

## **Lives of the Orange Men. A Biographical History of the Polish Orange Alternative Movement**

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"Poland in this time," readers are told early in Waldemar Fydrych's *Lives of the Orange Men*, "was a strange and wonderful land. Some people thought it was [a] real trip, but others found it psychotic. For this reason the unfamiliar reader might find themselves disoriented, as if tumbling down a rabbit hole. So for the purposes of edification and understanding, the reader will encounter a number of clear and concise explanatory notes to provide access to this world where the familiar becomes strange" (p. 9). Neither entirely clear nor concise, Fydrych's biographical history of the Orange Alternative movement he helped found is nevertheless an illuminating and pleasurable rabbit hole.

Organized in the 1980s, when Poland was gripped by the struggle between the Communist authorities and newly formed Solidarity movement, the Orange Alternative offered a playful and radically different point of view – staging irreverent "happenings" and decorating streets with graffiti dwarves. This book records the movement's humor and humanity and is a valuable source for those interested in Polish history and culture, as well as broader questions of political performance and art in public space. *Lives of the Orange Men* offers a personal glimpse into a pivotal era in Poland, but does so in a way that makes strange the familiar history – and thus revives the spirit of the movement it chronicles.

The Orange Alternative grew out of the New Culture Movement, a student organization at Wrocław University. Though it did not advocate a specific political platform, in a time of highly charged protests and politics (the united workers' strikes that led to the acknowledgement of Solidarity in 1980, student occupation strikes in 1981, and the imposition of martial law on December 13, 1981, for example), the Orange Alternative brought anarchic humor and fantastic creativity to the streets and encouraged a reclaiming of public space as a place of community. Fydrych argues that although Solidarity and the government were on opposing sides, they were alike in both their solemnity and their politicization of public space. It was the Orange Alternative, he suggests, that was truly radical and would have "defended the people" in talks with the state (p. 254).

In detailing the spirit of the Orange Alternative, this book offers not only a history of the movement, but also a reflective critique of Solidarity and the inadequacy of histories that fail to acknowledge that the latter did not

produce the only vision of a free Poland. The underlying ethos of the Orange Alternative was articulated in Fydrych's "Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism," the drafting of which is recalled in this volume. "The only solution for the future and for the present is surrealism," it argues, for, "the whole world is a work of art. Every single policeman standing in the street is a piece of art. Let's have fun, our destiny is not a cross to bear. What sense does it make to suffer when you can enjoy yourself" (p. 304). Here, Fydrych has distilled many of the ideas that shaped the Orange Alternative (to the degree that the loose collective took "form"). We see the rejection of seriousness and suffering (both of which he sees as characteristic for Solidarity) – as well as a rejection of fear. Rather than mourn the absurdity of the world and the ubiquity of the police, why not celebrate the surrealism of it all? The insistence on including the police within the scope of socialist surrealist "art" is particularly significant, as the Orange Alternative often parodied the apparatuses of state power and engaged security forces in a sort of dialectical performance art.

In *Lives of the Orange Men*, Fydrych recounts the path that led him to drafting his manifesto and the community that became the Orange Alternative before turning to descriptions of the planning and execution of many of the group's memorable happenings. Among the most well-known of these happenings is the Eve of the October Revolution celebration in 1987 where participants were encouraged to "put on red shoes, a red cap or scarf [...] At last resort, with no red flag, then paint your fingernails red. If you've got nothing red, then buy a red baguette, with ketchup. We reds (red faces, hair, pants and lips) will gather that day [...]" (p. 141). Like many of their happenings, the Eve of the October Revolution celebration was a parodic performance of Soviet rhetoric and aesthetics. It also characteristically engaged the local police as part of the "performance," as, initially, authorities were unsure how to react to the group that was ostensibly celebrating a communist holiday. How do you take someone seriously who is rounding up citizens for the crime of parading through town with a ketchup baguette?

Much as the ethos and aesthetics of "socialist surrealism," with its parodying take on socialist formalities, informed the actions of the Orange Alternative, so too does it infuse this text – making the work not only a history of socialist surrealism, but also a socialist-surrealist history. This style is signaled by the book's title – *Lives of the Orange Men* echoes the hagiographic "lives of saints" whose form was mirrored and secularized in the grandiose biographies of Soviet leaders. The opening account of Fydrych's birth builds on this style and indicates this is a story unique to its author. Beginning the text at the time of Stalin's death and his own birth a few weeks later, Fydrych describes his birthday as "a great turning point. Fiery signs appeared in the sky. A horrifying storm raged" (p. 9). We are introduced to a grand narrator of history – one we are immediately inclined to view with some reservations.

The majority of the text is devoted to an account of Fydrych's life and work – from his birth in 1953 through the first free Polish elections in 1989 (in which Fydrych ran for Senate). In the shorter chapters that follow, Fydrych introduces a number of men also associated with the movement (women only figure as partners to the profiled persons in this history). Even though their stories are told from Fydrych's perspective, and in the same "socialist-surrealist" style of the first chapter, the inclusion of these surrounding figures expands the scope of the work and offers a more thorough picture of the actions and perspectives that shaped the collective. The chapters on "Captain" Wiesław Cupała and Józef Pinior, in particular, provide the clearest articulation of Fydrych's argument

that Polish history might have taken a different path – that Solidarity was not the only alternative to communism.

Along with Fydrych's text and "Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism," this publication includes the complete translated run of *The Orange Alternative* (originally published by the New Culture Movement) and a selection of photos and ephemera from Orange Alternative happenings. These primary documents are framed by a new foreword by the activist duo The Yes Men, Anne Applebaum's foreword to the first Polish edition, and a timeline of Orange Alternative happenings. Readers seeking an introduction to the Orange Alternative or beginning research on the movement will find that this collection of documents helpfully collects works that were once difficult to track down – particularly in full translations.

Though certainly a valuable source, readers will find that the text is not without shortcomings. For those looking to the book as a history of the time, the style of Fydrych's prose and his self-aggrandizing narrative might prove frustrating in their limited scope and (at times) dubious claims. (Padraic Kenney's *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989*, one of the few scholarly works to address the Orange Alternative, might be a better place to start for such readers.) There are also a number of issues – including somewhat distracting awkward translations, small editorial errors, and factually incorrect dates in the timeline – that detract from both the polish and historical accuracy of the book. While at times frustrating, these deficiencies do not interfere with comprehension and might be taken as yet another means by which this text conveys the do-it-yourself ethos and aesthetics of the Orange Alternative.

Considered alongside scholarly tomes on Solidarity and the politics of transition, this relatively brief biographical history diversifies the prevailing historical narrative and offers a first-hand account of a life of art and protest. It is a valuable read for those thinking through ideas of humor and community, artistic agitation, traditions of Polish protest, or perhaps, as the forward by the Yes Men suggests, for those looking to "glean lessons for your own revolutions" (p. vii).



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