

Our age is indeed the age of the intellectual organization of political hatreds. It will be one of its chief claims to notice in the moral history of humanity.

—Julien Benda, *La trahison des clercs*, 1927

We must accept the fact that this kind of rebellion against modernity lies latent in Western society...its confused, fantastic program, its irrational and unpolitical rhetoric, embodies aspirations just as genuine...as the aspirations in other and more familiar movements of reform.

—Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, 1961

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New Year's Eve

ON DECEMBER 31, 1999, we threw a party. It was the end of one millennium and the start of a new one, and people very much wanted to celebrate, preferably somewhere exotic. Our party fulfilled that criterion. We held it at Chobielin, a small manor house in northwest Poland that my husband and his parents had purchased a decade earlier—for the price of the bricks—when it was a mildewed, uninhabitable ruin, unrenovated since the previous occupants fled the Red Army in 1945. We had restored the house, or most of it, though very slowly. It was not exactly finished in 1999, but it did have a new roof as well as a large, freshly painted, and completely unfurnished salon, perfect for a party.

The guests were various: journalist friends from London and Moscow, a few junior diplomats based in Warsaw, two friends who flew over from New York. But most of them were Poles, friends of ours and colleagues of my husband, Radek Sikorski, who was then a deputy foreign minister in a center-right Polish government. There were local friends, some of Radek's school friends, and a large group of cousins. A handful of youngish Polish journalists came too—none then particularly famous—along with a few civil servants and one or two very junior members of the government.

You could have lumped the majority of us, roughly, in the general category of what Poles call the right—the conservatives, the anti-Communists. But at that moment in history, you might also have called most of us liberals. Free-market liberals, classical liberals, maybe Thatcherites. Even those who might have been less definite about the

economics did believe in democracy, in the rule of law, in checks and balances, and in a Poland that was a member of NATO and on its way to joining the European Union (EU), a Poland that was an integrated part of modern Europe. In the 1990s, that was what being “on the right” meant.

As parties go, it was a little scrappy. There was no such thing as catering in rural Poland in the 1990s, so my mother-in-law and I made vats of beef stew and roasted beets. There were no hotels, either, so our hundred-odd guests stayed in local farmhouses or with friends in the nearby town. I kept a list of who was staying where, but a couple of people still wound up sleeping on the floor in the basement. Late in the evening we set off fireworks—cheap ones, made in China, which had just become widely available and were probably extremely dangerous.

The music—on cassette tapes, made in an era before Spotify—created the only serious cultural divide of the evening: the songs that my American friends remembered from college were not the same as the songs that the Poles remembered from college, so it was hard to get everybody to dance at the same time. At one point I went upstairs, learned that Boris Yeltsin had resigned, wrote a brief column for a British newspaper, then went back downstairs and had another glass of wine. At about three in the morning, one of the wackier Polish guests pulled a small pistol out of her handbag and shot blanks into the air out of sheer exuberance.

It was that kind of party. It lasted all night, continued into “brunch” the following afternoon, and was infused with the optimism I remember from that time. We had rebuilt our ruined house. Our friends were rebuilding the country. I have a particularly clear memory of a walk in the snow—maybe it was the day before the party, maybe the day after—with a bilingual group, everybody chattering at once, English and Polish mingling and echoing through the birch forest. At that moment, when Poland was on the cusp of joining the West, it felt as if we were all on the same team. We agreed about democracy, about the road to prosperity, about the way things were going.

That moment has passed. Nearly two decades later, I would now cross the street to avoid some of the people who were at my New Year’s Eve party. They, in turn, would not only refuse to enter my house, they would be embarrassed to admit they had ever been there. In fact, about half the

people who were at that party would no longer speak to the other half. The estrangements are political, not personal. Poland is now one of the most polarized societies in Europe, and we have found ourselves on opposite sides of a profound divide, one that runs through not only what used to be the Polish right but also the old Hungarian right, the Spanish right, the French right, the Italian right, and, with some differences, the British right and the American right, too.

Some of my New Year's Eve guests—along with me and my husband—continued to support the pro-European, pro-rule-of-law, pro-market center right. We remained in political parties that aligned, more or less, with European Christian Democrats, with the liberal parties of France and the Netherlands, and with the Republican Party of John McCain. Some of my guests consider themselves center-left. But others wound up in a different place. They now support a nativist party called Law and Justice—a party that has moved dramatically away from the positions it held when it first briefly ran the government, from 2005 to 2007, and when it occupied the presidency (not the same thing in Poland) from 2005 to 2010.

In the years it was out of power, the leaders of Law and Justice and many of its supporters and promoters slowly came to embrace a different set of ideas, not just xenophobic and paranoid but openly authoritarian. To be fair to the electorate, not everybody could see this: Law and Justice ran a very moderate campaign in 2015 against a center-right party that had been in power for eight years—my husband was a member of that government, though he resigned before the election—and was in the final year headed by a weak and unimpressive prime minister. Understandably, Poles wanted a change.

But after Law and Justice won a slim majority in 2015, its radicalism immediately became clear. The new government violated the constitution by improperly appointing new judges to the constitutional court. Later, it used an equally unconstitutional playbook in an attempt to pack the Polish Supreme Court and wrote a law designed to punish judges whose verdicts contradicted government policy. Law and Justice took over the state public broadcaster—also in violation of the constitution—firing popular presenters and experienced reporters. Their replacements, recruited from the far-right

extremes of the online media, began running straightforward ruling-party propaganda, sprinkled with easily disprovable lies, at taxpayers' expense.

State institutions were another target. Once in power, Law and Justice sacked thousands of civil servants, replacing them with party hacks, or else cousins and other relatives of party hacks. They fired army generals who had years of expensive training in Western academies. They fired diplomats with experience and linguistic skills. One by one, they wrecked cultural institutions too. The National Museum lost its excellent acting director, an internationally respected curator. He was replaced with an unknown academic, with no prior museum experience, whose first major decision was to dismantle the museum's exhibition of modern and contemporary art. A year later he would resign, leaving the museum in chaos. The director of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews—an institution unique in Europe, opened with great fanfare only a few years earlier—was suspended from his job with no explanation, horrifying the museum's international supporters and funders. Those stories were echoed by thousands of others that didn't make headlines. A friend of ours lost her job in another state institution, for example, after she had completed too many projects too quickly. Her new and unqualified director seemed to perceive her as a threat.

There was very little pretense about any of this. The point of all of these changes was not to make government run better. The point was to make the government more partisan, the courts more pliable, more beholden to the party. Or maybe we should call it, as we once did, the Party.

They had no mandate to do this: Law and Justice was elected with a percentage of the vote that allowed them to rule but not to change the constitution. And so, in order to justify breaking the law, the party stopped using ordinary political arguments, and began identifying existential enemies instead. Some were old and familiar. After two decades of profound Polish-Jewish conversations and reconciliation—after thousands of books, films, and conferences, after the construction of that spectacular museum—the government earned international notoriety by adopting a law curtailing public debate about the Holocaust. Although they eventually changed the law under American pressure, it enjoyed broad support among the party's ideological base—the journalists, writers, and thinkers, including some of my party guests, who now say they believe that anti-Polish forces

are plotting to blame Poland instead of Germany for Auschwitz. Later, the party also involved itself in a pointless spat with the Israeli government, an argument that seemed designed to appeal both to Law and Justice's angry, nationalist voters in Poland and Benjamin Netanyahu's angry, nationalist voters in Israel.

