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“How has Europe’s East-West division been overcome, transformed or reproduced since 1989?”¹ Historians Ferenc Laczó and Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič, posed this question to a constellation of authors spanning European and Anglo-American academia on the eve of the 30th anniversary of 1989. Their answers, together with a review, an interview, and an inter-generational conversation make up, a collection of essays that looks at 1989, its pre-history and its aftermath from many different intellectual, disciplinary, generational, and regional angles. The result is, to use Jarosław Kuisz’s phrase a “pan-European” discussion.

As guest editors of the online journal and network of European cultural journals *Eurozine*, Laczó and Gabrijelčič, sought to leave behind the usual (and with each anniversary intensified) “venturing into unexplored territory to extract gems of insight from seemingly obscure details”. Instead they strove for clarification over more “fundamental issues”. Their aim was to make the debate more accessible to the broader public. The editorial choice of the essayistic genre does, in fact, leave the floor open to thoughts that may be difficult to fit into the genre of research papers and monographs. For better or for worse.

While some authors of the volume are clearly skilled in making their, often highly specialized research, accessible to an educated non-specialist reader, others offer a shorter, yet not necessarily concise, overview of their research. Refreshingly, several essays are unapologetically personal: some would qualify as straightforward memoiristic reflections (e.g. Julia Sonnevend), others as thoroughly personalized political commentary (e.g. Jan Zelionka, Owen Hatherley). In this sense the volume also reveals the possibilities and the limits of having such discussion without the confines of academia. What then is the major contribution of this volume to the scholarship on 1989, its pre-history and its aftermath?

A Global History of 1989?

In his 2009 essay for the *New York Review of Books*, the British historian, author and commentator Timothy Garton Ash reviewed the recent additions to the scholarship on 1989.² Despite highly acclaiming some, especially the work of Victor Sebestyen’s or Mary Elise Sarotte, Garton Ash, an eyewitness and eloquent commentator of the 1989

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- 1 LACZÓ, Ferencz – GABRIJELČIČ, Luka Lisjak. Introduction. The legacy of division: East and West after 1989. In LACZÓ, Ferencz – GABRIJELČIČ, Luka Lisjak (eds.). *The Legacy of Division: East and West after 1989*. Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2020, p. 1. ISBN 9789633863749.
 - 2 GARTON ASH, Timothy. 1989! In *New York Review of Books*, November 5, 2009, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2009/11/05/1989/>

events, laments an absence of a “*global, synthetic history of 1989*”. Such an opus, concludes Garton Ash, may one day be written by “*a brilliant young historian—at home in many languages; capable of empathizing both with powerholders and with so-called ordinary people; a writer of distinction; tenured, but with few teaching obligations; well-funded for extensive research on several continents; Stakhanovite in work habits; monastic in private life—to start writing this necessary, almost impossible masterpiece: a kind of Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk of modern history*”. With luck, he adds, such work could be ready for the 2019 anniversary of 1989.

The present volume does not meet these standards, nor is it its editors’ and individual authors’ aspiration. Yet, the editors, their aim, the way they went about achieving it, and the actual result reveal that the kind of history of 1989 envisioned by Ash is in the making. That there is a cohort of young historians, well-spoken in several languages, at home in global academia, capable of grasping and analysing the many scholarly discourses that feed in, have informed and shaped the scholarship and the debate on 1989 and its aftermath. Laczó and Gabrijelčič come from Eastern Europe, were educated at both Western and Eastern institutions of higher learning and are fully capable of not only being part of but hosting and curating debate. Yet the volume also reveals that such history will most feasibly and perhaps even best be a collective work.

The end of the Cold War in Europe revisited

“*The achievement of the revolutions of ’89 was to have ended the division of Europe.*” This, argue the editors, was the unifying thread of conceptualizations, politics, and remembering of 1989 by its key participants. Steering clear of painting one homogenous picture of 1989, the authors nonetheless point to the fact that the fall of the Berlin wall has become a universally and globally accepted symbol of 1989. Indeed, when the Cold War came to an end, the leaders of the East and the West called for overcoming the past division and its legacy. Public statements were buttressed by narratives of European history in which the Cold War was an anomaly; the division was an artificial construct. As unifying as this narrative may have seemed, its Western and Eastern versions harboured potentially divisive perceptions of Europe, its past and present. Drawing on “*long-standing traditions in Western European thought that marginalized and even excluded the experiences of the continent’s eastern half*”, the integrational projects “*increasingly claimed to represent Europe as a whole*”.³ Eastern Europeans for their part, saw the Cold War, together with the communist era, as an aberration in their otherwise European national stories.

