

Fighting Fear with In



Contentious Symbolism in Socialist Poland

nocence

While sorting through stacks of archival material on the Cold War period in Central Eastern Europe, I stumbled upon a picture of strange graffiti. It captured a smiley little creature with a long, triangle-shaped hat, covering a large patch of hastily applied white paint. Its arms were hanging in the air, as if in an invitation for a big warm hug. I felt this was an absurdly cute and innocent image in an otherwise depressing atmosphere of repression and unfreedom. The picture was part of a photographic collection from 1980s Wrocław, and the dwarf-like creature was painted by a group who came to be known as the Orange Alternative.

Stormy streets of Poland

Calling the 1980s in Poland a stormy period would be an understatement. As a response to a severe political, economic, and social crisis, numerous strikes were staged around the country – starting in Lublin and the Baltic seaports. Encouraged by the small concessions granted by the regime, thousands of people flooded the streets, demanding the establishment of an independent trade union. A strong bond of solidarity was formed among the protesters, eventually leading to the foundation of the *Solidarność* [Solidarity] trade union, which was a result of an agreement signed between the regime and the strikers led by Lech Wałęsa in Gdansk

on 31 August 1980. *Solidarność* soon turned into a mass dissident movement, acquiring 10 million members in the first month of its existence.

In the eyes of the regime, *Solidarność* became its biggest enemy. To regain control, Prime Minister General Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed Martial Law on 13 December 1981. This announcement meant that all associations, institutions, and trade unions were officially suspended, forcing *Solidarność* underground. In this environment of fearful disenchantment, citizens soon started

looking for alternative ways of organizing protests, serving as the perfect breeding ground for a movement like the Orange Alternative to emerge.

From a student magazine to a political movement

The Orange Alternative (Polish: *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*) was an artistic oppositional movement established in the city of Wrocław in the early 1980s. It began as a surrealist student magazine, mysteriously named A. Founded in the heat of student strikes preceding the introduction of Mar-



“May everyone know that we shall not allow them to calmly deceive themselves.”¹

Why the *Orange Alternative*? Trapped on the colour wheel between red representing the Communists and the left-wing, and yellow symbolizing the Church and right-wing opposition, orange seemed like a natural alternative to both poles, perceived as equally limiting to freedom of thought and self-expression. The *Orange Alternative* offered a previously missing in-between position desired by many citizens. Even a highly prominent member of the Wrocław chapter of *Solidarność*, Józef Pinior, admitted:

*“I was weary of *Solidarność*; especially the fact that they were forming more and more*

*alliances with the Catholic Church tired me. This is not supposed to be a criticism of the church, but I didn’t think these close ties were right. They resulted in a loss of independence. The *Orange Alternative* helped me take off my mask.”²*

tial Law, the magazine was published by the New Culture Movement: the primary outlet of artistic opposition for students and young intelligentsia. Protest through artistic means was crucial, with A’s founder Waldemar “Major” Fydrych drawing inspiration mostly from avant-garde Surrealist and Dadaist movements, as well as Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. Their aim was clear: to introduce a new cultural paradigm, a more historically fitting *socialist surrealism*, the nature of which was masterfully captured in their Manifesto. Hearts and minds of the young generation needed fresh food for thought to challenge conformism and uncritical stances, and they needed help to snap out of their normalization of everyday reality. As they put it:

Dwarf graffiti: innocent symbols as a weapon against authoritarianism

Actions of the *Orange Alternative* did not stop with the publication of surrealist manifestos. A more open expression of dissent found its place soon after the declaration of Martial Law. All of a sudden, there was unusual graffiti appearing on buildings all over the city. The size of the graffiti was usually quite small, around thirty centimetres, and its form fairly simple. Straight lines with arrows were drawn instead of arms, circles represented heads and eyes, rectangles with snowmen-like buttons became bodies, and triangles with



small circles on top represented hats with pompoms. The use of colour was sparse, keeping the images mostly black and white, sometimes with additional touches of yellow, blue, or red. Despite this simplicity, the painted creatures were immediately recognizable: they were dwarves. With large smiles and open arms prepared for a big warm hug, they served as a constant mood booster to passers-by.

