



AFTER THE FALL

BEING AMERICAN IN THE
WORLD WE'VE MADE

BEN RHODES

BLOOMSBURY

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The World As It Is

AFTER
THE FALL

*The Rise of Authoritarianism in the
World We've Made*

BEN RHODES

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*For my family, and for people battling
authoritarianism everywhere*

The final takeover does not happen with one spectacular Reichstag conflagration, but is instead an excruciating, years-long process of many scattered, seemingly insignificant little fires that smolder without flames.

—ECE TEMELKURAN

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Prologue

ONCE THERE WAS a nation that ascended to a position of preeminence unparalleled in history. This nation held within its hands the capacity to destroy, shape, and enlighten all human life on earth. Its position of preeminence was reached after what seemed like an inexorable rise: born in revolution, built in part by the toil of those who suffered the lash of the whip, preserved through the crucible of Civil War, populated by immigrants from everywhere, enlarged through the brutal conquest of a continental frontier, enhanced by great feats of engineering and ingenuity, validated by the defeat of fascist ideologies that subjugated people half a world away and the extension of civil rights at home.

The expansion of this nation's influence was for a time contained by the barrier of an alternative form of human organization: communism. When the wall that symbolized this barrier came down, it was as if a dam had broken, allowing a great flood to water the soil on the other side. New markets would create wealth that people had been denied. Unmatched military strength would maintain peace among nations. Technological innovation would raise standards of living and make all human knowledge accessible to people everywhere. The people themselves would live in the freedom guaranteed by democracy, the uncorrupted government of, by, and for the people: the inevitable endpoint of history.

To be born American in the late twentieth century was to take

the fact of a particular kind of American exceptionalism as granted—a state of nature arrived at after all else had failed.

In the span of just thirty years, this assumption would come crashing down. Ironically, once they were unbridled, the very forces that enabled this nation's rise would accelerate its descent. The globalized spread of profit-seeking capitalism accelerated inequality, assaulted people's sense of traditional identity, and seeded a corruption that allowed those with power to consolidate control. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, this nation's sense of purpose was channeled into a forever war that hemorrhaged resources, propagated a politics of Us versus Them, and offered a template and justification for autocratic leaders who represented an older form of nationalism. This nation's new technologies proliferated like an uncontrolled virus before we understood their impact, transforming the way that human beings consume information; at first hopeful, the unifying allure of the Internet and social media segmented people back into lonely tribes where they could be more easily manipulated by propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theory. Somehow, after three decades of unchecked American capitalism, military power, and technological innovation, the currents of history had turned against democracy itself, bringing back those older forms of nationalism and social control in new packaging.

To be American in 2020 was to live in a country diminished in the world, unwilling to control the spread of disease or face up to our racism, and looking over the precipice of abandoning the very democracy that was supposed to be the solid core of our national identity.

Understanding how that happened is the starting point to figuring out how to move forward. America itself is a nation that encompasses the multitudes of humanity, a country populated with all of humanity's contradictions, hypocrisies, and opposing impulses. Having been humbled by our own excesses and salvaged by the narrow escape of the 2020 election, America has an opportunity to step back into history as a nation with a new understanding of how to improve upon the world we made. To do so, we have to re-create an identity

that draws on our better history as a nation of outsiders, reflexively distrustful of power, joined together to do big things, united by a set of principles that allows each of us to be whoever we want to be regardless of tribe. That is what we owe the world, and ourselves.

After the fall, we must determine what it means to be American again.

I SET OUT to write this book in the wake of the Obama presidency so that I could understand what happened to the world, my country, and myself. After working for eight years at the height of American political power, I felt like an exile in my own country. It was a newly disorienting reality, and one that lent itself to questioning every assumption I had as an American.

Travel was the most comforting and illuminating escape I could make from the political chaos back home. I took every opportunity I could to go overseas, and I found myself seeking out the kind of people I never really had the opportunity to fully *know* when I was in government: dissidents, activists, oppositionists—anyone, really, who looked at power from the perspective of an outsider. What an opportunity—to learn the stories of individuals who lived the political trends that I had watched from the exalted distance of the White House. Unburdened by being American themselves, they experienced no difficulty of politeness or discomfort that prevented them from seeing the Trump years for what they were: an American experiment with fascism, albeit of a particularly incompetent and corrupt kind. But there was also a similarly obvious reality: The forces that produced a Trump presidency long predated it and would still be there after it was over. Indeed, a new model of nationalist authoritarian politics is a defining reality of our world today.

