

Polish Oranges

How the Orange Alternative, a band of surrealist provocateurs, helped bring down Poland's Communist government in the 1980s

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a review of

Lives of the Orange Men by Major Waldemar Fydrych, edited by Gavin Grindon, translated by David French, with an introduction by the Yes Men Minor Compositions/Autonomea, 2014, 330 pp.

While many historically-minded radicals are familiar with the imaginative counter-cultural actions undertaken by the Dutch Provos in the 1960s, the Orange Alternative's subversive cultural resistance tactics emanating from Poland in the 1980s are less well known.

The Orange Alternative was a popular uprising that specifically used the marker of surrealism to subvert the spectacle of Soviet bloc communism. This book is a biographical history of the Orange Alternative as seen through the eyes of arch trickster/provocateur Major Waldemar Fydrych.

Presented here in its first English language edition, it thoughtfully includes contextual footnotes to Orange Alternative initiatives and such essential appendices as a reprint of their "Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism." Stylistically, Fydrych's text offers us an intentionally absurdist cross between an official Communist Party biography of duly anointed "socialist heroes" and a Catholic hagiography of the lives of the saints.

Reveling in this ironic vein of parody, it shines a comic light on the hated Polish Cold War regime whose dictatorship was being challenged by the heretical cultural initiatives of an anti-authoritarian Orange Alternative that did not merely desire the replacement of communist party bosses with capitalist ones.

The group existed simultaneously with the more internationally well-known Polish oppositional movement that called itself Solidarity. However, unlike the latter's serious-minded workerist opposition, the Orange Alternative's playfully subversive "socialist surrealism," as they called it, was engaged in anarchic forms of direct cultural action.

In the city of Wrocław, when the official censors covered up anti-government graffiti (including but not limited to that of Solidarity) with white paint, the surrealist pranksters of the Orange Alternative painted a dwarf on every white patch on the wall to both mark the spots where the graffiti had been, and also to provide a new elfin symbol of resistance that was meant to undermine the authority of the communist regime with black humor much as the Provos had done in their own way with the figure of the kabouter (gnome in English).

In the Orange Alternative's surrealist parody of Marxist dialectical materialism, Orange surrealist provocateur, "Major" Fydrych contended, with tongue firmly in cheek, that these actions embodied "important dialectical art, where the slogan was the thesis, the patch the antithesis and the dwarf the synthesis."

In this way, the government's attempt to erase the telltale traces of public disturbance was countered by a mischievous prank that through its ubiquitous appearances in the streets became as important a symbol of the resistance as the Guy Fawkes mask would later become to the Occupy movement when it went viral in the internet years.

In the pre-internet decade of the Orange Alternative, owning a computer was obviously not possible, yet their unruly gestures of resistance became the talk of Poland. What's more, anyone with a can of paint could join in the fun. The youthful rebels of the Alternative were able in this way to creatively use the subversive power of laughter to undermine the authority of the communist state by poking serious fun at its futile attempts to stifle dissent.

With Orange's carnivalesque approach to grassroots rebellion street theatre, happenings, underground newspapers and pirate radio utilized satire and ridicule as the weapons of choice for outflanking the powers that be in what Padriac Kenney has called an "Elfin Rebellion" in his book *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989*.

Orange also included a pre-Yes Man form of parody in which, as Kenney put it, "Instead of refusing to ape official ideology, it was more effective to ape it grotesquely." Rather than directly confronting the police by fighting in the streets, one of the Polish group's actions involved singing, dancing and throwing flowers at the police, not as a pacifist invocation of universal love, but as an exaggerated sign of contempt.

It was obvious to everyone that the flower throwers were anti-police, but the cops could hardly arrest them under the circumstances without themselves appearing in a bad light. In such ways, the Orange Alternative to the imposed reality of Soviet domination, symbolized for Kenney "a kind of surreal immunity from repression through foolishness."

Similarly, on the seventieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, a wildly successful Orange Alternative happening occurred. It was a kind of Groucho-Marxist send-up of the official sanctity of the Great Proletarian October Revolution, and was simultaneously staged in the streets as a mock celebration of Soviet history with the implicit understanding that everyone knew the Russians were, in fact, hated as an occupying army.

As Major Frydrych reports on the proceedings: "Socialist surrealism in full display. Shouts of 'RE-VO-LU-TION.' The Proletariat emerges from the bus; on their shirts are signs reading: 'I will work more,' and 'Tomorrow will be better.'" Everyone got the joke!

In their *Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism*, the Orange Alternative explained the basis for their preference for the creative tactics of the unfettered imagination: "Imagination means a world without limits. The realist's career consists in the murder of the winged imagination. Such a bird can be cooked for dinner."

It was just such a Stalinist wall of unimaginative realism which surrealist progenitor Andre Breton once confronted in his short-lived and mutually unsatisfactory attempt to find common ground with the Communist Party before returning to the anarchist first principles that had originally animated his politics. Fifty years later, a Polish version of Stalinism was being shattered by the surrealist tactics of the Orange Alternative.

All in all, the *Lives of the Orange Men* brilliantly illuminates the subversive power of the Polish group in much the same way that Marjolyn van Riemsdijk's *Assault on the Impossible* (Autonomedia, translated and expanded from the Dutch edition by Jordan Zinovich, 2013) does for the Dutch Provos who preceded them.

With its emphasis on merrily stirring the boiling pot of the collective imagination, *Lives* is a welcome companion to the Riemsdijk book, and offers a long-awaited refutation to those art histories which have erroneously associated the lived poetry of surrealism exclusively with the Western European milieu.

Ron Sakolsky is an anarcho-surrealist author who touches upon the inspirational outrageousness of the Orange Alternative in his latest book, *Breaking Loose: Mutual Acquiescence or Mutual Aid?* For ordering information, contact Little Black Cart (littleblackcart.com).

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