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Activism and Dissent under State Socialism: Coalitions and Campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s

Daniel Laqua and Charlotte Alston

Abstract

This essay introduces a dedicated *Labour History Review* issue on the subject of ‘Challenges to State Socialism in Central and Eastern Europe: Activists, Movements and Alliances in the 1970s and 1980s’. The essay highlights different stimuli for dissent and opposition in the Eastern bloc, drawing attention to three strands that helped to inform political activism. Firstly, it discusses the way in which various forms of dissident Marxism informed critiques of ‘actually existing socialism’ and helped activists to envision alternative ways of organizing society and state. Secondly, it emphasizes intersections between different actors and motivations, including links between the labour movement and forms of activism that have sometimes been categorized as ‘new social movements’. Thirdly, it notes the relevance of transnational inspirations and alliances, with a particular consideration of those that cut across the two power blocs. As a whole, the essay establishes the broader context for the case studies of activism and dissent that feature in this special journal issue.

Keywords

dissidents, activism, state socialism, Central and Eastern Europe, transnational history, social movements

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Activism and Dissent under State Socialism: Coalitions and Campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s

Daniel Laqua and Charlotte Alston

At the time when the governments of state socialist regimes fell in quick succession across Central and Eastern Europe, a plethora of observers emphasized the momentous nature of the events they were witnessing and described them in terms of a ‘revolution’.¹ Looking back twenty years later, Jens Reich – who had played a significant role in the struggle for civil liberties in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – stressed the suddenness with which the political landscape was being transformed in 1989: ‘For those twelve months political change took place at an astonishing speed, in contrast to the slow evolutions that took place before and in the years that followed.’² While structural challenges for state socialism as well as shifts in Soviet policy were important factors, protests ‘from below’ played a central role, too. Capturing the spectacular nature of popular protest in and around 1989, the historian Padraic Kenney has spoken of a ‘carnival of revolution’.³ In similar terms, Jens Reich described ‘a permanent state of high spirits and exhaustion, as if in an unending carnival where all the pressure has been lifted and everything is possible’.⁴

From our present-day vantage point, ‘1989’ serves as a historical cipher in more than one way: it stands for a ‘transnational moment of change’ and, in heralding the end of the Cold War, marks the final of three post-war eras in twentieth-century Europe.⁵ Unsurprisingly, the

¹ See e.g. Timothy Garton Ash, *We the People: The Revolution of ‘89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (Cambridge, 1990).

² Jens Reich, ‘1989 – Personal reflections on the year of revolutions’, *Eurostudia* 5 (2009), <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/euro/2009-v5-n1-euro3565/038646ar/> (last accessed 20 August 2021).

³ Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton, NJ, 2002).

⁴ Reich, ‘1989’.

⁵ Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kenney (eds), *Transnational Moments of Change: Europe 1945, 1968, 1989* (Lanham, MD, 2004); Martin Conway, Pieter Lagrou and Henry Rousso (eds), *Europe’s Postwar Periods – 1989, 1945, 1918* (London, 2019).

upheavals in and around 1989 have resulted in a substantial body of literature.⁶ At times, the focus on one specific historical moment can limit our appreciation of broader developments. With regard to the Soviet Union, Irina Prokhorova has argued that the significance of events in 1990 ‘had slipped [from] Russia’s cultural memory’, as they had been ‘overshadowed’ by 1989 on the one side and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 on the other.⁷ Indeed, recent work on the end of state socialism has highlighted the value of adopting broad spatial and temporal perspectives. For example, a major research project has placed ‘1989’ within the context of larger processes such as democratization, Europeanization and globalization.⁸ Any attempt to write the global history of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries needs to pay close attention to these transformations: after all, the changes in Central and Eastern Europe were entwined with broader geopolitical shifts and generated further globalizing dynamics.⁹

As far as the adoption of a broader chronological lens is concerned, it is certainly important to look beyond the late 1980s. One way of doing so is to consider ruptures, continuities and the varying legacies of the 1989 revolutions.¹⁰ At one level, it has been argued that the changes in this period had wider implications for the ‘democratic imaginary’ in the region.¹¹ However, with regard to Czechoslovakia, Veronika Pehe has highlighted the ‘transformation nostalgia’ among the former student activists of 1989.¹² Moreover, more than

⁶ See e.g. Vladimir Tismaneanu (ed.), *The Revolutions of 1989* (London, 1999); Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York, 2009); Padraic Kenney, *1989: Democratic Revolutions at the Cold War’s End: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA, 2010).

⁷ Irina Prokhorova, ‘Introduction’, in Irina Prokhorova (ed.), *1990: Russia Remembers a Turning Point* (London, 2013),

⁸ James Mark, Bogdan C. Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht and Ljubica Spaskovska, *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, 2019).

