

## INTRODUCTION: STREET THEATER, CONCRETE POETRY

**T**UESDAY, February 16, 1988. It was Mardi Gras, the eve of the Lenten season. The weather in Poland was sunny and unseasonably warm, with the temperature reaching the mid-60s in the southeastern city of Wrocław. It was a perfect occasion for a traditional Rio de Janeiro-style carnival, smoothly transposed into a communist setting: a “ProletaRIO Carnival” (*Karnawał RIObotniczy*), in fact. The crowd that gathered around the clock on Świdnicka Street in the center of this city of six hundred thousand was estimated to be three to five thousand.

“Let’s make our city outshine Las Vegas,” read the flyer posted on the streets and distributed in high schools and colleges. “Dress for a party. This time the police won’t touch us. We’ll say a magic word and either they’ll disappear, or they’ll join the carnival.”<sup>1</sup> Even the deejays on popular Radio Three called on their Wrocław listeners to join in the fun—until the authorities realized whose carnival it was and rescinded the invitation.

Thus began another “happening,” called into being (not to say “organized”) by the Orange Alternative. The guru of this guerrilla street-theater collective, 34-year-old Waldemar “Major” Fydrych, couldn’t make it: The police detained him and his orange-highway-cone megaphone as he approached the crowd. But the show went on anyway. Everyone seemed to have whistles or horns. There was a guitarist, Krzysztof “Jakub” Jakubczak, stirring up the crowd with children’s songs, communist ditties, and nationalist hymns. There was a skeleton, and a makeshift orchestra with a giant drum. Were those Ku Klux Klansmen, waving a sign reading “Open the borders, we’ll run to Calgary!”? There were Smurfs, a miner handing out lumps of coal, and a Jaruzelski puppet. There was a Red Riding Hood, arm-in-arm with a wolf, and a bear wielding a machine gun.

The crowd chanted, “The police party with us!” and “Hocus-pocus!” But the police did not disappear. Instead, they grabbed revelers and hauled them to waiting vans. The boisterous crowd freed those detained as quickly as the police could round them up; Jakubczak himself was liberated four times. Many police found themselves trapped inside their cars by the crowd. Finally, several dozen police linked arms and swept down Świdnicka Street. “This was a scene,” wrote an underground weekly, “to make any surrealist’s head spin.”<sup>2</sup> Was this blue-helmeted kickline a late entry in the festivities? Apparently not. By five o’clock, the happening was over—except at the police station, where Jakubczak led sing-alongs on

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his guitar while the several dozen who had been detained waited their turn to be reprimanded and sent home.

According to the stern reprimand in the communist press, this was just a bit of student foolishness that had to be shut down lest it paralyze the afternoon commuter hour. That was one version. Another saw a political maneuver, in reaction to the price hikes announced at the beginning of February, and to the failures of the regime's multistage economic reform program. After all, one sign promised imminent belt-tightening: "Second stage of reform: Carnival. Third stage: Ash Wednesday."

The report on the happening in *Tygodnik mazowsze*, Solidarity's largest underground paper, ran alongside an article by Solidarity strategist Jacek Kuroń with an ominous opening line: "The specter of a societal eruption is haunting the country."<sup>3</sup> Kuroń feared the destabilizing costs of such an explosion and wondered if the result would be a massive conflict between state and society. After the "Karnawał" happening, the Wrocław authorities would probably have agreed that Kuroń's fears were coming true. But really, how much political baggage can a Red Riding Hood carry?

One year later, Kuroń and the rest of the Solidarity elite would be sitting down to negotiations with the communist regime. Those negotiations, which were unimaginable to anyone in February 1988, led to the legalization of Solidarity, to semi-free elections, and, ultimately, to the fall of communism in Poland and all of Central Europe. A regime wavering between reform and repression sat down to talk with an opposition that feared the power of society's pent-up rage.

So why were the people of Wrocław on the street that winter day, and how do they fit into the story of the revolutions of 1989? We can start to put the pieces together by recognizing that the road from the fears of 1988 to the triumphs of 1989 is an improbable one. A world turned upside down in the space of a few short years. Red Riding Hood did come to embrace the wolf (despite that armed bear nearby). The story, we shall see, must take us through the streets of Wrocław and the peculiar world of Orange Alternative. But it will travel also through the streets of dozens of other cities and towns, accompanied by numerous other movements, and across events usually left out of the standard narratives of the greatest revolutionary event of our lifetime.