The more I investigated this phenomenon, trying to work it out for myself, the more I saw the fingerprints of the era of American hegemony on what was shaping the lives of people all around me. How the 2008 financial crisis had collapsed not only the global economy, but also confidence in the very fact of American-led globaliza-

tion, opening the door to deeply familiar nationalist appeals. How the post-9/11 wars had also discredited American leadership while opening the door to a hypersecuritized politics of Us versus Them, one that could easily be repurposed to target an available Other in country after country. How the spread of social media had unleashed a flood of disinformation that undermined democracy while offering autocrats ever more powerful tools of social and political control.

I saw this most clearly in three countries that were Communist throughout the Cold War and are at the center of the political forces remaking the world today. In Hungary, where the anticommunist liberal turned reactionary nationalist Viktor Orban took advantage of the 2008 financial crisis to create a model of authoritarian politics that is strikingly similar to the playbook that the Republican Party has run in America. In Russia, where Vladimir Putin capitalized upon the humiliations of the end of the Cold War to build a cabal anchored in corruption and nationalism and then set out to turn the United States into a mirror image with American social media as his most potent offensive weapon. And in China, where Xi Jinping is building the model for a new world order on the pillars of state-controlled capitalism, national sovereignty, and totalitarian technology. Remove any democratic values, and you get the shift from the recent American model to the emerging Chinese one.

This is a book of stories, based on the instinct that it is best to see global events through the perspective of individual lives. The Hungarian opposition searching for a democratic identity capable of overcoming the blood-and-soil nationalism of the past and the failure of globalization to deliver on its promise. The Russians who have been victimized by violence and are still insisting on a politics cleansed of corruption, anchored in the truth. The Hong Kong protesters who saw a freedomless capitalist techno-totalitarian future encroaching upon their city and launched a movement that should be heard as a cry of warning. Collectively, their stories allowed me to see more clearly what had happened in their countries and why, as

well as to see the myriad ways that the era of American hegemony had contributed to it. That, in turn, allowed me to see America more clearly—through the eyes of outsiders in other countries, and through my own experience of being an outsider at home.

Ultimately, this book is my story. My journey from the wake of a historic presidency to a world that looked at America and saw that presidency's opposite. My effort to relearn what it means to be an American in a world gone wrong. While I was writing this book, a Russian who is a leading character in it was poisoned and nearly killed, the Hong Kong protests I immersed myself in were snuffed out, the world went on lockdown in the face of a pandemic, and an American autocrat was voted out of office and sought to overturn the result. Through these dramatic developments, the currents of history that I was feeling around me remained constant; if anything, the picture became clearer and clearer, like a landscape from which fog is lifting.

Because this book represents my own experience of these things, it is inevitably incomplete. We are all inherently limited in our perspective, shaped by our own history. But by recognizing ourselves in others, we can expand our own lens of vision. Perhaps we can also see our own shortcomings more clearly. For me, the experience of looking into the eye of where America has gone wrong has only made me love more fiercely what America is supposed to be.

That is the starting point of my present journey.

Part I

THE
AUTHORITARIAN
PLAYBOOK

*We can never start a new life.
We can only continue the old one.*

—IMRE KERTESZ

The Currents of History

FROM THE MOMENT I was deposited back into civilian life after the Trump inauguration, I felt compelled to get away from what was happening in America. To emerge bleary-eyed from some international flight, change currency in the baggage claim, and walk into blinding sunlight and the cacophony of voices speaking another language along the curbside—men smoking in soccer jerseys, clustered around a metal pole—was to be reminded that life went on despite the sense of hostage taking that afflicted my homeland. It was a form of self-imposed exile. And yet, in each locale, there was the discovery that the same thing was happening everywhere.

In March 2017, I went to Myanmar to help the government there prepare for peace negotiations with a patchwork of provincial ethnic groups who had been waging civil war for decades. Diplomacy, it turned out, was privatized like everything else. I would be an independent contractor for a British-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) led by Jonathan Powell, who had served as chief of staff for Tony Blair. Powell had led the negotiations to secure the Good Friday Accords that secured peace in Northern Ireland in the late nineties. Ever since, he'd become something of a globe-trotting private peacemaker from Africa to Latin America to Southeast Asia, a figure out of a Graham Greene novel meeting rebels in jungles and deserts, seeking to recapture the accomplishment of his career's high-water mark. Perhaps because I was newly admitted into the ranks of former officials, it seemed no surprise to Powell or his staff that I

wanted to get to Burma a little early to unwind. We were trying to help end wars, but we were also dealing with our own private ones.

