civil society in communist eastern europe
opposition and dissent in totalitarian regimes

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The idea of civil society has undergone a dramatic renaissance in the past thirty years. This can be mainly attributed to the term’s re-discovery by dissidents in Poland, and Czechoslovakia and by political theorists interested in the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe. However, one need pass only a glancing eye over the amount of literature concerned with civil society, or in which civil society features significantly, to appreciate the myriad of topics the term is associated with. At its most basic level, civil society is understood as groups or organisations that are free to operate without state intrusion; at its boldest, as suggested by Sunil Khilnani (2001: 14), ‘the idea of civil society embodies the epic of Western modernity’.

This chapter will make two interrelated arguments. First, the civil society paradigm, as it has been applied to actions of dissenting opposition in Soviet-type regimes, lacks analytical rigour. Second, applying civil society to dissent and opposition in the Soviet-type regimes of Communist Central and Eastern Europe as an explanatory framework leads to flawed conclusions.

With this in mind, it is first essential to explore some of the history of the idea of civil society. Hence, the first part of this chapter introduces what are generally regarded as the most important early modern conceptions of civil society, beginning with the Scottish Enlightenment idea of civil society as a trading space free from state intervention, then Hegel’s tripartite understanding of civil society and finally Marx’s critique of the Hegelian notion of civil society. Considering its importance in the re-discovery of the idea of civil society, the second part of this chapter introduces Antonio Gramsci’s conception of civil society as a space in which alternative ‘hegemonies’ could be constructed. Continuing with the development of the concept, the third part of this chapter focuses on civil society as it has been applied to the analysis of dissenting opposition in Soviet-type regimes. As well as civil society’s inextricable relationship with modernity, and more specifically liberal democracy and markets, the first three parts will draw attention to the importance of the state in the relationship between civil society and the state. Focusing on what this research describes as situation-specific and liberal/market definitions of civil society as applied to dissenting opposition in Soviet-type regimes, it will be shown that the term serves as an inadequate framework through which to analyse dissidence in the Soviet-type regimes of Central and Eastern Europe. Having argued the limitations of situation-specific and liberal/market conceptions of civil society, parts four, five and six introduce and elaborate on this book’s alternative descriptive theoretical framework; the totalitarian public sphere.
**Ferguson, Hegel, Marx and Civil Society**

While there are now tensions between understandings of civil society and the state, this was not always the case. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, no distinction was made between the idea of a civil society and that of the state; the member of a civil society was at the same time a citizen subject to the laws of political community and bound to act in accordance with its prescriptions (Lewis 1992: 4). It was Adam Ferguson who first challenged this understanding of civil society. In *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (first published in 1767), Ferguson sketches a ‘natural history’ of the human species in its transition from ‘rude’ forms of life to a ‘polished’ or civilised form of society (Keane 1988a: 39–40). Ferguson describes the institutional conditions for the new body politic, which the advent of modern society had created in Britain at that time. For Ferguson, the advent of the modern state, and the fear of how it would encroach upon the individual freedom of men, made the existence of civil society essential. Ferguson wanted to limit the power of the state, and in turn dilute the impact of private interest by basing civil society on a set of moral sentiments. However, it is important to note that Ferguson still regarded civil society and the state as a single entity. For Ferguson, civil society is a space to be found in the modern state that facilitates the ‘civilising’ of man (see Ehrenberg 1999: 91–96). According to John Ehrenberg (1999: 91), Ferguson ‘located the roots of human sociability in a general capacity to put oneself in another’s place and see the world through another’s eyes’, and this in turn enabled him to make ‘moral judgement possible by reconciling individuality with a civil society constituted by shared ethical relations’.

Unlike Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Ferguson (1995: 195–196) argued that commercial interest was not the centre of human activity. He rooted his idea of civil society in a ‘love of mankind’; ‘Affection, and force of mind, which are the band and strength of communities, were the inspiration of God, and original attributes in the nature of man’. However, Ferguson (1995: 168) was particularly concerned with what he perceived to be man’s increasing preoccupation with financial gain at the expense of civic virtue;

> The members of every community are more or less occupied with matters of state, in proportion as their constitution admits them to a share in the government, and summons up their interest to objects of a public nature. A people are cultivated or unimproved in their talents, in proportion as those talents are employed in the practice of arts, and in the affairs of society; they are improved or corrupted in their manners, in proportion as they are encouraged and directed to act on the maxims of freedom and justice, or as they are degraded into a sense of meanness and servitude.

In a deviation from other Enlightenment thinkers, Ferguson (1995: 119) did not base civil society on a contract; rather, he argued that it should be thought of as a generally spontaneous space. Thus, Ferguson’s dilemma lay not in the creation of civil society, but in its maintenance. For Ferguson, a strong civil society, based on a natural condition, provided a check on the individual pursuit of wealth; a
condition he attributed to the increase in market influence, while at the same time providing a check on the powers of the state.

In complete contrast to Ferguson’s conception of civil society, G. W. F. Hegel (in Keane 1998a: 50) viewed civil society as a ‘self-crippling entity in constant need of state supervision and control’. The work done by Hegel in *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (first published 1820) was originally thought to be nothing more than the expression ‘of the spirit of the Prussian Restoration’ (in Houlgate 1998: 321). However, over time, it has come to be regarded as one of the most influential pieces of political and social philosophy.

The specific purpose of *Philosophy of Right* was ‘to continue Hegel’s philosophical project to examine what it was for human freedom to be objective’ (Houlgate 1998: 321). According to Hegel, human freedom becomes fully objective when it takes the form of a living community of free beings – an objective society or world of human freedom. The three main elements of this free or ‘ethical’ society are a) family, which constitutes ethical life in its ‘natural’ form; b) civil society, in which people freely labour in order to produce goods to meet their needs; and c) the state, in which citizens freely submit themselves to laws and institutions which are aimed at ensuring their protection and welfare.

As both Ehrenberg (1999: 124) and Pelczynski (1984: 1) note, the tripartite understanding of society presented by Hegel was the first to make the distinction between civil society and the state. Furthermore, in observing that ‘civil society is the [stage of] difference which intervenes between the family and the state’, Hegel (1998b: 361) presents the first systematic effort to theorise a competitive sphere outside that of the state. Hence, it can be argued that Hegel offers the first thoroughly modern understanding of the state and civil society. Indeed, Manfred Riedel (in Beem 1999: 94) notes that ‘[O]ne might well say that before Hegel the concept of civil society in its modern sense did not exist’. Hegel (1998b: 361) himself in part realised this when he wrote that ‘the creation of civil society belongs in the modern world’.

For Hegel (1998b: 361), the inhabitants of civil society act with their own interests in mind and are concerned with the satisfaction of their own individual needs: ‘In civil society, each individual is his own end, and all else means nothing to him. But he cannot accomplish the full extent of his ends without reference to others; these others are therefore means to the end of the particular [person]’. Individuals are compelled to behave selfishly, but, almost in spite of themselves, they cannot help but satisfy each other’s needs, in the process constructing durable social bonds;

The selfish end in its actualisation, conditioned in this way by universality, establishes a system of all-round interdependence, so that the subsistence and welfare of the individual and his rightful existence are interwoven with, and grounded on, the subsistence, welfare and rights of all, and have actuality and security only in this context (1998b: 361–362).

Hegel (1998b: 373) makes it clear that civil society is a realm of freedom. However, he also realised that this new realm was bourgeois in its character, and was
organised by the emerging market as much as anything. This is further emphasised when Hegel (1998b: 373) observes the powerful influence the market has on civil society; ‘civil society is the immense power that draws people to itself and requires them to work for it, owe everything to it, and to do everything by its means’.

It is clear that Hegel (1998b: 374) views civil society as a realm or space that cannot solve what he sees as one of modern society’s predominant curses - poverty.