The year 1989—the moment when the Cold War, and communism, lost out to democracy, the free market, and nationalist aspirations, in Central Europe and across the world—was a year of dramatic, and immediately evident, beginnings and endings. Communist leaders shook hands with dissidents only recently out of prison; a philosopher was elected president; everywhere, flags with their communist-symbol centers cut out flew above triumphant crowds.

But revolutions are not just turning points; the Russian Revolution and

the French Revolution are fascinating not only for the new worlds they wrought, but also for their atmosphere of limitless possibility and colorful aspiration. Both 1917 and 1789 were stages on which politically aware urban societies and movements pursued raucously diverse programs, in elaborate public rituals, celebrations, and (sometimes) battles. Though once the image of unruly mobs manipulated by crafty leaders may have dominated historical memory, we know now that the story is a lot more interesting than that.

Perhaps because Central Europe is a little out of the way, and because the events moved so rapidly across half a dozen countries, descriptions of 1989 often mystify more than they reveal. Even scholars who know the region very well resort to a bit of the supernatural to explain how democracy and freedom emerged from the communist bloc. It was a “year of miracles” (or *annus mirabilis*) in which “people power” “lit the night.”<sup>4</sup> Accounts of sudden miracles should make any historian suspicious. Enormous shifts like that of 1989 do not—cannot—appear out of nowhere; miracles rarely occur. The throngs that appeared on the streets or in the voting booths emerged—we must assume, if only by analogy with other revolutionary moments—onto a stage already prepared for them and by them.

The carnival that is the subject of this book played for about three and a half years, from the post-Chernobyl demonstrations in Poland in the spring of 1986 to the Velvet Revolution in Prague. Over these years, new issues, new movements, and a new generation altered the relationship among state, opposition, and society. The stage of this carnival was Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany, GDR), as well as parts of neighboring countries: Slovenia, the northernmost republic of Yugoslavia, and the western part of Ukraine, in the Soviet Union.

This Central Europe\* is a region with a common past in Western empires (the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Kingdom of Poland, and the Kingdom of Prussia). Since World War II, it has evolved shared traditions of nonviolent political engagement. Long before 1989, the people of this region developed ways of resistance to communism—though active participants were rarely more than a small minority. Beyond Central Europe, the events of 1989 and their aftermath looked dramatically different. The bloody fall of Romania’s Nicolae Ceaușescu, the horrific wars and genocide in Croatia and Bosnia, and the communist-led disintegration of the Soviet Union belong, in some ways, to an entirely separate story.

\* I use the term “Central Europe” in contrast to “Eastern Europe,” which refers to all of the former non-Soviet communist countries in Europe, plus the former western republics of the Soviet Union. To assign some countries to the East and some to the West or the Center is a tricky and controversial thing. Readers may draw their own conclusions about common pasts after reading this book.

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I call the era of revolution a carnival for several reasons, each of which separates those years from the opposition of the previous decades. First, there was variety, an almost bewildering pluralism of movements. Where once one could safely catalog most opposition as either nationalist/conservative or Marxist/socialist, now so much opposition defied any categorizing. Radical environmentalists, hippies, performance artists, and pacifists crowded onto the scene; they often mixed strands of anarchism, nationalism, liberalism, conservatism, and postmaterialism in idiosyncratic ways.\* Most had as their goal the end of communism, but often it was just as important to articulate a new style, and thus to change the social or natural environment. Certainly, some of this variety had appeared earlier: in Poland during Solidarity's first legal existence in 1980–81, or in the much freer Yugoslavia. But in 1986–89 it seemed as if activists' common assumptions and inhibitions simply disappeared.

Second, this revolution was joyful. Opposition had until this time been a weighty business, to match the grimness of life in the slowly decaying Soviet bloc. And for good reason: older generations of opposition remembered the horrors of war and Soviet liberation; of stalinist show trials, prisons, and back-breaking labor; and of Soviet tanks, in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The road to brave opposition was long and hard. For the most part, one engaged in opposition for philosophical reasons, or as a consequence of one's writings or scholarship, to save the nation's soul. In the carnival years, the new opposition could also be thoughtful: reading Gandhi was their answer to those who preached Lenin. But this opposition never took itself, nor the regime, too seriously. This opposition had a soundtrack (sometimes reggae, sometimes punk, sometimes the rhythms of Mardi Gras). Musicians, too, were not just another cause to write about, but part of the carnival itself. Demonstrations were neither angry nor desperate (though that style would reappear at the end, in 1989), but entertaining; they were as much celebrations as anything else.