For a couple of days, I walked aimlessly around the sprawling city of Yangon, a blanket of heavy heat over me, buying knock-off Nikes for a few bucks to make it easier on my feet. I went to a pagoda and sat staring at a Buddha, waiting to feel something. I walked into a U.S.-government-funded library where I'd been a guest of honor a couple of years before, now anonymous to young Burmese buried in books and screens. Then I conducted workshops in the capital city of Naypyidaw to help the Myanmar negotiating team prepare, sharing lessons I'd learned while negotiating reconciliation between the United States and Cuba. The civilians took earnest, copious notes. The stern-faced military men in drab green uniforms wrote nothing down. Afterward, I joined a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, dissident turned state councilor, at her residence. For the first time in my several meetings with her, we were asked to take off our shoes inside the Buddhist home, a reminder of the Burmese Buddhist nationalism that had become more predominant in recent years.

Within a matter of months, the Burmese military that had once imprisoned Suu Kyi would pursue a campaign of ethnic cleansing against a Muslim minority, the Rohingya. A million people were driven into neighboring Bangladesh. Through it all, Suu Kyi would remain silent. People wondered at her fall from Nobel Peace laureate of the early nineties to international pariah. But it made a certain kind of sad sense to me. A survivor from a country on the periphery of power in the world, she once surfed the wave of democracy that accompanied the end of the Cold War. She rocketed to international attention in 1989, the year that the Berlin Wall came down, by leading a democratic movement protesting the military government. By 2017, she was doing what she felt she needed to do to survive in a world where nationalism ran amok. Her own journey—from democracy icon to tacit collaborator in brutality fueled by Buddhist nationalism and rampant anti-Rohingya disinformation on Facebook—didn't cut

against the currents of history, it drifted in the wake of events in the wider world.

In April 2017, I went to Milan with Barack Obama. He was there to speak about climate change a few weeks after Donald Trump pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement. The rhythm of the trip felt familiar: a private plane, a block of hotel rooms, Secret Service agents. But the plane was a fraction the size of Air Force One, there were only a handful of hotel rooms and agents, and unlike the crush of responsibilities that used to follow me, I had very little to *do*. I accompanied Obama on a private tour of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings, peering down at bold lines that improbably anticipated the machines of the future—helicopters and missiles, the machinery of war that we'd presided over for eight years. Dusty volumes hundreds of years old lined the walls of the library. From human creations like this the Renaissance had emerged, paving the way for the pursuit of scientific inquiry and cultivation of a more enlightened Western civilization that now felt under assault. Back at the hotel, throngs of Italians waited outside Obama's hotel. I told him that he remained the most popular politician in the world. "No," he corrected me, "I'm one of the biggest *celebrities* in the world now." He didn't mean it as a good thing—progressive change relegated to cultural celebrity.

In July 2017, I went to Cuba. I stayed at the sprawling Hotel Nacional in the heart of Havana. Black-and-white photos of the Castros with visiting dignitaries and celebrities, vestiges of Cold War history, hung in the lobby. I met a friend from the American embassy for drinks at the outdoor bar, the kind of place that you assume has been populated by revolutionaries and spies for the last several decades. In a hushed voice, my friend told me about a mysterious illness that had struck employees of the embassy. There were theories about "sonic attacks," but the source would never be firmly established. It felt to us like something the Russians might do—people who wanted to sow conflict, drive others apart, put America and Cuba back into the Cold War that I thought we had ended.

A couple of days later, I flew to Santiago, where the Cuban Revolution had begun. I felt sicker than I could remember ever having been—a throbbing headache, ringing in the ears, repeatedly (and not always successfully) suppressing the urge to vomit. Was it food poisoning, or something else? I was shown around the revolutionary sites by an eager guide. A museum that documented the crimes of the prerevolutionary, U.S.-backed Batista government felt several historical epochs out of date, and so did the Cuban Revolution. I was driven into the countryside, almost two hours on roads at times blocked by mangy herds of animals, my stomach doing flips with every bump. We came to a secluded cemetery in the mountains, the place where the revolutionaries had become guerrillas. It was lush and peaceful, the only sounds coming from the birds and the breeze through the trees. An old man who'd fought with the Castros showed me around, his tour culminating at the site where Raúl Castro would be buried. I looked at the tomb with Raul's name already etched into it; this was a man who wanted to be remembered in the place where he had been young, when it was all still a cause uncorrupted by power and the passage of time.

