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# THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History  
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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## 3.5.3 Protest and Social Movements in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

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### Introduction

Over the course of the twentieth century, protest and social movements changed dramatically. In the first half of the century, much of the European continent was embroiled in conflict between right- and left-wing movements that sought to take power through revolutionary upheaval. By the end of the Second World War this central conflict had led to very different outcomes, which reconfigured the possibilities and aims of protest according to where it took place. In Southern Europe, right-wing dictatorships ruthlessly persecuted their leftist opponents for decades, but protests around 1968 proved formative for the democratic revolutions that would eventually take place once these regimes were weakened. In the liberal democracies of Western Europe, there was decidedly more scope for protest than there was under dictatorship and, in the 1960s, young people in particular questioned the limits that authorities imposed on both protest and on democracy itself. In Eastern Europe, uprisings against Soviet-style communist dictatorships were violently repressed, but they eventually gave way to forms of dissent and ultimately open protests that called for democracy. Developments across the continent differed greatly by region, but by the end of the twentieth century, there was a general trend that culminated in the fragmentation of political movements, blurring the lines between left and right and simultaneously leading to intense—and inconclusive—contestation over what ‘democracy’ could and should mean.



Fig. 1: Sailors from the liner "Prinzregent Luitpold" on deck of the ship with plaque reading "Soldatenrat Kriegsschiff Prinzregent Luitpold. Long live the socialist republic" (1918), CC BY 3.0, Wikimedia, Bundesarchiv, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv\\_Bild\\_183-J0908-0600-002,\\_Novemberrevolution,\\_Matrosenaufstand.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-J0908-0600-002,_Novemberrevolution,_Matrosenaufstand.jpg).

## Left- and Right-wing Movements in the Period up to 1939/1945

The First World War was a time when protest movements struggled to make themselves heard. European nation-states established internal political truces, known in several countries as the 'Sacred Union', which meant a pause on strikes and direct action, as agreed both by socialist parties and larger conservative and liberal parties. By the beginning of 1917, there was general weariness among the belligerent nations of the war. As a result, the Sacred Union could not be maintained for very long. Under pressure from their members, many socialist parties left their positions in government and their trade union propaganda was resumed. In Russia, a revolution led by liberals broke out in March 1917, but they were unable to hold on to power and finally the Bolsheviks, who favoured the rapid conclusion of a peace treaty, succeeded them in October.

Even after the end of the war in 1918, intense conflict continued, sometimes lasting until the mid-1920s. Initially, protests emanating from the left made it appear that a socialist or communist revolution might be imminent. In Germany, sailors in Kiel revolted against the continuation of the war in October 1918, quickly leading to a broader uprising. In the main industrial

centres, workers joined troops in the revolt and formed councils, much like the Russian soviets. Germany then fell prey to generalised unrest: in January 1919, the Spartacists (the revolutionary far left), disappointed with the progress of the revolution, decided to take over Berlin. In Hungary and Austria too, communist parties founded by charismatic leaders met with varied success. All these movements were quickly subjected to fierce repression. In Germany, the army and the *Freikorps* (heterogeneous volunteer armies) violently crushed the Spartacist insurrection. In Hungary, counter-revolutionaries received the support of the Allied troops occupying the country; the Romanian intervention in July-August 1919 sounded the death knell for the Hungarian communists: Bela Kun had to flee to Russia and Admiral Horthy began an authoritarian regency.

In the other European countries, governments reacted differently to the revolutionary strikes that followed the war. In France, trade union leaders were arrested and the main left trade union *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) was declared illegal. In Italy, the government depended on the support of many large industrialists and landlords, enabling the fascists and Mussolini to extend their influence. In Britain, the army put down the railway workers' strike. In Spain, waves of peasant revolts and strikes, led by socialists and anarchists, were severely and drastically put down by the government and the employers' federation. By 1920, with the exception of Soviet Russia—the focal point of the revolution—revolutionary movements were ending in failure throughout Europe.

The economic crisis that hit European countries in the 1930s improved the fortunes of both right- and left-wing movements. The struggle between them often degenerated into street clashes. In Italy and in Germany, dictatorships set to work mitigating the effects of the economic crisis and reorienting their economies towards the preparation for war, while also restricting public and individual liberties. Poland and Hungary offered examples of authoritarian regimes that were not strictly fascist in nature: Piłsudski carried out a policy of cleaning up political life by using forceful decrees and censorship (*Sanacja*), while Horthy steered Hungary along the path of nationalist and antisemitic conservatism. In Spain, the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera failed in 1930 partly due to the economic crisis and partly because of dynastic, republican, nationalist, and extreme-left opposition.

Communism, though, had the wind in its sails in the 1930s. It was strengthened by the difficulties caused by economic crisis, the lack of enthusiasm among Europeans for the apparent inefficiencies of liberal democracy, and by the hopes of youth that had not given up the dream of an ideal society. This partly explains the favour enjoyed by the young communist movement.