The reader with a taste for literary theory will already have wondered: did the Orange Alternative read Bakhtin? Some probably did: Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's writings about "carnival" as a literary trope arrived in Poland in the 1970s, not long after they had begun appearing in English. But whether or not literary critics were on the streets in Wrocław, Bakhtin would have found much that was familiar in Central Europe.

A carnival (Bakhtinian or otherwise) breaks down borders of all kinds. It forces a suspension of the usual rules in society, issuing a challenge to the existing order and reversing social and political hierarchies. And in-

\* Each of these ideologies meant something quite different to a Central European, compared to a Westerner, as will become clear.

deed, social movements in Central Europe in the second half of the 1980s appeared to disregard the fear that held so many others back, and to act almost with impunity. It didn't matter to them if the police detained participants in a demonstration, because that was part of the game, too. In fact, they were exhibitionists who wanted attention and knew that their antics were threatening to the established order without being dangerous.

Meanwhile, the iron curtains melted away. No longer did Central Europeans fight their national demons alone. These new movements, instead, paid a great deal of attention to one another. When possible, they visited one another, regardless of communist border guards and Kafkaesque passport restrictions. This interaction is a central feature of the carnival story.

These social movements also broke the rules of politics. Anticommunism did not mean, to them, waging war against the regime, or even engaging in dialogue with the communists (though some did). In place of loathing of the regime, or the desire to reform it, came indifference. For decades, the communists had ignored society; now some turned the tables on the state (even as their performances were staged in part for the authorities to view). Opposing the regime, they ignored it. Some movements were even ready to deride their elders in the "senior opposition." Discarding the old politics, they broke free of the usual opposition sites: shop floor, church hall, national monument, underground text. In this revolution, opposition could take place anywhere, on almost any grounds.

Where else but the communist world should we expect (in hindsight, anyway) an opposition we can call "carnavalesque"? To live in Central Europe before 1989 was to be on the receiving end of an incessant monologue. How could one interrupt the regime's stranglehold on communication and force it to listen to society? Years of patient attempts to initiate dialogue (by reformers within the party, or nonparty intellectual dissenters) had not succeeded. But the carnival ruptured this monologue—not with persuasive argument, but with a cacophony of insistent and derisive voices. And the result, if we look at Central Europe after 1989, was a dialogue between state and society that continues today.<sup>5</sup>

This suspension of the rules blurred the boundaries between citizens and opened up borders of all kinds. Ultimately, the fear of communism simply dissipated. From the perspective of grassroots social movements, then, we can look in a new way at the revolutions of 1989.

In September 1986 I arrived in Poland to begin a year's study of the Polish language and the history of early communist Poland.\* I chose to live

\* This was not my first trip behind the Iron Curtain; I had lived for four months in Moscow (on a college study-abroad program) in 1984 and spent ten days in Yugoslavia that same year.

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in the city of Wrocław. There was someone there I wanted to see again; I also thought I would learn Polish better if I were far from Warsaw. It was a lucky choice: two years later, Izabela and I were married in Wrocław's cathedral, and the city became my second home. And Wrocław in 1986 was also about to become the most lively city in Central Europe.

The movements that flourished there are among the ones described in this book. They include Orange Alternative; Freedom and Peace; Polish-Czechoslovak Solidarity; and various movements in high schools, universities, and churches. The students and teachers at Adam Mickiewicz Lyceum 3, where my fiancée taught Russian, and my fellow students at Wrocław University, in Prof. Tadeusz Marczak's fifth year class on the history of communist Poland, included many central characters in the Wrocław opposition scene.

I, unfortunately, knew little of this. I wish I could tell of my daring courier missions, clandestine meetings, demonstrations, pilgrimages, and underground seminars. But I was there (I thought) only to learn as much as I could about Polish history before starting a Ph.D. program. So for ten months I worked in the library and read a lot of books and old newspapers. In my free time, I traveled a little around Poland and made brief trips to Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Along the way, I decided that the game of opposition was not for me; after all, I reasoned, it was not my struggle, and anyway I would have an unfair advantage over the Poles, in that my passport would extricate me from any scrape (though possibly with a one-way ticket out of Poland, too). So other Americans could claim to be intrepid underground couriers or Jacek Kuroń's drinking buddies; I would keep my distance.

The real reason, of course, was probably the anxieties of a 23-year-old trying to master a language and choose a graduate career while falling in love at the same time. I attended just one demonstration that year (on April Fool's Day, 1987); when pictures of me hovering at the fringes showed up on the History Institute's bulletin board, I half believed my friends' ribbing that I was in real hot water.