Back at the Nacional the next day, I lay on my bed staring at the ceiling and having a conversation in my head. Had we misled all of these people, from the Cubans who wanted to move beyond the past, to the Europeans who saw America as a guarantor of democracy, to the Burmese who wanted democracy for themselves? People who had trusted us, only to be burned. Or were we always pushing against inexorable forces, the hard-line Cubans who clung to power with Russian backers, the nationalists trying to unravel the European Union, the Burmese military who wanted a nation for Buddhists? Was the dark turn I sensed everywhere I went a cause of America's nationalist, authoritarian turn, or was America merely following the same turn happening everywhere, caught in the current of history like a piece of driftwood?

This question continued to roll around in my head, from conti-

ment to continent. In Kenya, an American diplomat told me the Chinese were methodically supplanting American influence—buying up businesses and media, courting the students who no longer felt welcome in the United States. In Singapore, a senior government official told me casually over drinks that Asia had moved on from America—speaking as if this gleaming capitalist construction had almost been seamlessly handed off to the Chinese. In Amsterdam, Obama and I toured the empty Anne Frank house at night, peering into the small rooms where she'd penned her diary, the absence of tourists lending the place a feeling of having been forgotten.

In country after country, people asked me searching questions about how Trump could have happened. In Europe, Trump was often tied to the British vote for Brexit and the refugee crisis of 2015, the fears of Muslim hordes invading our open societies. But this theory, I felt certain, was wrong. It diminished the more structural, consequential forces at work everywhere I went, forces that had been building for a long time. No, this wasn't some black swan event, easily explained by a couple of years' worth of scary headlines. It ignored the lived reality of the eight years that I worked in the White House, the feeling that a cancer was metastasizing everywhere despite our efforts to treat it. It conveniently elided the ways in which decades of American capitalism, technology, and the politicized pursuit of national security had ripened so many people in the United States and around the world for crude nationalist appeals.

Then, on an early 2018 trip to Berlin for an Obama town hall with European youth, I met a young Hungarian named Sandor Lederer. We talked in an empty room of what was once the headquarters of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a Soviet-backed nation that doesn't exist anymore. The building was built in the drab style of 1960s Communist architecture. The exterior was gray and imposing, the interior filled with mosaics depicting idealized scenes of Germans in factories, farms, and mines contrasted with images of book burning and the persecution of workers under the Nazis. For

more than three decades, the men who ruled the GDR with access to the Stasi's files on the private lives of other East German citizens came to work in this building. It has since become one of Germany's leading business schools, the European School of Management and Technology (ESMT), a name that encapsulates the technocratic ethos of globalization that shaped the beginning of the twenty-first century. A monument to Communist power turned into a place to train capitalists. A reminder that history never ends.

Not yet forty, Sandor had knowing, sunken eyes and a mop of black hair flecked with gray, as if he carried around his country's post-Cold War journey like a weight. I asked him to walk me through how his country's prime minister, Viktor Orban, had transformed Hungary from an open democracy to a largely authoritarian system in the span of a decade. It took him only a few minutes. Win elections through right-wing populism that taps into people's outrage over the corruption and inequities wrought by unbridled globalization. Enrich corrupt oligarchs who in turn fund your politics. Create a vast partisan propaganda machine. Redraw parliamentary districts to entrench your party in power. Pack the courts with right-wing judges and erode the independence of the rule of law. Keep big business on your side with low taxes and favorable treatment. Demonize your political opponents through social media disinformation. Attack civil society as a tool of George Soros. Cast yourself as the sole legitimate defender of national security. Wrap the whole project in a Christian nationalist message that taps into the longing for a great past. Offer a sense of belonging for the disaffected masses. Relentlessly attack the Other: immigrants, Muslims, liberal elites.

It struck me that Sandor could have been describing America instead of Hungary.

I saw more clearly what had been stirring in me since Trump's inauguration: America wasn't at risk of being transformed into a semiauthoritarian nation by Trump; we were already well along that spectrum, and the damage could not be undone by any single election. And sitting in the old headquarters of the GDR, this monument

to the world that America transformed with the end of the Cold War, I began to see the outlines of how America's own actions over the last thirty years made this transformation possible—in our own country and in others.

This is the world we made.

