

rightful place in the social hierarchy. In Chapter 5, Staliūnas measures an elevated level of ethnic tension but, again, the plethora of detail does not yield any clear conclusion about why that tension did not give rise to more violence. Staliūnas saves the best for last: a chapter on comparative perspectives that provides more satisfying answers than anything preceding it. His inquiry into pogroms in Belarus concludes that Russian nationalism and imperial loyalty, neither of which was present among most ethnic Lithuanians, played a crucial role in facilitating the move to mob violence. Contrarily, Habsburg Galicia, like Lithuania, featured a hierarchy of ethnopolitical rivals as well as “an agrarian economy and slow modernization which . . . created fewer preconditions for anti-Jewish violence” (240).

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Störbilder einer Diktatur. Zur subversive fotografischen Praxis Ivan Kyncl im Kontext der tschechoslowakischen Bürgerrechtsbewegung der 1970er Jahre.

By Heidrun Hamersky. Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des ostlichen Mitteleuropa, no. 49. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015. 284 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. €34.00, hard bound.
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A 1979 photo shows Kamila Bendová sitting on an easy chair in a Prague apartment. Her five young children are draped over the chair and surrounding furniture, mugging for the camera; their mother is hunched down, hugging her youngest. Her pensive, tired gaze is cast downward, and she is almost concealed by her adorable children. This dissident family portrait (the paterfamilias Václav Benda was a political prisoner at the time) is just one of many images brought to light and sensitively analyzed by Heidrun Hamersky in *Störbilder einer Diktatur*, her wide-ranging, deeply researched monograph on Czech photographer Ivan Kyncl.

Hamersky's work draws on an archive of some 17,000 of Kyncl's negatives, obtained in 2010 by the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa at Universität Bremen; she has classified a subset dealing with surveillance, imprisonment, and other “dissident themes,” and these are the main subject of her book. Some of these images will be well-known to scholars of east central European dissent; if you are familiar with any portraits of Czech dissidents from the 1970s, you have probably seen the work of Kyncl, who was known as “the photographer of Charter 77.” Other images are completely new.

As Kyncl left few interviews or other records of his thought processes, Hamersky is thrown back on other sources; she draws widely on Czech and German scholarship, and makes skillful, effective, and hearteningly judicious use of secret police archives. An enormous strength of the book is some thirty interviews she conducted with Kyncl's friends and family, including former dissidents and exile publishers. Uncovering a wealth of detail and perspective, she constructs a composite portrait of Kyncl that is perhaps a bit thin on psychology—in the absence of his own testimony, for example, it's difficult to say why he signed the Charter—but nevertheless gives a nuanced view of his life. Above all she lets the photographic record speak for itself, composing its own portrait of an artist who was crafty, resourceful, risk-loving—and devoted to taking pictures.

At the heart of Hamersky's account is a conception of “subversive fotografische Praxis” (111), which is said to go beyond the creation of an alternative culture to reject the existing order as such. The weak point of this interpretation is that it's difficult to tell what subversive effect any of these photos actually had—and, as Hamersky

admits, speaking of their “subversive potential” (252) merely postpones the question. The strong point of the approach is that it helps distinguish between generalized anti-regime sentiment and structured oppositional activity, while also embedding “subversion” into international networks—Hamersky shows convincingly that maintaining unofficial culture inside Czechoslovakia required a constant exchange of information and documents with exiles and supporters in other countries. The focus on subversion also reminds us that photographing dissidents was often complicated and sometimes dangerous. The book is rich in detail about Kyncl’s tradecraft—we discover that he hid rolls of film in a half-body cast he had to wear after a skiing accident, for example, or that portraits of Chartists were pre-emptively sent to western exile organizations, so they would be ready for press releases in case of arrest.

Many of Kyncl’s “dissident photos” have their artistic flaws. Hamersky, unfortunately only in a few words in the conclusion mentions quite rightly that “often, his photographs are deliberately too dark, too indistinct, too coarse-grained” (250). This may be the price of subversion: photos must be taken quickly and secretly, at dangerous moments, from inopportune angles. But Hamersky analyzes quite nicely the resulting effect of “counter-surveillance” (a dissident photographer furtively observing his furtive observers), nor does she flinch from saying that Kyncl’s “surveillance photos” of the secret police sometimes end up looking similar to those taken by the police themselves, even as the very messiness of the photos creates a sense of spontaneity and authenticity.

In an aside, Hamersky mentions that Kyncl left over a *million* photos taken in his second (and brilliant) career as a theater photographer in Great Britain (102); she does not treat this portion of his output, nor does she consider the “non-dissent” photos from Czechoslovakia, which included photos of dance contests, Romani children, May Day parades, and recording sessions of his childhood friend, the singer Václav Neckář—among many other subjects (34n111). Looking at his whole career, then, we must surely see his Charter photographs as a bounded (minor?) part of his output, and a mere prelude to what became his life’s calling. Hamersky’s close attention to a relatively small number of dissident photos does raise the question of how they fit into Kyncl’s larger work; a sense of possible continuities and discontinuities across his life would have cast much additional light on his Charter 77 photographs.

Hamersky’s book skillfully draws our attention to the visualization of dissent and the role of photography in shaping western images of dissidents. She sees the main achievements of dissident photography as creating a counter-image of communist reality, turning the regime’s surveillance techniques against itself, and enforcing dissidents’ “right to their own image” (*Recht auf ein eigenes Bild*, 258). Like Kyncl himself, Hamersky focuses in on an exceptional group of individuals and captures them in their individuality, their weakness and their strength, without worrying about their heroism, influence, or political credentials. The result is a fine account of Kyncl’s work and a compelling group portrait of Czech dissent.

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Love Letter in Cuneiform. By Tomáš Zmeškal. Trans. Alex Zucker. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. x, 315 pp. \$20.00, paper.
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After much struggle to conclusively compose a study of Kafka, Borges revealed his failure in a short essay titled “Kafka and His Precursors.” Curiously, the essay begins