Brier, Robert, ed.  

The cover of Entangled Protest features a group picture of the East German singer-songwriter and dissident Wolf Biermann, who was stripped of his GDR citizenship while in West Germany in 1976, the Polish dissident and frequent political prisoner Adam Michnik, the Czech political émigré Jiří Pelikán, and the former West Berlin student leader and political activist Rudi Dutschke sitting next to each other on a panel of a meeting room. A Charter 77 banner is hanging above them while Biermann performs a song as an interlude in the event. This intriguing photograph, taken in Frankfurt am Main in the spring of 1977, is a perfect illustration of the transnational “entanglements” between (and among) Eastern European dissidents and the West. Somewhat less intriguing is the lengthy reference to Václav Havel’s parable of the greengrocer that the editor Robert Brier uses in his introduction to explain the very meaning of dissidence in Eastern Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. This is not because the parable is not useful but because it has been used heavily in recent scholarship (Bren 2011). However, the combination of new insights and well-known facts represented by these two dimensions serves as a good metaphor for the volume as a whole.

The ten chapters of the book, which emerged from the 2010 conference “Transnational Perspectives on Dissent and Opposition in Central and Eastern Europe,” aim to show dissident and oppositional movements as transnational phenomena. As Brier argues in the introduction, the similarities between national dissident movements are not only rooted in the similar political systems. They also stem from the mutual awareness and personal contacts between dissidents within the socialist bloc as well as their connections across the Iron Curtain and their appeals directed to a global public.

Brier’s introduction constitutes, together with Padraic Kenney’s sparsely reworked keynote lecture, the first of four sections. It is focused on theoretical approaches, general themes, and methodological challenges for the transnational study of dissidents. Rather than simply give a short introduction, Brier instead delves into the historical and historiographical context and adds the results of his own research. He also offers definitions of the volume’s key terms “dissent” and “transnational.” While Brier gives a coherent
definition of “dissent,” he is unable provide a clear and meaningful explanation of “transnational history,” and his difficulty in nailing down a definition is mirrored in the diverse set of approaches to transnational history taken in the other chapters. Despite the ambiguity of his terminology, Brier convincingly argues that a transnational approach to the study of dissent has a lot to offer. It helps elucidate the crucial role that the international human rights discourse played in dissident activity; it illuminates the dual role of the western media in transmitting information on East European Dissenters to the west and—through Radio Free Europe and other broadcasters—back into the region. Further, it allows scholars to comprehend how ideological and political concepts traveled across the Iron Curtain in both directions.

In the second chapter, Padraic Kenney, drawing largely on his earlier research, examines the dissent in its global context of protest movements between the 1980s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Identifying two different kinds of transnational factors—obvious transfers between actors and background processes mainly related to innovations in the field of communication technology—Kenney borrows a metaphor from the sciences describing the former as “electromagnetic forces” and the latter as “radio waves.” Aside from the fact that his metaphor is misleading if one looks at it through the lens of hard sciences, it also demonstrates an unwillingness to conceptualize his research in the terms of his own discipline. It is thus regrettable that Brier borrowed these “electromagnetic forces” and “radio waves” for his own text, further fueling the vagueness of the term “transnational.”

The second section, entitled “Mutual Contacts, East-West Intermediaries, Transnational Discourse,” suggests the diverse content and lack of cohesion between the three chapters comprising it. Tomáš Vilímek examines mutual contacts between East German and Czechoslovak dissidents. It is the only chapter that deals exclusively with transnational contacts between the dissidents themselves. Julia Metger’s remarkable contribution convincingly demonstrates the key role of Western correspondents in making East European dissidents discursive figures. Nenad Stefanov tackles transnational discourse itself in his analysis of the movement of the critical theory between Yugoslavia and the West.

The third section consists of two chapters dealing with the connections between dissent, détente, and human rights. Wanda Jarząbek addresses the issue from a Polish perspective. She shows how the Conference on Security