Contingent physical factors and circumstances based on external conditions may reduce individuals to poverty. In this condition, they are left with the needs of civil society and yet – since at the same time society has taken from them the natural means of acquisition, and also dissolves the bond of the family in its wider sense as a kinship group – they are more or less deprived of all the advantages of society… (emphasis in original)

Continuing this theme, Hegel (1998b: 362, 375) argues that civil society creates ‘want and destitution’, as well as great divides in wealth and equity;

when a large mass of people sinks below the level of a certain standard of living – which automatically regulates itself at the level necessary for a member of the society in question – that feeling of right, integrity and honour which comes from supporting oneself by one’s own activity and work is lost. This leads to the creation of a rabble, which in turn makes it much easier for disproportionate wealth to be concentrated in a few hands (emphasis in original).

For Hegel, an unregulated civil society, because it’s self serving proprietors cannot produce universality and freedom, will intrinsically exacerbate social and economic inequality. Likewise, because of those who occupy this sphere, civil society is incapable of providing people with a self-determined ethical whole.

Thus, for civil society to remain ‘civil’, Hegel (1998b: 387) argues that it needs to be subjected ‘to the higher order of the state’. It is the state that makes the selfish, egoistic individual fit for modern life;

The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom requires that personal individuality and its particular interests should reach their full development and gain recognition of their right for itself (within the system of the family and of civil society), and also that they should, on the one hand, pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and on the other, knowingly and willingly acknowledge this universal interest even as their own substantial spirit, and actively pursue it as their ultimate end. The effect of this is that the universal does not attain validity or fulfilment without the interest, knowledge and volition of the particular, and that individuals do not live as private persons merely for these particular interests without at the same time directing their will to a universal end and acting in conscious awareness of this end (1998b: 381, emphasis in original).

The state is an ethical category, because it reconciles civil society’s antagonisms and embraces humankind’s universal concerns in the broadest sense of the term (Hegel: 1998b: 414);
If the state is confused with civil society and its determination is equated with the security and protection of property and personal freedom, the interest of individuals as such becomes the ultimate end for which they are united; it also follows from this that membership of the state is an optional matter. But the relationship of the state to the individual is of quite a different kind. Since the state is objective spirit, it is only through being a member of the state that the individual himself has objectivity, truth and ethical life (1998b: 380, emphasis in original).

The universality of the state allows it to guarantee individual freedom, morality, family life, and preserve both the family and civil society. It is the state that makes civil society whole. Thus, for Hegel, civil society cannot function without the state, and the state cannot realise its full potential without a properly constituted and fully functioning civil society.

While Karl Marx agreed with many of Hegel’s observations, he disagreed with the central argument that Hegel presented; that the state sits hierarchically above civil society, and hence is the dominant sphere in this relationship. The writings of Marx inverted Hegel’s relationship, and made civil society the centre of this relationship.

Marx (1997a: 44), like Hegel, argued that civil society was made up of individuals held together by ‘natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic selves’. However, where Hegel argues that the profound divisions that he observed in civil society’s ‘realm of needs’ can be overcome by the presence of a strong state and bureaucracy, Marx argues that the modern state is not a rationally agreed upon apparatus capable of harmonising the discordant elements of civil society and binding them into a higher unity. Rather than reconciling the conflicts of civil society, Marx argues that the state legitimises them. Hence, it is civil society that dominates and defines the state. For Marx, the state is not the idealised representation of society, it is merely a reflection of the deep seated contradictions in civil society.

A further important distinction between Hegel and Marx is that of the significance Marx places on the ‘political economy’. Hegel observed that civil society was constituted by a division of labour, selfish competition, and pauperism. Marx argued that Hegel failed to see the underlying explanation for social organisation; the real force for change lay in the economic modes of production (Beem 1999: 103). Commenting on his critical examination of Hegelian philosophy, Marx (1992: 425) recalled how it led him to the view;

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1 The early writings of Karl Marx are dominated by his engagement with Hegel. As both Ehrenberg and Pierson argue, it was Marx’s critique of Hegel’s theory of the state and civil society that led him to write The Communist Manifesto (Pierson 1997: 6, Ehrenberg 1999: 132).

2 In the original German, both Hegel and Marx use the term bürgerliche Gesellschaft. Timothy Garton Ash (1990a) and Krishan Kumar (1993) highlight the ambiguity of the term, which can be translated as either ‘civil society’ or ‘bourgeois society’. Kumar in particular argues that Marx interprets civil society as being synonymous with bourgeois society or ‘the arena of the self seeking economic actor’ (1993: 379). It is clear that while Marx emphasises the ‘bourgeois’ in his understanding of civil society, Hegel places the emphasis on ‘civil’.
that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life, the totality of which Hegel […] embraces within the term ‘civil society’; that the anatomy of this civil society, however, has to be sought in political economy […] The general conclusion at which I arrived […] can be summarised as follows. In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.

Marx (1997b: 107) again reinforces this difference between himself and Hegel when he writes:

Civil society embraces the whole material intercourse of individuals within a definite stage of the development of productive forces. It embraces the whole commercial and industrial life of a given stage and, insofar, transcends the State […] Civil society as such only develops within the bourgeoisie; the social organisation evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the State.

Hence, two significant differences between Hegel and Marx become clear. First, Marx, in contrast to Hegel, argues the idea of civil society purely as a derivative of the economy. In turn, he argues that this economic order is also the root cause of the state (Beem 1999: 104). Second, while Hegel makes it clear that the state is an ethical, objective entity that determines its own existence; Marx views the state as a subjective entity that exists on behalf of the ruling class.

While Hegel believed that civil society certainly consisted of bourgeois society, Marx argued that it was not limited to this group. As Krishan Kumar (1993: 379) points out, ‘Hegel also includes within (civil society) the impulse to citizenship, the passage from the outlook of civil society to that of the state. This is why the sphere of civil society is not just economic but social and civic institutions’. However, for Marx, civil society was little more than the economic form in which the bourgeoisie creates a world after its own image.

One of the central tenets of the Marxist doctrine is the express denial of the need for the kind of protected space for autonomous social and economic activity denoted by the idea of civil society. Hence, as Ernest Gellner (1994: 1–2) notes;

one way of summarising the central intuition of Marxism is to say: Civil Society is a fraud. The idea of a plurality of institutions – both opposing and balancing the state, and in turn controlled and protected by the state – is, in the Marxist view, merely the provision of a façade for a hidden and maleficent domination.
Real freedom and real community, for Marx and Engels (2004: 31–32), would only be realised when civil society was overthrown by the proletariat:

The first step in the revolution by the working class, is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class [...] the proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the working class...

Marx denied that civil society could achieve any normative end. Once the old order had been overthrown, social activity would become autonomous and self organised.

**Gramsci**

Writing in 1988, John Keane (1988b: 1) announced that, ‘the old topic of the state and civil society is again becoming a vital theme in European politics [...] [Having] first appeared at the end of the eighteenth century [the topic] enjoyed a brief but remarkable career in Europe until the second half of the nineteenth century, when it fell [...] into obscurity and disappeared almost without trace’. This revival was due in no small part to a renewed interest in the writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci.

One of the founding members of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci was jailed in 1926 for his political activities, and spent the remainder of his life in various Italian prisons. Writing without access to books, and forced to write in code so as not to alert the censor, Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* is a collection of essays and notes in which he theorises the impact and nature of the political forces stabilising and sustaining capitalism.

Motivated by the failure of the revolutionary movements in the West at the end of the First World War, and the subsequent rise of Fascism, Gramsci both revitalised and added to the Marxist conception of civil society. Asking why capitalism continued to survive when, according to him and other Marxists, the objective conditions existed for a Socialist revolution, Gramsci (1971: 12) argued that the answer lay in the superstructure, which he divided into two parts:

one that can be called ‘civil society’, that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’, and that of ‘political society’ or the ‘state’. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of ‘hegemony’ which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of ‘direct domination’ or command exercised through the State and ‘juridical’ government.

Whereas Marx and Engels had argued that the failure by the working class to overthrow their oppressors was primarily due to the coercive powers of the state, Gramsci argued that in Western industrialised countries the system was maintained not only through coercion, but also through consent. The organs of civil society, according to Gramsci (1971: 235),
are like the trench systems of modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy’s entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defence which was still effective. The same thing happens in politics.

For Gramsci, the second line of defence represented the consent that defended the capitalist system against revolution.

