*urbánus* in Hungarian) dissidents as authentic voices from the East, the genuine representatives of their countries. The Westerners' ideological preferences had them prioritize the dissidents' ideas of civil society, human rights, and Central Europe and obscured the strength of the populist, so-called *népi* writers in Budapest. The biases of the West, thus, aggravated frictions within the diverse opposition to state socialism and overshadowed the appeal of ethnonationalism and dreams of "Greater Hungary," which came to haunt the dissidents turned politicians in the wake of the regime change in the 1990s.

The book centers the ideas that emerged out of the East–West interaction and shaped the transnational dialogue around dissent in the second half of the Cold War. It highlights those elements of dissident politics, or rather antipolitics, that resonated with Western audiences. Therefore, the Hungarian

dissidents' domestic discourse, which others have analyzed in depth, is reduced to those aspects pertinent to the East–West network and perceptions in the West.[3] The book complements studies on the history of ideas with insights into the organizational and practical context in which dissident ideas came to matter, the ideological predispositions and motivations of supporters who facilitated the reception and amplified dissident ideas in the West, and the Zeitgeist that allowed them to resonate.

Whereas East Europeans put forth the ideas that inspired transnational encounters and the alliance, Western activists and intellectuals had the organizational skills and the social, cultural, and financial capital to build a support network. A certain cohort of New Yorkers was particularly invested in the defense of civil liberties such as freedom of expression, conscience, religion, and assembly. They realized that to exert pressure and exploit the official Helsinki review process in the name of "universal" human rights they needed to coordinate their efforts and pool their expertise and resources. In creating organizations, institutions, and procedures of monitoring, reporting, and "public shaming," they raised awareness for the plight and goals of the dissidents and thus created a protective, albeit elusive umbrella.

In return, the dissidents' fight and their life stories corroborated the Westerners' commitment to antitotalitarian liberalism, reinforced the Westerners' skepticism toward and criticism of their own governments, and often confirmed their self-perception as public intellectuals, exceptional thinkers, and critical outsiders at home, which they deemed a mark of distinction. The friendships allowed some to experience the challenges and dangers of dissent behind the Iron Curtain firsthand, offering a glimpse at a dissident life, allowing them, at least temporarily, to feel like dissidents themselves. Several Western scholars carved out a niche as experts in dissident and East European affairs and, in the final years of the Cold War, built academic careers on that expertise.[4] They served as spokespeople for the dissidents in the West, well-positioned to explain the rapidly evolving situation in the East to increasingly interested Western audiences.

The analysis reveals how and why the dissidents' "rediscovery" of Central Europe acquired intellectual appeal in the West. Whereas others have examined the conceptual genealogy, this study reveals the practical and structural context, the milieu, and the Zeitgeist out of which this distinct vision of the region emerged—or supposedly reemerged—in the 1980s. New Yorkers and others embraced the idea because it complemented their preexisting fascination with European modernism and high culture. Once they had befriended

East European dissidents, Westerners readily projected a romanticized fin-de-siècle bohemian lifestyle onto them. Moreover, some, especially New Yorkers, felt a personal affinity: they recognized their own biographies and family histories in those of the dissidents.

As a concept, Central Europe offered an alternative to the Cold War status quo and an explanation for the region's political and historical dilemmas in the twentieth century. The Hungarian dissidents saw in it a viable alternative to "Yalta Europe"—that is, the arbitrary division of the continent during the allied conferences of 1945.[5] They believed in Central Europe's emancipatory potential, with which they delegitimized the relegation of the region to the Soviet sphere of influence. Hence, the debate about Central Europe moved the region symbolically westward and restored *Central* Europe to Europe proper. Inadvertently, the idea created a civilizational hierarchy that in the 1990s degraded countries farther east as backward and uncivilized, a discursive process that will be explained here.

Although the literature has hitherto ignored this aspect, the dissidents' talk of Central Europe opened the door for a new discussion of the "German question": the division into two German states after 1945. Scholarship on the idea has discussed its proximity and connection to Mitteleuropa, which had justified German hegemony, colonialism, and conquest of the region in in World Wars I and II. This book acknowledges that history—just as the dissidents did—but elaborates on how the region's rediscovery facilitated an acknowledgment of the historical role that Germans and German culture had played in Central Europe, without promoting German chauvinism and irredentism (but also without giving Polish or Russian concerns their due consideration). Once East Europeans initiated the historical reassessment of Central Europe, talking about "Mitteleuropa" became acceptable among certain West German circles, too. In hindsight, one could argue that the "rediscovery" of Central Europe in the 1980s helped pave the way for the dominance of a united Germany in the European Union, in which the country became a patron to its Central European neighbors' quest for membership.

With their missions accomplished, some organizations, such as the Jan Hus Fund and the Fondation pour une entraide intellectuelle européenne, ceased their operations. Although they had been instrumental in facilitating the early East–West exchanges in the 1970s, they have largely been forgotten today. Others turned their attention elsewhere, and several institutions, such as the IWM, Human Rights Watch, the Hungarian Soros-MTA Foundation, and the Open Society Institute, adapted to the changing times. They successfully

transferred pre-1989 ideas into the post–Cold War era and developed new agendas, often on the same ideological premises and with the same goals as before.

After 1989, when East European nationalism alienated the West, and the former dissidents could no longer credibly be portrayed as the only authentic voices of their home countries, the Western experts continued to serve as gatekeepers for Western audiences and insiders in East European affairs. Chapter 8 shows that as their careers consolidated in the 1990s, their commitment shifted from Central Europe to Europe at large. The wars in the former Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia, and the return of horrors not seen since World War II preoccupied many Westerners, who explain their engagement in the Balkans by recourse to the same motivations that had once inspired their solidarity with East European dissidents. The causes of and motivations for those shifts are part of the final discussions of the network's multiple legacies.

*The Making of Dissidents* concludes with an analysis of the network's elements and ideas that survived into the new era. The rise of nationalism around 1989 posed a fundamental challenge to the vision of a liberal, tolerant, inclusive, and emancipated Central Europe. Surging ethnonationalism, antisemitic attacks, and the demands of party and parliamentary politics soon disillusioned if not alienated the dissidents turned politicians. Their type of classic liberalism failed to take root in the new Hungary and most retreated from politics within a few years. Meanwhile, the idea of Central Europe underwent a curious evolution after 1989, when it was appropriated and adapted to serve as a stepping-stone toward EU and NATO membership. The idea lived on and gained added meaning, of course, in the Central European University, *the* legacy of the East–West network and the Hungarian opposition, which became a new home for many former dissidents and a unique, dynamic, and innovative intellectual hub in the region.

## Literature Overview and Contributions

*The Making of Dissidents* follows the recent shift to transnationalism in Cold War studies, which prioritizes culture, exchanges, and cooperation across the Iron Curtain over great power politics and political actors.[6] The Iron Curtain has turned out to be more permeable than the name suggests, which György Peteri captures with the concept of a "Nylon Curtain."[7] Accordingly, exchanges of ideas, people, and goods, and cultural diplomacy mark the "new" Cold War studies.[8] Prominent examples of this trend that mainly prioritizes cultural diplomacy include David Caute's *The Dancer Defects*, Giles Scott-Smith, Peter