

Entangled protest. Transnational approaches to the history of dissent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union

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It is no new insight that history is more than the dealings of presidents, kings and prime ministers. Nevertheless, the history of the East-West conflict is still very often a story of high level negotiations and government considerations. Although the interest in the impact that the division of Europe and the enforcement of communism in Eastern Europe has had on society in East and West has gained ground, this kind of research seldom encompasses a view of both sides of the conflict. The importance of the articles in the book *Entangled Protest* lies in doing exactly this – telling the story of the contact between East and West 'from below'.

The stated aim of *Entangled Protest* is to shed new light on the history of dissidence in the Soviet Bloc through a transnational approach. It however does far more than only study the transnational ties between Eastern European dissident movements. Almost all articles also offer an account of transnational ties that cross the Iron Curtain. This way the volume adds a transnational component not only to the historiography on Eastern European dissidence, but also to that of the East-West conflict in general.

The methodological background to the volume is given by the editor Robert Brier and Indiana University professor Padraic Kenney, both of whom have already published extensively on the transnational links of the Eastern European opposition. Especially Kenney's book *Carnival of Revolution* (2002) is one of the earliest and still leading studies on the topic.

Adhering to a common definition of transnational history, Brier and Kenney prefer to research coincidental meetings, informal dialogues and networks from below over (instead of?) traditional diplomatic history. Kenney explicitly states that he is not interested in the traditional grand narrative of a 'Zeitgeist' or the deterministic 'falling dominoes' of 1989. He graphically describes history as the result of 'radio waves' and 'electromagnetic forces'. The contacts, networks and information exchanges of ordinary activists are 'like atoms in a molecule, bound together and exchanging information over short distances; thus if the opposition in the Soviet bloc was a molecule (...), transnational interactions are like the electromagnetic force binding them closer together' (p. 45). Kenney acknowledges that this kind of history is more difficult to write than traditional diplomatic history. That it is nonetheless possible, is proven by some of the excellent articles in this volume.

In line with Kenney's rejection of 'falling dominoes', Brier stresses how important it is to resist a finalist approach to the history of the 1970s and 1980s. He rightfully states that to truly understand the opposition of these years, it is crucial to be aware that their chances of success in the eyes of those in the East and West seemed very slim.

Brier introduces the concepts and historiography relevant for the book in a methodological and thematic opening article. Although he mainly focuses on the history of dissidence, also here the important East-West component of the book shows. He, for example, emphasises the context of *détente*. This was indeed important for the Eastern European opposition. Not in the least because the fact that traditional *détente* thinking had difficulty in understanding the nature and importance of Eastern European dissidence accounted for many of the misunderstandings and paradoxes in the East-West dialogue.

The transnational approach in this volume comes in different forms. While Kacper Szulecki focuses on dialogue between East and West and Nenad Stefanov is concerned with transfer, Idesbald Goddeeris and Kim Christiaens choose to conduct a comparison. All these articles succeed in giving both very interesting insights into the working of Kenney's 'electromagnetic forces' and in opening up new fields of research.

The only exceptions seem to be the articles by Holger Nehring and Wanda Jarzabek. Their articles provide interesting analyses and insights, but adhere less strictly to the focus on border-crossing contact from below. In switching back and forth between the 'lower' level of social movements and individuals and the 'higher' level of high politics they tell a relevant, but partly more conventional and familiar story.

Good examples of the new approaches and insights of this volume are the articles of Tomáš Vilimek, Kacper Szulecki, Julia Metger, and Bent Boel. Tomáš Vilimek's article probably fits best in the tradition of Kenney's book of 2002 about the transnational ties between Eastern European oppositional movements. Vilimek zooms in on the mutual perception of, and exchange of ideas between, the East German and Czechoslovak opposition. Still the links to Western movements are not absent from this article. He rightfully stresses that contact within Eastern Europe was often possible only through mediation by sympathisers in the West.

These East-West contacts that Vilimek and Kenney shortly dwell upon as a necessary background and interesting intermezzo, merit more research in themselves. Kacper Szulecki recognises the importance of this topic. In his contribution he gives an excellent analysis of the difficult dialogue between Western peace activists and Eastern European oppositionists. He shows the great differences in opinion on crucial issues such as peace and human rights on both sides of the Iron Curtain and how this influenced the debate that intensified in the later 1980s. He rightfully calls 1985 a 'tipping point of a Europe-wide cooperation for peace and human rights' (p. 199).

Julia Metger introduces Western correspondents in Moscow as transnational actors between East and West. In this way she sheds light on an important and little researched group of mediators between both blocs. Furthermore she shows an eye for detail that is crucial in conducting successful transnational research. Not only does she study the growing contact between the Moscow dissidents and the foreign correspondents, but also the way this contact is influenced by their practical working conditions and later on expressed in the

changing content and semantics of the newspaper articles.

Bent Boel researches the reaction of Western Social Democracy to Eastern European dissidence. In this transnational and comparative form this is a rather new topic [1]. His article invites us to look beyond the - partly rightful but also all too easy - judgmental tone that is very common in studies about Western Social Democracy and the Eastern European opposition. If one switches the focus from Poland, where it is usually directed, to Czechoslovakia, a more nuanced judgement is possible. Social Democrats from different countries who failed to react adequately to the developments in Poland, often had warm contacts with Czechoslovak *émigrés* and the opposition in the country itself. This asks for more comparative and explanatory research [2]. Despite the fact that he wants to leave behind the judgmental tone, he also has to conclude that established parties played only a small role in the dialogue from below between East and West in the 1970s and 1980s.

This clearly shows the importance of this book. Because the traditional, established protagonists of historical accounts were largely absent from it, the story of how actors in Eastern and Western societies found each other long before 1989 is not likely to be told in the Cold War handbooks. The transnational ties of the opposition and the East-West dialogue from below teach us important lessons about the existence of a dialogue between European societies long before the division of Europe came to an end. This book is a valuable introduction to this relatively new topic and offers many interesting new insights and useful historiographical overviews. For the historian interested in a transnational approach to both the dissidence and the East-West dialogue this book is indispensable; at least until more extensive monographs appear. The research in this volume is promising enough to create a strong wish that more will follow.

[1] Another very recent comparative study is: Bernd Rother, 'Mieszane odczucia – reakcja zachodnioeuropejskich socjaldemokratów na powstanie "Solidarności"', in: Paweł Jaworski, Łukasz Kamiński ed., *Świat wobec "Solidarności" 1980–1989* (Warsaw 2013) 242-253.

[2] These closer connections between social democrats and the Czechoslovak opposition are also shown in a more national context in Bernd Rother, 'Zwischen Solidarität und Friedenssicherung. Willy Brandt und Polen in den 1980er Jahren', in: Friedhelm Boll, Krzysztof Ruchniewicz ed., *"Nie mehr eine Politik über Polen hinweg". Willy Brandt und Polen* (Bonn 2010) 220-263 and Christie Miedema, 'Laveren tussen ontspanning en solidariteit. De PvdA en de FNV ten tijde van de Poolse crisis', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 126 (2013) no. 3, 363-377.

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Christie Miedema: Rezension zu: Robert Brier (ed.): Entangled protest. Transnational approaches to the history of dissent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, 2013, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/publikationen/entangled-protest-transnational-approaches-history-dissent#r1943>.