According to Gramsci, consent is created and recreated through the established hegemonic power of the state. Like Marx, he argues that hegemony was organised and maintained in civil society through such institutions as newspapers, schools, and publishing houses. However, in a confusing and perhaps contradictory addition to this understanding, Gramsci suggests that civil society also serves as a space where alternate hegemonies can be established.3

Gramsci’s vision of civil society, as noted by Robert Miller (1992: 6), was ‘designed precisely for a situation where the opposition movement had to operate within a strong, modern state, which it had almost no prospect of overcoming by violence or direct political action’. Hence, it is clear why Gramsci’s vision of civil society was so attractive to intellectuals and left wing dissidents in the Soviet Bloc. Although Gramsci’s reformulation of the idea of civil society did not provide a viable action plan in Fascist Italy, developments in Central and Eastern Europe, and particularly Poland, gave the Gramscian approach a new lease of life. Pelczynski (1988: 367) argues that Gramsci’s re-working of the civil society concept presents, ‘an analytical framework for considering developments in advanced (capitalist) bourgeois society (that) has been transformed into a framework for analysing the situation in contemporary socialist countries of East Europe’.

The Gramscian model of civil society serves as a clear and express strategy for the overthrow of a particular political society. But it is limited, both when applied as an analytical framework for understanding dissidence in Soviet-type regimes and when adopted as a model for organisation against a totalitarian state, especially when one appreciates that Gramsci’s model, although calling for the overthrow of the state, depended on the continuing existence of state institutions and the legal security that these institutions provided. Miller (1992: 7) outlines further contradictions in the Gramscian model when he writes:

- its conception of the political was unrealistically narrow, for the kinds of propagandistic and organisational activity espoused by Gramsci […] to achieve ‘hegemony’ were quintessentially political actions, bound to lead to involvement in political society and to be immediately recognised as such by the authorities, with obvious consequences.

As Joseph Femia (2001: 140) points out, Gramsci’s use of civil society is not entirely consistent; ‘In a number of passages (of Prison Notebooks) […] civil society is outside the state, but elsewhere (Gramsci) refers to a general notion of the state comprising both political society and civil society’ (emphasis in original).
Gramsci’s notion of civil society as both a normative model and an explanatory framework is limited. While the Gramscian model situates civil society in opposition to a strong state, it seems not to appreciate the nature of the totalitarian state, in that any non-approved political action would represent a threat to the Party’s ‘leading role’, and would hence never be tolerated by any of the Soviet-type regimes in Communist Central and Eastern Europe. Any activity undertaken in Gramsci’s civil society would be halted almost before it had begun. Likewise, the serious limitations of the Gramscian model are further revealed when it becomes apparent that once the Gramscian strategy became feasible, it is no longer necessary.

Civil Society as Applied to Soviet-Type Regimes

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the term ‘civil society’ has assumed an increasingly omnipresent status in political science canon. The concept’s renaissance centred on its application to political resistance in the Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, perhaps best represented by Jacques Rupnik’s (1979) essay ‘Dissent in Poland, 1968–78: The End of Revisionism and the Rebirth of Civil Society’.

Following the ‘Velvet Revolutions’ in 1989, and the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, the popularity of the term increased, due in part to the large tract of literature that emerged arguing the integral role civil society had played in the overthrow of these regimes. However, as with much of the literature concerning civil society, each new addition to the debate was accompanied by a different understanding of civil society. This section will argue that it is possible to break these understandings of civil society into two broad categories; situation-specific and liberal/market. A broad overview of these definitions will be presented with the aim of highlighting the limitations of civil society as applied to the analysis of dissenting opposition in Soviet-type regimes.

Writing about civil society and the supposed role it played in the break-up of the Soviet Union, Chandran Kukathas and David Lovell (1991: 21) present a narrow definition of civil society, which they define as ‘a complex set of institutions and practices which make up “the market”, as well as associations of individuals who join together to pursue all sorts of goals beyond narrowly economic ones’. However, as Leslie Holmes (1991: 126) notes, ‘by including the modifier ‘narrowly’, Kukathas and Lovell are – at least implicitly - suggesting that civil society is basically concerned with economic activity that is autonomous of the state’. Similarly, Zbigniew Rau (1991: 4), in arguing that civil society is ‘a space free from both family influence and state power’ suggests that ‘civil society is market orientated, since resources, goods, and services are allocated through a spontaneous process of voluntary transactions between individuals and their associations’. Definitions that present civil society as little more than activities centred on and around market activities not only offer a very limited understanding of civil society, but they have limited applicability to the analyses of dissenting opposition in totalitarian regimes. Such definitions do not allow for
activities such as group protests, nor do they allow for collective political activity beyond economic issues.

Focusing on events in Poland in 1980–81, Andrew Arato (1992: 129) presents a definition of civil society that, ‘while not developed merely by the interpretation of East European politics, is largely compatible with the trajectory of the project of the reconstruction of civil society as it emerged in this region’. Rather than civil society being a space for economic interaction, he suggests that civil society provides a counterbalance for both the state and the economy. He defines civil society as a ‘sphere of interaction between economy and state, composed above all of associations and publics’ (1992: 129). Arato then distinguishes civil society from a ‘political society of parties, political organisations and political parties in particular parliaments’. He argues that

the structures of political society cannot afford to subordinate strategic criteria to the patterns of normative integration and open minded communication characteristic of civil society [...] The political role of civil society in turn is not directly related to the control or conquest of power but to the generation of influence, through the life of democratic associations and the unconstrained discussion in the cultural public sphere. (1992: 129)

Seeking to distinguish political society from civil society only adds to the confusion regarding the term and concept. Holmes (1991: 126) is correct when he points out that ‘political society in its full blooded sense is one part of civil society’. Arato (1992: 128–129) then defends his separation of civil society from economic society by arguing that ‘civil society in fact represents only a dimension of the sociological norms, roles, practices, competences and forms of dependence, or a very particular angle of looking at this world from the point of view of conscious association building and associational life’. As argued below, separating civil society from the state and the economy on the basis of functional differentiation has merit. However, while Arato’s definition offers a thought provoking introduction to the idea of civil society, in failing to explore differences relating to the nature of the state, it is limited in its applicability.

Also working within the area of Soviet studies, Vladimir Tismaneanu and Michael Turner (1995: 4) understand civil society to mean ‘the unofficial, autonomous and self-regulated social activities and initiatives undertaken outside government structures’ and, quoting Ernest Gellner, argue that civil societies represent ‘institutional and ideological pluralism, which prevents the establishment of monopoly of power and truth, and counterbalances those central institutions which, though necessary, might otherwise acquire such a monopoly’. Having established a definition of civil society, they then argue that ‘the institutions of civil society are necessary for the establishment of a modern democracy; and they ensure that it functions smoothly by moderating the capriciousness of the markets and self-aggrandising appetite of the state’ (1991: 4).

Like Arato’s understanding of civil society, Tismaneanu and Turner fail to sufficiently explore differences relating to the nature of the state, and more particularly, the form that the state may take, in their definition. Furthermore, in
arguing that civil society was a major cause of what they call ‘Gorbachevism’, Tismaneanu and Turner are suggesting that civil society is a project for revolution. Presenting civil society simultaneously as both a revolutionary project and an institutional necessity to ensure liberal democratic stability is not only contradictory; it also does nothing to solve the ambiguity surrounding understandings of the term.

Redefining the notion of civil society as ‘a successful framing strategy with which the democratic movements (in Poland and Czechoslovakia) mobilised support on behalf of their aims’, John Glenn (2001: 24–25) argues that ‘the notion of “civil society” should be reconceptualised as a master frame with which civic movements across Central and Eastern Europe sought to mobilise public support in light of changing political opportunities’. Although Glenn presents his framework as a solution to ‘monocausal logic and conceptual imprecision’, this redefinition of civil society appears to be limited in its application only to the events that occurred in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989.