⁹ Akira Iriye (ed.), *Global Interdependence: The World after 1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

¹⁰ See e.g. the contributions in Part IV (entitled ‘Then and now: Continuity and change in the academic and cultural perceptions of the communist era and its aftermath’) of Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe (eds), *The 1989 Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe: From Communism to Pluralism* (Manchester, 2013), 213–84; George Lawson, Chris Armbruster and Michael Cox (eds), *The Global 1989: Continuity and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, 2010).

¹¹ Paul Blokker, ‘Dissidence, republicanism, and democratic change’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 25 (2011), 219–43.

¹² Veronika Pehe, ‘The wild 1990s: “Transformation nostalgia” among the Czech student generation of 1989’, *East Central Europe*, 46 (2019), 113–34.

thirty years on from these events, some observers are warning of ‘democratic backsliding’ in the region, as exemplified by Viktor Orbán’s rule in Hungary and the policies of Poland’s Law and Justice party.¹³

From a different angle, the embrace of a broader chronological perspective invites us to reassess earlier forms of dissent. After all, the discontent that manifested itself in the large-scale mobilizations of 1989 did not emerge overnight. During the 1970s and 1980s, a variety of activists had diagnosed the crisis of the existing system and articulated their criticisms. As the British campaigner and academic Mary Kaldor argued in 1991, ‘the democracy movements of 1989 ... represented an outburst of popular feelings but these feelings were articulated by those who had gained experience in the new peace, green and human rights movements of the 1980s’.¹⁴ Indeed, many of the individuals who had been associated with earlier oppositional movements – whether Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia or Solidarność in Poland – played leading roles in and after 1989. The fact that both Václav Havel (in December 1989) and Lech Wałęsa (in December 1990) ascended to the presidencies of their respective countries seemed to encapsulate the triumph of former dissidents. According to the Hungarian author György Konrád, one shared feature in 1989 – notwithstanding national differences – was that ‘the intellectuals were the protagonists everywhere’: ‘Slow and fast revolutions elevated different groups of oppositional intellectuals’.¹⁵ In other cases, however, activists were marginalized in the making of post-communist societies.¹⁶

¹³ Arch Puddington, ‘Thirty years: The changing state of freedom in Central Europe’ (Freedom House, 7 November 2019), <https://freedomhouse.org/article/thirty-years-changing-state-freedom-central-europe> (last accessed 9 August 2021).

¹⁴ Mary Kaldor, ‘After the Cold War’, in Mary Kaldor (ed.), *Europe from Below: An East–West Dialogue* (London, 1991), 37.

¹⁵ George Konrad [György Konrád], ‘From communism to democracy’ in Kaldor (ed.), *Europe from Below*, 51.

¹⁶ On the Soviet case, see the comments by former Soviet dissident Alexander Podrabinek in episode 4 (‘History repeats itself?’) documentary *They Chose Freedom* (dir. Vladimir V. Kara-Murza, 2017), available via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U7hX36avpM> (last accessed 20 August 2021). See also Robert Horvath, *The Legacy of Soviet Dissent: Dissidents, Democratisation and Radical Nationalism in Russia* (Abingdon, 2012), 2–3 and 236–8.

This special issue of *Labour History Review* focuses on contestations and critiques during the 1970s and 1980s. We do not suggest that there was any straight line that connected such earlier expressions of opposition and dissent on the one side, and the ultimate demise of the established political order on the other. Instead, we adopt a non-teleological approach and probe what different criticisms meant *at the time*, within their own historical moment.¹⁷ In other words, we do not intend to gaze backwards from 1989. To some extent, the efforts and events that are under discussion here are fruitfully approached through a ‘long 1970s’ perspective that stretches from the late 1960s to the 1980s.¹⁸ As a whole, our collection of research articles draws attention to new social and political visions in the two decades after the Prague Spring of 1968. It thus contributes to a growing literature on different forms of dissidence.¹⁹ Three dimensions are particularly important for our analysis and will therefore be discussed in greater depth in this opening essay: the envisioning of alternative socialisms, the confluence of different forms of activism, and the importance of transnational bonds.

Visions of state socialism

In 1977, the East German dissident Rudolf Bahro attracted significant attention when he published his analysis of ‘actually existing socialism’ in the GDR and other countries in the Eastern bloc. In his book *Die Alternative*, Bahro argued that state socialism had failed to build a truly classless society; at the same time, he suggested paths towards a genuine ‘communist alternative’.²⁰ Bahro’s example is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, he represented a form

¹⁷ For a detailed consideration of various earlier oppositional movements and ideas, see Barbara Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher-Kings* (Budapest, 2003).

¹⁸ Paul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager and Helle Porsdam (eds), *The ‘Long 1970s’: Human Rights, East – West Détente and Transnational Relations* (Abingdon, 2016).

¹⁹ For a detailed consideration of key research directions and debates, see Barbara J. Falk, ‘Resistance and dissent in Central and Eastern Europe: An emerging historiography’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 25 (2011), 318–60.