By late 2000s, it transpired that European integration, in terms of East and West’s smooth rapprochement was more easily said than done. The financial economic crisis of 2008 the backsliding in the relations between Russia and the West, and the loud presence of several East-European budding autocrats in the global upsurge of authoritarianism, all of these signalled weakening of the 1990s “liberal consensus”. Already, the mid-2000s saw grievances directed against the underlying assumption of both transition and

3 LACZÓ – GABRIJELČIČ, ref. 1, p. 2.

transitology, that Eastern European countries were to follow in the footsteps of their Western counterparts. Exploiting and further inciting these grievances, Eastern European autocrats of the Orbán sort, became an inspiration for anti-liberal politics in the West in an “unexpected reversal in the direction of transfer of political ideas and styles”.⁴ As the editors argue, “the possibility of convergence between Europe’s two halves has been reconceived as a threat to the liberal democratic order and the European project”.⁵ As Laczó and Gabrijelčič conclude “Europe, that fluid signifier that served as a centripetal ideal in 1989, has re-emerged as a contested notion” existing against the backdrop of a “curious mixture of greater mobility and sustained ignorance”.⁶ This again has its own prehistory: it is the anti-Western mantras of communist propaganda but also traditionalist and radical discourses predating the post-war era that are now being revived, left and right. In the West, the Cold War stereotypes of inherently authoritarian Eastern Europeans out to take advantage of Western resources have gained currency, most notoriously so during the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom.

With this current context in mind, what has happened to Europe’s East-West division since the end of the Cold War and the fall of communist regimes? The aim of the book is to leave behind the often-lopsided soul-searching on the part of Eastern European scholars, probing instead the perceptions and misperceptions of both halves of the continent about each other. Indeed, do we or should we talk about East-West division? If so what characterizes it and how has it come about? And vice versa. What happened to the hopes of overcoming the divide over the past three decades?

The Light that Failed

The answers to these questions, diverse as they are, bring in much insight into the past and present of East-West division. The exchange between the distinguished German Egyptologist and historian of post-1945 German memory Aleida Assmann and Ivan Krastev, a Bulgarian political scientist currently based in Austria, and Stephen Holmes, professor of law at the NYU Law School, over Krastev’s and Holmes’ recently released book, *The Light that Failed, A Reckoning* (2019) is an interesting sample of the exchanges that this volume brings to light.

Analysing post-1989 development through the prism of “political psychology”, Holmes and Krastev delve into the origins of the current authoritarian malady in some states of Eastern Europe, the United States and, of course, Russia. The analysis revolves around two main arguments: the first is that the post-Cold War period in Eastern Europe, was defined “by lack of ideological alternatives” and the second, that the past division between democracy and communism, East and West, typical for the Cold War was replaced by a “division between societies that were already liberal democracies and those that wanted to become ones”.⁷ The post-Cold War era was thus an age of imitation and

4 LACZÓ – GABRIJELČIČ, ref. 1, p. 3.

5 LACZÓ – GABRIJELČIČ, ref. 1, p. 3.

6 LACZÓ – GABRIJELČIČ, ref. 1, p. 3.

7 Interview by KINGA PAPP, Réka – GARNETT, Simon. ‘The future was next to you’: An

from there followed a “*politics of imitation*”. This, however, proved to be a “*humiliating experience*”⁸ in a world where originality has been a perennial hype. Soon it became a nuisance. And an easily exploitable one. Krastev and Holmes argue that populist parties and leader the like of Mr. Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński exploit “*resentments towards the imperative to imitate*”; they do not base their politics on actual ideological alternatives but on “*plain resistance*”.⁹

