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Certainly, there is more than one history of the Cold War. Students of International Relations (IR), security, and the heirs of ‘Sovietology’ can tell us one story, which is perhaps the dominant narrative in Western scholarship. But there are different, less prominent although surely not less valid or interesting narratives coming from other disciplinary perspectives and regional vantage points. In his article, Robert Brier proposes an approach drawing on cultural history and, at the same time, one that is told from an Eastern European viewpoint. His in fact is a counter-narrative, because the underlying scholarly goal is visibly polemic, and the regional perspective is underrepresented to date. It is therefore a highly interesting contribution and a worthwhile read for historians, IR scholars, and a general audience interested in recent European history.

The article has two main addressees. In the introductory section, Brier suggests that his research should feed into the main stream of Cold War history and expand the scope of the cultural history of the East-West struggle. Whereas the focus to date has mostly been on the first two decades (1945-1960s), there is much to be learned from the cultural shifts of the 1970s. In his view, culture encompasses ideology as well as ideas – and crucially for the argument, the intellectual content and context of human rights. In his focus on the emergence of human rights as both a set of norms and a discourse reorganizing inter-bloc politics after the Helsinki Accords of 1975, Brier enters into a dialogue with a different still corpus of literature, namely constructivist
international relations scholarship on norm diffusion.¹ He explicitly picks out what is perhaps the most prominent monograph in that sub-field, Daniel C. Thomas’s “Helsinki Effect” – and throughout the article engages in a heated polemic with different aspects of the ‘Helsinki effect’ concept.²

As empirical material for his analysis, and to support his argument, Brier chose the case of the emergence and early transnational reception of Poland’s Workers’ Defense Committee (KOR), primarily focusing on two of its intellectual leaders – Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń. This choice allows Brier to go into fine-grained historical analysis and provide interesting details, but comes at a price of constraining the author to some extent and perhaps losing part of the international readership not used to grand narratives reflected in individual life stories.

The first empirical section introduces the history of KOR which emerged from spontaneous acts of solidarity between the Polish independent intelligentsia and factory workers persecuted after June 1976 protests sparked by centrally induced price hikes (106). Unlike the majority of Polish historians though, Brier quickly departs from the national context and moves his focus to the transnational space of interaction between the nascent opposition movements and various foreign actors.³ In this case it is mostly the Western left – Italian communists, German social democrats, French Marxist intellectuals, etc. In the following sections he digs deeper into this at first unlikely coalition, portraying both the respective domestic contexts and the problems a dissident-left alliance caused for Eastern European communist parties. Using a lot of very varied archival material he is able to trace complex patterns of circulation and influence, backstage political and diplomatic games as well as the mechanism of transnational advocacy.

From the above summary the article may seem to be a rather narrowly framed case study. Perhaps it would be, but Brier is able to show much wider implications of the


events he describes. The main argument is not a complete novelty. Both the history of the Workers’ Defense Committee and analyses of the emergence of human rights as a new discourse in East-West relations exist. However, the former are mostly focused on domestic struggles, while the latter do not provide an explicit link to the cultural history of the Cold War. Brier does, and retells elements of already known stories in a new fashion and with a specific goal in mind. On a more abstract level, his piece is an empirical test for Thomas’ ‘Helsinki effect’ hypothesis. Throughout the article, Brier suggests what that hypothesis would imply and frames his evidence as either confirming or falsifying Thomas’s argument.

First and foremost, he argues that the parsimonious notion of a ‘Helsinki effect’ – which proposes that the signing of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) Final Act at Helsinki in 1975 sparked human rights-based dissent across the Eastern Bloc – needs to “be seen within a more general transformation of Cold War culture” (106). This transformation, as we learn from the remainder of the article, has three main traces. The first is the emergence of human rights not merely as a set of formalized international norms, but rather as a universally inspiring political symbol. Second is the ideational shift within the Western progressive circles – away from real existing Soviet socialism and the ‘revolutionary privilege’ and towards more liberal values and a focus on individual rights. This, as Brier explicitly notes, has been brilliantly described by Robert Horvath in his “Solzhenitsyn effect” – an interesting addition to Thomas’s work. Brier also points out that Thomas’s assumptions about the role of formalized human rights prescriptions of the Helsinki Accords’ ‘Third basket’ are superficial by the standards of social constructivist thought in IR. If states agreed on formal norms, Brier argues (building on Alexander Wendt), this means that they shared some more fundamental ideas beforehand (112). Thus, third, and most ambitiously, Brier shows that the transformation of Cold-War culture involved a


5 This process has been discussed among others by Moyn and Hoffmann. Samuel Moyn, The Last Utopia. Human rights in history (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010); Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, (ed.), Human rights in the twentieth century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).


struggle over the concept of modernity in its competing and largely mutually exclusive Western-capitalist and Eastern-communist versions (119-120). 8

If the CSCE Final Act had indeed caused the emergence of new rights-based ‘dissidence’ in Eastern Europe, then, Brier points out, we still do not have a complete causal chain that would explain the shift in state behavior towards norm compliance – which is what Thomas suggests. Brier tries to provide the lacking mechanism by showing how the emergence of organized opposition using the language of human rights was then received abroad, and how transnational mobilization, enabled by the deeper cultural shifts of the 1970s, resulted in political pressures on Polish authorities to comply, at least partly, with the agreements they signed. It thus gives more empirical content to the already known idea of a ‘boomerang effect’, without its inherent Western-centric edge. 9 In this way, Brier’s article “both confirms and challenges” the idea of a ‘Helsinki effect’. It is definitely not testing the hypothesis in a positivist sense, but contributes to our understanding of the emergence and role of dissidence.

In the conclusion, Brier sketches out some interesting suggestions for future research on the cultural history of the Cold War, both in its early and later phases. In this he maintains a transnational and inter-bloc approach which is, unfortunately, still visibly lacking.

The strengths of the article are many. It is an interesting critical voice in the long debate sparked by Thomas’s ‘Helsinki Effect’ in which the critics all acknowledge the phenomenon signaled in the book’s title (which in a rougher and less academic form predated the publication and originated in the actual experience of Eastern European opposition), but seek to nuance its simple and top-down logic. Brier’s article should also be applauded for compiling a large amount of archival material and secondary literature from Eastern Europe – a terra incognita (125) – that is still unavailable in English and summarizing it for a potentially interested international audience. Last but not least, the ambitious goal of expanding Cold-War cultural history (although of course impossible to fulfill in a single article) is well served. On a critical note, one could argue that the argument, especially having international politics scholars in mind, could benefit from trading some of the depth (dense historical ‘factography’ and archival references) for analytical breadth, i.e. looking at more than one dissident movement in more than one Eastern European country. Surely, however, this last

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weakness will be dealt with as the transnational historical program that Robert Brier has developed expands.

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