I would not come much closer to participation that year. Careful to the last, I never asked what my friends were doing, and they never asked me to help. Nevertheless, even I could see their attitude of utter indifference toward the communist regime, and toward ideology. I suppose that feeling has colored my writing on the Polish People's Republic ever since.

It was journalism that pushed me to pay more attention. When my parents came to Wrocław for the wedding in the summer of 1988, I arranged some interviews for my father, a journalist at *The Boston Globe*. I was rather surprised to discover that I knew some very interesting people. Then in August, as Izabela and I returned from our honeymoon, strikes broke out in several cities. Just at that time, Boston Mayor Raymond

Flynn arrived in Kraków to attend an opposition-organized International Human Rights Conference there. With strikes raging, no *Globe* reporter could get a Polish visa (Flynn had gotten one only by promising not to tip off the press corps), so I was pressed into service as a stringer. In the space of a week, at the conference and on a trip to Gdańsk with Mayor Flynn, I met opposition leaders like Adam Michnik, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Zbigniew Romaszewski; I talked to striking steelworkers and miners in Kraków and Jastrzębie; and I tried to figure out just who was calling the shots. My strongest impression from that summer (which also included an Orange Alternative demonstration in Wrocław in June) was that Solidarity was no longer in charge of the Polish opposition. Western and Eastern observers alike wrote as if “opposition” and “Solidarity” were the same thing. But in truth, even I could see that the opposition was now simply too varied, and the old rules of dissent had disintegrated.

To the perspectives of friend and journalist, finally, I added that of historian. Three years after my first encounter with Poland, I returned for a year’s stay to collect material for my dissertation, on Polish workers during the communist revolution of 1945–49. I arrived as Mazowiecki’s government took power; posing as a journalist, I managed to bluff my way into the parliament to watch the swearing-in. Many times, as I hurried to the archives in the morning, read Michnik’s *Gazeta wyborcza* over lunch, or looked up from dusty folders in the late afternoon, I thought to myself: “Here you are, studying a society in revolution. But there’s a revolution happening right now, outside! Chuck aside this research, grab a notebook, and record history as it happens!”

I didn’t do that, except for an occasional story filed with the *Globe*. I followed the blistering pace of change in the newspapers (and in my wallet, as the new government’s shock therapy reduced my graduate-student stipend to 20 percent of its former buying power in just a few months), and I watched the changes in friends’ lives. But I began to think about this revolution in historical terms, as a product of society that could be examined as I was examining the dynamics of 1945. While no one (myself least of all) predicted the revolution, it also could not seem utterly miraculous to anyone who had lived in and studied Poland in those last years. The question, of course, was how to capture that story, as a historian who was also close (and yet not so close) to the events and the participants.

Over the intervening years, I have found that what I read about the revolutions of 1989 does not match what I saw, felt, and experienced. As scholars have moved past the “miracle” story of 1989, they have proposed many different explanations for the swift collapse of communism, and equally swift victory of democracy.

There are three common explanations. The first—and I think, most widely known—centers on the accession to Kremlin leadership of Mikhail

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Gorbachev, which emboldened liberalizing and democratic impulses throughout the Soviet empire. Indeed, if we want to understand why communist leaders gave up the ghost so rapidly, even in Eastern Europe's darker corners, Gorbachev is quite important. He was the first Soviet leader of the postwar generation, a man who thought pragmatically about Soviet-style socialism and the communist world. Within a short time after becoming Communist Party general secretary (*genssek*) in early 1985, he initiated sweeping reforms (and, what is more important for Central Europe, talked boldly about those reforms) in the economy, and then in politics and international relations (including a series of meetings with U.S. President Ronald Reagan).

From Gorbachev, economic reformers and democratic thinkers got the signal to push their ideas, while hard-liners found they could no longer rely on Soviet tanks, or Soviet subsidies, to prop up their policies. Central European communist leaders, still accustomed to following Kremlin signals slavishly, offered echoes of Gorbachev's slogans: restructuring the economy (*perestroika*), openness in the media (*glasnost*), and democratization. Gorbachev used visits to Central Europe, and also to the West, to pressure those leaders to rescue socialism according to his plan. The irony is that communism fell sooner on the periphery of empire than in the core, where reform ideas had originated. But the fact that even the hardest-line regimes (Romania, Bulgaria, the GDR) experienced change in 1989 can be credited in part to Gorbachev's pressure.