The extreme right also experienced a resurgence. However, fascist parties and reactionary formations in the countries of Western and Northern Europe,

even though they expanded greatly, failed in seriously threatening the powers that be. In France, the *Ligues* on 6 February 1934 violently opposed left-wing movements during an anti-parliamentary demonstration organised in Paris in front of the Chamber of Deputies which turned into a riot and resulted in a dozen deaths and several hundred injuries. It also led to the fall of the Daladier government, but the right-wing groups did not manage to take power. The British Union of Fascists, founded by Oswald Mosley in 1932, had 50,000 members in 1934 and around 100,000 supporters, and reached its peak in 1939. Despite significant results in the 1937 London municipal elections, the party became unpopular in the late 1930s. Indeed, most of these fascist parties declined rapidly after 1936.

Between 1939 and 1945, the Nazis conquered most of Europe and protest movements went underground. Economic plunder, propaganda, repression against adversaries (self-declared or named by the state), and persecution against the 'inferior races' all became part of daily life in the occupied countries. Local governments participated in this subjugation, whether willingly or not. But there were also resistance movements that fought the Nazis, inspired by the governments that took refuge in London or which spontaneously refused German tutelage. Beyond the military stakes, the Resistance became a reflection of popular European will for political and social renewal. There was nevertheless a divide between communist resistance fighters on the one hand, and on the other, a more reformist resistance aligned with the restoration of traditional institutions and societies. In the post-war period, this opposition erupted in broad daylight, as in Greece, where it led to civil war.

## Protest Movements in Southern European (Authoritarian) Contexts after 1945

The post-1945 condition in the European South was characterised by political violence and its after-effects. Civil wars and their aftermath, long-running authoritarian regimes, and 'disciplined democracies' gave way to waves of discontent, which started being expressed in the 1950s. In Greece the repressive political system that followed the Civil War of the 1940s reached its climax in 1967 with the Colonels' putsch, while in Spain and Portugal, the autocratic rule of Francisco Franco (1892–1975) and António de Oliveira Salazar (1889–1970) remained virtually unchallenged from the late 1930s and mid-1920s, respectively. These conflicts were followed by systems of political and social exclusion for left-wingers, and waves of political (and, later on, economic) refugees flooded Western and, to some extent, Eastern Europe. The Portuguese, Spanish and Greek Communist Parties remained outlawed up until the 1970s.

While protest emerged in each country during the 1950s for different reasons, by the 1960s protest potential was present everywhere. This decade was marked by a general qualitative upsurge of student unrest, this time coupled with workers' movements that were previously dormant. In Spain, a strong trade unionist movement was becoming visible by the early 1960s, with the semi-legal and Communist-controlled *Comisiones Obreras* initiating several major incidents of organised opposition, such as massive strikes in Asturias in 1962. Greek and Portuguese state-controlled trade unions were unwilling to organise strikes, despite occasional outbursts. A major exception occurred in July 1965 in Athens, when a wave of workers' strikes and demonstrations against the direct involvement of the crown in Greece's politics paralysed the country.

The mid to late 1960s marked the beginning of a protest wave. The apparent softening of censorship in Spain, Portugal and Greece provided a space for action and allowed for the import of political and artistic stimuli from France, Italy, and West Germany. At the same time, the upheavals of 1956 and especially 1968 created major rifts within left-wing organisations, leading to the gradual emergence of a 'New Left' and, from the early 1970s onwards, a Eurocommunist contingent. Other forms of left-wing politics were also on the rise. Maoists and Trotskyists immersed themselves in new radicalism inspired by Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. They sought mobilisation at all costs, importing the *tiers-mondiste* frame of guerrilla movements from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Fantasies of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist violence proliferated in this framework, wherein local authoritarianism was often seen through the prism of US neo-colonialism. In fact, the Basque separatist organisation ETA framed the Basque country as the 'European Cuba' and intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre famously supported this idea.

State response to agitation was so brutal that it resembled the Eastern European or Latin American model of protest policing. This was the case with the 1968 occupations of the Universities of Madrid and Barcelona, along with occupations of the Law School and Polytechnic School in Athens, in February and November 1973 respectively, with the latter ending up in a bloody intervention by the regime.

Despite some breakthroughs in terms of gender and sexuality within the movements, the absence of strong feminist, homosexual, or ecologist demands is striking. These so-called new social movements only flourished in the post-authoritarian European South after the fall of the regimes in the mid- to late 1970s. In a sense, from the mid-1970s up to the early 1980s, protest movements in these countries were synchronised with, and increasingly resembled, their counterparts in Western Europe.