Some of the enemies were new. After a brief period of attacking Islamic immigrants—difficult, in a country with almost no Islamic immigrants at all—the party focused its ire on homosexuals. A national weekly, *Gazeta Polska*—a couple of whose most prominent journalists were at my New Year's Eve party—printed “LGBT Free Zone” stickers for its readers to put on their doors and windows. On the eve of another parliamentary election in October 2019, state television showed a documentary called *Invasion*, describing the secret “LGBT” plan to undermine Poland. The Polish Catholic church, once a neutral institution and an apolitical symbol of national unity, began promoting similar themes. The current archbishop of Krakow, a title previously held by Pope John Paul II, gave a sermon describing homosexuals as a rainbow-colored “plague” that had replaced the “red plague” of Communism. His sermon was applauded by the Polish government and then removed from YouTube by online moderators, on the grounds that it constituted hate speech.

This sequence of events now makes it difficult for me and some of my New Year's guests to speak about anything at all. I have not, for example, had a single conversation with Ania Bielecka, formerly one of my closest friends—the godmother of one of my children—since a hysterical phone call in April 2010, a couple of days after a plane carrying the then president crashed near Smolensk, in Russia, about which more in a moment. Bielecka is an architect whose other friends include, or anyway used to include, some of the best-known artists of her generation; she also enjoys, or used to enjoy, contemporary art exhibitions, even traveling a few times to the Venice Biennale, just for fun. She once told me she enjoyed people watching at the Biennale—all of the arty ladies in their elaborate outfits—as much as the exhibitions. But in recent years she has grown close to Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice and the late president's twin brother. She now regularly hosts lunches for Kaczyński at her apartment—she is a great cook—and discusses whom he should appoint to

his cabinet. I am told that the culture minister, the author of the assault on Polish museums, was her suggestion. I tried to see her a couple of years ago in Warsaw, but she refused. “What would we talk about?” she texted me, and then went silent.

Another of my guests—the one who shot the pistol in the air—eventually separated from her British husband. Her eccentricity has been transformed into something else, and she appears to spend her days as a full-time Internet troll, fanatically promoting a whole range of conspiracy theories, many of them virulently anti-Semitic. She tweets about Jewish responsibility for the Holocaust; she once posted an image of an English medieval painting depicting a boy supposedly crucified by Jews, with the commentary “And they were surprised that they were expelled,” referring to the expulsion of the Jews from Britain in 1290. She follows and amplifies the leading lights of the American “alt-right,” whose language she repeats and promotes.

A third guest, the journalist Anita Gargas, has spent the past decade investigating, over and over again, a set of conspiracy theories involving the death of the late president, Lech Kaczyński, in the Smolensk plane crash, each time postulating a different explanation. She’s employed by *Gazeta Polska*, the weekly newspaper that distributed the antigay stickers. A fourth guest, Rafal Ziemkiewicz, has made a name for himself as an outspoken opponent of the international Jewish community. He refers to Jews as “scabby” and “greedy,” calls Jewish organizations “blackmailers,” and regrets his former support for Israel. The notoriety he gained from this language appears to have bolstered what had been his faltering career, and he now appears frequently on party-controlled state television.

I happen to know that some of these ex-friends are estranged from their children because of their political views. In a couple of cases, the estrangement is profound. One of my former friends, though deeply committed to a political party with an openly homophobic agenda, has a gay son. But that too is typical—these divides run through families as well as groups of friends. We have a neighbor near Chobielin whose parents listen to a progovernment, Catholic-conspiratorial radio station called Radio Maryja. They repeat its mantras, make its enemies their enemies. “I’ve lost my mother,” my neighbor told me. “She lives in another world.”

To fully disclose all of my interests here, I should explain that some of this conspiratorial thinking is focused on me. My husband was the Polish defense minister for a year and a half, in a coalition government led by Law and Justice during its first, brief experience of power. Later, he broke with that party and was for seven years the foreign minister in another coalition government, this one led by the center-right party, Civic Platform. In 2019, he ran for the European Parliament and won a seat, though he is not currently part of the leadership of the political opposition.

I have lived in Poland on and off since 1988, with large chunks of time spent in London and Washington, writing history books and working as a journalist for British and American newspapers. That makes me an exotic political spouse by Polish standards, though until 2015 most people were curious about me rather than angry. I never experienced any direct anti-Semitism, never felt any hostility; when I published a Polish cookbook—intended, among other things, to overturn negative stereotypes about Poland outside the country—the reaction inside Poland, even among Polish chefs, was largely positive, if a little bemused. I also tried quite hard to stay out of politics, mostly avoiding Polish television except to speak about my books.

But after Law and Justice won, negative articles about the government began appearing abroad—and I was blamed. I was featured on the covers of two pro-regime magazines, *wSieci* and *Do Rzeczy* (former friends of ours work at both), as the clandestine Jewish coordinator of the international press and the secret director of its negative coverage of Poland; one of them invented details about my family in order to make it seem more sinister. Similar stories appeared on state television's evening news broadcast, along with another, wholly invented story about how the Law and Justice Party had gotten me fired from a job that I didn't have. Eventually they stopped writing about me: negative international press coverage of Poland finally grew much too widespread for a single person, even a single Jewish person, to coordinate all by herself, though naturally, the theme recurs on social media from time to time. During my husband's European election campaign, some of his team were asked more questions about me and my "anti-Polish activity" than about him. Whether I like it or not, I am part of this story.

When this all began, I felt a kind of *déjà vu*. I remembered reading a famous journal kept by the Romanian writer Mihail Sebastian from 1935 to 1944. In it, he chronicled an even more extreme shift in his own country. Like me, Sebastian was Jewish, though not religious; like me, most of his friends were on the political right. In the journal, he described how, one by one, they were drawn to fascist ideology, like a flock of moths to an inescapable flame. He recounted the arrogance and confidence his friends acquired as they moved away from identifying themselves as Europeans—admirers of Proust, travelers to Paris—and instead began to call themselves blood-and-soil Romanians. He listened as they veered into conspiratorial thinking or became casually cruel.

People he had known for years insulted him to his face and then acted as if nothing had happened. “Is friendship possible,” he wondered in 1937, “with people who have in common a whole series of alien ideas and feelings—so alien that I have only to walk in the door and they suddenly fall silent in shame and embarrassment?” In an autobiographical novel he wrote at the same time, the narrator offers friendship to an old acquaintance, from whom he is now divided by politics. “No, you’re wrong,” comes the response: “The pair of us can’t be friends. Now or ever. Don’t you get the smell of the land off me?”

Today is not 1937. Nevertheless, a parallel transformation is taking place in my own time, both among the thinkers, writers, journalists, and political activists in Poland, a country where I have lived for three decades, as well as in the rest of the societies we have come to call the West. Everywhere, this transformation is taking place without the excuse of an economic crisis of the kind Europe and North America suffered in the 1920s and 1930s. The recession of 2008–2009 was deep, but—at least until the coronavirus pandemic—growth had returned. The refugee crisis of 2015–2016 was a shock, but it has abated. By 2018, refugees from North Africa and the Middle East had mostly stopped coming to Europe, thanks to deals done with Turkey by the EU and its mainstream politicians.

In any case, the people I am writing about in this book were not affected by either of these crises. They are perhaps not all as successful as they would like to be, but they are not poor and rural. They have not lost their jobs to migrant workers. In Eastern Europe, they are not victims of the

political transition since 1989, or of politics in any sense at all. In Western Europe, they are not part of an impoverished underclass, and they do not live in forgotten villages. In the United States, they do not live in communities ravaged by opioids, they do not spend much time in midwestern diners, and they do not, in fact, match any of the lazy stereotypes used to describe Trump voters at all—including some of the lazy stereotypes they have invented themselves. On the contrary, they have been educated at the best universities, they often speak foreign languages, they live in big cities—London, Washington, Warsaw, Madrid—and they travel abroad, just like Sebastian’s friends in the 1930s.

What, then, has caused this transformation? Were some of our friends always closet authoritarians? Or have the people with whom we clinked glasses in the first minutes of the new millennium somehow changed over the subsequent two decades?

