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Bedachtzame revolutionairen. Oost-Duitse en Tsjechische oppositiebewegingen, 1975-1990

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Summary

Bedachtzame revolutionairen: Tsjechische en Oost-Duitse oppositiebewegingen, 1975-1990 (Cautious revolutionaries: Czech and East German opposition movements, 1975-1990) analyzes and compares debates among the opposition in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the last fifteen years of communist rule. In a Central European context the peace, human rights and environmental groups that made up the opposition in the GDR are often considered a special case, for several reasons. First of all, it is often assumed that up till 1989 socialist beliefs played a much greater role in the East German opposition than anywhere else. Secondly, it is frequently claimed the East German groups cannot really be called an opposition because, as a result of their enduring belief in a reformed version of socialism and their close relations with the Protestant Church - which tried to depoliticize them - they mostly refrained from a fundamental critique of the communist regime. Indeed, many activists from these groups themselves explicitly rejected the label 'opposition'. Thirdly, the civic protest movements that in 1989 grew out of the East German opposition groups and initially attracted widespread support, supposedly played only a minor role in the eventual overthrow of the communist regime. As soon as it became clear that many of the opposition's leaders were not in favour of rapid unification with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), East German voters abandoned them in overwhelming numbers.

These assumptions about the East German opposition have provoked criticism, but they have rarely been tested in comparative research. This book tries to fill that gap by comparing how during the 1970s and 1980s the opposition movements in the GDR and Czechoslovakia debated several issues (the relevance of socialism, the tension between peace and human rights, cultural criticism and environmental activism), how they reacted to the Soviet reforms which from 1985 onwards changed the political landscape of Central and Eastern Europe, and, finally, how they acted during the breakdown of the communist regimes in 1989. Legitimacy is a key concept in the analysis of these themes. In a system with no theoretical room for dissenting voices, opposition movements were forced to develop legitimization strategies in order to justify their own existence. By showing how opposition movements consciously invoked specific intellectual and cultural traditions and confronted but at the same time used certain claims by the communist regime to their advantage, this book aims to reconstruct the tactical dimension that lies underneath much of the dissident discourse. A wide range of sources has been used, varying from samizdat and exile publications, archival holdings on opposition movements, the vast amounts of secondary literature (especially for the East German case), to interviews with former dissidents.

The period under research is 1975 to 1990, the year in which for the first time in over forty years free elections were held in Czechoslovakia and the GDR. 1975 is a logical starting point because in that year, in Helsinki, the member-states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) signed the so-called Final Act, which enacted a new period in the history of opposition against communism in Central and Eastern Europe. In exchange for increased economic cooperation and recognition of the post-1945 borders by the Western powers, the Soviet Union and its allies committed themselves to respecting human rights and agreed to follow-up conferences where the stipulations of Helsinki, including the human rights situation, would be reviewed. In the following years, across Central and Eastern Europe human rights groups came into existence, invoking the Final Act to justify their activities and demanding that the countries of the Soviet bloc regimes live up to the promises made in Helsinki. These human rights groups formally asked the communist regimes for nothing more than the honouring of its legal obligations, and they tried to act both openly and legally. This marked an important shift in the themes and action modes of opposition against communism, which previously had consisted mainly of revisionist critiques of Soviet-style communism together with a few resistance groups that had acted in secret, plotting the overthrow of the communist regimes.

In Czechoslovakia, the human rights movement *Charta 77* united different dissident fractions, ranging from former high-ranking politicians, religious activists, banned intellectuals and artists to musicians from the underground culture. In the GDR, the 'Helsinki effect' was less strong and a full-blown human rights movement did not come into existence until much later. However, the mid-seventies were a turning point nonetheless. The exiling of singer Wolf Biermann in 1976 crushed whatever hope was left of liberalization of the East German communist regime. It set off the development of a diverse network of political alternative groups, often based within the Protestant Church, centering around themes such as demilitarization and peace, environmental concerns, solidarity with the Third World and eventually human rights.

This book is divided into six chapters, the first of which provides a comparative overview of communism and opposition in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic. In the seventies and eighties, the communist regimes in both countries were ideologically very orthodox and intolerant of dissent. Although they had strong historical roots, by the mid-seventies both regimes were weak in terms of national legitimacy and tried to generate popular support by keeping the costs of living low and increasing investments in consumer products. This policy led to a relatively high living standard, but neglected innovation and structural reform of the economy, which caused serious problems. However,

in both countries liberal and reform-minded fractions within the communist party were too weak to influence the course of events significantly.