The "Gorbachev factor" does not take us very far in Central Europe, though. After all, in Mikhail Gorbachev's first two years in power, he was primarily concerned with reviving the Soviet economy. Perestroika meant modestly ambitious plans to introduce competitive mechanisms and decentralization of management. Not until a party plenum in January 1987 did Gorbachev and his allies emphasize *glasnost*—by which time, as we shall see, social movements in Central Europe had already pushed openness farther than Gorbachev ever would. We shall return to Gorbachev's influence briefly in chapter 4.

One of the taboo subjects Gorbachev addressed—though not until 1987–88—was the Soviet Union's relationship to Eastern Europe. Economic strictures drove this exploration: the Soviets needed to de-emphasize the military's role in foreign policy if they would craft a more manageable budget. Subsidies, too, ought to be scaled back. This meant, ideally, that the countries of the bloc would evolve toward a more trustworthy relationship with their dominant partner. And since trade with the bloc accounted for over half of all Soviet foreign trade, a relationship built upon trust and self-sufficiency rather than coercion and subsidies would benefit *perestroika* at home.

This leads us to the second explanation of communism's fall: as an eco-



conomic system, it was fatally flawed. Economic policy tended to be dictated by political necessities, such as the communists' desire to prove that socialism was more powerful than capitalism, or their fear of individual enterprise. The result was a tightly centralized, inflexible planning system that could not respond to popular desires or technological innovation. Meanwhile, a growing familiarity with the West (as more people traveled, or as they encountered Western media and Western products at home) made the citizens of Central Europe more impatient to experience the benefits of Western-style markets. The socialist economies attempted to provide what people wanted but eventually went bankrupt under the strain, and people simply chose a system that they hoped would improve their standard of living.

This explanation, too, helps us to understand why communist leaders (outside of the Balkans) gave in so easily. The widespread assumption, shortly after 1989, that the communists were only surrendering what they had already ruined was not entirely fanciful. Few had expected a peaceful end to communism; after all, the Central European regimes had their own firepower if Gorbachev would not come to their aid. But leaders in Poland and Hungary in particular knew the game was up and had already experimented a little with free-market mechanisms. Indeed, many communist bureaucrats relinquished their hold on political power only to find security in the new economic system (the so-called nomenclaturization of the economy).

Nor were communists the only ones who saw the economic failure. Mass emigration, largely for economic reasons, played a crucial role in the fall of East Germany. If the revolution had an imagined end-point, it was, for many people in Central Europe, the prosperity and economic security of the West. On the other hand, slogans demanding economic change were rare (if they appeared at all) in the protests of 1989. For that matter, Gorbachev's name was usually invoked ironically, to draw a contrast to his supposed faithful minions in Prague, Berlin, and elsewhere.

To understand the ideas that often motivated people in 1989, we can turn to the intellectuals. This third explanation was at one time the most compelling but is now sometimes overlooked. A small group of intellectuals, who drew in part on Western ideas but also upon national traditions, formulated powerful humanist critiques of the state-socialist regimes and then disseminated these ideas by means of *samizdat*.<sup>\*</sup> With the Helsinki Accords signed by nearly all European countries in 1975 as their platform, they argued incessantly for the respect of basic human rights. They also gave voice to national and religious traditions. Over the course

<sup>\*</sup> "Self-published" (Russian). A companion term is *tamizdat*: literature published "over there," in emigration.

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of a decade and a half, these ideas reached more and more people—especially after one Central European intellectual, Archbishop Karol Cardinal Wojtyła of Kraków, became Pope John Paul II in 1978. By 1988 or so, this argument runs, these ideas were second nature to those who took to the streets, or who cast ballots.

This idea becomes clear when we look at postcommunist Central Europe. Those countries where democratic practices and respect for human rights appear to have successfully taken root are also those countries where those ideas were most strongly articulated before 1989 by dissident intellectuals. Ideas about human rights, democracy, and European values entered the national consciousness through samizdat, the demonstrations of 1989, and the attention that former dissidents enjoyed in the first year or so of freedom. Even when civil or human rights have come under attack in those countries, the language of the former dissidents is familiar, and irrevocably part of the national discourse. And finally, the movements whose stories make up this book did not spring from nowhere; most owed a great deal to the ideas and practices of their elders, even when they tried to keep their distance.

Since the older generation of opposition was often a point of departure for many of the movements in the Central European carnival, a brief road map of dissent might be helpful here. “Dissent” itself is a controversial term,\* encompassing many different types of resistance or opposition. First, there is reformist dissent within the Communist Party. This was important in Czechoslovakia (and indeed throughout the region) before and during 1968; the Prague Spring of 1968 was reformism’s finest hour. Some in the region continued to look to Marxism through the 1980s.