Freedom's High-Water Mark

SANDOR LEDERER WAS six years old when the Berlin Wall was torn down in 1989. His father was a foreign correspondent based in East Berlin, and Sandor remembers the energy of the people in the streets, the excited conversations at the dinner table, the sense that something important was happening all around him even if he was too young to fully grasp it. After experiencing the euphoria of Berlin's reunification, his family returned to Budapest to find it transforming. "As a child," he told me, "you see the visuals. Visuals in terms of statues that you see on the streets, street names, cars on the street, billboard advertising, and also what you see on TV—several political parties discussing things." Gone were the traces of Soviet-sponsored totalitarianism, with its stale sameness, Communist iconography, and anointed heroes. In its place, suddenly, was the promise of an open society—the freedom to choose what news you watched, what products you aspired to buy, which political parties you joined. The freedom to choose who you were.

Viktor Orban was just twenty-five years old when he made his first impression on Hungarians at a rally in Budapest five months before the Wall came down. The purpose of the rally was to rebury the corpse of the martyred Imre Nagy, the man who led Hungary during its 1956 uprising against Soviet rule. Nagy, the Communist prime minister, had embraced the uprising, called for multiparty democracy, declared Hungary's neutrality in the Cold War, and demanded an end to Soviet military occupation. In a scene analogous to that in

Tiananmen Square a few decades later, Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest, crushing the uprising, killing thousands and displacing hundreds of thousands more. Nagy was hanged, his body discarded in a prisoner's grave.

At the time of the 1989 rally, Orban was a young beneficiary of the wealthy Hungarian-American émigré George Soros. As the leader of the Federation of Young Democrats, Orban represented the demands of Hungarian youth. Tieless, his dark hair in the style of a 1980s lead singer, he stood in front of four microphones and a crowd of a hundred thousand people. Orban paid tribute to the fact that Nagy “identified himself with the wishes of the Hungarian nation to put an end to the Communist taboos, blind obedience to the Russian Empire, and the dictatorship of a single party.” Orban himself was strident and uncompromising in his own defiance.

“Orban was a very popular liberal politician back then,” Sandor told me. Listening to him recall those days, I remembered my wonder at the images I watched on television as a twelve-year-old in New York City, of the crowds of Europeans filling the streets of fallen imperial capitals. I believed that what they wanted was simple: They wanted freedom, and that meant that America—in my young boy's mind—was winning. *The winds of change.*

This was freedom's high-water mark. In a dizzying few years, the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe collapsed, followed by the Soviet Union. Nelson Mandela strode out of a South African prison. Right-wing dictatorships tumbled from South America to Southeast Asia, no longer a useful extension of American anticommunism. The organizing principle of American politics disappeared as well: the Cold War, which had driven everything from our ascent to the moon, to the structure of our government, to the pop culture that shaped my worldview through osmosis. Bill Clinton was elected, the first American president born after World War II, who melded together center-left policies with accommodation to the unregulated, wealth-creating markets unleashed by the collapse of the Iron Curtain.

When the Cold War ended, Orban was in some ways an Ameri-

can creation—an underdog and vessel for the same arguments American presidents had been making for decades, a beneficiary of the American policy of containment that compressed the Communist bloc into a pressure cooker overheated by its own corruption and hypocrisy. Today, the anticorruption organization that Sandor leads, along with many other civil society organizations, has been deemed an “enemy of the state” by the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Meanwhile, Orban has become what he once railed against: obedient to Russia, the corrupt beneficiary of the dark money that courses through the veins of global markets, leader of what increasingly resembles a dictatorship by a single party. The story of how that happened is the story of how the period after that high-water mark of freedom failed to reconcile the wounds of the past or offer people a sense of purpose for the future. It’s a story that shaped the lives of Hungarians like Viktor Orban and Sandor Lederer in very different ways.

AT THE TIME, the fall of the Berlin Wall seemed to end the historical epoch that had begun with the rise of fascism and Communism. The carnage of World War II had morphed into the competition between capitalist democracy and Communist autocracy, and now that battle was over. As an American, I believed we had all emerged into a new consensus, the benevolent cocoon of American-led globalization. But within Europe, the early-twentieth-century clashes over identity cast long shadows; after the Iron Curtain was lifted, the shadows were still there within nations, communities, and individual lives.

Sandor is a half-Jewish Hungarian whose family circle encompasses the various conflicts and contradictions of the twentieth century. He was born in a country that suffered under the rule of Nazi-backed Hungarian fascists during World War II and Russian-backed Communists during the Cold War. His Jewish grandparents on his father’s side met in exile, in Turkey, during World War II. During the war, Sandor’s grandmother—who was born in the Ukrainian city of Odessa—

worked for Soviet intelligence. Sandor's grandfather—horrified by what was happening in Europe—worked for the British secret services. After the war, Sandor's grandparents moved to Budapest, where they were generally loyal to the new Soviet-backed system. "For them," Sandor said, "I think the Communist rule was a safeguard that Nazism could not come back. Politics was a question of red or brown"—Communist or Nazi.

