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REVIEW ARTICLE

The Faces of Democracy in the Revolutionary East Bloc

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Julia Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 300 pp. (hb), $99.99, ISBN 978-1316-51914-1.

James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 292 pp. (hb), $53.95, ISBN 978-0801-45205-5.

Anna Machcewicz, *Rebellion: The Shipyard Strikes in Poland and the Birth of Solidarność in August 1980* (Paderborn: Brill/Schöningh, 2023), 375 pp. (hb), $76, ISBN 978-3-506-79044-6.

Adrian-George Matus, *The Long 1968 in Hungary and Romania* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), 289 pp. (hb), $115.99, ISBN 978-3111-25309-1.

Christian Rau, *Hungern für Bischofferode: Protest und Politik in der ostdeutschen Transformation* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2023), 273 pp. (hb), €29, ISBN 978-3593-51728-5.

Kacper Szulecki, Janusz Waluszko and Tomasz Borewicz, *The Chernobyl Effect: Antinuclear Protests and the Molding of Polish Democracy, 1986–1990* (New York: Berghahn, 2022), 228 pp. (hb), $135, ISBN 978-1800-73619-1.

Cover pictures on books about 1989 and its aftermath typically depict the faces of frustrated citizens: sometimes a group of disaffected workers or youth, sometimes thousands of people massing in the streets. Who were these people? How did they get there? What did they want? And what came of it all?

Almost four decades later, the answers to these questions are more pressing than ever. Nostalgia for authoritarian regimes has summoned popular support against democracy. Through a barrage of 'fake news' that frames the end of the Cold War as a Western plot and power grab that decimated beautifully stable socialist wonderlands, power-hungry demagogues and their oligarchic supporters have incited many Europeans to undo the democratic accomplishments of revolutions that climaxed in 1989.[1] Understandably impatient with neoliberal capitalism, yearning for an idealised past of their youth or unable to clearly remember what the so-called socialist regimes had really been like, contemporary Europeans at both political extremes succumb to nostalgia akin to a tendency among mid–Cold War late-to-middle-aged West Germans, who reimagined their youthful 'normal lives' in a halcyon Third Reich. This misreading of the late East Bloc epoch forgets the achievement attained

[1]Russian schoolbooks maintain that East Germany was simply annexed by the West, making it that much more fraught that this same dogma is ubiquitous in Western discourse. Marina Jung, 'Russian Textbook Claims German Unification Was "Annexation"', *Deutsche Welle* (3 October 2023), accessed 19 November 2023, https://www.dw.com/en/reunification-russia-speaks-of-annexation-of-the-gdr/a-66986199.

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by thousands of brave engaged citizens through the fall of 1989 – an end to authoritarian violence and the inauguration of over thirty years of relative peace and democratic transformation. Of course, the 1990s transition yielded very real pain for many East Europeans, not least when successor regimes unleashed varying forms of capitalism. But democratic freedoms and, in some states, social welfare structures also fostered decades of local engagement, European integration and comparative stability. By reframing 1989 as a tragedy, populist movements threaten to discard the hard-earned fruits of democracy.

Contesting such authoritarian reimagining of the past, recent scholarship has moved to explain how and why revolution happened *from below*. Immediately after 1989, scholars put greatest emphasis on high politics, sometimes acceded to Western triumphalism and understood 1989 primarily as a caesura that ended a largely stagnant East Bloc. Earlier surveys such as those by Gale Stokes and Robin Okey digested this approach by juxtaposing each East Bloc country's political and economic transitions.[2] Applying macro- and micro-historical approaches, new scholarship has sought to break down the paradigms that sequestered Eastern Europe into a zone of stagnation. On the one hand, a recent wave of big-picture comparative histories has broadened our gaze to situate Eastern Europe firmly as a part of global developments.[3] On the other hand, the six books under review here represent a trend that narrows in on local contexts and animates deeply human stories during tumultuous times. They question overarching top-down chronologies and closed-door high-level political discussions by exploring the less famous personalities and mass demonstrators who made the revolution possible when they turned out on the streets. Often taking a long view through the final decades of communism and looking into the transition years of the early 1990s, each case study (four based on dissertations) has sought out untapped collections in former state security archives and local repositories, as well as private papers and interviews uniquely available for contemporary research. In keeping with Gareth Dale's survey of revolutionary movements across East Germany's 1989, each work broadens our gaze away from a few disaffected youth in each capital and soundly disproves the presumption that authoritarianism's end was a sort of spontaneous implosion from above.[4] Like Kyrill Kunakhovich's comparison of cultural spheres in East German and Polish urban milieus, they also humanise local reformist party leaders, many of whom were predisposed to lend protesters an ear, even support.[5] By the late 1980s in each country, engaged citizens broadly desired radical change. Revolution was never inevitable, but it was no accident either.