There is no single explanation, and I will not offer either a grand theory or a universal solution. But there is a theme: Given the right conditions, any society can turn against democracy. Indeed, if history is anything to go by, all of our societies eventually will.

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The ancient philosophers always had their doubts about democracy. Plato feared the “false and braggart words” of the demagogue, and suspected democracy might be nothing more than a staging point on the road to tyranny. Early American advocates of republican government also recognized the challenge that a corrupt leader could pose to democracy, and thought hard about creating the institutions that would resist one. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 created the electoral college as a means of ensuring that a man with what Alexander Hamilton called “talents for low intrigue, and the little arts of popularity” could never become president of the United States. Although it eventually became a rubber-stamp body with no power—and, more recently, a mechanism that gives outsize influence to small groups of voters in a few states—the electoral college was originally meant to be something quite different: it was designed as a kind of review board, a group of elite lawmakers and men of property who

would select the president, rejecting the people's choice if necessary, in order to avoid the "excesses of democracy."

Hamilton was one of many in colonial America who read over and over again the history of Greece and Rome, trying to learn how to prevent a new democracy from becoming a tyranny. In his old age, John Adams was once again reading Cicero, the Roman statesman who sought to halt the deterioration of the Roman Republic, even quoting him in letters to Thomas Jefferson. They wanted to build democracy in America on the basis of rational debate, reason, and compromise. But they had no illusions about human nature: They knew that men could sometimes succumb to "passions," to use their old-fashioned word. They knew that any political system built on logic and rationality was always at risk from an outburst of the irrational.

In modern times, their successors have searched to define that irrationality and those "passions" further, and to understand who might be drawn to a demagogue and why. Hannah Arendt, the original philosopher of totalitarianism, identified an "authoritarian personality," a radically lonely individual who "without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party." Theodor Adorno, one of a generation of intellectuals who fled Nazi Germany for America, investigated that idea further. Influenced by Freud, Adorno sought to find the source of the authoritarian personality in early childhood, perhaps even in repressed homosexuality.

More recently, Karen Stenner, a behavioral economist who began researching personality traits two decades ago, has argued that about a third of the population in any country has what she calls an authoritarian predisposition, a word that is more useful than *personality*, because it is less rigid. An authoritarian predisposition, one that favors homogeneity and order, can be present without necessarily manifesting itself; its opposite, a "libertarian" predisposition, one that favors diversity and difference, can be silently present too. Stenner's definition of *authoritarianism* isn't political, and it isn't the same thing as *conservatism*. Authoritarianism appeals, simply, to people who cannot tolerate complexity: there is nothing intrinsically "left-wing" or "right-wing" about this instinct at all. It is anti-

pluralist. It is suspicious of people with different ideas. It is allergic to fierce debates. Whether those who have it ultimately derive their politics from Marxism or nationalism is irrelevant. It is a frame of mind, not a set of ideas.

But theorists often leave out another crucial element in the decline of democracy and the construction of autocracy. The mere existence of people who admire demagogues or feel more comfortable in dictatorships does not fully explain why demagogues win. The dictator wants to rule, but how does he reach that part of the public that feels the same? The illiberal politician wants to undermine courts in order to give himself more power, but how does he persuade voters to accept those changes? In ancient Rome, Caesar had sculptors make multiple versions of his image. No contemporary authoritarian can succeed without the modern equivalent: the writers, intellectuals, pamphleteers, bloggers, spin doctors, producers of television programs, and creators of memes who can sell his image to the public. Authoritarians need the people who will promote the riot or launch the coup. But they also need the people who can use sophisticated legal language, people who can argue that breaking the constitution or twisting the law is the right thing to do. They need people who will give voice to grievances, manipulate discontent, channel anger and fear, and imagine a different future. They need members of the intellectual and educated elite, in other words, who will help them launch a war on the rest of the intellectual and educated elite, even if that includes their university classmates, their colleagues, and their friends.

In his 1927 book *La trahison des clercs*—loosely translated as “The Treason of the Intellectuals” or sometimes “The Betrayal of the Intellectuals”—the French essayist Julien Benda observed and described the authoritarian elites of his time long before anyone else understood how important they were. Anticipating Arendt, his concern was not “authoritarian personalities” as such, but rather the particular people who supported the authoritarianism that he already saw taking both left- and right-wing forms all across Europe. He described both far-right and far-left ideologues who sought to promote either “class passion,” in the form of Soviet Marxism, or “national passion,” in the form of fascism, and accused them both of betraying the central task of the intellectual, the search for

truth, in favor of particular political causes. Sarcastically, he called these fallen intellectuals *clercs* or “clerks,” a word whose oldest meanings link it to “clergy.” Ten years before Stalin’s Great Terror and six years before Hitler came to power, Benda already feared that the writers, journalists, and essayists who had morphed into political entrepreneurs and propagandists would goad whole civilizations into acts of violence. And so it came to pass.

If it happens, the fall of liberal democracy in our own time will not look as it did in the 1920s or 1930s. But it will still require a new elite, a new generation of *clercs*, to bring it about. The collapse of an idea of the West, or of what is sometimes called “the Western liberal order,” will need thinkers, intellectuals, journalists, bloggers, writers, and artists to undermine our current values, and then to imagine the new system to come. They may come from different places: in Benda’s original definition, the *clercs* included ideologues of the right as well as the left. Both are still with us. An authoritarian sensibility is unquestionably present in a generation of far-left campus agitators who seek to dictate how professors can teach and what students can say. It is present in the instigators of Twitter mobs who seek to take down public figures as well as ordinary people for violating unwritten speech codes. It was present among the intellectuals turned spin doctors of the British Labour Party who prevented any challenge to Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, even as it became clear that Corbyn’s far-left agenda would be rejected by the country. It was present among the Labour activists who first denied and then downplayed the anti-Semitism that spread within the party too.

But although the cultural power of the authoritarian left is growing, the only modern *clercs* who have attained real *political* power in Western democracies—the only ones operating inside governments, participating in ruling coalitions, guiding important political parties—are members of movements that we are accustomed to calling the “right.” They are, it is true, a specific kind of right, one that has little in common with most of the political movements that have been so described since the Second World War. British Tories, American Republicans, East European anti-Communists, German Christian Democrats, and French Gaullists all come from different traditions, but as a group they were, at least until recently,

dedicated not just to representative democracy, but to religious tolerance, independent judiciaries, free press and speech, economic integration, international institutions, the transatlantic alliance, and a political idea of “the West.”

By contrast, the new right does not want to conserve or to preserve what exists at all. In continental Europe, the new right scorns Christian Democracy, which used its political base in the church to found and create the EU after the nightmare of the Second World War. In the United States and the United Kingdom, the new right has broken with the old-fashioned, Burkean small-*c* conservatism that is suspicious of rapid change in all its forms. Although they hate the phrase, the new right is more Bolshevik than Burkean: these are men and women who want to overthrow, bypass, or undermine existing institutions, to destroy what exists.

This book is about this new generation of *clerics* and the new reality they are creating, beginning with a few whom I know in Eastern Europe and then moving to the different but parallel story of Britain, another country where I have deep ties, and finishing with the United States, where I was born, with a few stops elsewhere. The people described range from nativist ideologues to high-minded political essayists; some of them write sophisticated books, others launch viral conspiracy theories. Some are genuinely motivated by the same fears, the same anger, and the same deep desire for unity that motivates their readers and followers. Some have been radicalized by angry encounters with the cultural left, or repulsed by the weakness of the liberal center. Some are cynical and instrumental, adopting radical or authoritarian language because it will bring them power or fame. Some are apocalyptic, convinced that their societies have failed and need to be reconstructed, whatever the result. Some are deeply religious. Some enjoy chaos, or seek to promote chaos, as a prelude to imposing a new kind of order. All of them seek to redefine their nations, to rewrite social contracts, and, sometimes, to alter the rules of democracy so that they never lose power. Alexander Hamilton warned against them, Cicero fought against them. Some of them used to be my friends.