As a child, Sandor was preoccupied with the Holocaust. He wasn't religious, but he was acutely aware that he would have been marked for the death camps. "It's still a lesson from history that shapes my thinking," he said. "How such a tragedy can happen in a civilized world as Europe was in the first half of the twentieth century." During his time in Germany as a child, Sandor used to take a particular interest in the older buildings, whose timelessness seemed to represent something sturdy and lasting from the past. He'd look around and wonder how it was that a country that was in many ways the center of Western civilization could produce such evil, supported explicitly or implicitly by the people who'd lived in those old buildings. As I am half-Jewish and secular myself, it's not surprising that this question used to gnaw at my American mind as a child as well, even though I was insulated by the distance of an ocean.

Sandor grew up wary of the dark places that charismatic political leaders can take nations, so his heroes were not politicians, but ordinary people—Victor Kugler and Johannes Kleinman, the two Dutch men who helped hide Anne Frank and her family in that small annex to an apartment during the Nazi occupation of Holland. "I never really liked authority and celebrities and stars and these kinds of heroes," Sandor told me. "And for me these two guys were powerful examples of risking their own lives, risking their own well-being, to protect a family that was in danger because they were Jewish." It made no difference that none of the people in this drama were Hungarian. "What we need in society are such people," he said.

Yet as Sandor moved through school in 1990s Budapest, he noticed how Hungarians avoided the minefields of the twentieth century.

Some Hungarians had supported the Nazi-collaborating government that sent hundreds of thousands of Jews to their death. Others, like Sandor's family, had supported the Communists who kept a tight lid on Hungary for more than four decades. "We did not really deal with it," he said. "Teachers were afraid to touch these topics, or speak out on this, because immediately students brought up their family stories. Because every family could look back on this—we were victims of the Nazis, we were benefiting from the Communists, we were benefiting from the Nazis taking flats from the Jews. So instead of having these debates, the teachers I think always wanted to share the minimum—the dates and people involved, and just to have a timeline of history but not really the interesting stuff."

In this way, instead of forging a renewed sense of national identity after the experience of the Cold War, one that exorcised its ghosts and replaced them with something different, the newly free Hungary avoided the matter of identity, what it meant to be Hungarian in the political sense. That was something private, tied to the painful past. Globalization was the new identity on offer from the American victors of the Cold War: expanding markets, opening societies, and liberal democracy washing over Eastern Europe like the rushing water of a breaking wave before it recedes.

AS SANDOR MOVED through school, Viktor Orban began his transformation from liberal firebrand to reactionary. There was a crowded slate of parties on the left, and Orban's own party—Fidesz—performed poorly in elections. So he pulled his party to the right, embracing—at first—a conventional form of center-right politics: smaller government, market-friendly, socially conservative. He served an unremarkable term as prime minister from 1998 to 2002 and was then voted out.

Over the next eight years, Orban turned his political party into a social movement, organizing "civic circles" across the country. The civic circles were small gatherings of people, often centered in churches, that cemented a longing for a traditional set of values rooted in a lost Hungarian identity: a Hungary that was Christian, a

Hungary with an ancient past, a brotherhood rooted in patriotism and shared grievances. Orbán reached back to the time before the Cold War and even before World War II. He highlighted the historic humiliation of the Treaty of Trianon, which dismembered Hungary at the end of World War I, costing it two thirds of its territory and stranding millions of ethnic Hungarians beyond newly drawn borders. Here was a history that many Hungarians could agree upon. But it was also the same blood-and-soil form of European nationalism that had ravaged the continent during World War II and killed hundreds of thousands of people in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, a nationalism that implicitly excused the ideology of fascism while rebuking the more recent evil of Communism.

Orbán's politics didn't always fit neatly on the West's left-right spectrum. Many of his supporters from the civic circles joined the global protests against the Iraq War in 2003, embracing antiwar rhetoric that rightly cast the American occupation of an Arab country as a form of imperialism that discredited the entire American-led international order. As the decade marched on toward the financial crisis of 2008, Orbán attacked amoral multinational corporations and the neoliberalism that fueled their profits, along with widening inequality between individuals and nations. In this way, Orbán's identity-based nationalism drew upon resentment of two fundamental pillars of the post-Cold War American order: the unequal wealth creation of open markets, and the unchecked excesses of American military power. At the same time, Orbán began to expropriate themes from the Republican Party's culture wars within American society: fidelity to Christian values, opposition to abortion and LGBT rights, antipathy to crass popular culture, and resentment of the political correctness of elites.