Rather than just filling gaps, each book reconstructs why people in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania lost faith in seemingly stable regimes, supported democracy as a solution and remained engaged as matters unfolded after 1989. Julia Ault (University of Utah) traces the emergence and influence of East German environmental movements at the end of communist rule. James Krapfl (McGill University) assesses the narrative tropes of revolutionaries in Czechoslovakia's streets in 1989. Anna Machcewicz (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw) gives a day-by-day account of the 1980 Solidarity strike in Gdańsk. Adrian-George Matus (Milestone Institute, Budapest) investigates intellectual and cultural ferment after 1968 in Hungary and Romania. Christian Rau (Institute for Contemporary History, Berlin) reconstructs the politics of protest and

[2]Gale Stokes, *And the Walls came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Robin Okey, *The Demise of Communist East Europe: 1989 in Context* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2004).

[3]For an excellent joint publication by scholars on differing parts of the world during the Cold War era and beyond, see James Mark, Bogdan Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska, *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). For intellectual-political histories of 1989 with global reach, see George Lawson, Chris Armbruster, and Michael Cox, eds., *The Global 1989: Continuity and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Jacques Rupnik, ed., *1989 as a Political World Event* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[4]Gareth Dale, *The East German Revolution of 1989* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 224–5. Padraic Kenney has focused on Polish intellectuals, workers, and local party figures in *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe, 1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[5]Kyrill Kunakhovich, *Communism's Public Sphere: Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland and East Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

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memory in a rural potash mining area of early 1990s former East Germany. And Kacper Szulecki (University of Oslo) teams up with two witnesses to demonstrate how anti-nuclear protests gained revolutionary appeal in late-communist Poland. Bringing creative perspectives from diverse institutions on both sides of the Atlantic, this new generation of scholars seeks to drop the baggage of preconceptions about Western superiority or idealisation of 'actually existing socialism' and so offer fresh approaches for decoding why 1989 happened. Breaking these works down into four interrelated sections, this essay shows how the six books collectively articulate (1) the sources and methodologies needed to undertake grassroots histories of East Bloc revolutions; (2) what preconditions made the revolutions possible, even likely, and how they unfolded; (3) the place of biographical history in explaining revolutionary dynamics and (4) the aftermaths and legacies of these revolutions in the decades that followed.

Sources

Each work under review draws from a source base that benefits from closeness to grassroots revolutionary actors. The narrow window has not yet closed for accessing interviews and private materials that will be lost when the last witnesses pass away. By the same token, many archival collections and former state security archives from the era are freshly catalogued and available. As Krapfl eloquently attests: 'The aim of the book is "resurrection" insofar as most of the evidence presented here has been forgotten, and in bringing this buried material out of its archival "tombs" and into the public light, the book restores voices to historical actors who have hitherto been denied the power to speak.'[6] Along with flyers, bulletins, declarations, posters and open letters from across Czechoslovakia's 112 districts, he traces the day-by-day evolution of discourse about non-violence and humanity against an 'inhumane' communist regime in November and December 1989.[7]

In like manner, Matus draws from extensive state and security archives in Romania and Hungary, as well as myriad interviews and musical recordings, to reconstruct the quiet, subversive political culture of dissidents from the 1968er generation in Hungary and Romania. Chiefly exploring the post-communist period, Rau casts his net broadly to explore recently accessible materials in Germany's Federal Archive, Parliamentary Archive, Thuringian State Archive, personal papers collected at the Robert Havemann Society, the corporate archive at the BASF chemical concern and a wide range of interviews, personal papers, transcripts from leftist radio broadcasters and the records of Treuhand potash mining director Klaus Schucht. Along with extensive police files, Szulecki avails himself of knowledge from his two co-authors – Waluszko and Borewicz – to demonstrate how Polish activists in Warsaw and Wrocław were some of the first to propagate information about the 26 April 1986 Chernobyl explosion (notwithstanding regime attempts to curtail information). Ault digs into Stasi reports, Federal Archive data on East Germany's state environmental ministry and environmental groups and personal papers at the Robert Havemann Society. To substantiate her day-to-day documentation of how thousands of workers at the Gdańsk shipyards seized legitimacy from communist rulers in August 1980, Machcewicz deploys interviews, unpublished diaries, party and IPN Security Service archives and social studies dating from the late 1960s through the 1980 strike's aftermath.