²⁰ Rudolf Bahro, *Die Alternative: Zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus* (Hamburg: EVA, 1977). For a analysis of Bahro’s work a few years after its publication, see Wolfgang Schlauch, ‘Dissent in Eastern Europe: Rudolf Bahro’s criticism of East European communism’, *Nationalities Papers*, 9 (1981), 105–16.

of ‘dissident Marxism’ that was a prominent current of oppositional thinking during the 1970s and 1980s.²¹ At the time, a contributor to the American journal *New German Critique* described Bahro’s views as an ‘authentically communist position’ and argued that ‘internal communist critics’ such as Bahro amounted to ‘a greater threat than anti-communist ones’ as the authorities found it difficult to respond adequately to such challenges.²²

In itself, internal criticism from a Marxist standpoint was not a product of the 1970s. After all, a variety of thinkers, activists and politicians already argued the case for reforming state socialism – without abandoning the vision of an alternative to capitalist market economies – at earlier points. For instance, in 1964, the Polish socialists Jacek Kurón and Karol Modzelewski outlined their own concerns in Marxist terms within their ‘Open Letter to the Party’. In Czechoslovakia, protagonists of the Prague Spring promoted a greater degree of civic involvement and civil liberties but largely affirmed their commitment to socialist principles.²³ Notwithstanding such earlier examples, these criticisms received fresh stimuli during the 1970s, in the face of both economic and political stagnation.²⁴ In his contribution to this special journal issue, Dirk Dalberg highlights another case, the Slovak philosopher, Miroslav Kusý, who had begun to articulate his views on the shortcomings of Czechoslovak socialism during the 1960s. Dalberg takes this case into the 1980s. He explores how, in response to Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovak leaders launched tentative steps towards reforming parts of the economy. In his critical dissection of the changes proposed by

²¹ For an analysis at the time, see Thomas Oleszczuk, ‘Dissident Marxism in Eastern Europe’, *World Politics*, 34, 4 (1982), 527–47. The phenomenon has also been the subject of a recent edited volume: Knud Andresen, Mario Keßler and Axel Schildt, Axel (eds), *Dissidente Kommunisten: Das sowjetische Modell und seine Kritiker* (Berlin, 2018).

²² Hugh Mosley, ‘The new communist opposition: Rudolf Bahro’s critique of “really existing socialism”’, *New German Critique*, no. 15 (1978), 36.

²³ A broader perspective is offered in Kieran Williams and James Krapfl, ‘For a civic socialism and the rule of law: The interplay of jurisprudence, public opinion and dissent in Czechoslovakia, 1960s–1980s’, in Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe (eds), *Eastern Europe in 1968: Responses to the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion* (Basingstoke, 2018), 23–44.

²⁴ See, for instance, the case of Hungary, where a new generation of dissidents came to the fore towards the end of the 1970s: András Bozóki and Agnes Simon, ‘Rolling stones: Dissident intellectuals in Hungary (1977–1994)’, *East European Politics*, 37 (2021), 352–78.

the Communist Party, Kusý outlined his own vision of workers' self-management in Marxist terms.

Of the articles in this journal issue, Dalberg's article is most explicitly concerned with Marxist alternatives to state socialism. However, the subject also features in Daniel Laqua's article on the East German singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann, whom the GDR authorities expatriated whilst he was on a concert tour in West Germany in 1976. Biermann had attacked the contradictions and shortcomings of state socialist practice in song – yet, at the same time, he affirmed his commitment to changing the system from within. In 1978, the aforementioned piece in *New German Critique* explicitly compared the positions of Bahro and Biermann: 'Like Wolf Biermann and those who followed him unwillingly into exile in the wake of last year's protests, Bahro is a communist who opposes the regime; like Biermann, Bahro does not want to leave the GDR but to stay and struggle for change there'.²⁵

While it serves to exemplify the wider phenomenon of dissident Marxism, Bahro's case is also relevant in a second respect: it shows that the search for non-capitalist alternatives connected thinkers and activists across the two power blocs. In Western Europe and North America, a New Left had developed since the 1950s. Repressive acts such as the crushing of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 had fostered the disenchantment of some members of communist parties in the West.²⁶ Moreover, the appeal of New Left ideas inspired a new generation of activists, as highlighted by the student protests of 1968.²⁷ To protagonists of the New Left in Western Europe, dissidents such as Bahro appeared as kindred spirits – and they therefore sought to amplify their voices. Accordingly, the English translation of Bahro's book

²⁵ Mosley, 'The new communist opposition', 25.

²⁶ For an overview on the British context, see Madeleine Davis, 'The origins of the British New Left' in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (eds) *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism 1956–1977*, (Basingstoke, 2008) 45–56.