To many Hungarians, the first two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall had been disorienting and disappointing. The nation was wealthier, but that wealth was still far behind that of its Western European neighbors, and it was concentrated more in the hands of faceless corporations and a small elite than in those of individual

Hungarians. The nation was a member of clubs like NATO and the European Union, but it lacked the clout to have a voice on foolish American projects like the invasion of Iraq. The nation was free, but to many, the liberated culture seemed designed to offend more traditional Christian sensibilities. In response, Orbán wasn't just leading a political party, he was building a movement rooted in a deeper sense of national identity, offering a seawall of protection against the encroaching tides of globalization. To do that, he planted a foot on one side of that unresolved divide between red and brown—Communism and fascism—in Hungarian history. He was a nationalist, and he was poised to make Hungary great again.

AROUND THE SAME time, in the mid-2000s, Sandor had a very different kind of political awakening. He was finishing university with plans to be a diplomat when he noticed that one of his favorite parts of Budapest was being systematically destroyed—the 7th District, a neighborhood of pleasantly worn-in nineteenth-century buildings with balconies and long courtyards, housing a teeming mix of people from different classes, backgrounds, and ethnicities. It was also Hungary's old Jewish quarter, the neighborhood where Jews had been pushed into ghettos toward the end of Nazi dominance. That distinctive charm and resonant history, he noticed, was being replaced by new buildings without any character—the stale sameness not of Communism but of utilitarian capitalism. “Ugly, irrelevant buildings,” Sandor told me, “that could be anywhere in the world.”

It was not hard for me to understand why Sandor might have a visceral reaction to this cultural erasure. Like Sandor's, my Jewish roots are in the Eastern European countries where pogroms drove people deep into the Jewish quarters of the grand cities. A good chunk of my family came to America early, decades before German nationalism lit the fires that fueled the Holocaust, while some stayed behind, destined to be surrounded by walls. Growing up in New York City, I did not feel my Jewishness as a religious identity; history was something we had escaped from. Our rabbis were writers—

Roth, Bellow, Singer—who told stories from the residue of nation-states, the assertion of the individual. Our temples were the apartment buildings, courtyards, and fire escapes of Manhattan, where every life contained multitudes. As unbridled capitalism washed across New York at the same time that it remade Budapest, I had felt Sandor's sense of loss as I watched characterless glass towers erase those old apartment buildings and with them the stories they held.

While Orban was starting his civic circles, Sandor decided to investigate what was remaking this neighborhood he cared about. It wasn't hard to find a paper trail around the real estate transactions, or to figure out the larger context. The people kicked out of their old apartments received little compensation. The developers made a lot of money putting up these larger, uglier buildings. The politicians funded their campaigns—and probably made something on the side—from the developers. “It was not simply ignorance or a lack of culture,” he told me, “it was mainly corruption. Very typical. I think you have these stories all around the world.”

When Sandor graduated from university, he decided to do something about it. Together with two friends, he started K-Monitor, an organization dedicated to combating corruption and promoting transparency and accountability in politics. They had no money. They worked, Sandor said, like a garage band out of a worn-down house that one of his friends' parents owned on the outskirts of Budapest. They collected data and created a database mapping corruption across the country. The Internet was essential to their work. Ultimately, their database grew to include more than fifty thousand articles. They began to raise funds and receive grants. In keeping with the grassroots, egalitarian ethos of the organization, Sandor insisted on paying each employee the same amount, himself included.

In their different ways, Orban and Sandor were both reacting to a sense in the broader society that the economy and politics were increasingly corrupted. And there was ample evidence to justify that feeling. At the same time that K-Monitor was formed in 2006, confi-

dence in the center-left government collapsed when the recently reelected prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, was secretly recorded giving a speech to party elites in which he acknowledged, “obviously we lied throughout the last year and a half, two years . . . we lied morning, noon and night.” He was referring, in part, to a refusal to tell the truth in the last campaign about austerity measures that would be needed because of the excess government spending that seemed to have benefited mostly those at the top. “If there is a scandal in the society,” he lamented, “it’s the fact that the upper ten thousand are building themselves up again using public money.” As if anticipating the coming direction of events, he implored the left “that it doesn’t have to hang its head in this fucking country. That we shouldn’t shit ourselves in fear of Viktor Orban and the right.”