Matus and Machcewicz give particular attention to how Radio Free Europe served as an essential source of information for revolutionaries. Like Western television access across much of East Germany, Radio Free Europe exemplified 'to what extent and under what conditions the Iron Curtain was indeed a porous and permeable environment'.[8] Although official state media sought to monopolise print and airwaves and proscribe inconvenient truths, the enduring availability of outside sources like Radio Free Europe – crucially broadcast in local languages – decisively swept away the

[6] James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 2.

[7] Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face*, 7.

[8] Adrian-George Matus, *The Long 1968 in Hungary and Romania* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), 21.

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smokescreen of what authoritarians wanted citizens to think was real. Given the inestimable importance of Radio Free Europe for cutting through authoritarian fake news in the 1980s, it is only natural that authoritarian forces today are seeking to shut it down.

The Anatomy of Revolution

Why and how did revolutions sweep across Eastern Europe in 1989? Back in 1938, the eminent historian Crane Brinton spoke of the 'anatomy of revolution': patterns that emerged when he compared the English Civil War, French Revolution and Bolshevik Revolution. While one could not prescribe a set 'recipe', the origins of most revolutions appeared to centre on an old regime struggling with acute financial strife and a loss of political legitimacy. The result? Truth came to dwell in anti-regime speeches and publications.[9] Out of these preconditions, a triggering event launched the revolution in earnest. This event's authoritative fervour in turn intensified a sense of solidarity that inspired personal sacrifice.

Akin to Brinton's preconditions, Machcewicz shows how Gdańsk ripened for a revolution as the 1970s progressed due to the confluence of political and economic factors (delegitimisation of existing authority, economic crises blamed on regime incompetence, popular support for rival political narratives). Gdańsk's Lenin shipyard – the fifth largest in the world in the 1960s – had already suffered marked decline with accompanying layoffs that spawned a strike in 1970. Although through the early 1970s the Gierek administration had improved wages and consumption, conditions for fresh unrest had matured by 1980 thanks to economic fallout from the 1973 oil crisis and a decade of excess spending. Environmental pollution, illness on the job caused by dangerous working conditions and ample evidence that party elites thrived on the Second Economy (such as by raking in high-end goods in 'commercial shops') prompted outcry.[10] Everyone knew existing trade unions failed to serve workers, and many openly listened to Radio Free Europe on the job. Regime incompetence to help people amid a wintry deluge in January 1979 was followed by Pope John Paul II's June 1979 advocacy of human rights during his Poland tour, an event then compounded by massive price increases and the tenth anniversary of the 1970 strike.

Ault and Szulecki reveal the added dimension that the political and economic preconditions for late twentieth-century revolutions were intertwined with environmental degradation. Szulecki and his co-authors describe a 'Chernobyl effect' that exploded across Poland after April 1986 in response to environmental devastation that delegitimised the regime. Panic spread as the regime claimed everything was fine but mandated that adults and children alike drink disgusting iodine cocktails.[11] Shortly after the Chernobyl disaster, people in Wrocław protested deadly contamination of the Odra River from the Siechnice industrial plant. By the late 1980s, diverse environmental protest groups took aim at the poorly assembled and corruptly managed Żarnowiec nuclear plant construction site near Gdańsk. By May 1989, dissidents had even built and burned a cardboard 'nuclear reactor' on Długa Street in central Gdańsk to protest the dangers of nuclear energy. Nor did a change of regime disarm concerns. When the post-communist regime planned to complete the nuclear plant anyway, protests intensified until a Belgian company affirmed in February 1990 that Żarnowiec was unsafe and had to be abandoned.[12] Meanwhile, Ault contrasts East Germany's official claims of 'environmental protection at home and abroad in the 1960s and 1970s' with rampant pollution in everyday reality, which transformed church and even state environmental groups into germinating grounds

[9]Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, third printing (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 68.