²⁷ This also included the transatlantic circulation of New Left ideas: see e.g. Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), esp. 10–40.

was published by an imprint of Britain's *New Left Review*.²⁸ Meanwhile, in another periodical associated with the British New Left, namely the *Socialist Register*, Ralph Miliband also took up Bahro's analysis.²⁹ Irina Gordeeva's contribution to this special issue also features a prominent New Left figure from Britain: Gordeeva notes how E.P. Thompson fostered ties with peace activists in the Soviet Union. While such endeavours formed part of a wider movement for 'détente from below', Gordeeva argues that Thompson's interest in dissident peace activists reflected his wider concern for 'human agency' as a historian and activist.³⁰

In discussing the desire for change, Bahro highlighted that 'the Eastern European peoples not only want security, but also a political constitution of the type that [Enrico] Berlinguer, [Georges] Marchais and [Santiago] Carrillo outlined at the Berlin Conference'.³¹ These remarks constituted a reference to Conference of Communist and Workers Parties of Europe that had taken place in East Berlin in 1976. At the event, the leaders of the communist parties of Italy, France and Spain had openly criticized aspects of state socialism, along lines that were described as 'Eurocommunism' at the time.³² Bahro interpreted the willingness of some communist leaders in Western parties to steer a more independent course as potential encouragement for efforts to generate change in the Eastern bloc.³³ Laqua's article in this journal issue further illustrates how the Eurocommunist project resonated among dissident Marxists.

There is a third area in which Bahro's case relates to political ideas that feature in this journal issue. After political imprisonment in 1978–1979, Bahro emigrated to West Germany

²⁸ Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London, 1978).

²⁹ Ralph Miliband, 'A Commentary on Rudolf Bahro's *Alternative*', *The Socialist Register*, 16 (1979), 274–84.

³⁰ On the convergence between Thompson's historical work, his vision of socialism and his peace activism, see Michael D. Bess, 'E. P. Thompson: The historian as activist', *The American Historical Review*, 98 (1993), 18–38.

³¹ Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, 339.

³² For an overview, see Silvio Pons, *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism 1917–1991*, trans. Allan Cameron (Oxford, 2014), 284–92.

³³ Mosley, 'The new communist opposition', 27. The relevance of Eurocommunism for dissidents was also noted by other contemporary observers, e.g. Schlauch, 'Dissent in Eastern Europe', 105–6.

where he became a prominent voice in the environmental movement. In a series of publications, he argued for fusing ecology and socialism in the making of a ‘new politics’.³⁴ While Bahro’s environmentalism highlights the oppositional potential of green politics, Alexandra Wedl’s article in this journal issue draws attention to the way in which environmentalist critiques could occur underneath the umbrella of state socialism. She highlights how within Czechoslovakia’s Socialist Union of Youth, concerns for the environment gained in prominence during the 1970s and 1980s. At one level, individuals raised concerns about the nature of industrial policies pursued by the state – yet this did not necessarily amount to questioning the wider ideological premises of state socialism.

Movements new and old

Wedl’s discussion of environmental concerns draws attention to one area that gave rise to growing political mobilizations in both East and West during the 1970s and 1980s. Environmentalism is often seen as a manifestation of ‘new social movements’ in which class interest was less decisive than it had been in earlier periods.³⁵ The concept of ‘new social movements’ has attracted some criticism, both in regard to the question of ‘novelty’ and in terms of the emphasis on post-material concerns in some of the literature.³⁶ That said, many who use the term acknowledge that such movements were not new in all respects. As Clare Saunders has put it, ‘new movements may not be distinctly new in historical terms, or in their shape or form’, yet ‘the extent of scholarly interest that was generated in response to them and the emphasis on cultural aspects of social movements clearly was new’.³⁷ In the context of our

³⁴ Rudolf Bahro, *Elemente einer neuen Politik: Zum Verhältnis von Ökologie und Sozialismus* (West Berlin, 1980). See also Rudolf Bahro, *Socialism and Survival: Articles, Essays and Talks, 1979–1982. With an Introduction by E.P. Thompson* (London, 1982).

³⁵ Clare Saunders, *Environmental Networks and Social Movement Theory* (London, 2013), 121–150.

³⁶ For an example of such criticisms, see Colon Barker and Gareth Dale (eds), ‘Protest waves in Western Europe: A critique of “new social Movement” theory’, *Critical Sociology*, 24 (1998), 65–104.

³⁷ Saunders, *Environmental Networks*, 122.

special journal issue, such scholarly perspectives are useful as our analysis covers both ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements, including the intersections between them.