II

How Demagogues Win

MONARCHY, TYRANNY, OLIGARCHY, DEMOCRACY— all of these ways of organizing societies were familiar to Plato and Aristotle more than two thousand years ago. But the illiberal one-party state, now found all over the world—think of China, Venezuela, Zimbabwe—was first developed by Lenin, in Russia, starting in 1917. In the political science textbooks of the future, the Soviet Union’s founder will surely be remembered not just for his Marxist beliefs, but as the inventor of this enduring form of political organization. It is the model that many of the world’s autocrats use today.

Unlike Marxism, the illiberal one-party state is not a philosophy. It is a mechanism for holding power, and it functions happily alongside many ideologies. It works because it clearly defines who gets to be the elite—the political elite, the cultural elite, the financial elite. In the monarchies of prerevolutionary France and Russia, the right to rule was granted to the aristocracy, which defined itself by rigid codes of breeding and etiquette. In modern Western democracies, the right to rule is granted, at least in theory, by different forms of competition: campaigning and voting, meritocratic tests that determine access to higher education and the civil service, free markets. Old-fashioned social hierarchies are usually part of the mix, but in modern Britain, America, France, and, until recently, Poland, most assumed that democratic competition is the most just, and efficient, way to distribute power. The most appealing and competent politicians should rule. The institutions of the state—the judiciary, the civil service—should be

occupied by qualified people. The contests between them should take place on an even playing field, to ensure a fair outcome.

Lenin's one-party state was based on different values. It overthrew the aristocratic order, but it did not put a competitive model in its place. The Bolshevik one-party state was not merely undemocratic; it was also anticompetitive and antimeritocratic. Places in universities, civil rights jobs, and roles in government and industry did not go to the most industrious or the most capable: they went to the most loyal. Individuals advanced not because of talent or industry, but because they were willing to conform to the rules of the party. Though those rules were different at different times, they were consistent in certain ways. They usually excluded the former ruling elite and their children, as well as suspicious ethnic groups. They favored the children of the working class. Above all, they favored people who loudly professed belief in the party, who attended party meetings, who participated in public displays of enthusiasm. Unlike an ordinary oligarchy, the one-party state allows for upward mobility: true believers can advance—a prospect especially appealing to people whom the previous regime or society had not promoted. Arendt observed the attraction of authoritarianism to people who feel resentful or unsuccessful back in the 1940s, when she wrote that the worst kind of one-party state “invariably replaces all first-rate talents, regardless of their sympathies, with those crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty.”

Lenin's disdain for the idea of a neutral state, for apolitical civil servants and for any notion of an objective media, was an important part of his one-party system too. He wrote that freedom of the press “is a deception.” He mocked freedom of assembly as a “hollow phrase.” As for parliamentary democracy itself, that was no more than “a machine for the suppression of the working class.” In the Bolshevik imagination, the press could be free, and public institutions could be fair, only once they were controlled by the working class—via the party.

The far left's mockery of the competitive institutions of “bourgeois democracy” and capitalism, its cynicism about the possibility of any objectivity in the media, the civil service, or the judiciary, has long had a right-wing version too. Hitler's Germany is the example usually given. But

there are many others, from Franco's Spain to Pinochet's Chile. Apartheid South Africa was a de facto one-party state that corrupted its press and its judiciary to exclude blacks from political life and promote the interests of Afrikaners, white South Africans descended mainly from Dutch settlers, who were not succeeding in the capitalist economy created by the British Empire.

It's true that there were other parties in apartheid South Africa. But a one-party state is not necessarily a state with no opposition parties at all. Although Lenin's Communist Party and Hitler's Nazi Party arrested and murdered their opponents, there are plenty of examples of one-party states, even quite vicious one-party states, that permitted some limited opposition, if only for show. Between 1945 and 1989, many of the communist parties of Eastern Europe allowed opponents—peasants' parties, pseudo-Christian Democrats, or in the case of Poland, a small Catholic party—to play roles in the state, in the rigged "parliaments," or in public life. In recent decades, there have been many examples, from Ben Ali's Tunisia to Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, of de facto one-party states that controlled state institutions and limited freedom of association and speech, but allowed a token opposition to exist, so long as that opposition didn't actually threaten the ruling party.

This form of soft dictatorship does not require mass violence to stay in power. Instead, it relies upon a cadre of elites to run the bureaucracy, the state media, the courts, and, in some places, state companies. These modern-day *clerics* understand their role, which is to defend the leaders, however dishonest their statements, however great their corruption, and however disastrous their impact on ordinary people and institutions. In exchange, they know that they will be rewarded and advanced. Close associates of the party leader can become very wealthy, receiving lucrative contracts or seats on state company boards without having to compete for them. Others can count on government salaries as well as protection from accusations of corruption or incompetence. However badly they perform, they will not lose their jobs.

Around the world, there are many versions of the illiberal one-party state, from Putin's Russia to Duterte's Philippines. In Europe, there are many would-be illiberal parties, some of which have been part of ruling coalitions, for example in Italy and Austria. But as I write this, only two

such illiberal parties have monopolies on power: Law and Justice, in Poland, and Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, in Hungary. Both have made major steps toward the destruction of independent institutions, and both have showered benefits on their members as a result. Not only did Law and Justice change the civil service law, making it easier to fire professionals and hire party hacks, it also fired heads of Polish state companies. People with experience running large companies were replaced by party members, as well as their friends and relatives. Typical is Janina Goss, an avid maker of jams and preserves and an old friend of Kaczyński's from whom the prime minister once borrowed a large sum of money, to pay for a medical treatment for his mother. She had held some low-level party jobs before—but now she was named to the board of directors of Polska Grupa Energetyczna, the largest power company in Poland, an employer of forty thousand people. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's son-in-law is a similarly wealthy, privileged figure. He was accused of defrauding the EU, but no investigation was ever completed. The case against him was dropped by the Hungarian state.

You can call this sort of thing by many names: nepotism, state capture, corruption. But if you so choose, you can also describe it in positive terms: it represents the end of the hateful notions of meritocracy, political competition, and the free market, principles that, by definition, have never benefited the less successful. A rigged and uncompetitive system sounds bad if you want to live in a society run by the talented. But if that isn't your primary interest, what's wrong with it?

If you believe, as many of my old friends now believe, that Poland will be better off if it is ruled by people who loudly proclaim a certain kind of patriotism, people who are loyal to the party leader, people who are, echoing the words of Kaczyński himself, a "better sort of Pole"—then a one-party state is actually *more* fair than a competitive democracy. Why should different parties be allowed to compete on an even playing field if only one of them deserves to rule? Why should businesses be allowed to compete in a free market if only some of them are loyal to the party and therefore truly deserving of wealth?

This impulse is reinforced, in Poland as well as in Hungary and many other formerly Communist countries, by the widespread feeling that the

rules of competition are flawed because the reforms of the 1990s—when mass privatization and the imposition of free-market rules transformed the economies—allowed too many former Communists to recycle their political power into economic power. Both Orbán and Kaczyński frequently describe their opponents as “Communists,” and even win over foreign admirers for doing so. In Orbán’s case, his primary opponents, at least in the earlier part of his career, really were former Communists, renamed as “socialists,” so this description had some power.