In a similar argument to that offered by Glenn, Gideon Baker (1998: 125) suggests that the methods of the Polish democratic opposition can be best understood through the unique ‘Polish model of civil society’. In an eloquent argument, Baker (1998: 142) points out that, framed against a totalitarian state, the Polish re-conceptualisation of civil society as ‘the realm of freedom that the very annexation of civil society by the state [...] had precluded’ served as a critique of classical alternatives of reform and revolution. But Baker’s normative model is still problematic. First, normative understandings of civil society fail to heed Keith Tester’s (1992: 124) warning that ‘it is a very serious mistake, and it is certainly historically and methodologically naive, to assume that the category [of civil society] simply and perfectly clearly represents some determinate reality existing “out there”. Second, as with Glenn above, this idea of civil society is “situation limited”. Third, in arguing that what he calls the ‘Polish model of civil society’ was unable to reconcile the radical and liberal elements contained in their model, Baker is arguing that the aim of the dissenting opposition in Poland was not only the overthrow of the Communist Party-state, but also the establishment of liberal-democratic institutions.

While not working within the field of Soviet studies, the definition of civil society that Gellner (1994: 5) offers appreciates the importance of the nature of the relationship between the state and civil society. He defines civil society as a

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4 Tismaneanu and Turner’s (1991: 4) misinterpretation of ‘Gorbachevism’ is compounded when they argue ‘[t]he rise of civil society was a phenomenon that predated Mikhail Gorbachev: the new Secretary-General simply recognised the need to catalyse this trend and capitalise upon it to further his own agenda of “humanising socialism”’. This analysis fails to appreciate that revolution was never one of Gorbachev’s goals.

5 Marc Garcelon (1997: 303–304) agrees when he writes ‘The tendency to place instances of both “public” political rebellion and “private” economic pursuits under the “rebirth of civil society” only (adds) to the confusion’ and ‘ambiguities about whether civil society belongs to the “public” or the “private” realm, to “politics or “anti-politics” pervade Western thought’.
set of diverse, non-government institutions which are strong enough to
counterbalance the state and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling
its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can
nevertheless prevent it from dominating and atomising the rest of society.

In pointing out the need to ‘counterbalance the state’, Gellner’s definition
implicitly appreciates the nature of the state and how this relates to the existence
of civil society. This definition highlights the importance of civil society being
juxtaposed to the state, rather than acting completely independently of, or against,
the state. He also makes it clear that a key function of civil society is the prevention
of state domination and atomisation of the rest of society. It is possible, however,
to make an addition, using Michael Bernhard’s understanding of civil society, to
Gellner’s definition of civil society. Bernhard (1993: 4) introduces notions of law
into his understanding of civil society when he writes that ‘civil society must be
legally separated from the state by law, and the actors within it must be guaranteed
specific personal and group liberties, so they may pursue their real and ideal
interests.’ When this legal component of civil society is added to the definition,
the relationship between civil society and the state becomes mutually appreciative,
as both are legally recognised. Furthermore, a legal demarcation means that the
state is not prevented from ‘fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator
between mutual interests’. This adapted definition best encapsulates what most
theorists argue civil society is or what it should be.

Combining Gellner’s civil society-state equilibrium with Bernhard’s legal
demarcation makes for the most complete and satisfactory understanding of civil
society. But, considering the totalitarian states’ ability to dominate and atomise
society, combined with the clearly liberal institutional underpinnings of this
definition, it still does not provide us with an adequate analytical framework
through which to analyse the actions of the dissenting opposition in Soviet-type
regimes.

The application of liberal/market civil society frameworks to activities of
opposition and dissent in Soviet-type regimes, as exemplified by Kukathas and
Lovell, Rau, Baker and Tismaneanu and Turner, (and Gellner to a lesser degree)
is problematic. Such applications form part of the powerful consensus that has
developed around liberal interpretations not only of the events of 1989, but also
of dissenting opposition in Communist regimes in general. First, it is argued
here that using a liberal/market civil society paradigm to study opposition within
these regime types results in analysis that is tainted by Cold War dichotomies;
the tendency to compare these regimes to Western market democracies becomes
unavoidable. Hence, conclusions reached using this framework are often reduced
to a Manichaean idea that totalitarianism is bad and civil society is good. Second,
liberal/market civil society analyses of 1989 place too much emphasis on ‘bottom
up’ explanations for these events. While bottom up factors played a part, the
capitulation of the Communist Party-state was negotiated in many cases by a small
number of elites in relatively non-transparent ‘round table’ negotiations. Third,
much of this liberal analysis offers not only a political prognosis of events, but ‘an
historical interpretation to the effect that liberal democratic institutions were the intended outcome’ of said events (Isaac: 1998: 158). But, and in direct contrast to Baker’s claim, Jeffrey Isaac (1998: 159) correctly points out that while certainly democratic, it is not clear that the dissenting opposition was unambiguously liberal democratic. Following from this is the fourth and final point; such analysis implicitly suggests that the establishment of a flourishing, post-revolution civil society is a given. However, as both Marc Morjé Howard (2002) and David Lane (2010) argue, many of the post-Communist Central and East European states are still struggling to establish a thriving civil society.

Likewise, those understandings of civil society identified under the broad description of situation-specific (Arato, Glenn and Baker) are restricted by two problems. The first is that they are limited in their applicability to very particular events i.e. the 1989 Revolutions or the events of 1980–81 in Poland. Second, as with the liberal conception, these normative conceptions make assumptions about the likely outcome of any dissenting opposition and hence provide answers to questions before they are asked.

Public Spheres

Having argued the limitations of both the situation-specific and liberal/market conceptions of civil society, it now becomes possible to introduce and elaborate on an alternative descriptive and analytical framework. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas introduces a public sphere that comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, assessing their validity. The public sphere can be viewed as the creation of procedures, whereby those affected by general social norms and collective political decisions can have a say in this formulation, stipulation and adoption. It will be argued here that there are characteristics of Habermas’ public sphere that can be taken and applied in the study of opposition and dissent in Soviet-type regimes. However, in appreciating that Habermas formulated his idea of the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ in a social environment far removed from that of the Soviet-type regimes found in Central and Eastern Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century, and in order to differentiate from Habermas’ public sphere, this new framework is called the totalitarian public sphere.

Habermas is perhaps best known for his wide-ranging defence of the modern public sphere and its related ideals of publicity and free public reason. As a student of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Habermas is recognised as the leading intellectual heir to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Baynes 1998). His contribution to the ongoing historical understanding of civil society was made in his first book, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (translated into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*) in which he outlines the rise and decline of an historically particular form of public sphere, which Habermas calls the ‘liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere’.
By the public sphere, Habermas (1989a: 136) was speaking of a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens [...] Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to publish and express their opinions – about matters of general interest...

In a clarifying statement, Habermas points out what he means by public opinion; that is ‘the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally – and, in periodic elections, formally as well – practises vis-à-vis the ruling structure organised in the form of the state’ (1989a: 136).

As a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest were institutionally guaranteed, the public sphere took in the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy.6

Society, now a private realm occupying a position in opposition to the state, stood on the one hand as if in clear contrast to the state. On the other hand, that society had become a concern of public interest to the degree that the production of life in the wake of the developing market economy had grown beyond the bounds of private domestic authority. The bourgeois public sphere could be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body, which almost immediately laid claim to the officially regulated ‘intellectual newspapers’ for use against the public authority itself. In these newspapers, and in moralistic and critical journals, they debated that public authority on the general rules of social intercourse in their fundamentally privatised yet publicly relevant sphere of labour and commodity exchange (Habermas 1989a: 138–139).

According to Habermas (1989b: 30), the idea of the public sphere is that of a collective of private people gathered to discuss matters of public interest or the common good; ‘it was a public sphere constituted by private people’.

With the rise of a sphere of the social, over whose regulation public opinion battled with public power, the theme of the modern (in contrast to the ancient) public sphere shifted from the properly political tasks of a citizenry acting in common (i.e. administration of law as regards internal affairs and military survival as regards external affairs) to the more properly civic tasks of a society engaged in critical public debate (i.e. the protection of a commercial economy). The political task of the bourgeois public sphere was the regulation of civil society (in contradistinction to the res publica) (Habermas 1989b: 52).