[10]Anna Machcewicz, *Rebellion: The Shipyard Strikes in Poland and the Birth of Solidarność in August 1980* (Paderborn: Brill/Schöningh, 2023), 20.

[11]Kacper Szulecki, Janusz Waluszko, and Tomasz Borewicz, *The Chernobyl Effect: Antinuclear Protests and the Molding of Polish Democracy, 1986–1990* (New York: Berghahn, 2022), 66.

[12]Szulecki et al., *The Chernobyl Effect*, 183.

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for criticism of state hypocrisy.[13] Grassroots efforts to protect local spaces steadily spread across East Germany and sometimes even networked with those in other countries. Although usually limited to a few personal connections, Ault shows that occasionally East Berlin activists attained ties with counterparts in Poland. And by 1989 actors in the state Cultural League's environmental wing were turning on state leaders because of their obvious lapses in caring for the environment.

According to Brinton, the masses typically abandon the old regime in earnest at a triggering moment. This can manifest when some particularly brutish regime effort to quell revolutionary actions by force ignites the longstanding tinder of discontent over government lies and a moribund economy.[14] After the Polish state had struggled to suppress a preceding strike by 18,000 people in seventy-nine workplaces in Lublin in July, Machcewicz shows, the longstanding revolutionary free trade unionist crane operator Anna Walentynowicz was fired from her post at the Gdańsk shipyards on 9 August 1980: the eve of thirty years of service that would have won her a pension. When she went to the shipyard to get her final pay cheque, four guards beat her up at the gate, threw her in a van and delivered her to the personnel office, where the sitting bureaucrats promptly had no idea what else to do with her. Instantly, the 'expectations and slogans of those involved moved from being economic and grievance-based to political and civically engaged'.[15] Agitators like Lech Wałęsa and Bogdan Borusewicz exploited the scandal by calling for a general strike. Their demands were economic (pay increases, pay for time off) and political (reinstating Wałęsa and Walentynowicz as well as erecting a monument for the workers killed in 1970). As the strike spread to the Paris Commune shipyard in Gdynia and journalists ventured inside both shipyards to openly sympathise with the strikers, party leaders feared a repeat of the traumatic violence that had ended the shipyard strike in 1970, and they started acceding to demands. This included allowing workers to weld anchors onto cross-shaped memorial plinths for the victims of 1970 and reinstating Walentynowicz as a crane operator, in essence legitimising the authority of the protesters.

The inflammatory incident in Czechoslovakia came on 17 November 1989, when state-backed thugs beat up peaceful protesters in central Prague, many of them students. The result was a general strike that started on 27 November, uniting student, industrial-worker and farmer grievances into a united civic initiative across the republic. Though mobilised, the armed forces held back as it became clear that half of the national labour force was on strike, and another quarter (mostly from education, healthcare and other essential sectors) expressed solidarity. Regime concessions terminated the authoritarian monopoly on power, while the mantle of non-violence and humanity imbued the protesters with legitimacy.

In many of the East Bloc countries, heterogenous revolutionary groups experienced a kindred sense of moral authority against the desacralised old regime. As Machcewicz argues, opposition to rampant waste, corruption and illegitimate state-sponsored unions had brought on the shipyard strikes in Gdańsk and Gdynia in summer 1980. As the Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee (MKS) proved its confidence and unity by presenting twenty-one demands, strikers felt a 'sense of community' after years of fear in an atomised authoritarian country. The strike effectively 'became a lesson in civics, leading people to clarify or radicalise their expectations towards the authorities'.[16] As Dale observes in East German cities, a sense of solidarity fused the anti-regime sentiment among protesters – an emotional factor hard to classify.[17] In Czechoslovakia, Krapfl argues, diverse agitators experienced 'a transcendent new sense of community', which the masses sacralised into new 'rituals, prohibitions, and myths'. This sense of solidarity accumulated as a process of democratisation from below in workplaces, unions and local administrations. Based upon shared tenets of

[13]Julia Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968–90* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2.

[14]Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, 90.

[15]Machcewicz, *Rebellion*, xix.

[16]Machcewicz, *Rebellion*, xxi.

[17]Dale, *The East German Revolution of 1989*, 55.