Second, there is the “civil society” dissent pioneered by Václav Havel and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, by the Workers’ Defense Committee (KOR) in Poland, and by the Democratic Opposition in Hungary, all in the late 1970s. The ideas articulated by these groups and thinkers centered around how the communist system curtailed the independence of the individual; these dissidents countered with advice to “live the truth,” as Havel put it. KOR’s strategy included close cooperation with opposition-minded workers: at first by defending workers put on trial, later by working with them to develop underground trade unions and newspapers. Their model of “antipolitical” concrete action, and their understanding of the importance of publicity as a safeguard for dissent, would be influential for the next generation of opposition.

A third source of opposition was from within the churches. The most famous case is Poland, because of Pope John Paul II. But the underground

\* Some former dissidents claim it implies essential agreement with the system and thus is appropriate only for socialist opposition. I will use it as roughly equivalent to “intellectual opposition.”

Catholic Church played an important role in Slovakia, while František Cardinal Tomašek of Prague enjoyed great moral authority. In Western Ukraine there was a second secret church: the outlawed Uniate Church, which followed a rite not dissimilar to that of Russian Orthodoxy while maintaining allegiance to Rome. In Slovenia and Hungary, both predominantly Catholic, the Church was one of the ingredients of opposition culture, as was the Lutheran Church in the GDR.

A fourth type of opposition came from the counterculture. The communist regimes did not for the most part ban rock music, but not all of it was acceptable. In Czechoslovakia, home of the most famous underground rock group the Plastic People of the Universe, every musician had to have a license to perform, granted at yearly auditions. Through milieux like the Jazz Section—a semi-tolerated branch of the official musicians' union—many Czechs drifted from alternative culture to alternative politics. Music outside the accepted mainstream existed in a literal underground: it spread by word-of-mouth and spawned samizdat publications and informal associations. Punk music, which was most articulate in Poland and Slovenia, was the most powerful example. Underground music was in a way like the Church: it was not a form of opposition in itself but was a milieu where some people would discover opposition, and a resource (of contacts, and of strategies) for that opposition.

Finally, there was nationalist opposition. This was the oldest of them all, usually with roots stretching back to the 1940s and the communist takeovers. Nationalist opposition focused its attention on sovereignty as a first order of business, or on the salvation of national cultural traditions. The former was an impractical dream until very late in the communist period; the latter was often the work of exile communities, which were an important resource for each of the nations of Central Europe. Nationalist opposition was particularly important in Ukraine, where the work of the Ukrainian Helsinki Union blazed a trail for others to follow, and in Slovenia, where a group of intellectuals in 1981 founded a journal, *Nova revija*, that would set the parameters for opposition based upon Slovene national culture.

All of these strands of dissent came together in one event that would have a great impact on the entire region: the creation of the Solidarity trade union in 1980. Widespread strikes in July–August 1980, and the close cooperation between KOR intellectuals and workers, especially on the Baltic coast, led to negotiations between the Polish government and shipyard workers in Gdańsk, led by Lech Wałęsa. The result was a sixteen-month period in which the regime tolerated an increasingly independent-minded body that grew to nearly ten million members (or close to half the adult population of Poland). Solidarity was a dramatic illustration of the alternative to total communist control: independent orga-

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nization of society from below. As such, it captured the imagination not only of the West, but also of independent thinkers throughout Central Europe.

Such, in barest detail, is the state of wisdom on the fall of communism at a remove of just over a decade. Each of these explanations contributes much to the story, for no event as epochal as the revolutions of 1989 could possibly be captured by one theory. But if Soviet reform, economic collapse, and dissent are each essential to grasping some part of the complexity of 1989, they are together incomplete without the story of the social movements of the 1980s.

This should become obvious if we try to imagine why people would come out onto the streets in 1989. Even after we take into account such important reasons for the massive support for change, we still need to understand why people felt they could behave as they did in Wrocław, Prague, or Leipzig. Dissidents, no matter how famous in the West, could no more be an instigator of that popular upheaval than was Mikhail Gorbachev. Would most people risk repression because of a text by an imprisoned playwright or a speech by a communist leader? Hardly—no more than it was likely that crowds in Petrograd in 1917 had studied Lenin or Marx. Ideas—even those about freedom and oppression, or about economic deprivation—do not translate automatically into action.