In her contribution to this journal issue, Irina Gordeeva’s focuses on a new manifestation of a longstanding activist current, as she explores the resurgence of peace campaigning in the period of renewed Cold War tensions during the 1980s. Her discussion of the independent peace movement in the Soviet Union draws attention to activists who were influenced by hippie ideals and alternative lifestyles. Moreover, she also considers links between different kinds of activism, charting the relationship between protagonists of the ‘Trust Group’ in the Soviet Union and British feminists who were involved in the Greenham Common Peace Camp. While Greenham Common attracted women from different backgrounds, some of its features reflected the prior rise of both countercultural protest and women’s liberation.³⁸

Meanwhile, other articles in this issue draw attention to human rights activism. Some scholars treat the 1970s as the decades in which ‘human rights’ experienced their ‘breakthrough’ as subject of widespread political concern.³⁹ A key exponent of this thesis, Samuel Moyn, has argued that human rights discourse exercised a special appeal because of the disenchantment with earlier ‘utopias’, including communism.⁴⁰ As such, the period saw a variety of movements and campaigns that focused on human rights. This included efforts to support dissidents in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in the region.⁴¹ In this journal issue, Mark Hurst explores how the British trade unionist Frank Chapple raised the issue of human rights violations in the Soviet Union, for instance by drawing attention to the plight of the *refuseniks*. Irina Gordeeva notes that British campaigners highlighted the imprisonment of dissident

³⁸ Jill Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (London, 1989), part III. Greenham Common also features in Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women’s Liberation Movement, 1968–Present* (Oxford, 2019).

³⁹ Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in History* (Philadelphia, PA, 2014).

⁴⁰ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

⁴¹ Mark Hurst, *British Human Rights Organizations and Soviet Dissent, 1965–1985* (London, 2016); Benjamin Nathans, ‘The disenchantment of socialism: Soviet dissidents, human rights, and the new global morality’, in Eckel and Moyn (eds), *The Breakthrough*, 33–48.

pacifists in the Soviet Union; she also notes that by the second half of the 1980s, European Nuclear Disarmament included human rights on its agenda. Meanwhile, Daniel Laqua shows how the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Final Act provided one possible framing for expressions of support for Wolf Biermann. Alexandra Wedl and Dirk Dalberg deal less directly with human rights activism – yet both note the role of Charter 77, the dissident group whose defence of basic freedoms evoked the Helsinki Accords.

While activists played a role in putting human rights on the agenda, so too did governments. For example, under Jimmy Carter’s presidency, US foreign policy adopted an explicit focus on human rights.⁴² In practice, a commitment to this agenda sat uneasily with ongoing support for various non-communist dictatorships. In their turn, the Soviet Union and its allies advanced their own conception of human rights vis-à-vis the West.⁴³ In this respect, we can look at human rights activism as partly being shaped by the interplay between foreign policy and activism – which is exemplified by influence of the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the emergence of various Helsinki Groups in its wake.⁴⁴

The emphasis on a human rights ‘breakthrough’ has been challenged in some recent work. Robert Brier, for example, argues that we should allow for multiple overlapping chronologies and understandings of human rights.⁴⁵ This debate bears a relationship to our focus on the connections between ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements: class-based politics remained important, even in contexts when campaigners adopted the language of human rights. This aspect emerges very clearly in Hurst’s contribution, which shows how Frank Chapple’s

⁴² Sarah Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, 2018); Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

⁴³ Ned Richardson Little, *The Human Rights Dictatorship: Socialism, Global Solidarity and Revolution in East Germany* (Cambridge, 2020); Michal Kopeček, ‘The Socialist Conception of Human Rights and Its Dissident Critique,’ *East Central Europe*, 46 (2019), 261–89.

⁴⁴ Sarah Snyder, *Human Rights and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁴⁵ Robert Brier, ‘Beyond the Quest for a “Breakthrough”: Reflections on the Recent Historiography on Human Rights’, *Jahrbuch für europäische Geschichte / European History Yearbook*, 16 (2015), 155–74.

human rights activism was shaped by his former experiences within the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and British trade union politics. Furthermore, Laqua notes the role of West German and Italian trade unionists in providing Biermann with a forum. As a whole, organized labour continued to play a role in highlighting and mediating developments in Central and Eastern Europe. Navigating these issues could be a complex matter for protagonists of the labour movement, as individuals could be torn between longstanding sympathy for the communist project and disillusionment about the nature of state socialism. The formation of Solidarność as an independent trade union in Poland in 1980 – as well as the repressive policies adopted by the Polish authorities – therefore had multiple dimensions. On the one hand, the imposition of martial law in 1981 drastically highlighted the extent to which human rights were being curtailed. On the other hand, trade union solidarity provided another prism through which activists could engage with the events in Poland.⁴⁶ In such instance, we can also see the enduring resonance of ‘solidarity’ as both an idea and practice within the left.

Internationalism and transnational ties

This essay has already noted the manifold ties between campaigners in East and West. The material gathered in this journal issue reflects the growing sensitivity to transnational historical processes. Labour historians have embraced the opportunity to approach their subject from transnational and global perspectives, as exemplified by coverage in *Labour History Review* and other journals in the field.⁴⁷ While the focus of the pieces gathered here is mostly on

⁴⁶ Robert Brier, *Poland's Solidarity Movement and the Global Solidarity of Human Rights* (Cambridge, 2021); Idesbald Goddeeris (ed.), *Solidarity with Solidarity: Western European Trade Unions and the Polish Crisis, 1980–1982* (Lanham, MD, 2010).