6 As Cohen and Arato (1992b: 140) correctly point out, a degree of ambiguity about the status of civil society exits in Habermas’ work. He is unable to decide whether civil society is the realm of ‘commodity exchange and of social labour’ or a sphere mediating between the private and public authority. In line with Cohen and Arato, it is argued here that the diagram in Structural Transformation (Habermas: 1989b: 30) suggests that it is more likely the former.
The public sphere is an area conceptually distinct from the state. Furthermore, as far as Habermas is concerned, it is also conceptually distinct from the official economy. As Nancy Fraser (1992: 111) notes ‘it is not an area of market relations, but rather one of discursive relations […] Thus the concept of the public sphere permits us to keep in view the distinctions among state apparatuses, economic markets, and democratic associations…’

Habermas (1989b: xvii) makes it very clear that the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ is a historically specific phenomenon; ‘the bourgeois public sphere is a category that is typical of an epoch. It cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that civil society originating in the Europe High Middle Ages; nor can it be transferred, ideal typically generalised, to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations’. This point is reinforced by Kenneth Baynes (1998), who writes that the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ ‘refers to those socio-cultural institutions that arose in the eighteenth century in opposition to the absolutist powers of the state – private clubs and coffee houses, journals and newspapers’.

As Cohen and Arato (1992a: 211) point out, Habermas’ public sphere is bourgeois;

because in it, independent owners of property, divided into their competitive, egoistic economic activities that have grown vastly beyond the limits of the household, are capable of generating a collective will through the medium of rational, unconstrained communication (emphasis added).

Within this new, modern society, certain educated, property owning elites began to regard themselves as representative of the public, and in turn, opponents of state authority:

Because, on the one hand, the society now confronting the state clearly separated a private domain from public authority and because, on the other hand, it turned the reproduction of life into something transcending the confines of private domestic authority and becoming a subject of public interest, that zone of continuous administrative contact became ‘critical’ also in the sense that it provoked the critical judgement of a public making use of its reason (Habermas 1989b: 24).

As Craig Calhoun (1992: 9) notes, it is the last phrase of the above quotation that is crucial. He writes that ‘the bourgeois public sphere institutionalised, according to Habermas, not just a set of interests and an opposition between the state and society but a practice of rational-critical discourse on political matters’. Hence, inasmuch as it was a clearly identifiable milieu, distinct from that of that of the state, the public sphere should not be thought of as non-political. In this manner it served as an environment in which to check authoritarian power:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them
in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatised but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason (Habermas 1989b: 27).

In short, the bourgeois public sphere served two functions. First, it was a setting in which the critical public could address social problems and check institutional authority. Second, it designated a particular kind of discursive interaction. The discussion was to be open, unrestricted and accessible to all. Hence, participants in the public sphere were treated as peers. Merely private interests were to be inadmissible. The result of such communicative activity would be the establishment of a public opinion concerning collective notions of the common good.

However, according to Habermas (1989b: 141–151), the advent of the full potential of the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ was never realised in practise. The emergence of welfare-state democracy meant the distinction between private and public became blurred; the public critique of the state gave way to private interest and the manufacturing and manipulation of public opinion. While not abandoning the idea of the public sphere as a realm of rational, communicative association, 

*Structural Transformation* does not present an alternative model to the ‘bourgeois public sphere’. While Habermas never abandoned the concept entirely, a number of authors, working within a broad Habermasian framework, have theorised the public sphere as a facilitator of democratic self-organisation.

As noted above, *Structural Transformation* positioned the public sphere as a series of mediations between the state and civil society. Arguing that previous conceptions of civil society, ‘in all its versions, runs into some characteristic and unavoidable difficulties today’, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato (1992b: 131) argue that it is possible to present a modern understanding of civil society as a contemporary project of democratisation, based upon Habermas’ dualistic social theory with its key categories of system and lifeworld.7 Linking the categories of the lifeworld and civil society, they argue that the ‘system-lifeworld’ duality presents a three part civil society framework, allowing for a distanciation of civil society from the two ‘subsystems’ of the state and the economy (Cohen and Arato 1992b: 131).

Cohen and Arato (1992b: 136) proceed to argue that the politics of civil society is one of self-limiting radicalism, and that ‘self limitation must be exercised in order to avoid disempowering the steering media that are preconditions not only of modern levels of material reproduction but of democratic processes of participation as well’. Seeking to further support their argument, they highlight Habermas’ reference to the idea of establishing ‘thresholds of limitation’ capable

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7 As suggested by Paul Gorner (2000: 187), Habermas’ conception of the ‘lifeworld’ is best understood as ‘the world as structured by language (a particular language) and cultural tradition’. The lifeworld is contrasted with Habermas’ concept of system. Richard Bernstein (1985: 22) explains that ‘We cannot understand the character of the lifeworld unless we understand the systems [such as economic or legal systems] that shape it….’. (Also see Habermas 1987).
of checking the colonisation of the lifeworld as impossible without the ‘intelligent self-limitation’ that he contrasts with the politics of ‘the great refusal’ (1992b: 136–137). Finally, in arguing that civil society offers a viable framework for projects of democratisation, Cohen and Arato (1992b: 137) write that ‘it is our contention that influence on legislation and policymaking is inconceivable without the establishment of democratic publics within the firm and the state – or, where they exist, their redemocratisation with a program of self limitation’.

This reconceptualisation of Habermas’ public sphere offers useful theoretical insights into associative democratic initiatives aimed at bringing collective public pressure to bear on the state and economic power. Cohen and Arato’s dualistic notion of civil society presents a theoretical conception that appreciates the inherent limitations of market-centric conceptions of civil society. However, it has limited usefulness as a theoretical framework for analysing dissenting opposition in the Soviet-type regimes of Central and Eastern Europe. The first of these limitations relates to the notion of self-limitation as applied to associative activity. While understandably desirable, it is nonetheless problematic. The various activities of dissenting opposition discussed here, Solidarity in particular, stressed the self-limiting nature of their endeavours. However, to what degree their activities were self-limiting is questionable. It is suggested here that the language of self-limitation employed by Solidarity serves as an example of Aesopian language, in that it was designed to assuage any fears the Party-state might have over their actions. As the events of 1981 showed, the theory of self-limitation proved to be unrealistic in practice. Furthermore, describing the politics of civil society as one of ‘self-limiting radicalism’ is oxymoronic. That is, radical actions, by definition, are not self-limiting. A final problem with Cohen and Arato’s modern interpretation of civil society is that it is limited by its lack of appreciation of the role of the state, or the form that the state might take; this conception of civil society still does not resolve the problems of mutual recognition and appreciation in totalitarian regimes.

Serving as an extension of many of the themes discussed by Habermas and Cohen and Arato, Iris Marion Young’s *Inclusion and Democracy* (2000) sets out to highlight the limitations and challenges confronting modern democracy. As part of this examination, Young includes a chapter that evaluates the function and limitations of civil society and its ability to make state institutions and economic power publicly accountable. Arguing that the notion of civil society has evolved beyond the classical modern usage of it merely constituting social life outside state institutions, Young (2000: 158) presents civil society as part of a tripartite schema of state, economy and civil society, defining economy as a capitalist economy and civil society as ‘a sector of private associations that are relatively autonomous from both state and economy. They are relatively autonomous in that they are neither mandated nor run by state institutions, but spring from the everyday lives and activities of communities of interest’. Following Habermas and Cohen and Arato, Young (2000: 158) separates the state, the economy and civil society from each other on the basis that each entity ‘corresponds to three distinct ways of coordinating action, the first through the medium of authorised power, the second through the medium of money and the third through communicative interaction’.
As with Cohen and Arato, Young posits herself within a broadly Habermasian framework when she expands on the theme of communicative action by suggesting that the activity that constitutes civil society corresponds to the activities described by Habermas as constituting the ‘lifeworld’. In a continuation of this theme, Young adopts Cohen and Arato’s dualistic notion of civil society. However, while Cohen and Arato describe ‘defensive’ (the way associations and social movements develop forms of communicative interaction that expand participatory possibilities and create networks of solidarity) and ‘offensive’ (whereby associational activity aims to influence or reform state or corporate policies and practices) aspects of civil society,8 Young (2000: 165–166) refers to these activities respectively as the aspect of self organisation and the activity of the public sphere. Considering the focus of this research, it is apt to examine Young’s notion of the public sphere and what it contributes to civil society.