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non-violence in response to state violence, the solidarity peaked when Václav Havel was elected president in December 1989.[18]

To illustrate how factions within the united front articulated the lessons of Czechoslovakia's revolution as conditions evolved, Krapfl turns to Hayden White's literary 'emplotments' for historical writing.[19] Early radicalisation often progressed as the hollowness of state authority turned to farce. Just as Dale shows how ordinary East Germans seized the stage from local state leaders to public applause – in effect proving the powerlessness of regime representatives and decreasing serious need for dialogue with them[20] – Krapfl narrates a romantic early stage, in which student protesters became 'knights', Havel 'a saint' and the masses 'gods'. State claims that 'forces of order' were overturning hooligans on 17 November with dogs, armoured vehicles and beatings were dismissed as absurd, while revolutionary depictions of the same event as a 'massacre' gained traction.[21] With ultimately decisive implications, the state had lost any remaining control of the master narrative.

This 'anatomy' of revolution evolved further, however, as many grassroots social activists who made the revolutions possible then took part in the crystallisation and contestation of new meanings and power structures through the early 1990s. In Krapfl's narration, solidarity steadily broke down as radicals rejected the comedic emplotment that Václav Havel's inauguration signified a happy ending, and instead lamented seeming continuities in 1990 as tragic, to the point that post-revolutionary depictions turned to satire over whether there had been a revolution at all. Drawing out rich micro-historical evidence, Christian Rau devotes most of his book to excavating human stories surrounding a July 1993 hunger strike by about forty potash miners who campaigned to keep their jobs in a village of former East Germany's Catholic Eichsfeld Iron Curtain borderland in Thuringia. Rau emphasises the hunger strike as 'a kaleidoscope of the transforming German society, with all its hopes and fears, in view of a fully open future. All the experiences, expectations and (alternative) conceptions of democracy were dealt with more concretely here than anywhere else.' Looking to 'micro spaces' like factories, parliaments or unions, he draws out multisided and often contradictory narratives about what East Germany had been and what people made of the transformations of the early 1990s, effectively countering popular metanarratives that frame the early 1990s as a disastrous breakthrough to neoliberalism.[22] As Szulecki similarly reveals, when Poland's post-communist regime sought to continue construction at the Żarnowiec nuclear site, many of the same people who had opposed communism engaged in hunger strikes, violent clashes, grassroots mobilisation and expert debates about the economics of nuclear energy. This 'shows the fluidity of the political situation under the conditions of transformation – and also the continuity between the 1980s and the 1990s', as protagonists continued seamlessly in the new political reality with 'all their previous experiences, conflicts, ideas and hopes'.[23] As will be shown, many of the works under review offer new micro-historical insights to preceding scholarship on how protesters sustained radical energies against corruption and oppression they perceived in the new power structures that evolved after the revolutionary moment had passed.[24]

[18]Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face*, 9–10.

[19]Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

[20]Dale, *The East German Revolution of 1989*, 70.

[21]Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face*, 15.

[22]Christian Rau, *Hungern für Bischofferode: Protest und Politik in der ostdeutschen Transformation* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2023), 19.

[23]Szulecki et al., *The Chernobyl Effect*, 5.

[24]This insight about public desires for further agitation after 1989 dovetails with James Mark's earlier findings on dissatisfaction with revolutionary outcomes in immediate post-communist Hungary in *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). Taking a comparative geopolitical approach, André Liebich also looks at discontent after 1989 in *The Politics of a Disillusioned Europe: East Central Europe after the Fall of Communism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021).