Their symbolic meaning, however, was much deeper. As *Solidarność* was forced to go underground, anti-government slogans appeared on the walls of public buildings: a daring reminder that the fight against the regime was far from over. These were quickly painted over by the militia who, fearing the potential of public mobilization, left behind large patches of white and grey paint. For the Orange Alternative, this was the opportunity they had been waiting for. Perhaps an innocent, seemingly non-political symbol

would have a bigger chance of survival against the militia? After all, who would dare prosecute a fairy-tale? The plan was simple:

“We’ll paint dwarves on those patches. There are thousands or tens of thousands of paint patches in Wrocław, and probably a million in the entire country. If a million dwarves get painted on a million patches, people will find strength and the government will fall.”³

And so they did just that, with dwarf graffiti soon spreading to most cities in the country. Despite their apolitical character, the context in which they were drawn injected them with distinct political importance. The anti-regime slogans hidden underneath maintained their power. Their reference to fairy-tales also had a strong psychological impact. As smiling and joyful creatures, the dwarves stood in stark contrast to the government’s reign of fear and repression, violently imposed through the Martial Law. They thus played a crucial role in the early stages of mobilization, helping citizens to overcome their fear by proving that an alternative fight with the regime was still possible. One did not need to be involved in a direct clash with the authorities. Symbolic protest was just as powerful, and the Orange Alternative was well aware of this:

“Dwarves will not accept threats, dwarves are happy and will laugh. In this psychological war, it was the dwarves who were winning, for he who laughs is not afraid!”⁴

Impact of the Orange Alternative

Actions of the Orange Alternative quickly spilled over from Wrocław to other Polish cities, growing in scale and participation. At their peak between 1986-1990, they organized around sixty public “happenings”: large-scale participatory protest performances usually attracting hundreds or sometimes thousands of people. They ceased their activities in 1989-1990 following Fydrych’s unsuccessful attempt to be elected President. Despite becoming active again in 2001, they never managed to regain their previous popularity.

Over the course of its existence, the Orange Alternative managed to mobilize people from all social and age groups and significantly contributed to the reactivation of Poland’s culture of protest, paving the way for Solidarność later on. Through their contentious performances, they re-conquered public spaces held captive by the authoritarian regime and helped citizens overcome their fear of reclaiming them. They created a counterpublic: an alternative discursive space where formerly apathetic citizens could once again express their dissent, even if only in a subversively absurd way. By re-asserting their right to visibility, the movement helped break the prevalent “distribution of the sensible”⁵ and brought dissenting voices back into the public sphere. As historian Tyszka confirms:

“Laughter which suddenly started to sound on Świdnicka Street, in the very centre of Wrocław, was the first sign of the liberation of ‘real existence’ in Poland. The political liberation came later.”⁶

Authoritarian regimes are rarely considered to be fruitful ground for political activism, as the playing field for grassroots movements is far from even. However, as the Orange Alternative shows, certain anti-authoritarian counterstrategies are capable of shaking rigid power structures. Employing symbols of innocent dwarf creatures, the movement waged a powerful and ultimately successful psychological war with its seemingly much stronger opponent. *Encryption* was particularly important here, as seemingly apolitical activities often present the only way for a silenced oppositional movement to re-enter the realm of the visible and the audible. I believe that the Orange Alternative’s protest activities hidden in a layer of innocent absurdity and surrealism present an inspiring case, giving us hope that even the most repressive environments could be conquered by a well-targeted dose of humour.



Illustrations

- p. 200: A Dwarf preserved on Madalińskiego street in Warsaw, Agnieszka Couderq, "Orange Alternative" Foundation.
- p. 202: Waldemar Fydrych, HuBar, CC-BY.
- p. 203: Major Fydrych's story protagonist, the so-called A5 with a Dwarf in Wrocław, "Orange Alternative" Foundation.
- p. 205: Pomaranczowa alternatywa-dzien wojska, Julo, CC0.

Endnotes

- 1 Waldemar "Major" Fydrych, *Lives of the Orange Men: A Biographical History of the Polish Orange Alternative*, New York: Minor Compositions, 2014.
- 2 Padraic Kenney, *Wrocławskie Zadymy*, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2007.
- 3 Fydrych, op. cit.
- 4 Elżbieta Beszlej, "Through the Absurd in search for Alternative Normality – a case study of Orange Alternative's happenings", Diploma thesis, Goldsmiths College: University of London, 2009.
- 5 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, New York: Continuum, 2004.
- 6 Juliusz Tyszka, "Orange Alternative: street happenings as social performance in Poland under Martial Law", *New Theatre Quarterly* vol. 14, no. 56 (1998), p. 321.