But in both countries this appeal to “anti-Communism,” which felt so important a quarter century ago, seems thin and superficial now. Since at least 2005, Poland has been led solely by presidents and prime ministers whose political biographies began in the anti-Communist Solidarity movement. Kaczyński’s primary rivals are in the liberal center right, not on the left. There is no powerful ex-Communist business monopoly in Poland either—at least not at the national level, where plenty of people have made money without special political connections. Indeed, the most prominent ex-Communist in Polish politics right now is Stanisław Piotrowicz, a former Communist prosecutor in the martial law era, now Law and Justice’s nominee to the Constitutional Court. He is, unsurprisingly, a great enemy of judicial independence. Orbán regularly employs former Communists in high posts too. The “anti-Communism” of both governments is another form of hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, grim warnings about the influence of “Communism” retain an appeal for the right-wing ideologues of my generation. For some of them, it seems to explain their personal failures, or just their bad luck. Not everybody who was a dissident in the 1970s got to become a prime minister, or a bestselling writer, or a respected public intellectual after 1989—and for many this is a source of burning resentment. If you are someone who believes that you deserve to rule, then your motivation to attack the elite, pack the courts, and warp the press to achieve your ambitions is strong. Resentment, envy, and above all the belief that the “system” is unfair—not just to the country, but to you—these are important sentiments among the nativist ideologues of the Polish right, so much so that it is not easy to pick apart their personal and political motives.

Certainly that's what I learned from the story of Jacek Kurski, the director of Polish state television and the chief ideologist of the would-be one-party state. He started out in the same place, at the same time, as his brother, Jarosław Kurski, who edits the largest and most influential liberal Polish newspaper. Born in the same family, they believe in two very different ideas of Poland. They are two sides of the same Polish coin.

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To understand the Kurski brothers, it's important to understand where they came from: the port city of Gdańsk, on the Baltic Sea, where shipyard cranes loom like giant storks over old Hanseatic street facades. The Kurskis came of age there in the early 1980s, when Gdańsk was both the hub of anti-Communist activity in Poland and a shabby backwater, a place where intrigue and boredom were measured out in equal doses.

At that particular moment, in that particular place, the Kurski family stood out. Anna Kurska was a lawyer and a judge, active in the Solidarity trade union, the main opposition organization at the time. At home, their door was always open; all day long, people would stop by, hoping to discuss some urgent legal matter, maybe get some advice. Then they would stay, chat, drink tea, smoke, drink tea again, and chat some more. Nobody phoned up in advance, in 1980s Gdańsk. People didn't have telephones, or if they did they didn't trust them not to be bugged.

Anna's sons became activists too. Senator Bogdan Borusewicz, one of the most important underground trade-union activists from the time, told me that their school was widely known to be *zrewoltowane*—rebellious, in revolt against the Communist system. Jarosław represented his class in the school "parliament," an opposition initiative; he was also part of a group that read Polish conservative philosophy and literature. Jacek, slightly younger, was less interested in the intellectual battle against Communism. He thought of himself rather as an activist and a radical. After martial law was declared in 1981, ending the brief period of Solidarity's legal existence, both brothers went to marches, shouted slogans, waved banners. Both worked first on the illegal school newspaper and then on *Solidarność*, the illegal opposition newspaper of Solidarity.

In October 1989, Jarosław went to work as the press secretary to Lech Wałęsa, the leader of Solidarity, who, after the election of Poland's first non-Communist government, felt out of sorts and ignored; in the chaos created by revolutionary economic reforms and rapid political change, there was no obvious role for him. Eventually, at the end of 1990, Wałęsa ran for president and won, partly by galvanizing people who already resented the compromises that had accompanied the negotiated collapse of Communism in Poland, most notably the decision not to jail former Communists. The experience made Jarosław realize that he didn't like politics, especially not the politics of resentment: "I saw what doing politics was really about... awful intrigues, searching for dirt, smear campaigns."

That was also his first encounter with Kaczyński, later the founder of Law and Justice, who Jarosław told me was "a master of all that. In his political thinking, there is no such thing as an accident....If something happened, it was the machination of an outsider. *Conspiracy* is his favorite word." (Unlike Jarosław, Jacek would not speak with me. A mutual friend—we have several—gave me his private cell phone number; I texted, and then called a couple of times and left messages. I called again and someone cackled when I stated my name, repeated it loudly, and said, "Of course, of course"—naturally the chairman of Polish television would return my call. But he never did.)

Eventually Jarosław quit and joined *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a newspaper founded at the time of Poland's first partially free elections, in 1989. In the new Poland, he could help build something, create a free press, he told me, and that was enough for him. Jacek went in precisely the opposite direction. "You are an idiot," he told his brother when he learned Jarosław had quit working for Wałęsa. Although he was still in high school, Jacek was already interested in a political career himself, and even suggested that he take over his brother's job, on the grounds that no one would notice: "There was Jarek, now there's Jacek. Who can tell the difference?"

Jacek was—in his brother's description—always "fascinated" by the Kaczyński brothers, who were plotters, schemers, inventors of conspiracies right from the beginning. At the same time, he was not particularly interested in the trappings of Polish conservatism, in the books or the debates that had captivated his brother. A friend of them both told me she

didn't think Jacek had any real political philosophy at all. "Is he a conservative? I don't think so, at least not in the strict definition of conservatism. He's a person who wants to be on top." And from the late 1980s onward, that was where he aimed to be.

The sort of emotions that don't usually get much attention from great political theorists played a big role in what happened next. Jacek Kurski is not a radically lonely conformist of the kind described by Hannah Arendt, and he does not incarnate the banality of evil; he is no bureaucrat following orders. He has never said anything thoughtful or interesting on the subject of democracy, a political system that he neither supports nor denounces. He is not an ideologue or a true believer; he is a man who wants the power and fame that he feels he has been unjustly denied. To understand Jacek, you need to look beyond political science textbooks and study, instead, literary antiheroes. You could look at Shakespeare's Iago, who manipulated Othello by playing on his insecurity and his jealousy. You could study Stendhal's Julien Sorel, who murdered his mistress when she stood in the way of his personal advancement.

Resentment, revenge, and envy, not radical loneliness, form the backdrop to what happened next. Jacek eventually turned against Wałęsa, perhaps because Wałęsa didn't give him the job he thought he deserved. He married and divorced; he sued his brother's newspaper several times, and the newspaper sued him back. He coauthored a fiery book and made a conspiratorial film about the secret forces lined up against the Polish right. Both projects gave him a certain cachet among the group who felt, like him, unfairly excluded from power in the first twenty-five years of post-Communist Poland.

Jacek was also a member, at different times, of different parties or factions, sometimes quite marginal and sometimes more centrist. He was a member of parliament for one term, where he made no mark. He was a member of the European Parliament, for one term, and made no mark there either. He came to specialize in so-called "black" PR. Famously, he helped torpedo the presidential campaign of Donald Tusk (who eventually became prime minister of Poland, and then president of the European Council) in part by spreading the rumor that Tusk had a grandfather who had voluntarily joined the Wehrmacht, the Nazi army. Asked about this

invention, Jacek reportedly told a small group of journalists that of course it wasn't true, but "*ciemny lud to kupi*"—which, roughly translated, means "The ignorant peasants will buy it." Bogdan Borusewicz, the legendary Solidarity leader, describes him as "without scruples."

But although he spent years in public life, Jacek did not win the popular acclaim he thought that he, as a former teenage Solidarity activist, was entitled to. And this, his brother believes, was a huge disappointment: "All of his life, he believed that he is owed a great career...that he will be prime minister, that he is predestined to do something great. Yet fate dictated that he failed over and over again....He concluded that this was a great injustice." By contrast Jarosław was successful, a member of the establishment, the editor of what was arguably the country's most important newspaper.

In 2015, Kaczyński plucked Jacek out of the relative obscurity of fringe politics and made him the director of state television. And this, it would seem, was Jacek's chance to exorcise his frustrations. Try to imagine what would happen to the BBC if it were taken over by the conspiracy website InfoWars: that will give you a rough idea of what happened to Telewizja Polska, Poland's public broadcaster, the operator of several radio and television channels and still the main source of news for a large part of the population. Jacek's destruction of state media was unconstitutional—after 1989, state television was supposed to become public television, politically neutral like the BBC. But it was nevertheless very thorough, the work of a man driven by a need for revenge.