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The Faces of the Revolution

Who made the revolution possible? All six works under review show it was engagement from a sufficiently large swath of the population. Drawing together the diverse, complex biographies of workers, local political elites and state security officers into a dense narrative, Machcewicz features both the 1971 and 1980 strikes as a continuous dynamic of accumulating unrest and memorial continuity that made the tri-city of Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot a restive core for 1989. On the one hand, she highlights sustained opposition by worker activists like Bogdan Borusewicz, who distributed an underground press and spread nationalist narratives comparing the present opposition to Soviet dominance with Polish national resistance to Tsarist imperialism in the nineteenth century. Although the church hierarchy was skittish about endangering its privileges, a range of reform-oriented priests supported the strikers. And along with Lech Wałęsa – a charismatic everyman who increased his stature by building his own car – Machcewicz features Anna Walentynowicz, an orphan and onetime star of Stalinist labour in the 1950s who turned to opposition as her decades of labour in the shipyard paralleled worsening working conditions. On the other hand, however, Machcewicz demonstrates the key role played by local officials like the young and educated Gdańsk party secretary Tadeusz Fiszbach, who tried to walk the fine line between close personal relations with workers and residents and faithfulness to the reformist Gierek administration– which meant suppressing workers when they demonstrated against the regime. Mostly forgotten in historical memory culture, Gdańsk shipyard director Klemens Gniech plays a role nearly on par with Wałęsa; respected by workers for having taken part in 1970 strike, he calmly left the mass demonstration of thousands of workers when Wałęsa jumped up to steal the show, drove to his office and awaited the strikers' demands. His spirit of negotiation ensured that the Solidarity strike in 1980 did not fall into bloodshed like 1970, but turned to negotiation that moderated the revolution. Likewise, while security forces tried to infiltrate opposition groups, some security officers switched sides: a betrayal that never happened within the East German Stasi, apart from a fictional account like the 2006 blockbuster *The Lives of Others*. It should be noted, however, that even in Poland such an outcome was the exception, rather than a general pattern. In most cases, Poland's security services terrorised opposition figures, such as by impoverishing them through forced unemployment or even killing young opposition figures as a warning to others.

In concert with a recently thriving field of environmental research, Ault dives into motivations among often overlooked participants in a state environmental group (GNU) that East Germany's party elites meant to control, but whose circa 60,000 members were increasingly urging reform by 1989.[25] Drawing out a fascinating human story, Ault identifies a nameless young woman at the GNU's founding in 1980, who openly complained that children and youth in the mining regions around Leipzig and Halle had to bathe after going out to swim, while windows were dirty whenever there was any wind. 'From its creation, the GNU occupied a precarious position between promoting environmentalism and inviting critique', Ault observes, just as church groups enjoyed a special liminal space between opposition and reform – tolerated but heavily watched.[26] Like Machcewicz and Ault, Matus devotes most of his book to humanising lesser-known dissidents, in this case artistic circles in a late–Cold War generation that embraced rock music, alternative lifestyles and Western literature in Hungary and Romania. Hardly analogous to the political protests to come, this was a countercultural scene forged by Western media and intellectual relations with French, Greek and other Western artists. Building on a wide range of scholarship across the late Eastern Bloc, Matus shows how this 'last generation' of youth embraced alternative lifestyles that were not perceived as revolution, but rather (as Alexei Yurchak observes in the late Soviet Union) evinced something of a 'performative shift'. As

[25] For the politics of environmentalism in East Germany, often with deep assessment of intertwined GNU and church ecology groups, see Thomas Höpel, *Opposition, Dissidenz und Resistenz in Leipzig, 1945–1989* (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 2018); Christian Möller, *Umwelt und Herrschaft in der DDR. Politik, Protest und Partizipation in der Diktatur* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020); and Anne-Kathrin Steinmetz, *Landeskultur, Stadtökologie, und Umweltschutz. Die Bedeutung von Natur und Umwelt 1970 bis 1989. Eine deutsch-deutsche Betrachtung* (Berlin: Metropol, 2017).

[26] Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism*, 67.

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Yurchak concludes, Moscow's intelligentsia embedded state materials and slogans with their own, relatively uncontrolled forms of 'meaningful, creative life'. This they perceived as a normal life, such that 'reproducing the system and participating in its continuous internal displacement were mutual constitutive processes. When the changes of perestroika made it no longer important or possible to reproduce the experience of the system's immutability, the paradoxical processes of late socialism could no longer continue.'[27]

The Aftermaths of Revolution

Although 1989 is instrumentalised by authoritarian groups today, it is clear that feuds over revolutionary legacies commenced even as new power structures rapidly coalesced – many agitators perceived – against their collective or individual interests.[28] When Wałęsa signed the agreement with state leaders ending the strike in return for independent and self-governing trade unions, Machcewicz observes, people felt not just joy and relief but also exhaustion. After millions of Poles signed up to join the independent Solidarity trade union, the subsequent declaration of martial law and repression a year later traumatised the revolutionary cohesion of summer 1980 and hindered the creation of a post-communist Poland 'more deeply rooted in democracy, and more well-versed in civic and community action'.[29] Krapfl notes that his interview partners in former Czechoslovakia expressed almost universal disappointment about 1989: 'The contrast between their faith in humanity then and the many deceptions and disappointments that have followed – dare one say as a result? – tends to make 1989 either embarrassing or a cruel reminder of how easily people can be manipulated.'[30] The standard view by the 2010s was that 1989 had little meaning, in no small part because tensions between local revolutionary leaders in each half of the republic had helped to bring about its dissolution against the will of the majority in 1992.[31]

