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ELECTROMAGNETIC FORCES AND RADIO WAVES OR DOES TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY ACTUALLY HAPPEN?

In the summer of 1998, I was conducting research in Budapest, trying to understand how the revolutionary changes in Hungary in 1989 fit into the overall pattern of revolution in the region. I had spent a year in Poland interviewing hundreds of opposition activists, especially those of the younger generation (who were in their teens or twenties when communism ended). I knew that many in the Polish opposition were interested in the opposition movements among their neighbours; all one had to do was read the underground papers to see this was true.

As I began to research the Hungarian case, I was struck by how much the leading youth opposition of 1987-88, Fidesz (the Association of Young Democrats), resembled the most significant youth movement in Poland, Freedom and Peace (WiP). WiP, the most important new opposition force in eastern Europe after Solidarity, was formed in 1985 to protest the required military oath, and grew into a multi-issue movement active all across Poland. Its focus on concrete issues, its emphasis on aboveground work and its indifference to political divisions (embracing anarchists and conservatives) distinguished it. And as I learned about Fidesz – founded in 1988 by a group of law students – the similarities were obvious. Though today Fidesz is a right-wing party (still led by Viktor Orbán, one of its founders), in its first year it was precisely as I have described WiP. It demonstrated on environmental issues, supported conscientious objectors, and displayed a confrontational yet non-ideological style that contrasted with the politics of its elders.

Circumstantial evidence, though, should not be enough for the historian of modern multinational events. Societies are not chemical compositions, giving rise to similar phenomena under similar conditions; nor are they elements in a demonstration of a domino effect. Historians need to ask themselves, yet rarely do so: how and why are phenomena similar to one another? Even when we know that two societies have similar political and