For Aleida Assmann, this thesis does not amount to much more than “*clever and eloquent self-critique-cum-self-regard*” which is, in the final analysis, “*exasperating*”. As she argues, the idea of imitation being at the centre of post-1989 developments in Central Eastern Europe, “*constructs a narrative that parenthesizes and ignores everything potentially able to mediate between East and West*”.¹⁰ She finds Krastev’s and Holmes’ analysis essentially nihilistic. In the current context of the rise of illiberal regimes, it would be much more “*constructive*”, argues Assmann, “*to strengthen basic liberal attitudes, and in doing so to recall the enormous investment made by Eastern Europe in the shared European project, rather than ignoring it and thus eradicating it completely*”.¹¹

In particular, Krastev and Holmes, claims Assmann, overlook the transnational East-West history of human rights and the contribution of Eastern European dissidents.¹² In their response to the first part of this criticism Krastev and Holmes reveal without admitting or perhaps even realizing it, that their analysis lacks thorough historical analysis of the origins of the current rise of illiberalism, and its opposites. As far as the limited influence of dissent is concerned Krastev points to *The Uncivil Society* (2010) by Stephen Kotkin. In it, Kotkin, argues that the fall of communism was essentially an “*implosion*”. Extrapolating his observations about the fall of Communism in the USSR to its satellites, Kotkin asserts that popular demonstrations, not to mention dissidents, played only marginal role.¹³

Assmann’s second point is that after 1989, Holmes and Krastev conflate liberal democracy with neoliberalism; the disenchantment is not from liberalism and liberal dissidents but from neoliberalism which has little to do with liberal dissent and its legacies.¹⁴ In doing so, they look at Eastern Europe with the gaze of “*Western cultural imperialism*”, indirectly, supporting the illiberal narrative. However, Krastev and Holmes are most likely correct that most dissidents did indeed go for neoliberalism after 1989. True, neoliberalism was and is the preserve of former communists as well as grey zone

interview with Ivan Krastev on '89 and the end of liberal hegemony. In LACZÓ – GABRIEL JELČIČ, ref. 1, p. 276.

8 Interview by KINGA PAPP – GARNETT, ref. 7, p. 277.

9 Interview by KINGA PAPP – GARNETT, ref. 7, p. 277.

10 ASSMANN, Aleida. Go East!. In LACZÓ – GABRIEL JELČIČ, ref. 1, p. 274.

11 ASSMANN, ref. 10. p. 274.

12 ASSMANN, ref. 10. pp. 267–9.

13 Interview by KINGA PAPP – GARNETT, ref. 7, p. 287.

14 ASSMANN, ref. 10. pp. 269–72.

technocrats.¹⁵ But there is growing evidence about widespread dissident love for neoliberalism in the 1990s.¹⁶

All in all, neither Assmann nor Krastev move much past the well-known signposts and narratives. Krastev's and Holmes' analysis is wanting in some respects, and can as such provide food for illiberal thought (if illiberals, in fact, read Krastev and Holmes, which cannot be ruled out, given the widely advertised sophistication of the leading cadre of the "illiberal" regimes). But it is doubtful whether Assmann's suggestions are the way to prevent such unwanted collateral damage and indeed reinforce shared East-West solidarity. After all, in places, Assmann's lamentations read as a Western echo of what can be heard from ex-dissidents (especially of the liberal bent) every autumn as the anniversary approaches. Moreover, her review lacks demonstrations of wider knowledge of the most recent research into Central Eastern European history. In fact, the inclusion of her review in the volume has more value in showing the extent to which the Western myth about Eastern Europe is still in place among German conservative intellectuals.

If we approach the volume as a collective deliberation, then it is the essays by e.g. Jarosław Kuisz, Bogdan C. Jacob, James Mark and Tobias Rupprecht, or Ján Zielonka that work better as correctives to Krastev's and Holmes' (and indeed, Assmann's) work. They provide a more inclusive springboard for further thought and research, in the sense of creating space for self-knowledge and self-reflection, as the main agenda.