⁴⁷ See the introductions to two special issues of *Labour History Review*: Neville Kirk, Donald MacRaild and Melanie Nolan, ‘Transnational ideas, activities, and organizations in labour history 1860s to 1920s’, *Labour History Review*, 74 (2009), 221–32; Melanie Nolan, Donald MacRaild and Neville Kirk, ‘Transnational Labour in the Age of Globalization’, *Labour History Review*, 75 (2010), 8–19. To cite but some examples from other labour history journals: Michael Hanagan and Marcel van der Linden, ‘New approaches to global labor history’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 66 (2004), 1–11; Richard Croucher and John McIlroy, ‘Introduction: Beyond national history’, *Labor History*, 54 (2013), 485–90; Peter Winn, ‘Global labor history: The future of the field?’ *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82 (2012), 85–91.

connections within Europe, rather than more global developments, we do draw attention to wider questions of transnational practice involving socialist states in the 1970s and 1980s.

As this journal issue is specifically concerned with activism, one way of conceptualizing transnational bonds is by acknowledging the role of internationalism. Within the labour movement, internationalism described a set of ideas and practices, based on the creation of bonds between workers from different countries. In official rhetoric, state socialism placed itself within a tradition of proletarian internationalism that dated back to the nineteenth century. More specifically, it evoked the transnational ties created in the wake of the Bolsheviks' ascent to power in 1917. During the interwar years, communist internationalism manifested itself not only in the Communist International, but also in various other organizations and ventures.⁴⁸ Even at that time, such links were far from unproblematic, as local factors, national visions and assumptions about 'race' shaped, and sometimes curtailed, internationalist practice.⁴⁹ At the same time, at least in principle, communists continued to celebrate their internationalism. During the Cold War, the governments of the Warsaw Pact states proclaimed internationalist fraternity. Scholarship in recent years has emphasized how Soviet internationalism experienced a revival in the years after Stalin's death, with manifold efforts to forge ties to different countries emerging, both within and beyond Europe.⁵⁰ Irina Gordeeva draws attention to state-backed varieties of internationalism when noting the role of

⁴⁸ See e.g. Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Basingstoke, 2015); Kasper Braskén, *The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany* (London, 2015); Holger Weiss, *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939* (Leiden, 2017); Kevin Morgan, *International Communism and the Cult of the Individual: Leaders, Tribunes and Martyrs under Lenin and Stalin* (London, 2017).

⁴⁹ Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay (eds), *Left Transnationalism. The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions* (Montreal, 2019).

⁵⁰ Tobias Rupprecht, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War* (Cambridge, 2015); James Mark and Péter Apor, 'Socialism goes global: Decolonization and the making of a new culture of internationalism in socialist Hungary, 1956–1989', *Journal of Modern History*, 87 (2015), 852–91; Patryk Babiracki and Austin Jersild (eds), *Socialist Internationalism in the Second Cold War: Exploring the Second World* (Cham, 2016).

the quasi-official Soviet Peace Committee and its participation in the communist-dominated World Peace Council.

At the same time, transnational connections were complex and far from unidirectional. In this respect, global cultural developments shaped personal experiences and political practices in the state socialist countries in different ways.⁵¹ Within the countries governed by communist parties, expressions of transnational solidarity had multiple – and sometimes contradictory – features. This, for instance, is evident when one considers ways in which both activists and governments in the ‘Second World’ expressed their solidarity with the ‘Third World’.⁵² From an official perspective, such proclamations provided opportunities to attack neo-colonialism or other forms of oppression that they associated with the West. In this respect, official support for political opponents of Augusto Pinochet’s rule in Chile or for the victims of the apartheid regime in South Africa could serve as an affirmation of internationalist values. Yet in other regards, there were tensions between state-sanctioned discourse on the one hand and grassroots expression of solidarity on the other.⁵³

As noted at the outset, dissidents and other activists built alliances across national borders, in ways that sought to overcome repression at home. Much of the recent literature acknowledges that internationalism was a broad phenomenon that could encompass a variety of political orientations: it can be understood as comprising various tools and mechanisms that sought to promote international cooperation.⁵⁴ Seen from this angle, our special issue highlights the role of counter-internationalisms that challenged the state-endorsed variety. These

⁵¹ Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker (eds), *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington, IN, 2013); Petra Goedde, ‘Global cultures’, in Iriye (ed.), *Global Interdependence*, 537–678.

⁵² Kim Christiaens, ‘Europe at the crossroads of three worlds: Alternative histories and connections of European solidarity with the Third World, 1950s–80s’, *European Review of History*, 24 (2017), 932–54.