## Protest Movements in Western and Northern Europe after 1945

In Western Europe after 1945, war-weary citizens were initially more concerned with economic reconstruction than political protest. Post-war democracies combined elements of classic liberalism with economic planning, trade union representation, and welfare state measures. This alleviated some of the economic grievances that had fuelled protest in earlier periods and facilitated the consolidation of democratic institutions. As a result, protest became less common and more muted during the first decade of the post-war era.

However, 'post-war' Europe was in many ways still at war, both within and beyond the continent. Like other empires, France resisted decolonisation, and the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) gave rise to large-scale strikes by Algerian workers in France, soldiers' protests against conscription, and underground organising on the right as well as the left. As the Cold War took hold, citizens from Britain to West Germany demonstrated against nuclear weapons, backed up by the moral authority of famous intellectuals like Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell. By the beginning of the 1960s, anti-imperialism and opposition to the Cold War had become key elements of a revitalised, transatlantic 'New Left'.

The New Left grew in part from disenchantment with the limits of post-war representative democracy, dominated in most countries by conservatives who remained in power for decades (for example, until 1969 in West Germany, 1974 in France, and 1981 in Italy). However, many New Leftists were also repelled by Soviet communism, especially after the 1956 invasion of Hungary. Rejecting both Cold War options, they advocated 'participatory democracy' instead. Young people born after the Second World War were more acutely aware than their parents of how 'freedom' often failed to live up to its promises: initially small protests on matters ranging from sexual norms to the Vietnam War all encountered harsh repression throughout the 1960s.

Even under liberal democracy, police violence was a major catalyst of protest. After police killed a demonstrator in West Berlin in June 1967, the West German student movement radicalised. In May 1968, police repression of small-scale student protests in Paris quickly led to a general strike among workers across France. Demonstrations in one place frequently inspired protests elsewhere. The issues at stake differed from one country to the next, but protesters readily identified with one another and borrowed tactics from abroad, creating the appearance of a worldwide revolt. When these dramatic protests seemingly failed to lead to revolutionary change, many activists directed their political energies elsewhere.



During the 1970s, feminism quickly became the single most important social movement in Western Europe. Though women in most of Europe had already gained the right to vote at least twenty years earlier, they still had lower-paid jobs and the additional burden of unpaid housework, while men monopolised power in political parties, companies, and even protest groups. Organising amongst themselves, women engaged in consciousness-raising, created their own media and publishing houses, and launched transnational campaigns for abortion rights. Only months after 343 French women publicly declared in April 1971 that they had had illegal abortions, 374 West German women made a similar declaration on the cover of a magazine. The women's movement of the 1970s inspired gay liberation as well as later movements challenging intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender.

Protests over peace, human rights, and the environment developed in parallel. While the upheavals of 1968 remained an important point of reference, demonstrations against the stationing of American nuclear warheads in West Germany in 1981–1983 attracted millions of participants—far more than the thousands that had protested there in 1968. The arms race of the 1980s, the Chernobyl nuclear power accident (1986), and the war in the former Yugoslavia (1991–2001) also illustrated that these and other issues were globally interconnected. As the Cold War gave way to a new wave of capitalist globalisation in the 1990s, disparate social movements converged again, for a time, in a 'movement of movements' that contested the inequalities created by globalisation.



Fig. 2: Nagy Gyula, "Kossuth Lajos utca a Ferenciek tere felől nézve. 1956. október 25-e délután, — Fortepan 24652" ("Kossuth Lajos Street seen from Ferenciek Square. On the afternoon of October 25, 1956"), Internet Archive, [https://web.archive.org/web/20190123034910/http%3A//www.fortepan.hu/\\_photo/download/fortepan\\_40060.jpg](https://web.archive.org/web/20190123034910/http%3A//www.fortepan.hu/_photo/download/fortepan_40060.jpg).

This image from 25 October 1956 in Budapest Hungary shows the anti-communist and nationalist revolutionaries marching towards the Hungarian Parliament building to present their anti-Soviet demands. Hungarian flags with a hole in the middle were a powerful symbol during the protests, because the communist coat of arms was cut out from the fabric. The day ended in tragedy, when shots were fired at a large crowd on Kossuth Square in front of the Hungarian Parliament.

## Protest and Social Movements in East-Central Europe, 1945–1990

At the end of the Second World War much of East-Central Europe came under Soviet dominance. By 1948–1949, communists had taken over and consolidated their hegemony in the region. The party-state endeavoured to exercise control over society, either by eliminating rival political parties or, in countries such as Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic, reducing them to mere ‘bloc parties’ that remained subordinate to the Communist Party. With genuine political pluralism at an end, social movements and institutions were also brought under communist control. For example, diverse youth organisations and women’s associations, formerly affiliated with various political parties and the churches, were banned or dissolved; only the officially approved, communist varieties were allowed to exist. In most Eastern Bloc countries, all types of social and cultural organisations, as well as the state party itself, were integrated into the so-called people’s fronts or national fronts.