The Polish intellectual historian and editor in chief of the weekly *Kultura Liberalna* Jarosław Kuisz writes about the way in which East and West have imagined each other after 1989.¹⁷ The past 30 years saw the steep rise and gradual decline of two myths that formed the mutual perception of the East and the West. On one hand, there was Western mythologization of the East as backward. And on the other hand, the "post-communist" myth about the West, namely "*the naïve and uncritical admiration for countries west of the Elbe and for the US*".¹⁸ Kuisz does follow Krastev and Holmes when arguing that this myth propelled Eastern Europeans to "*imitate this other, better world, without any sense of irony*".¹⁹ The following observation may just as well apply to the rest of the region: "*For almost as long as the Third Republic has existed, the 'better world' that the West represents to Poles has been largely imagined rather than examined.*"²⁰ Is the rise of illiberalism an inevitable answer to this age of imitation? Not necessarily, and this is where Kuisz analysis diverts from Krastev's and Holmes'.

15 See, e.g. KOPEČEK, Michal (ed.). *Architekti dlouhé změny, Expertní kořeny postsocializmu v Československu*. Prague: Argo; FF UK; ÚSD AV ČR, 2019. ISBN 978-80-257-2808-6.

16 VANĚK, Miroslav (ed.). *Sto studentských evolucí: Vysokoškolští studenti roku 1989. Životopisná vyprávění v časosběrné perspektivě. (vol. I.–III.)*. Prague: Academia, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2019. ISBN 978-80-200-3027-6.

17 KUISZ, Jarosław. The two faces of European disillusionment: An end to myths about the West and the East. In LACZÓ – GABRIJELČIČ, ref. 1, p. 254.

18 KUISZ, ref. 17, pp. 255–6.

19 KUISZ, ref. 17, p. 258.

20 KUISZ, ref. 17, p. 260.

To be fair, Krastev and Holmes do not hail another end of history either. That, at least, is what they make clear in the interview. Yet, the historical narrative implied in their analysis, as Assmann correctly points out, does not offer alternatives, limiting its proclaimed open-endedness. Kiusz, Bogdan C. Iacob, James Mark and Tobias Rupprecht, offer exactly this much-needed complexity.

For Kiusz the end of imitation is also the beginning of an age of (self)-examination. The current disenchantment with the West, Europe or the EU is not new in Poland, nor, for that matter, original. As elaborated by Bogdan C. Iacob, James Mark and Tobias Rupprecht, *“populist governments’ rejection of a ‘decadent’ and ‘imperialist’ West merely continues an official communist approach, despite their anti-communist rhetoric”*.²¹ As Kuisz reminds, today’s Eurosceptics tended to be those who were Euro-optimists.²² From this perspective the decline of the image of the West as the perfect other is anything but unexpected.

Jan Zielonka deconstructs the East-West divide from another angle. Europe is a *“complicated maze with many fault lines, not one single fault line, between the East and the West”*. These fault lines run between *“states exposed to refugee flows, chiefly because of their geographical location, and those with no similar pressures”*, between *“creditor states and debtor states”*, between states *“governed by illiberal parties, and states where populists are still kept at bay”*. None of these fault lines, argues Zielonka, *“have anything to do with the East-West divide”*.²³ Nor are they, historically speaking, unchangeable. As Zielonka reminds, *“the major problem with stereotypes is that they ignore historical change. Certain negative or positive characteristics come and go; they are never timeless”*.²⁴

Conclusion

An intergenerational, interdisciplinary, interregional, and intra-European exchange over the East-West division, its perceptions and misperceptions, their pasts and presents, the *Legacy of Division* reveals both the pros and cons of writing contemporary history from a variety of perspectives. If some of the authors fell short of conveying their knowledge in readable and approachable essayistic style, the idea to re-publish these online articles in a volume gives expert readers a second chance to get a taste of the complexity of cutting-edge thought and scholarship about the topic. In my view, the major contribution of the volume is exactly that: making apparent the kaleidoscopic nature of the history of the past 30 years.

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21 IACOB, Bogdan C. – MARK, James – RUPPRECHT, Tobias. The Struggle over 1989. In LACZÓ – GABRIJELČIČ, ref. 1, p. 127.

22 KUISZ, ref. 17, p. 259.

23 ZIELONKA, Jan. The mythology of the East-West divide. In LACZÓ – GABRIJELČIČ, ref. 1, p. 70.

24 ZIELONKA, ref. 23, p. 74.