The best-known journalists were fired and replaced by people who had previously worked for the far-right press, on the fringes of public life. Very quickly, news broadcasts ceased to make any pretense of objectivity or neutrality. Instead, they produced twisted news reports and carried out extensive vendettas against people and organizations whom the ruling party didn't like. As it turned out, these vendettas were not just ugly, they were lethal. For months on end they ran a vicious, repetitive campaign against the popular mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz, accusing him of everything from corruption to treason. And someone was listening: On January 13, 2019, a recently released criminal, who had been watching state television in prison, leapt onto a stage at the climactic moment of a charity

concert and plunged a knife into Adamowicz's chest. The mayor died the next day.

Neither Kurski nor Kaczyński ever acknowledged the role that the channel had played in radicalizing the murderer. On the contrary: Instead of apologizing, Telewizja Polska turned its venom on others. Among them was the new mayor of Gdańsk, Alexandra Dulciewicz, who now needs a bodyguard. The mayor of Poznań, along with several other mayors, has had death threats as well. The taboo against political violence has been broken in Poland, and no one is certain who might be the next victim.

Still there has been no retreat, no acknowledgment that the constant drumbeat of hatred might inspire another assassination. The channel does not pay lip service to fairness. It does not employ any neutral commentators. On the contrary, it celebrates its own ability to manipulate reality. At one point in 2018, the station showed a clip from a press conference; the then leader of the opposition party, Grzegorz Schetyna, was asked what his party achieved during its eight years in government, from 2007 to 2015. The clip shows Schetyna pausing and frowning; the video slows down and then ends. It's as if he had nothing to say.

In reality, Schetyna spoke for several minutes about the mass construction of roads, investments in the countryside, and advances in foreign policy. But this manipulated clip—one example of many—was deemed such a success that for several days, it remained pinned to the top of Telewizja Polska's Twitter feed. Under Law and Justice, state television doesn't just produce regime propaganda; it draws attention to the fact that it is doing so. It doesn't just twist and contort information, it glories in deceit.

Jacek—deprived of respect for so many years—finally got his revenge. Even after he formally stepped aside as television director—for some inside his party he began to go too far—he remains right where he thinks he should be: at the center of attention, the radical throwing Molotov cocktails into the crowd. His frustration, born of his inability to advance in a political system that favored rationality and competence, has now been overcome. The illiberal one-party state suits him perfectly; the uglier it becomes, the more fear he will inspire, the more power he will have. Communism isn't available anymore as an enemy to fight. But new enemies can be found. His victory over them will make him even greater.

From Orwell to Koestler, the European writers of the twentieth century were obsessed with the idea of the Big Lie, the vast ideological constructs that were Communism and fascism. The posters demanding fealty to the Party or the Leader, the Brownshirts and Blackshirts marching in formation, the torch-lit parades, the terror police—these forced demonstrations of support for Big Lies were so absurd and inhuman that they required prolonged violence to impose and the threat of violence to maintain. They required forced education, total control of all culture, the politicization of journalism, sports, literature, and the arts.

By contrast, the polarizing political movements of twenty-first-century Europe demand much less of their followers. They do not espouse a full-blown ideology, and thus they don't require violence or terror police. They want their *clerics* to defend them, but they do not force them to proclaim that black is white, that war is peace, and that state farms have achieved 1,000 percent of their planned production. Most of them don't deploy propaganda that conflicts with everyday reality. And yet all of them depend, if not on a Big Lie, then on what the historian Timothy Snyder once told me should be called the Medium-Size Lie. To put it differently, all of them encourage their followers to engage, at least part of the time, with an alternative reality. Sometimes that alternative reality has developed organically; more often, it's been carefully formulated, with the help of modern marketing techniques, audience segmentation, and social-media campaigns.

Americans are of course familiar with the ways a lie can increase polarization and inflame xenophobia. Long before he ran for president, Donald Trump entered American politics promoting birtherism, the false premise that President Barack Obama was not born in America—a conspiracy theory whose power was seriously underestimated at the time. But in at least two European countries, Poland and Hungary, we now have examples of what happens when a Medium-Size Lie—a conspiracy theory—is propagated first by a political party as the central plank of its election campaign, and then by a ruling party, with the full force of a modern, centralized state apparatus behind it.

In Hungary, the lie is unoriginal: It is the belief, now promoted by the Russian government and many others, in the superhuman powers of George Soros, the Hungarian Jewish billionaire who is supposedly plotting to destroy Hungary through the deliberate importation of migrants. This theory, like many successful conspiracy theories, is built on a grain of truth: Soros did once suggest that wealthy Europe might make a humanitarian gesture and admit more Syrians, in order to help the poorer nations of the Middle East cope with the refugee crisis. But the propaganda in Hungary—and on myriad European and American far-right, white supremacist, and “identitarian” websites—goes far beyond that. It suggests that Soros is the chief instigator of a deliberate Jewish plot to replace white, Christian Europeans—and Hungarians in particular—with brown-skinned Muslims. These movements do not perceive migrants just as an economic burden or even a terrorist threat, but rather as an existential challenge to the nation itself. At various times, the Hungarian government has put Soros’s face on posters, on the floors of subway trains, and on leaflets, hoping that it will scare Hungarians into supporting the government.

In Poland, the lie is at least *sui generis*. It is the Smolensk conspiracy theory, which obsesses our old friend Anita Gargas and so many others: the belief that a nefarious plot brought down the president’s plane in April 2010. The story has special force in Poland because the crash did have eerie historical echoes. The president who died, Lech Kaczyński, was on his way to an event commemorating the Katyń massacres, a series of mass murders that took place in 1940, when Stalin slaughtered more than twenty-one thousand Polish officers—a deliberate assault on what was then the country’s elite. Dozens of senior military figures and politicians were also on board, many of them friends of mine. My husband knew almost everybody on the plane, including the flight attendants.

A huge wave of emotion followed the accident. A kind of hysteria, something like the madness that took hold in the United States after 9/11, engulfed the nation. Television announcers wore black mourning ties; friends gathered at our Warsaw apartment to talk about history repeating itself in that dark, damp Russian forest. My own recollection of the days that followed are jumbled and chaotic. I remember going to buy a black suit to wear to the memorial services; I remember one of the widows, so frail

she seemed barely able to stand, weeping at her husband's funeral. My own husband, who had refused an invitation to travel with the president on that trip, went out to the airport every evening to stand at attention while the coffins were brought home.

At first the tragedy seemed to unify people; after all, politicians from every major party had been on the plane. The funerals took place all over the country. Even Vladimir Putin, then the Russian prime minister, seemed moved. He went to Smolensk to meet Tusk, then the Polish prime minister, on the evening of the crash. The next day, one of Russia's most-watched television channels broadcast *Katyń*, an emotional and very anti-Soviet Polish film, directed by Andrzej Wajda, Poland's greatest director. Nothing like it has ever been shown so widely in Russia, before or since.

But the crash did not bring people together. Nor did the investigation into its cause.

Teams of Polish experts were on the ground that same day. They did their best to identify bodies. They examined the wreckage. Once the black box was found, they began to transcribe the cockpit tape. The truth, as it began to emerge, was not comforting to Law and Justice or to its leader, the dead president's twin brother. The plane had taken off late; the president was likely in a hurry to land, because he wanted to use the trip to launch his reelection campaign. He may have been up late, and drinking, the night before. As the pilots approached, they learned that there was thick fog in Smolensk, which did not have a real airport, just a landing strip in the forest; they considered diverting the plane, which would have meant a drive of several hours to the ceremony. After the president had a brief phone call with his brother, his advisers apparently pressed the pilots to land. Some of the advisers, against protocol, walked in and out of the cockpit during the flight. Also against protocol, the chief of the air force came and sat beside the pilots. "*Zmieścisz się śmiało*"—"You'll make it, be bold," he said. Seconds later, the plane collided with the tops of some birch trees, rolled over, and hit the ground.