While Young (2000: 171) argues that civil society should not be described using spatial language, she argues that referring to the public sphere with spatial metaphors is appropriate, as it ‘enables the theory to say that a society has one continuous public sphere without reducing those who are “in” it to common attributes or interests’.9 Young (2000: 173) argues, as Habermas does, that the public sphere is the primary connector between people and power; ‘In the public sphere political actors raise issues, publish information, opinions, and aesthetic expression, criticise actions and policies, and propose new policies and practices. When widely discussed and disseminated, these issues, criticisms, images, and proposals sometimes provoke political and social change’. However, unlike Habermas (and Cohen and Arato), who argue that a functioning public sphere is an essential precondition for civil society, Young (2000: 155) argues that it is civil society that enables the emergence of public spheres.

Young’s distinction between state, economy and civil society based on function is valuable. Related to this argument, and equally valuable, is Young’s argument that the public sphere, and not civil society, should be referred to using spatial metaphors. But, as Young (2000: 155) admits, her investigation asks about ‘the function and limits of civic association in the context of societies guided by a rule of law that recognises basic liberties, and have democratic political practices, but where structural injustices exist’ (emphasis added). Hence, as with Cohen and Arato’s conception of civil society, while providing useful guidance, further ‘tweaking’ is required if the Habermasian notion of the public sphere is to be utilised in an examination of dissenting opposition in the Soviet-type regimes of Central and Eastern Europe.

More recently, the appropriateness of the public sphere as an analytical tool

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9 Young (2000: 159–160) argues that spatial language ‘suggests that society has three distinct parts that do not overlap. It also tempts us into placing each social institution into one and only one of these supposed spheres’.
Up until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, totalitarianism was a term that characterised the twentieth century (Kjeldahl 2001: 121). Part of this characterisation was the often heated debate amongst academics (and non-academics) as to the value of the term. Hence, following the end of the Cold War, one might have reasonably thought that this debate might cease, and the term be consigned to the infamous ‘dustbin of history’. However, it seems that the opposite is in fact the case; the merits, or otherwise, of the analytical value of the term continue to be hotly debated.

First introduced by Italian writer Giovanni Gentile to describe Mussolini’s Fascist regime, the connotations of this term were initially favourable. However, once used to describe the dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin, the term took on a more negative and menacing connotation (Canovan 1998). This was highlighted by comments made in 1941 by George Orwell (in Tucker 1983: 92–93):

Totalitarianism has abolished freedom of thought to an extent unheard of in any previous age. And it is important to realise that its control of thought is not only negative but positive. It not only forbids you to express – even to think – certain thoughts, but it dictates what you shall think, it creates an ideology for you, it tries to govern your emotional life as well as setting up an emotional code of conduct. And as far as possible it isolates you from the outside world, it shuts you up in an artificial universe in which you have no standards of comparison. The totalitarian state tries, at any rate, to control the thoughts and emotions of its subjects at least as completely as it controls their actions.

George F. Kennan (1954: 17) also chose to highlight the negative and menacing nature of the totalitarian regime when he described totalitarianism as ‘a source of sorrow and suffering to the human race […] that has overshadowed every source of human woe in our times […] It has demeaned humanity in its own sight, attacked man’s confidence in himself and made him realise that he can be his own most terrible and dangerous enemy’.1

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1 Kennan’s comments provide a good example of the emotive nature of the ‘totalitarian debate’, a debate that was often consumed by Cold War rhetoric. Considering that Kennan was the architect of the policy of containment, his comments offer an interesting insight into the politics of the term. Debates surrounding the usefulness of the term were often consumed by Cold War rhetoric. As Achim Siegel (1998: 273–274) eloquently notes ‘the pros and cons (of the ‘totalitarian debate’) […] were often motivated by non-cognitive, political predilections so that the cognitive issues of that debate seemed to be inextricably intertwined with the political interests and predilections of the scholars in question’. 
Having risen to prominence on the back of books by Hannah Arendt and Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, most political scientists argued that the concept of totalitarianism presented a sound summary of the key features of both Nazism and Communism. But by the 1960s, authors had started to suggest that changes within the Soviet Union and its satellites could not be explained by the totalitarian model. It will be argued here, however, that the concept of totalitarianism remains a more than useful tool when examining the relationship between the state and society in Soviet-type regimes.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, it introduces what are generally regarded as the two ‘classic’ theories of totalitarianism; Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Friedrich and Brzezinski’s *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, with a focus on the key elements present in both; ideology and terror. Included in this first part is a brief review of some of the main critiques of these works and an introduction to the way in which the term was appropriated for political purposes in the 1980s. It is argued in this first part that by understanding totalitarianism as an ideal-type, much of its original analytical and descriptive value can be maintained. Second, considering it is a focus of this research, a discussion, including a definition, of terror is provided. The final part of this chapter, will demonstrate how Central and East European dissidents regarded totalitarianism as the most apt term by which describe their condition.

### Conceptions of Totalitarianism

First published in 1951, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is essentially a philosophical investigation of the origins of totalitarian dictatorships. Arguing that ‘up to now we know only two authentic forms of totalitarian domination: the dictatorship of National Socialism after 1938, and the dictatorship of Bolshevism since 1930’, Arendt’s (1968: 117) work is notable not only for her strictly limited application of the concept to two particular regimes, but also her philosophical musings as to the ability of totalitarian governments to atomise society;

> totalitarian government […] could certainly not exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities […] [Totalitarian domination] bases itself on loneliness, of the experience of not belonging to the world at all… (1968: 173).

According to Arendt (1968: 162), the defining characteristic of totalitarianism is terror: ‘if lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination’. For Arendt, (1968: 135) the concentration camp is the institution that embodies the defining aspects of totalitarianism: terror; concentration camps ‘serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified’. Continuing with this theme, Arendt (1968: 141–142) observes that
The real horror of the concentration and extermination camps lies in the fact that the inmates, even if they happen to keep alive, are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they had died, because terror enforces oblivion. Here, murder is as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat […] There are no parallels to the life of the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the reason that it stands outside life and death. It can never be fully reported for the very reason that the survivor returns to the world of the living, which makes it impossible for him to believe fully in his own past experiences. It is though he had a story to tell of another planet, for the status of the inmates in the world of the living, where nobody is supposed to know if they are alive or dead, is such that it is as though they had never been born.

Linked to this idea of terror is ideology. In arguing that ‘totalitarianism differs essentially from other forms of political oppression such as despotism, tyranny and dictatorship’, Arendt (1968: 158) identifies ideology, and the role it plays, as one of the defining principles of the totalitarian system. For Arendt, totalitarian ideology is the intellectual expression of terror, in that totalitarianism allows no room for individual thought. She writes (1968: 117) that the totalitarian system ‘is “total” only in a negative sense, namely, in that the ruling party will tolerate no other parties, no opposition and no freedom of political opinion’.

Finally, Arendt argues that the key to the totalitarian system is not simply the adoption of an ideological principle, but rather the relentless working out of that principle to its logical conclusion in the removal of what she calls ‘objective enemies’. Arendt (1968: 121) draws a distinction between the ‘suspect’ and the ‘objective enemy’, the latter being defined not by the individual’s desire to overthrow the totalitarian system, but rather the policy of the government. The ‘objective enemy’ needs to be continually reinvented, because, as Arendt (1968: 122) notes, ‘if it were only a matter of hating Jews or bourgeois, the totalitarian regimes could, after the commission of one gigantic crime, return, as it were, to the rules of normal life and government’.

To summarise: Arendt’s work places terror at the apex of the totalitarian system; anyone wanting to understand totalitarian domination must first appreciate this. The instruments of terror – the secret police and the army – assume supreme significance in this system. While ideology is important, it is of secondary importance to terror. This is made clear when she writes that totalitarianism ‘is a form of government whose essence is terror and whose principle of action is the logicality of ideological thinking’ (1968: 165). Finally, Arendt’s work should be understood not as a political model, but rather as an investigation of the relationship between the totalitarian state and those who live within it.