We also don't know why 1989 looked and felt the way it did. For example, a crowd newly and suddenly liberated should be vengeful, even violent. It ought to show distaste for compromise and (at the ballot box) be eager to endorse quick fixes. Anyone familiar with Central Europe will note these attitudes are common today; they were not so in 1989. Instead, gentle, triumphant irony was the order of the day. From the Solidarity election poster showing Gary Cooper in *High Noon* brandishing a ballot, to the Prague banner reading "Well, you've knocked communism out of our heads, comrades . . .," to the Hungarian poster showing Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honecker kissing, the sense of the ridiculous ameliorated the gravity of the change. The people of Central Europe preferred ironic protests to slogans promising extermination of the communists (and there were such voices). They accepted protest that was not only about political and economic power, but about environmental and other issues. Protest became a ubiquitous part of everyday life in the major cities. The social movements that are the main actors in this book created this revolutionary style.

To most observers, both inside and outside Central Europe, the revolutions were completely unexpected, in their pace and in their popular nature. Participants in the grassroots activism were less overwhelmed, as the style, mode, language, and goals of society's mass participation in 1989 were an outgrowth of what they had been enacting for several years. For

the most part, neither dissident leaders nor reform communists sought to mobilize society (in strikes or demonstrations); the new movements, in contrast, brought the carnival to town. They created the framework, and the language, of the revolutions. People voted, or demonstrated, in part because they had learned how to do so from these movements and accepted (for the moment) their goals. As we pay attention to the carnival, we can learn to think about 1989 without resorting to “miracles,” “people power,” and “surprise.”

Some of the social movements in this story are rather well known; most are now nearly forgotten. As I began this project in Poland, I was interested in examining any and all oppositional activity in the last half-decade of communism. The rough-and-ready distinction that I came to adopt in selecting stories to pursue was one employed by many of my Wrocław friends. They would say that an activist they were recommending to me was “*konkretny*.” As I came to understand, these were the kind of people I wanted to meet. *Konkretny* meant focused on reality: on everyday problems and on realistic, effective means of overcoming, or at least exposing, them. *Konkretny* meant someone who knew how to organize a demonstration, or to use the media, and who could implement ideas effectively. The opposite—and I talked to many of these, too—would be someone who enjoyed analyzing the communist system or the opposition and believed in the power of a devastating critique. Truth—about the workings of the communist system or the promise of, say, liberalism—was for such activists the prerequisite to opposition. It became clear, though, that by the mid-1980s the time of the “truth-tellers” had passed, giving way to what I call the *konkretny* generation.\*

The *konkretny* activists matched support of the practical with a new attitude toward pluralism. This was not simply a tolerant pluralism of parties or movements, in which one person might be a socialist and another a conservative, or one person focused on environmental problems while another worried about nuclear war. I think of it as *internal pluralism*: one mixed and matched identities, and issues, as necessary, depending upon what was necessary to defeat the communists. A nationalist pacifist, or a promarket green, was not an uncommon species. One might even support ideas one didn’t believe in (by helping at a demonstration, or giving space in one’s publications), as long as those ideas furthered the destabilization of the communist system.

\* The distinction between *konkretny* and *niekonkretny* is not the same as between active and passive, however. A devotee of underground resistance would not be considered *konkretny*. The terms might be translated as realist and idealist, except that “realist” can imply, as *konkretny* does not, a certain defeatism or pessimism. “Pragmatic” is also not a good translation: the demonstrations and protests that the *konkretny* activist organized were hardly the pragmatic thing to do.

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A signal tactic of the *konkretny* activist was to exploit issues that laid bare surprising weaknesses of the communist regimes. This owed a great deal to the intellectual dissidents of the earlier generation (Václav Havel, Jacek Kuroń), who had proposed that opposition to the communist system could come in many different forms. Precisely because the communists aimed to control every aspect of society (even if that was impossible), they said, any independent activity, no matter how apolitical it seemed, weakened the regime's hold on power.

But it had always been easiest to attack the communists on the question of national sovereignty, or repression of free speech, or the falsification of history. The new opposition, by contrast, spread into areas on which there ought not to have been any disagreement: a temperance movement in Warsaw, a celebration of folk traditions in Lviv, a march against nuclear holocaust in Budapest, a campaign to clean up Bratislava. Precisely because they were so evidently innocuous, they backed the regimes into uncomfortable corners. They also were, for the same reason, more accessible to those who had not participated in opposition before. These were not intimidatingly subversive ideas, and it was not obvious why the state would arrest anyone for taking part. Such conflicts, then, sharpened the distinctions between state and society, while lowering barriers to participation.