Initially, Jarosław Kaczyński seems to have believed that the crash was an accident. "It's your fault and the fault of the tabloids," he told my husband, who had the horrific task of informing him of the crash. By that, he meant that it was the government's fault because, intimidated by tabloid

journalism, it had refused to buy new airplanes. But as the investigation unfolded, its findings were not to his liking. There was nothing wrong with the plane.

Perhaps, like so many people who rely on conspiracy theories to make sense of random tragedies, Kaczyński simply couldn't accept that his beloved brother had died pointlessly; perhaps he could not accept the even more difficult fact that the evidence suggests the president and his team, perhaps even inspired by that phone call, had pressured the pilots to land, thus starting the chain of events that led to the crash. Maybe he felt guilty—the trip was his idea—or remorseful. Or perhaps, like Donald Trump, he saw how a conspiracy theory could help him attain power.

Much as Trump used birtherism to stoke suspicion of the “establishment” even before he was a candidate, Kaczyński used the Smolensk tragedy to galvanize his followers, to reach out to new supporters on the extreme right, to convince them not to trust the government or the media. Sometimes he has implied that the Russian government downed the plane. At other times, he has blamed the former ruling party, now the largest opposition party, for his brother's death: “You destroyed him, you murdered him, you are scum!” he once shouted in parliament.

None of his accusations are true, and at some level he seems to know this. Perhaps to distance himself somewhat from the lies that needed to be told, he gave the job of promoting the conspiracy theory to one of his oldest and strangest comrades. Antoni Macierewicz is a member of Kaczyński's generation, a longtime anti-Communist, though one with some odd Russian connections and strange habits. His secretive demeanor and personal obsessions—he has said that he finds the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to be a plausible document—even led the Law and Justice Party to make an election promise in 2015: Macierewicz would definitely not be the defense minister.

But as soon as the party won, Kaczyński broke his promise and appointed Macierewicz to precisely that post. Immediately, Macierewicz began to institutionalize the Smolensk lie. He created a new investigation commission composed of cranks, among them an ethnomusicologist, a retired pilot, a psychologist, a Russian economist, and other people with no expertise on air crashes. The previous official report was removed from a

government website. Police entered the homes of the aviation experts who had testified during the original investigation, interrogated them, and confiscated their computers. When Macierewicz went to Washington, D.C., to meet his American counterparts at the Pentagon, the first thing he did was ask whether U.S. intelligence had any secret information on Smolensk. The reaction was widespread concern about the minister's mental state.

When, some weeks after the election, European institutions and human-rights groups began responding to the actions of the Law and Justice government, they focused on the undermining of the courts and public media. They didn't focus on the institutionalization of the Smolensk conspiracy theory, which was, frankly, just too weird for outsiders to understand. And yet the decision to put a fantasy at the heart of government policy really inspired much of what followed.

Although the Macierewicz commission has never produced a credible alternate explanation for the crash, the Smolensk lie laid the moral groundwork for other lies. Those who could accept this elaborate theory—could accept anything. They could accept the broken promise not to put Macierewicz in the government. They could accept—even though Law and Justice is supposedly a “patriotic” and anti-Russian party—Macierewicz's decisions to fire many of the country's highest military commanders, to cancel weapons contracts, to promote people with Russian links, to raid a NATO facility in Warsaw in the middle of the night. The lie also gave the foot soldiers of the far right an ideological basis for tolerating other offenses. Whatever mistakes the party might make, whatever laws it might break, at least the “truth” about Smolensk would finally be told.

The Smolensk conspiracy theory also served another purpose: for a younger generation that no longer remembered Communism, and for a society where former Communists had largely disappeared from politics, it offered a new reason to distrust the politicians, businesspeople, and intellectuals who had emerged from the struggles of the 1990s and now led the country. More to the point, it offered a means of defining a new and better elite. There was no need for competition, or for exams, or for a résumé bristling with achievements. Anyone who professes belief in the Smolensk lie is by definition a true patriot—and thus qualified for a

government job. And Poland is not, of course, the only country where this simple mechanism functions.

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The emotional appeal of a conspiracy theory is in its simplicity. It explains away complex phenomena, accounts for chance and accidents, offers the believer the satisfying sense of having special, privileged access to the truth. For those who become the one-party state's gatekeepers, the repetition of these conspiracy theories also brings another reward: power.

Mária Schmidt wasn't at my New Year's Eve party, but I've known her for almost that long. She's a historian, the author of some valuable work on Hungarian Stalinism; she gave me quite a bit of help when I was writing about Hungarian Stalinism myself. We first met in 2002, when she invited me to the opening of the Terror Háza—the House of Terror museum—in Budapest, which once gave me an award. The museum, which she still directs, explores the history of totalitarianism in Hungary. When it opened, it was one of the most innovative new museums in the eastern half of Europe.

From its first day, the museum has also had harsh critics. Many visitors didn't like the first room, which has a panel of televisions on one wall broadcasting Nazi propaganda, and a panel of televisions on the opposite wall broadcasting Communist propaganda. In 2002, it was still a shock to see the two regimes compared, though perhaps it is less so now. Others felt that the museum gave insufficient weight and space to the crimes of fascism, though Communists ran Hungary for far longer than the fascists did, so there is more to show. I liked the fact that the museum was seeking to reach younger people with its video and audio exhibits, and its intelligent use of objects. I also liked the fact that the museum showed ordinary Hungarians collaborating with both regimes, which I thought might help their descendants understand that their country—like every country—should take responsibility for its own politics and its own history, avoiding the narrow nationalist trap of blaming problems on outsiders.

Yet this is precisely the narrow nationalist trap into which Hungary has now fallen. Hungary's belated reckoning with its Communist past—putting

up museums, holding memorial services, naming perpetrators—did not, as I thought it would, help cement respect for the rule of law. On the contrary, sixteen years after the Terror Háza’s opening, Hungary’s ruling party respects no restraints of any kind. It has gone much further even than Law and Justice in politicizing the state media and destroying the private media, achieving the latter by issuing threats, blocking access to advertising, and then encouraging friendly businessmen to buy up media properties weakened by the harassment and loss of revenue. In addition to a clique of ideologues, the Hungarian government, like the Russian government, has also created a new business elite that is loyal to Orbán, and that benefits accordingly. One Hungarian businessman who preferred not to be named told me that soon after Orbán first took over the government, regime cronies demanded that the businessman sell them his company at a low price; when he refused, they arranged for “tax inspections” and other forms of harassment, as well as a campaign of intimidation that forced him to hire bodyguards. Eventually he, like so many others in the same position, sold his Hungarian property and left the country.

Like the Polish government, the Hungarian state promotes a Medium-Size Lie: it pumps out propaganda blaming Hungary’s problems—including the coronavirus, which the country’s hospitals were ill-equipped to fight—on nonexistent Muslim migrants, the EU, and, again, George Soros. Despite her opposition credentials and intellectual achievements, Schmidt—a historian, scholar, and museum curator—was one of the primary authors of that lie. She periodically publishes long, angry blog posts fulminating against Soros; against the Central European University, originally founded with his money; and against “left intellectuals,” by which she seems to mostly mean liberal democrats, from the center left to the center right.