In the preface to the third edition of Origins, Arendt (1968: xvi) observed the beginning of a ‘detotalitarianisation process which followed upon Stalin’s death’. Of course, according to Arendt’s application of the term, this meant that there remained no pure totalitarian regimes. In support of this argument, Arendt (1968: xix) pointed to the ‘amazingly swift and rich recovery of the arts in the last decade’
and the introduction of trials for dissenters, and concluded that this demonstrated ‘that we deal here no longer with total domination’.

Perhaps Arendt was too hasty in announcing the end of totalitarian regimes. First, future events, including the crushing of the Prague Spring, indicate that the central tenets of Arendt’s understanding of totalitarianism, terror and ideology, still served as an integral part of the Soviet-type regimes. Second, the degree to which totalitarianism under Stalin was ever ‘total’ is questionable. In what could possibly be interpreted as an admittance of hastiness, Arendt (1968: xix) does not rule out a relapse; ‘the most horrible of all new forms of government, whose elements and historical origins I set out to analyse, came no less to an end in Russia with the death of Stalin than totalitarianism came to an end in Germany with the death of Hitler’.

In arguing that terror is the defining characteristic of the totalitarian system, Arendt appears to be suggesting that the totalitarian system is not a permanent phenomenon. As Michael Walzer (1983: 116) argues,

if totalitarianism finds its perfection in the death camps, then it can only be a temporary society. A regime that systematically murders its own people is in one respect at least like a utopian community whose members are pledged to celibacy: neither one of them can last indefinitely […] Nor is there an imaginable political elite that will accept and live with the reality of a ‘permanent purge’[…] Totalitarianism as an ideal-type cannot be realised in fact, nor can it endure.

Two points need to be made here. First, in Arendt’s defence, unlike Friedrich and Brzezinski, she did not argue that totalitarian governments were likely to become, over time, more total. Indeed, as shown above, she was very quick, perhaps too quick, to announce the end of totalitarian regimes. Second, Walzer’s criticism of Arendt relies on a very narrow understanding of terror; terror is more complex than the murdering of one’s citizens by the state.

A further criticism of Arendt’s work is offered by Robert Burrowes (1969: 274), who argues that Origins ‘does not easily yield up an explicit and clearly stated connotative definition’. This, combined with Arendt’s use of ‘judgemental and pejorative’ language, argues Burrowes (1969: 280), makes Origins ‘flawed as an aid to systemic political analysis’. While Burrowes’ criticism of Arendt’s language is valid (terms such as ‘totalitarian virus’, ‘nightmare’ and ‘radical evil’ have hyperbolic undertones), he makes the mistake of assuming that Arendt’s work serves as a political science text. When treated as a philosophical investigation, rather than a political framework, Arendt’s claims of societal atomisation prove prescient, especially when looking at Soviet-type regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Although not defining terror as such, the importance given to this concept is also prescient, particularly when one considers the way in which societal groups in Central and Eastern Europe organised themselves vis-à-vis the state. In agreeing with Raymond Aron (1968), who, like Arendt, was interested in
how totalitarian regimes inhibited societal interactions,² Arendt’s conception does contain investigative worth as a tool that best describes the situation between rulers and ruled.

While Arendt’s investigation of totalitarianism limited its application to two specific regimes and should be regarded as a philosophical rather than purely political investigation, Friedrich and Brzezinski’s *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* represents a clear attempt at developing a more rigorous, scientific totalitarian framework. Like Arendt, Friedrich and Brzezinski (1966: 17) argue that totalitarianism is a twentieth century phenomenon. In arguing that totalitarian regimes differ from any previous form of political organisation, they write:

> what is really the specific difference, the innovation of the totalitarian regimes, is the organisation and methods developed and employed with the aid of modern technical devices in an effort to resuscitate such control in the service of an ideologically motivated movement, dedicated to the total destruction and reconstruction of mass society.

Friedrich and Brzezinski (1966: 21) outline six ‘basic features or traits that we suggest as generally recognised to be common to totalitarian dictatorships’ and argue that they ‘form a cluster of traits, intertwined and mutually supporting of each other’ and should therefore not be considered in isolation.³ Two important qualifiers are made that serve as pointers as to the rigidity of this model. First, Friedrich and Brzezinski (1966: 22–23) point out that these six traits are far from exhaustive; ‘[this] is not meant to suggest that there might not be others, now insufficiently recognised’. Second, they admit ‘that within this broad pattern of similarities, there are many significant variations’.

This approach constituted the most dominant paradigm in western studies on Communist systems up to the beginning of the 1960s (Siegel 1998: 273). However, in the 1960s, the term began to lose popularity. It was argued that following the death of Stalin, many Communist regimes had abandoned mass terror and even initiated economic reforms. Hence, the analytical value of totalitarianism was questioned. Part of the reason for this, particularly following the denunciation of Stalin by Khrushchev at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, was that it

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² Also see Kjeldahl (2001).

³ These six features are: 1) An elaborate ideology, consisting of an official body of doctrine covering all vital aspects of man’s existence to which everyone living in that society is supposed to adhere; 2) a single mass party typically led by one man; 3) a system of terror, whether physical or psychic, effected through party and secret police control and characteristically directed not only against demonstrable ‘enemies’ of the regime, but against more or less arbitrarily selected classes of the population; 4) a technologically conditioned, near complete monopoly of control, in the hands of the party and of the government, of all means of effective mass communication, such as the press, radio and motion pictures; 5) a similarly technologically conditioned, near complete monopoly of the effective use of all weapons of armed combat; and 6) a central control and direction of the entire economy through the bureaucratic coordination of formally independent corporate entities (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1966: 22).
At the end of the Second World War, Czechoslovakia found itself in a comparatively enviable position. It had not suffered substantial war destruction, (Poland and Yugoslavia), was not treated as a defeated war enemy, (Germany, Hungary and Romania), and was not burdened by reparations and foreign occupation. Furthermore, Czechoslovakia could lay claim to a proud, democratic heritage. From 1918–1938, it was a model, Western-type parliamentary democracy. Despite this, less than three years after the end of the Second World War, Czechoslovakia’s democratic, pluralistic past was but a memory and was to remain as such until the ‘Velvet Revolution’ of 1989.

This chapter presents a chronological and critical analysis of opposition and dissent in totalitarian Czechoslovakia, beginning with the Communist take-over in 1948 and finishing with the rise of Civic Forum in 1989. It is delivered in six parts; post-war Czechoslovakia, Stalinisation, the Prague Spring, post-Spring ‘normalisation’, the rise of new opposition and finally, the Velvet Revolution.

The aims of this chapter are threefold. First, by highlighting the integral role that terror assumed in the regime, combined with the maintenance of the ‘leading role’ of the Komunistická strana Československa (the Czechoslovak Communist Party, henceforth abbreviated to KSČ) it will be argued that Czechoslovakia remained a totalitarian regime right up until the revolution in late 1989. Considering the method by which the Prague Spring was ‘put down’, the second aim of this chapter is to show how and why post-Spring opposition movements, specifically Charter 77, framed their activities as ‘non-political’. Finally, and closely related to the first two aims, this chapter will argue that the repressive nature of the regime, combined with the acceptance by opposition groups that no space was to be made available to them in which to vent opposition, means that the dissenting opposition that did exist (a) can best be understood as constituting a ‘totalitarian public sphere’ and (b) their modus operandi can best be understood through the application of the ‘totalitarian public sphere’.

Considering the totalitarian nature of the regime, the fact that Czechoslovakia’s Soviet-type regime was overturned by revolutionaries, and continuing the underpinning theme of this research, it will be argued that a) it is not possible to locate civil society in Czechoslovakia while the KSČ remained in power and b) the revolutionary nature of the opposition in Czechoslovakia in 1989 means that their actions cannot and should not be explained using a civil society framework.
Post-war Czechoslovakia

John Bradley (1991: 3) argues that ‘Czechoslovakia emerged from the war more politically confused and disorganised than devastated’. It was to this environment that deposed President Eduard Beneš returned. In 1938, Beneš was forced to abdicate as a result of the Munich Agreement. Returning in 1945, Beneš found himself in an intriguing situation. In the absence of an elected Parliament, he was essentially an autocrat; however, he also had international recognition from the Western Allies and, importantly, Stalin as the Czechoslovak President (Bradley 1991: 9).