These distinctions held in every country in Central Europe. The generation born between roughly 1957 and 1970 differed from its predecessors in just this way. The strikers in Poland in 1988; the students who demonstrated, then went on strike, in Prague; the spectacularly successful Association of Young Democrats (Fidesz)—a party that barred membership to anyone over 35—in Hungary; the aggressive journalists of the Slovene youth weekly *Mladina*; and the young nationalists in Lviv: none of these remembered 1968 (still less 1945) nor pretended to fight those old battles. They opposed the communists, of course, but did not propose another ideology to take its place.

In each case, of course, there were older opposition leaders who supported (or joined) their younger *konkretny* colleagues; some movements, like the Polish temperance campaign, were made up entirely of people over forty. But the distinction generally held. Even when I turned West, looking at activists from democratic countries who came to Central Europe, I found a roughly similar contrast: there, too, were people who believed in “doing something” and chafed at the bit while their elders talked theory.

The actors in this play—decidedly not a drama, though many would object to calling it a comedy—are social movements: groups of people, sharing a collective identity (and sometimes a lifestyle, too), who seek to mobilize others around a set of issues. But (as my search for the *konkretny*

indicates) the individuals who made up these movements can best help us to understand what the movements were like, where they came from, and how they connected with other movements. So, at the risk of making the stage altogether too crowded, individuals from most movements will make their appearance as well.

Though I draw extensively on samizdat and personal archives, this book is in large part an oral history of 1989. It is worth recognizing the pitfalls of this approach. That memories can fail is but the contemporary historian's least worry. Of greater concern is that participants will embellish their roles, intentionally or not, and cast their movement's activities in the benevolent light of a successful revolution. A story told to a "neutral" third party is also an opportunity to settle old scores with movement rivals. Each of these biases is no less true for any written source and must be accounted for by the conscientious historian. For example, I have for the most part disregarded all the less flattering stories interviewees have told me about others, while taking stories of personal valor with a grain of salt.

There are also murky questions of spies, secret funds, and police manipulation. It seems that every movement, every key event in Central Europe trails in its wake rumors of informers or ambiguous ties to one regime or another. These stories can neither be proven nor be disproven in the foreseeable future, if ever, and I have chosen to leave them aside. When, toward the end of the next decade, a few relevant records in Moscow and Washington, as well as in Central European capitals, are released, we may discover that the successes or failures of this or that movement or activist appear in a quite different light. For the meantime, I think, we can safely start by appreciating a spectacle without wondering too much about the pulleys and wires that may or may not make our characters dance.

To write about opposition to communism in the 1980s, one must begin with Poland. The Poles were the only ones ever to stage repeated challenges to communist rule, with major uprisings in 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, and 1980. Solidarity, the last of these, was a more credible alternative to communism than anything else produced in Central Europe. Its influence throughout the region was incalculable, even after General Wojciech Jaruzelski ordered in the tanks and riot police and installed martial law on December 13, 1981. As a result of the Solidarity experiment, there were far more people in Poland than elsewhere with experience in independent political activism—perhaps by a factor of 100. For this reason, the first chapters of this book will focus mostly on Polish movements. We will then see how the remarkable variety and potential of Polish opposition inspired the rest of the region up through 1989.

What started as just a carnival became a revolution. This story of 1989's

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revolution is quite different from what others have written. Rather than beginning in Moscow, or perhaps in Gdańsk, and cascading outward, it moves back and forth across borders, searching for parallels and influences. There are no miraculous events here, but many years of concerted action. The actors are not the famous dissident intellectuals and the ruthless communists, but hundreds of lesser-known individuals, most of whom, as I write, have yet to reach their forty-fifth birthday. Nor, finally, is this a pessimistic story of desperately poor societies demanding a better standard of living and turning nasty when their hopes turn sour. Instead this is a story of people who began by trying to change what they could (or believed they could). As they succeeded, their “concrete” efforts contributed to a revolution.

As the years have passed, the term “revolution” often disappears; people even in Central Europe speak of the “changes,” the “transition,” or just “1989.” But the scope of change—political, economic, social, cultural—plus the speed at which it took place make any other word a strange and even tendentious fit. We shall see that many of the hopes of the participants in that raucous time have not been fulfilled. But it is enough to interview them a decade later—in parliamentary offices or in isolated mountain huts, in spacious company headquarters or in Internet cafes (or even over the Internet) to realize that Central Europe has changed utterly and irrevocably. And it is a world that, at least in part, they themselves have made.





## Central Europe in 1989