Ironies and paradoxes in her life story are plentiful. Schmidt herself was a member of the anti-Communist opposition, though not a prominent one. She once told me a story about how, in her university years, all of the opponents of Communism used to work in the same Budapest library; at a certain point, someone would give a signal and all of them would get up and meet for coffee. After 1989, she became a prime beneficiary of Hungary’s political transition: her late husband made a fortune in the post-Communist real-estate market, thanks to which she lives in a spectacular

house in the Buda hills. Although she has led a publicity campaign designed to undermine the Central European University founded by Soros, her son is one of its graduates. And although she knows very well what happened in her country in the 1940s, she followed, step by step, the Communist Party playbook when she took over *Figyelő*, a once-respected Hungarian magazine: she changed the editors, pushed out the independent reporters, and replaced them with reliably loyal progovernment writers.

Figyelő remained “private property” and thus technically independent. But from the beginning, it wasn’t hard to see who was supporting the magazine. An issue that featured an attack on Hungarian NGOs—the cover visually equated them with the Islamic State—also included a dozen pages of government-paid advertisements, for the Hungarian National Bank, the treasury, the official government-funded anti-Soros campaign. This is a modern reinvention of the progovernment, one-party-state press, complete with the same cynical tone that the Communist publications once used. It is a Hungarian version of Jacek Kurski’s Polish state television: sneering, crude, vicious. In April 2018 it printed a list of so-called “mercenaries of Soros”—the “traitors” who worked for organizations that had received Soros donations—thus setting them up to be subjects of scorn and attack. In December of that same year, it put András Heisler, the leader of the Hungarian Jewish community, on the cover with banknotes—Hungarian twenty-thousand-forint bills—floating around and over his image.

Schmidt agreed to speak with me—after calling me “arrogant and ignorant”—only if I would listen to her objections to an article, about Hungary and other things, that I had written for *The Washington Post*. Despite this unpromising invitation, I flew to Budapest, where the candid conversation I had hoped for proved impossible. Schmidt speaks excellent English, but she told me that she wanted to use a translator. She produced a terrified-looking young man who, judging by the transcripts, left out chunks of what she said. And though she has known me for nearly two decades, she plunked a tape recorder on the table, in what I assumed was a sign of distrust.

She then proceeded to repeat the same arguments that had appeared in her blog posts. As her main bit of evidence that George Soros “owns” the Democratic Party in the United States, she cited an episode of *Saturday*

Night Live. As proof that the United States is “a hard-core ideologically based colonizing power,” she cited a speech Barack Obama gave in which he criticized a Hungarian foundation for proposing to build a statue in honor of Bálint Hóman, the man who wrote Hungary’s anti-Jewish laws in the 1930s and 1940s. She repeated her claim that immigration poses a dire threat to Hungary and became annoyed when I asked, several times, where all the immigrants were. “They’re in Germany,” she finally snapped. Of course they are: those few Middle Eastern immigrants who did manage to enter Hungary in 2016 had no desire to stay. Immigration is an imaginary problem in Hungary, not a real one.

Schmidt is touchy, angry: she says she feels patronized, and not only by me. Recently, the writer Ivan Krastev has described this mood, which he has compared to a “post-colonial” mindset. Unimpressed by (or uninterested in) the universal values that underly democracy, some people, especially accomplished intellectuals like Schmidt, now find it humiliating to have been imitators of the Western democratic project rather than founders of something original themselves. In speaking to me, Schmidt used precisely this language. The Western media and Western diplomats “talk down from above to those below like it used to be with colonies,” she told me. When Schmidt hears talk of anti-Semitism, corruption, and authoritarianism she instinctively reacts with a version of “it’s none of your business.”

Yet Schmidt, who spends a lot of time criticizing Western democracy, is not offering anything better or different in its place. Despite being dedicated to the uniqueness of Hungary and the value of “Hungarianness,” Schmidt has lifted much of her profoundly unoriginal ideology wholesale from Breitbart News, right down to the caricatured description of American universities and sneering jokes about “transsexual bathrooms.” Yet there is no cultural left in Hungary to speak of, and in any case Orbán, who has put the Hungarian Academy of Sciences under direct government control, terrified academics into silence, and forced the Central European University out of the country, is a far greater threat to academic freedom than anyone on the left in his country. I know of at least one group of Hungarian academics who decided not to publish an electoral analysis—it showed that Fidesz had cheated—for fear of losing funding, or losing their jobs. But

Mária continues the fight against the nonexistent “left” anyway. She even invited Steve Bannon and Milo Yiannopoulos to Budapest, long after both of those sad figures ceased to have much influence in the United States. Even her alt-right nationalism is, in the end, another imitation.

The other irony is how much she, far more so than Orbán, perfectly embodies the ethos of the Bolsheviks she genuinely hates. Her cynicism is profound. Soros’s support for Syrian refugees cannot be philanthropy; it must come from a deep desire to destroy Hungary. Obama’s comments about the statue were not sincere; they must have reflected a financial relationship with Soros. Angela Merkel’s refugee policy could not possibly have come from a desire to help people; it had another, nefarious agenda. “I think it is just bullshit,” Schmidt said. “I would say she wanted to prove that Germans, this time, are the good people. And they can lecture everybody on humanism and morality. It doesn’t matter for the Germans what they can lecture the rest of the world on; they just have to lecture someone.” All of this recalls Lenin’s contempt for the institutions of “bourgeois democracy,” for the free press he considered to be phony and the liberal idealism he considered to be inauthentic.

But the Medium-Size Lie is working for Orbán—just as it has for Donald Trump, and for Kaczyński—if only because it focuses the world’s attention on his rhetoric rather than his actions. Schmidt and I spent most of our unpleasant two-hour conversation arguing about nonsensical questions: Does George Soros own the Democratic Party? Are the migrants who tried to cross Hungary to get to Germany in 2016—and have now stopped coming altogether—still a threat to the nation, as government propaganda insists? We spent no time at all discussing Russia’s influence in Hungary, which is now very strong, or the fact that her museum’s special exhibitions have slowly begun to reflect the new anti-German, anti-European form of political correctness in the country: on the anniversary of 1917, for example, she put on an exhibition that portrayed the Russian revolution as nothing more than a German intelligence operation.

We did not talk about corruption, or the myriad ways—documented by Reuters, the *Financial Times*, and others—that Orbán’s friends have personally benefited from European subsidies and legislative sleight of hand. Orbán’s method works: Talk about emotive issues. Set yourself up as

a defender of Western civilization, especially abroad. That way nobody notices the nepotism and graft at home.

Nor, in the end, did I learn much about Schmidt's motives. I am sure that her national pride is sincere. But does she really believe that Hungary is facing a dire existential threat in the form of George Soros and some invisible Syrians? Maybe she is one of those people who can usefully persuade themselves to believe what it is advantageous to believe. Or maybe she's just as cynical about her own side as she is about her opponents, and it's all an elaborate game.

There are advantages to her position. Thanks to Orbán, Schmidt has had for nearly two decades the funding and political support needed to oversee not just her museum but also a pair of historical institutes, giving her unique power to shape how Hungarians remember their history, a power that she relishes. In this sense she really does recall the French writer Maurice Barrès, one of Julien Benda's *clerics*. Though Barrès "began as an intellectual skeptic," Benda wrote, "his material star waxed a hundredfold greater, at least in his own country, when he made himself the apostle of 'necessary prejudices.'" Barrès adopted extremist, far-right politics—and became rich and famous in the process. Schmidt's angry anticolonialism has helped her too.

Perhaps that's why she plays the game so carefully, always keeping on the right side of the ruling party. After we met, she published on her blog, without my permission, a heavily edited transcript of our conversation, which was confusingly presented as her interview of me and seemed intended to prove that she had "won" our argument. The transcript also appeared on the Hungarian government's official website, in English.

Try to imagine the White House publishing the transcript of a conversation between, say, the head of the Smithsonian Institution and a foreign critic of Trump and you'll understand how strange this is. But when I saw it, I realized why she had agreed to the interview: It had been a performance, designed to prove to other Hungarians that Schmidt is loyal to the regime and willing to defend it. Which she is.