Beneš returned with a particular idea of what role Czechoslovakia should play in the post-war order; the state would function as a bridge between East and West by offering mediation and co-operation to both sides. This idea found its origin in two observations. First, as the war progressed, it became clear to Beneš that the influence of the Soviet Union in Eastern and Central Europe would greatly increase following the defeat of Germany. Secondly, like many Czechs, the traumatic experience of the Munich Agreement meant that he was unlikely to entirely trust Czechoslovakia’s lot to the West European democracies (Renner 1989: 3).

The re-establishment of Czechoslovak democratic institutions was a priority for Beneš. At a meeting held in Moscow between 22 and 28 March 1945, delegates from the four Czech political parties and the Slovak National Council discussed the programme and composition of the post-war government. The participants included spokespersons from the National Socialists, Social Democrats, the People’s Party and the Communists on the Czech side, while the Democratic Party and the Communists were represented on the Slovak side (Kaplan 1989: 147). While there were expected disagreements in Moscow, the various parties were able to resolve their differences so that in April 1945, as agreed to in Moscow, Beneš was able to nominate a new government. This was supported by a three-hundred-member Provisional National Assembly, in which every registered party secured forty seats, the remaining 60 seats being allotted to specialist interest groups (Bradley 1991: 17; Korbel 1959: 151). They agreed to ban those parties which had ‘done harm to the national interest’ and to permit the emergence of other parties on the proviso they accepted the government programme (Kaplan 1989: 148). In this way, they ensured that there would be no opposition.

The Parliament emerged from indirect elections, the deputies being chosen by delegates of the National Committees. The political parties were equally represented. However, some of the deputies were sponsored by social organisations.

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1 The Munich Agreement, signed by Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain, Edouard Daladier and Benito Mussolini in September, 1938, gave Germany control over the Sudetenland, on the proviso that Hitler would cease his expansionist intentions. To many Czechs, the Munich Agreement constituted a gross betrayal of trust by Western countries.

2 The communists had double representation because of their device of a technically separate Communist Party of Slovakia (Korbel 1959: 150–151).
This fact, combined with Beneš’ recognition of the Soviet Army’s role in the liberation of Czechoslovakia, meant that the Communist Party was granted a greater share of power than its pre-War standing warranted (Bradley: 1991: 10; Kaplan 1989: 164–165).

Importantly, it was agreed that this was a temporary government, and the programme stipulated that the Provisional National Assembly would be replaced by a Constitutional Assembly on the basis of free elections, a process that was to ‘take place in the shortest possible time’ (in Korbel 1959: 124). Of equal importance was the role Beneš took in this process. At the announcement of the new Government in Košice, he thought it important to mention that he would be ‘a constitutional President’ (cited in Korbel 1959: 123). Again, while essentially an autocrat, Beneš respected the limitations placed on him by the constitution.

Clearly, this post-war arrangement was designed with the reestablishment of Czechoslovakia’s pre-war democratic institutions in mind. This notion is further underpinned when one considers the presence of legally participating political parties and social organisations; a nascent civil society as such.

A development of note was the increasing popularity of the KSČ. In July 1945, party membership was 475,000. By March, 1946, membership had reached one million. Hans Renner (1989: 15–16) suggests that the popularity of the KSČ can be ascribed to several factors. First, as the opposition party before the war, it had regularly renounced the policies of Beneš and had pronounced itself in favour of armed resistance against Hitler. Secondly, the Czechs and Slovaks, unlike the Poles, Hungarians and Finns, to name but a few, had not had any bad historical experience with Russia. The traditionally pro-Russian stance of Czechs and Slovaks was expressed as support for the Communist Party. Finally, the KSČ was able to tap into the political disillusion of Czechoslovak youth. Frustrated by the Munich Agreement and the resultant occupation, they lost faith in the traditional political parties. In their eyes, the old political system had failed because it did not guarantee the integrity and establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic.

At the first post-war general election in 1946, the popularity of the KSČ was translated into electoral success when it won 38% of the vote. While the Party failed to gain an absolute majority, the nearly three million votes garnered gave it 114 of the 300 seats in the new parliament (Bradley 1991: 18).3

As the leader of the Party with the most votes, and as tradition dictated, Klement Gottwald became the new Prime Minster. When it became clear that the fracturing of the left wing alliance meant that the KSČ’s desire to achieve an absolute majority in the scheduled 1948 elections was unrealistic (Kaplan 1989: 151–152), they instead focused on extra-parliamentary action, referred to in party-jargon as ‘mobilisation of the masses’. This comprised such activity as the organisation of ‘spontaneous’ demonstrations that ‘expressed the will of the people’, and continuous visits to parliament by workers’ delegations (Renner 1989: 8). The

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3 This compares to 18.3% for the National Socialist Party, 15.6% for the People’s Party, 14.1% for the Slovak Democratic Party and 12.1% for the Social Democrats (Bradley 1991: 18).
KSČ were also aware, however, of the need to maintain the democratic façade of Czechoslovak politics. Czechoslovakia’s proud democratic history meant a violent putsch would be unacceptable. These sentiments were confirmed by Václav Kopecký (in Renner 1989: 9) in November, 1947, at the plenary meeting of the Central Committee:

We have a lot of power. To use this power straight away, however, might be explained as a dictatorship. We will determine ourselves when to use this power, in such a way that nobody can accuse us of having abandoned the democratic way.

While it is important to consider domestic concerns in the lead up to the events of 1948, international affairs also played a prominent role in determining Czechoslovakia’s Communist future. Pavel Tigríd (1971: 402) points to three events in 1947 that shaped events to come: the declaration of the Truman Doctrine; the exclusion of communists from coalition governments in France and Italy; and the announcement of the Marshall Plan. Considering the subject matter covered here, it is worth analysing the third event highlighted by Tigríd.

Soviet observers viewed the Marshall Plan as proof of ongoing United States’ interest in European affairs and, consequently, as an attempt to rob the Soviet Union of its hard fought and commanding position in Central and Eastern Europe (Kaplan 1989: 153). Originally, the KSČ had voted in favour of Czechoslovakia’s participation in the Marshall Plan. Some authors suggest that Prague’s enthusiasm to participate stemmed from a misunderstanding between Prague and Moscow (Kaplan 1989: 153; Korbel 1959: 181; and Renner 1989: 12). Nevertheless, there was no misunderstanding Stalin’s stern rebuke and Czechoslovakia’s resultant withdrawal from Marshall Plan negotiations. Korbel (1959: 182) argues, rather melodramatically, that ‘on July 10, 1947, Czechoslovakia lost her independence’ because ‘the Soviet Union had arrogantly dictated to her government a course of action on a matter of paramount importance to her future’. These sentiments were reinforced by Foreign Affairs Minister Jan Masaryk’s (in Korbel 1959: 183) comments: ‘I left for Moscow as Minister for Foreign Affairs of a sovereign state. I am returning as Stalin’s stooge’.

Domestically, the National Front façade was slowly being eroded. In late 1947, the non-Communist parties used their majority in the Assembly to vote down Communist bills, one of which was the controversial ‘millionaire’s tax’.4 Then, on 20th February 1948, the non-Communist members of Cabinet resigned, convinced, according to Renner (1989: 9), that ‘Beneš would not accept their resignation, which would mean the fall of the Gottwald government and early elections’.

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4 The Communists proposed imposing a special tax on all property exceeding the value of one million crowns. This was regarded by the non-Communist members of the National Front as a cynical attempt to solidify their support. According to Korbel, the Communists ‘provocatively’ called it “the millionaire’s tax” aware that such properties under the nation’s inflated currency in many cases did not represent any appreciable wealth’ (Korbel 1959: 187).