By the late 1950s, Stalinist regimes were giving way to less oppressive forms of state socialism in most East-Central European countries, and certain civic, local, or cultural initiatives gained official recognition. But the system’s fundamental intent to keep societal movements under state control remained unchanged. Activism of any kind continued to face severe limits: social initiatives, civic efforts, and protest movements could go only as far as they were tolerated by governments. At the same time, reforms by domestic governments—including economic reforms, the liberalisation of the public sphere, and the extension of various freedoms—could go only as far as the Soviet Union permitted. This became glaringly evident in revolutionary situations as well as in periods in which communist authorities cracked down on protest participants and dissident movements.

Central and Eastern Europe witnessed several major crises and uprisings during the communist period, including the Berlin Uprising of 1953, the Hungarian Revolution and Poznań Uprising of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the Polish Crisis of 1980–1981. These events grew out of popular dissatisfaction with oppressive policies and economic shortcomings, the

latter resulting in generally low wages and salaries, modest living standards, and recurring shortages of certain products. The extent of such problems, as well as the extent to which individual rights and freedoms were curtailed, varied from country to country. There were also specific factors, such as the continuous Soviet military presence, which in Hungary was one of the main causes of the national uprising in 1956.

From the late 1970s, dissident movements emerged in most countries of East-Central Europe, inspired by various traditions and revolutionary ideologies, contemporary activism in Western Europe, and by the legacy of 1968. The movements were diverse, with opposition groups gathering different constituencies and taking on different issues, but their common denominator was the desire to build up a new, democratic order. Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia was a movement of dissident intellectuals who signed a democratic charter. *Solidarność* in Poland was an alliance of trade unions with a mass following of workers and other employees, counting about 10 million members in 1980. The so-called democratic opposition in Hungary in the 1980s was largely composed of liberal intellectuals, whereas other groups of Hungarian dissidents consisted of populist-conservative writers and intellectuals or veteran '56ers.

Opposition movements often crystallised around established, older institutions. The Catholic Church in Poland, for example, was a powerful counterweight to the communist regime; the first visit of Pope John Paul II to his homeland in 1979 catalysed subsequent mass protests. The Lutheran Church in the GDR played a similar role.

Various civil movements, albeit not primarily political, could potentially acquire political overtones as well: heritage protection, environmentalism, and the question of national or ethnic minorities could all serve as issues through which citizens could express their criticism toward the regime. The end of the period brought about the escalation of societal discontent in Central Eastern Europe: the mass demonstrations which unfolded during the autumn of 1989, culminating in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in East Germany, and the Romanian Revolution. These events paved the way for democratic transformation, and other countries of the region underwent nonviolent transition during 1989–1990.

## Conclusion

While the Russian Revolution left a powerful imprint on all sociopolitical struggles of the interwar period, the rise of fascism and National Socialism altered the dynamics of social movements more generally, resulting in conflicts between the extreme right and left. The late 1930s signalled the

crushing of protest movements and things soon came to a standstill with the advent of the Second World War, which nevertheless favoured communist-led anti-fascist resistance. The drive for revolutionary change in the post-1945 period was subject to temporal and geographical differences throughout the continent. The most important change was the impact of institutionalised socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, where Soviet-aligned communist parties attempted to control protest at all costs. From the mid-1950s onwards, the parallel intervention of the Soviet Union in Hungary and the proliferation of antinuclear movements in countries such as West Germany and Britain gave rise to a rift between the Old Left and the New Left. This would crystallise in the student and workers' movements of 1968, as well as through the Warsaw Pact's intervention in Czechoslovakia.

While the idea of introducing state reforms to achieve 'socialism with a human face' seemed to vanish at the end of the 1960s, new trends, such as the centrality of human rights, came to the fore. At the same time, protest against censorship and the violation of basic human rights in the authoritarian European South reached its peak. Police violence and state repression, especially targeting young activists, were catalysts of protest for most movements of the 'long 1960s', with qualitative differences depending on the context. Whereas in the West, identity-based politics and new social movements such as feminism, environmentalism, and peace movements developed in parallel, such demands only flourished in the south after the fall of the dictatorships in the mid-1970s. In the 1980s, these and other interrelated issues fuelled the development of 'civil society', culminating in the 1989 revolutions. With the end of the Cold War, a new set of movements emerged, this time focussing on the adverse effects of globalisation on democracy.

## Discussion questions

1. In which ways did left-wing and right-wing protest movements differ in twentieth-century Europe?
2. Which role did the Cold War play in the development of social movements in twentieth-century Europe?
3. How do current protest movements (such as Fridays for Future) differ from movements in the twentieth century? Why?

## Suggested reading

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