⁵³ Paul Betts, James Mark, Idesbald Goddeeris and Kim Christiaens, ‘Race, socialism and solidarity: Anti-apartheid in Eastern Europe’, in Anna Konieczna and Rob Skinner (eds), *A Global History of Anti-Apartheid: ‘Forward to Freedom’ in South Africa* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), 151–200.

⁵⁴ Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (eds), *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge, 2017); David Brydan and Jessica Reinisch (eds), *Internationalists in European History: Rethinking the Twentieth Century* (London, 2021); Daniel Laqua, ‘Internationalism’, *European History Online (EGO)*, 21 May 2021, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/laquad-2021-en> (last accessed 12 August 2021).

internationalisms could be built around ideas that we have discussed thus far – alternative visions of socialism, pacifism, environmentalism and human rights. In other cases, for instance trade union engagement with Solidarność, it could also draw on established notions of labour internationalism.⁵⁵

Such internationalism could manifest itself in practical or symbolic support for dissidents.⁵⁶ Thus, while ‘international solidarity’ was a staple of communist internationalism, the victims of communist repression became the subject of solidarity campaigns themselves. The Soviet physicist and dissident Andrei Sakharov inspired a series of international hearings which, from the inaugural session in Copenhagen in 1975, documented human rights violations in the Soviet Union more broadly.⁵⁷ Sakharov’s example also indicated how individual dissidents could become the focus of international attention. Support committees for other Soviet dissidents, from Alexander Solzhenitsyn to Yuri Orlov and Alexander Ginzburg, sprang up in a range of countries in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1978, an international congress in West Berlin tackled the plight of Rudolf Bahro’s imprisonment.⁵⁸ Even beyond increasing pressure on the authorities, transnational contacts mattered, for instance in the way that they facilitated the distribution of *tamizdat*, that is, oppositional literature that was published abroad.⁵⁹ Moreover, real or imagined ties to other nations could provide inspiration for dissidents, as

⁵⁵ Christie Miedema, ‘The transnationality of Dutch solidarity with the Polish opposition 1980–1989’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire*, 89 (2011), 1307–30; Idesbald Goddeeris, ‘Lobbying allies? The NSZZ Solidarność Coordinating Office Abroad, 1982–1989’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 13 (2011) 83–125; Andrzej Packowski, *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Poland, 1980–1989: Solidarity, Martial Law, and the End of Communism in Europe*, trans. Christina Manette (Woodbridge, 2015).

⁵⁶ Kacper Szulecki, *Dissidents in Communist Central Europe: Human Rights and the Emergence of New Transnational Actors* (Cham, 2019); Snyder, *Human Rights Activism*. For examples from Hungary, see Victoria Harms, ‘Destined or doomed? Hungarian dissidents and their Western friends, 1973–1998 (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2015). See also Victoria Harms, ‘Living *Mittleeuropa* in the 1980s: A network of Hungarian and West German intellectuals’, *European Review of History*, 19 (2012), 669–92.

⁵⁷ Bent Boel, ‘The International Sakharov Hearings and transnational human rights activism, 1975–1985’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 23 (2021), 81–137.

⁵⁸ Rudi Steinke, Walter Süß, Ulf Wolter and Michel Vale, ‘His refrain is Heard around the world: An initial assessment of the Bahro Congress’, *International Journal of Politics*, 10 (1980), 213–33.

⁵⁹ Friederike Kind-Kovács, *Written Here, Published There: How Underground Literature Crossed the Iron Curtain* (Budapest, 2014); Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (eds), *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media during and after Socialism* (New York, 2013).

highlighted by the way in which the fall of the Spanish dictatorship in 1975 inspired visions of a democratic transition in Hungary.⁶⁰

An emphasis on transnational contacts and alternative internationalisms must not obscure tensions and boundaries. For instance, Idesbald Goddeeris has highlighted the limitations of Western trade union solidarity with the Polish opposition.⁶¹ Moreover, in the West, expressions of support could also serve domestic political purposes. Hurst's article provides a good example, as he highlights an intra-union dimension to Frank Chapple's engagement with the situation in the Soviet Union. Hurst also notes competing visions of internationalism: when British trade unionists welcomed Alexander Shelepin, chairman of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, in 1975, it was a manifestation of traditional trade-union bonds – but Chapple and other critics objected to the visit, pointing to Shelepin's former role as head of the KGB and to the repressive features of the regime he was involved in. Furthermore, with regards to Czechoslovak environmentalism, Alexandra Wedl notes international inspirations but also discerns a lack of active contacts between the green movement in the West and the environmental movement in Czechoslovakia.⁶² There could be limits to transnational cooperation, and the local contexts in which activists operated were also critical in shaping their activism. Collectively, the contributions to this journal issue highlight both the significance of transnational bonds and the extent to which specific geographical and political settings matter.