Continuing seamlessly from agitation before 1989 against poor working conditions and environmental decline, Christian Rau's potash miners in former East Germany's Eichsfeld kept protesting in the early 1990s as part of 'a "long" history of democracy as a space of experience and process of negotiation'.[32] Hardly rapacious 'neoliberal attacks by the Kohl regime' against helpless East Germans, the closures in the Eichsfeld coincided with two potash mine closures in the West (even as two other mines stayed open in the East), decided upon by both state leaders in Thuringia and industrial leaders at BASF in a climate of profound uncertainty.[33] Rau even includes local voices that were critical of the ongoing hunger strike, reminds his readers that the potash industry in both Germanies had long been in decline, and asserts that the Treuhand – itself formed at the behest of East Germany's Modrow regime in June 1990 to administrate the country's massively inefficient collectivised industries – may have ultimately done more good than harm in salvaging what economic stability it could.

[27] Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). 283. Similar ideological ambivalence manifests among late-communist Hungarian youth in Laszlo Kurti, *Youth and the State in Hungary: Capitalism, Communism and Class* (London: Pluto, 2002). Anna Saunders expounds that those who grew up as young adults in East Germany looked back fondly on 1980s pedagogy, stimulating Ostalgie. See her *Honecker's Children: Youth and Patriotism in East(ern) Germany, 1979–2002* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Ljubica Spaskovska, meanwhile, sees a more active role among youth in former Yugoslavia, who sought to reinvigorate socialism with democratic ideals on the eve of its destruction. See her *The Last Yugoslav Generation: The Rethinking of Youth Politics and Cultures in Late Socialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

[28] David Ost offers a classic assessment based on rich analysis of neglected documentation and interviews in Polish factory towns during and especially after 1989 in *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[29] Machcewicz, *Rebellion*, 345, 352.

[30] Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face*, xi.

[31] Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face*, 9–10.

[32] Rau, *Hungern für Bischofferode*, 23.

[33] Economic historian Jörg Roesler, quoted from *Neues Deutschland* (2018), in Rau, *Hungern für Bischofferode*, 16.

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Polemical imaginings of an evil Western plot nonetheless dated back to the 1993 hunger strike itself. Workers suddenly forgot the extreme danger of their occupation in badly maintained shafts where East German apparatchiks had demanded overproduction at the expense of safety or sustainability. Smelling a story, mainstream media swarmed to the mining town to document the shrivelling bodies of the hunger strikers and foreground a 'deep crisis that concerned the entire nation'.[34] The disappointment was great when the mine was closed as planned on 31 December 1993, and little attention was given to the fact that the miners won an unusually high financial settlement. Various state offices even paid to construct an industrial park in the area, foster new businesses, subsidise work-creation programmes and reduce unemployment to 17.4 per cent: the lowest in northern Thuringia.[35]

When looked at critically, the outcome of the hunger strike was neither a triumph for democracy nor a prehistory for right-wing groups like Pegida, Rau concludes, but rather a contradictory set of meanings that require honest, dialogue-based memory work. While the hunger strike functioned as a 'testing ground for conceptions and experiences of democracy', local people also reflected on it through the coming years as proof that true democracy had not yet been realised. In reality, Rau contends, the Treuhand had pursued economically sensible measures that were needlessly secretive, while the protesters had striven to keep their jobs at all costs, even though these 'jobs were essentially already lost' because of poor economic planning before 1989 and global economic developments that were affecting West Germany too.