The opposition movements in both countries were consistently persecuted and therefore socially isolated. The Czech and East German opposition were roughly the same size, but their social background, organization and political outlook differed highly. The Czech opposition was dominated by the political and cultural elite that had been expelled from public life after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Although *Charta 77* was loosely organized, its leading fractions consulted each other closely and managed to bridge their political differences by concentrating on the monitoring of the human rights situation and the supporting of all kinds of independent initiatives from below, through which they hoped to build an alternative, ultimately free society. Opposition in the GDR was highly fragmented and almost completely lacked leading intellectuals, since those who had become disenchanted with life in East Germany, mostly preferred emigration to West Germany over a role in the opposition. In addition, the constant flow of emigration robbed the political alternative groups of its most experienced members, thereby preventing the growth of the kind of networks that proved so critical for the cohesion of the Czech opposition. Initially, these groups had hardly any political intentions. Especially in the early eighties they focused on certain specific issues and only over time developed a more fundamental critique of communist rule in the GDR.

In the second chapter, the attitude of the opposition movements towards communist ideology and socialism in general is discussed. For both the Czechs and the East Germans, socialist ideals continued to play a role, albeit mostly in a non-Marxist form. Czech veterans of 1968, who made up an important part of *Charta 77*, staunchly defended the legacy of the Prague Spring, partly out of conviction, but also because they had not given up their hopes of rehabilitation. Other dissident fractions did not share their enduring belief in reform socialism. However, in line with the non-political approach of *Charta 77*, centered on human rights, Czech dissidents generally tried to avoid divisive political debates. This trend was strengthened around 1985 by the ascent of a new, younger generation of dissidents, who had little interest in ideological issues and were more concerned with practical problems. For the East German opposition, the ‘socialism with a human face’ of the Prague Spring remained a positive point of reference. Most dissidents, including the younger generation, were more critical of the communist regime than of socialism itself, but, as in the Czech case, high politics was less on their minds than grassroots activism. Only after Michail Gorbachev launched his far-reaching reforms in the Soviet Union, did the possibility of a rejuvenated, democratized socialism again become a serious topic of discussion among the opposition movements.

Since the Final Act of Helsinki, peace and human rights had become central concepts in the Cold War. The countries of the Soviet bloc claimed that Western human rights politics was both dangerous, because it complicated East-West relations, and hypocritical, because it reduced human rights to political rights, thereby neglecting the in their view equally important social rights that were also listed in the Helsinki agreements. Chapter three shows how the Czech and East German opposition movements positioned themselves in this war of words. The different fractions of the Czech opposition were held together by a broad notion of human rights. Especially the older generation of Czech dissidents, by referring to the infamous Treaty of Munich from 1938, repeatedly denied that one should sacrifice everything for peace. They also coined the phrase 'indivisibility of peace', suggesting that true commitment to international peace precludes the kind of internal political repression of which the communist regimes were guilty. In the GDR, most opposition movements were initially susceptible to the argument that the struggle for human rights would pose a risk for peace between East and West. They tended to identify human rights activism with the so-called *Ausreiser*-movement, which invoked the Final Act of Helsinki in order to emigrate from the GDR, an act of which they disapproved. However, the East German groups were critical of the inconsistencies of the official 'peace politics', which involved the militarization of public life and anti-Western propaganda. As they became disillusioned with the treatment they received from the East German authorities, these groups gradually started to use a language of rights while formulating their demands and, as a consequence, they increasingly got into conflicts with church officials who tried to prevent actions that might offend the communist party. From the mid-eighties on the East German groups turned to different themes, including human rights, but unlike their Czech counterparts they remained reluctant to embrace Western human rights activism.