This *Labour History Review* issue

⁶⁰ James Mark, "'The Spanish analogy': Imagining the future in state socialist Hungary, 1948–1989", *Contemporary European History*, 26 (2017), 600–20.

⁶¹ Idesbald Goddeeris, 'The transnational scope of Western labour's solidarity with Solidarność', *Labour History Review* 75 (2010), 60–75.

⁶² On the limitations of such links, see also Miroslav Vaněk, 'The development of a green opposition in Czechoslovakia: The role of international contacts', in Horn and Kenney (eds), *Transnational Moments of Change*, 173–87.

The contributions to this journal issue have their roots in plans for a conference on ‘Social Movements and the Challenges to State Socialism in Central and Eastern Europe’. This event was due to be held in March 2020, hosted by the ‘Histories of Activism’ research group at Northumbria University with the support of the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH). When the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to cancel this in-person event, we reconfigured our plans and instead brought together our original contributors and further guests through two online symposia, which were held in November 2020. We thank the Society and all participants for their commitment to find alternative vehicles for our dialogue. On the back of our online sessions, we prepared the present issue of *Labour History Review* as well as a second publication project, which will explore different forms of non-conformity and subversion. We are grateful to the LHR editors for their enthusiastic support and the reviewers for their thoughtful reports.

As a whole, our journal issue covers international phenomena as well as specific developments in three countries of the Eastern bloc, namely the Soviet Union, the GDR and Czechoslovakia. It also highlights the significance of transnational bonds, for instance those that connected activists in Britain and the Soviet Union. The latter aspect is a key feature of the first article, that is, Mark Hurst’s case study of the British trade unionist Frank Chapple. Hurst traces Chapple’s transition from CPGB member to anti-communist campaigner. While Chapple was concerned with counteracting communist influence within his own trade union, his political trajectory also resulted in growing engagement with the human rights situation in the Soviet Union. Chapple’s activism thus demonstrates the interplay between international and domestic concerns.

The second article draws attention to protagonists of ‘détente from below’ during the 1980s. Irina Gordeeva shows how members of European Nuclear Disarmament, including E.P. Thompson, fostered links with campaigners in the Soviet Union. She contrasts grassroots

campaigns with the position of the state-sanctioned ‘peace committees’ in the Soviet Union and other countries in the Eastern bloc. Gordeeva’s contribution substantially advances our knowledge of nonconformist peace activism in the USSR and the author discusses the imaginative actions of the ‘Trust Group’ as well as the repression faced by its members.

The later sections of Gordeeva’s article consider various expressions of solidarity for activists who faced political persecution. From a different angle, this subject is explored further in Daniel Laqua’s piece on the expatriation of the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann in 1976. Biermann’s situation attracted widespread attention and led to major expressions of dissent in the GDR. Laqua highlights several important transnational dimensions – from connections with Anglo-American culture and Biermann’s own involvement in international solidarity campaigns to the role of Eurocommunism and the rise of human rights discourse. In this respect, his analysis contributes to the wider literature on the international left of the 1970s.

Alexandra Wedl addresses another international context, namely the growth of environmentalism in both East and West during the 1970s and 1980s. She notes transnational inspirations that affected debates on the protection of the environment within Czechoslovakia. At the same time, she also demonstrates the boundaries and domestic settings within which debates on the environment operated. In particular, Wedl discusses the environmental coverage of *Mladý Svět*, a magazine associated with the country’s official youth organization. Wedl highlights discontent with the fate of the environment under state socialism, and notes the dissident potential for environmental critique even when it occurred within frameworks of the communist state.

Wedl’s article takes the story of Czech dissent into the 1980s. In the final contribution to this journal issue, Dirk Dalberg also focuses on Czechoslovakia in that decade. Dalberg familiarizes us with the ideas and arguments of the Slovak dissident Miroslav Kusý. In criticizing the ‘Proposal on the State Enterprise Act’ (1987), Kusý attacked tentative

Czechoslovak plans on Marxist grounds and outlined his own vision of workers' self-management. To Kusý, 'self-management' had to be conceived and implemented holistically: rather than remaining confined to arrangements for state enterprises, it had to apply to society as a whole. Dalberg takes dissident critique seriously and also shows how one particular intellectual can be connected to wider strands of alternative thought at a time when the political leaders in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere were facing growing pressure for reform.

Collectively, the contributions in this special issue investigate the range of activisms that took place in socialist states in the decades prior to the collapse of state socialism in 1989. They do not look back from that turning point, but instead explore the alternatives that activists deemed possible in their present, seeking to understand what particular manifestations of activism or protest meant for their protagonists. While paying particular attention to connections across borders and across 'old' and 'new' movements, the articles also acknowledge the limits and peculiarities of the movements and events in question. As a whole, they contribute to our increasingly nuanced understanding of activism in Central and Eastern Europe in a period before it became the fulcrum of global historical transformation.