The prime minister had committed the political sin of stating the truth, confirming a sense in the country that the government was dishonest, corrupt, and powerless against the forces of globalization shaping life in Hungary. The streets exploded in protest. There were riots at the national television station and in front of the parliament building. Sandor recalls being unsettled by the instability. He could understand the anger, but it seemed that Orban was inciting the protests, the far right was taking over the streets, and the police did little to assert control. “You see the police cars in the neighboring street and you see some policemen coming up, but they are just pushed away by the crowds—the far-right crowds, there were many skinheads and right-wing radicals. And somehow the government is unable to stop it.” From his perch as leader of Fidesz, Orban fueled this dynamic with provocative talk about who was a “real Hungarian” and who was not. The competition between red and brown that had gone unresolved in Sandor’s classroom was now being pursued in the streets.

Meanwhile, in those early years of K-Monitor, Sandor told me they learned a basic truth: “Political corruption is very much connected to political finance.” In the post-Soviet bloc, the financing of politics was poorly regulated. “If I want to put it in a nice way,” San-

dor said, “it made politicians become corrupt because they do this to be able to fund campaigns. They had to get the money from somewhere.” Once parties like Fidesz won elections at the local level, they also started funneling public money into their campaigns.

K-Monitor saw some results in its anticorruption work—local politicians were shamed, and national corruption scandals were a feature of campaigns, but nobody was vigorously prosecuted because everyone had similar clouds hanging over them. This proved corrosive to Hungarian politics and society, as ordinary Hungarians became more cynical about the whole enterprise of democracy, which was, after all, less than two decades old.

Many Hungarians recall Orban’s rise by citing the Hungarian flag cockades that Fidesz members started to wear on their clothes, which recalled for me the ubiquitous American flag lapel pins that appeared on the suit jackets of American politicians after 9/11. In America, national fervor about terrorism had been marshaled by the Bush administration to replace the sense of purpose that we once had found in opposing Communism during the Cold War; in Hungary, national fervor was marshaled by Orban to fill the chasm that had opened up after the end of the Cold War, only the enemies were the forces of globalization encroaching from abroad and his political opponents at home.

IN 2008, THE bottom fell out of the global economy after American-made financial schemes triggered the financial crisis. Hungary was hit particularly hard, with one of the most open economies in Europe and without the deep reserves of capital that allowed Americans to avoid collapse on a similar scale. Because of foreign debts and its swollen budget deficits, Hungary was forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund to stabilize its finances—a dynamic that added humiliation to the economic injury. The already discredited government had no levers to pull to stimulate growth. Banks wouldn’t lend. Investment dried up. People couldn’t pay their debts. Jobs were lost. Wages stagnated. The ads on billboards showed

things that people couldn't afford, the unattainable spoils of liberal democracy. The political parties on television were helpless to deliver them. The people lost confidence in the entire system of the post-Cold War world: democracy and capitalism, globalization and the American-led order, which now appeared as corrupted as an old neighborhood being wrecked for a dubious real estate deal or a politician admitting to lies in a secret recording, a soulless exercise that created wealth for the wealthy with no anchor in morality. Perhaps the post-Cold War system was no better than what came before, a pyramid scheme to protect the interests of the powerful.

Orban was ready for that moment. He was already the leading opposition figure, and as Hungary plunged into a debt spiral and people lost their savings, he swept to a massive electoral victory in 2010. Orban had completed his transformation from a young, liberal politician to a far-right nationalist with a political project rooted in Hungary's older history. "It's definitely a cut between 1989 and 2010," Sandor told me. Beginning in 2010, Orban would set about remaking Hungary, claiming as a mandate the failure of the period that went before. "The economic crisis was a main driver that change could happen. So 2010 was more than a change in government."

Viktor Orban and Sandor Lederer both formed their political identities in response to the shortcomings of the post-Cold War era, the failure of the American-led order to replace the ghosts of the past with a tangible sense of meaning. Both of them lamented globalization's bloodless encroachment on certain aspects of Hungarian identity. Both of them found a foil in a government that had become too comfortable with the soiled compromises of corrupted democratic governance. Orban's instinct was to pursue power by directing people to the currents of national identity and historical grievance left dormant and unaddressed beneath the surface of Hungarian life, like an underground river—the politics of red or brown. Sandor's impulse was to protect something he loved in his community and to search for ways to hold those in power accountable like the ordinary people who'd been his heroes. Both of them were defending things

from the past that needed to be protected. But whereas Sandor was pursuing activism against the unjust use of political and economic power, Orban was methodically pursuing political and economic power. What he did when he attained it not only transformed Hungary, it joined a wave of right-wing nationalism that would reshape the world.