The fourth chapter explores the role of civilization critique, cultural criticism and environmental activism in the dissident debates. Many leading personalities in the Czech and East German opposition movements did not think of themselves as political activists in a narrow, anticommunist sense. Rather, their actions were informed by a thorough critique of modern industrial society. Comparisons between East and West were a crucial part of this discourse. Intellectual dissidents like Václav Havel, Ludvík Vaculík, Christa Wolf and Robert Havemann all made comparisons of life in East and West, but with very different intentions and conclusions. Havel tried to convince his Western audience that communism was only a variation of the faceless, bureaucratized civilization that had originated in the West. The novels of Wolf, which were avidly read in the East German political alternative groups, were full of despair about the seemingly uncontrollable development of dangerous technologies such as nuclear power and Wolf no longer seemed to believe that socialism could avert global

disaster. On the other hand, Havemann hoped he could persuade the East German communist party to adopt a more idealistic, humane form of socialism by showing that the socialism of the GDR was just as focused on consumption as capitalism. An important difference between the two countries was that the Czechs often linked cultural criticism to specific issues in their own country, such as the shallowness of official culture and pollution of the environment, for which they held the communists responsible. This national dimension, with its explicit political overtones, was rare in the writings of the East Germans, who tended to take a wider, more global view.

Chapter five examines the reorientation and politicization of the Czech and East German opposition movements in the late eighties, a development which was closely connected to the reforms enacted in the Soviet Union by Michail Gorbachev. Especially the veterans of the Prague Spring stressed the similarities between their own reform projects and Gorbachev's *perestrojka* and *glasnost*. Most other Czech dissidents had little interest in renewed socialist experiments, but they did recognize that Gorbachev's reforms could lead to more autonomy for Czechoslovakia, which they of course welcomed. This national perspective was absent in the East German debates, but the opposition movement in the GDR did grow more critical of the East German communists, since these refused to support Gorbachev. New groups in the GDR, which were partly modeled after *Charta 77*, started to monitor the human rights situation and adopted the strategy of supporting grassroots initiatives, but they did so with a decidedly East German twist. Even these groups remained skeptical about the *Ausreiser*-movement and they linked emphasis on activism from below with a clear rejection of interference from the West, particularly West Germany. Nevertheless, this new approach was very controversial within the East German opposition and it complicated relations with the Protestant Church, to which many of the political alternative groups formally still belonged.

The sixth chapter focuses on the role of the opposition movements in the revolutions of 1989. Contrary to what is often assumed, the leading Czech dissidents were not prominently involved in the decisive demonstrations, and initially they were just as surprised by the turn of events as the East Germans. Building upon years of cooperation, they were however better able to agree on a minimal program of demands and to form a united front against the communist party and the state authorities. Nonetheless, the relatively quick political transition in Czechoslovakia was more the result of successful improvisation than of serious planning. The East German dissidents enjoyed enormous popular support for some time, but typically could not agree on a common program or organization. Together with their reluctance towards German unification, this explains their devastating defeat in the elections of March 1990.

Despite their fundamentally different composition, the Czech and East German opposition had more common than is often claimed. Reform socialism, cultural criticism and a critical attitude towards Western consumer society and party democracy were not themes unique to the East German opposition movements. What was unique was the East German context, which was shaped by the division of Germany. East German citizens who no longer believed in a future for the GDR had the possibility to emigrate to West Germany, if they were determined enough, thereby effectively changing the political system without leaving the country. This option did not exist in the other countries of the Soviet bloc. As a result of this, the political diversity of the opposition in the GDR was much lower than in Czechoslovakia. This meant that the East German groups did not have to engage in finding the kind of compromises that was characteristic for the Czech opposition. Initially, most political alternative groups in the GDR did not even consider themselves opposition movements. However, they adamantly refused to be regulated by the authorities. They set up their own communication channels and consistently tried to reach a wider audience. Regardless of their intentions, within a Soviet-style communist system such movements inevitably acquired political significance. Over time and under the influence of other Central European opposition movements, some East German dissidents developed a more outspoken political consciousness and became more active in generating support among the population, but the label 'opposition' remained controversial and divided them until the very end. Another important difference between the Czech and the East German opposition was that the East Germans lacked a national historical narrative, which in the Czech case was an important tool, both for keeping the different dissident fractions together and for criticizing the communist party. The East Germans were however united by their belief in a democratized, reformed, but truly independent East German state. It was therefore only logical that they did not simply give up this vision once communism was at its end, but they were unable to find much support for it. Whereas after 1989 their Czech counterparts took up high state offices, many of the East Germans dissidents became, once again, outsiders.