In the end, Rau argues, the hunger strike contributed 'in the long term to solidifying the narratives of a planned "takeover" of the East by the West' in ways 'politically instrumentalized' by radical, authoritarian-minded political parties.[36] This trend has continued more recently, as authoritarian movements such as Pegida or the Alternative for Germany party have sought to claim the Eichsfeld hunger strike of 1993 as an antecedent for their own objectives. Uncritically replicating interviewee memories, a 2018 MDR documentary propagated this fiction that the hunger strike epitomised the 'Treuhand-Trauma' of East Germans, inspiring a journalist in 2021 to romanticise the miners' heroic struggle against cold-blooded Western capitalists. Even if reality had been far more complicated, Rau concludes, the hunger strike demonstrated that 'already right after Reunification, thousands of East Germans took to the streets, falling back on the revolutionary slogan "We are the Volk," to demonstrate at first against the "selling out" of the East and the Treuhand, but increasingly also against the "rising number of foreigners [*Überfremdung*]" and other developments perceived as threatening'.[37] Right after the 1989 revolution, some of the same actors who had protested against communism were agitating against the excesses of capitalism. Yet they did not want to turn back the revolution; rather, they imagined their actions as a continuation of democratic struggle.[38]

Conclusion

The deeply researched case analyses under review point to the need for freshly informed, cohesive metanarratives. In their laudable attention to grassroots players and backdrops, each book occasionally loses track of geopolitical causalities and interconnections that defined 1980s revolutions and their outcomes. For instance, James Krapfl's revolutionary moment on 17 November 1989 in Czechoslovakia only makes sense in the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall just days before, which

[34] Rau, *Hungern für Bischofferode*, 12–13.

[35] Rau, *Hungern für Bischofferode*, 197, 200–3.

[36] Rau, *Hungern für Bischofferode*, 220–1.

[37] Rau, *Hungern für Bischofferode*, 11.

[38] This reinforces Daphne Berdahl's already classic interpretation that post-1989 East German nostalgia for communism was above all an appeal for an alternative way of life to contemporary Western capitalism. See her *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany*, edited and with an introduction by Matti Bunzl (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

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in turn only makes sense in light of peaceful protests in cities like Leipzig in October and coinciding unrest at Dresden's train station as East German refugees in Prague passed through East German territory to reach the West. Borders were increasingly porous, and the regimes were increasingly rickety. Such weakness across the Warsaw Pact was above all indebted to the narrow window of reformist optimism and refusal to engage in violence that emanated from Gorbachev's Moscow. Historically, the imperialist entity in Russia has acted as a spoiler state that cracks down on revolutions; from a long list, one could name 1830, 1848, 1863, 1905, 1953 or 1968. For a narrow window of time from about 1985 to 1995, a reformist and comparably humane regime in Moscow facilitated the preconditions for real existing change that, though challenging for many, allowed for a period of democratic expression, reform and relative peace in Europe – a period of peace that has been eroding at least since the Russian–Georgian War of 2008.

Amid our ongoing, evidently authoritarian transition, the sentiments and quandaries of oppressed ordinary people in the late East Bloc can feel contemporary. This is all the more reason to delve into primary materials to excavate what made people tick before, during and after the revolutions that inaugurated the apparently outgoing era of democracy. Democracy, we often hear, is fragile. The books under review show it can also be robust, unwieldy and well worth the risk. The revolutionary moment is fleeting, but it can inspire future critique and action. For if its outcome is truly democratic – which is by no means certain – then no single individual will get everything that he or she wants.

Compromise – integral to democracy – has potential to disappoint the romantic dreams revolutionary actors nourished amid the fervour of revolution. For this reason, all three of the revolutions Crane Brinton compared back in 1938 eventually yielded tyranny. Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon Bonaparte and Joseph Stalin had each loathed the slowness and corruption they had perceived after the fiery moment of revolution had passed; all three had mustered a popular personality cult that had moulded the masses around their will in pursuit of completing the revolutionary promises that egalitarian structures had apparently proven incapable of thrusting into reality.

The hard data in the six books under review never reaches this authoritarian turn, which would largely postdate each author's period of analysis. But by animating the human faces that populated the dynamically democratic revolutions of the late East Bloc, they reinforce awareness of the freedoms that were attained against old regimes that – notwithstanding all the nostalgic resentments since 1989 – had not been free. Without awareness of popular dreams and demands at the end of authoritarianism, Krapfl argues, one reaps silence. 'This silence leads to forgetting, and if it does not undermine democratic political culture in Czechoslovakia's successor states, it certainly does not strengthen it.'[39] Why did each revolution happen, who made it happen and what came of it? The answers posed in these historical findings should enrich further case analyses, broader syntheses and upper-division courses about the end of the so-called communist regimes east of the Iron Curtain, the history of revolutions writ-large and perhaps how to take on authoritarian mechanisms that have increasingly dominated the early twenty-first century.

[39]Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face*, 1.

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