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Impresarios of identity: How the leaders of Czechoslovakia's 'Candlelight Demonstration' enabled effective collective action in a context of repression

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of identity leadership (Haslam et al., *The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence and power*, Routledge, 2020) in the 1988 'Candlelight Demonstration' in Bratislava which was a precursor to the 1989 Velvet Revolution. The analysis is based on interviews with the five remaining leaders of the demonstration and addresses three core issues. First, how leaders use performative means (*identity impresarioship*) as well as limited rhetorical means (*identity entrepreneurship*) to assemble protestors and create a sense of shared identity amongst them. Second, how these strategies of mobilization are linked to the highly repressive context in which the demonstration took place. Third, we analyse the extent to which these strategies are rooted in a psychological understanding of the processes of mobilization. We conclude by addressing the implications for our general understanding of leadership and the mobilization of collective action and the need for more research into these processes under conditions of repression.

KEYWORDS

collective action, identity leadership, mobilization, repression, social identity

INTRODUCTION

On 25 March 1988, several thousand demonstrators gathered on Bratislava's Hviezdoslavovo Square to sing the national anthem and light candles. They were there for little over half an hour, carried no banners, shouted no slogans and heard no speeches. Yet the event had great significance. It was the first

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mass protest against the Czechoslovak Communist regime for decades and is considered a precursor to the Velvet Revolution of November 1989. It can be considered a world-making event.

In this paper, we are interested in the role of leadership in organizing and mobilizing this event. What steps did the leaders take in order to make the demonstration possible in such a repressive context where the regime had minimal tolerance and harsh penalties for any form of collective dissent – and what are the implications for the study of leadership and collective action which is predominantly conducted in Western liberal democracies that are considerably more tolerant of protest activities?

In order to address these issues, we will first review the literature on leadership and collective action, then consider some limitations of this literature before, finally, providing the context and details of the ‘Candlelight Demonstration’ along with our specific research questions.

Leadership and collective action

Over the last two decades, there has been a considerable expansion in psychological studies on the precursors of participation in collective action (e.g. Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Stürmer & Simon, 2004; van Zomeren et al., 2008, 2012). This points to several key factors including a sense of collective grievance, identification with the aggrieved group, belief in the efficacy of action and a moral obligation to act (e.g. Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; Drury & Reicher, 2005; Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995; Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013; Uysal et al., 2022; Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012).

Characteristically, however, these analyses seek to identify the beliefs and emotions which dispose people to action without asking how people come to think and feel in such terms. They are models of mobilization which lack mention of a mobiliser. This is a serious absence since, as many authors point out, leadership is of central importance to collective action (e.g. Ganz & McKenna, 2019). But at the same time as pointing this out, they tend in the next breath to bemoan the fact that leadership is both under-studied and under-theorized in collective action research (e.g. DeCesare, 2013; Reger, 2007).

What is more, when leadership is invoked, it tends to be in very one-sided and top-down terms, looking at what leaders do to provide for or even impose upon members – such as the resources for mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), tactics and strategy (McAdam, 1983), or frames of understanding (Benford & Snow, 2000). To put it slightly differently, they address leadership of the collective but not a collective process of leadership. This is at odds with contemporary approaches to leadership, especially group leadership, which treat it as a phenomenon of influence rather than of imposition whereby one or more members of a group motivate other members of a group to internalize group goals and contribute to them willingly (Haslam et al., 2020; Mols et al., *in press*).

Perhaps of most relevance, is the social identity approach (Reicher et al., 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987) which, as we have seen, is central to social psychological approaches to collective action (both as an antecedent of whether people participate in collective action and also as a determinant of what people do in collective events; Drury & Reicher, 2020) is also the basis of recent models of identity leadership. These models develop the core insight that, when people define themselves in terms of membership in a given social group, they seek to learn and conform to the core norms, values and beliefs associated with that group (Turner, 1982). Accordingly, those who are in a position to define the nature of this social identity are also in a position to influence group members.

Early social identity research on leadership stressed the need for someone to be seen as a prototypical group member in order to be in a position to define the group identity and hence achieve influence (e.g. Hogg, 2001). More recently, Haslam et al. (2020) have developed a multidimensional model of *identity leadership* (Haslam et al., 2020; Platow et al., 2017; Reicher et al., 2007). This complements the emphasis on prototypicality (i.e. leaders need to be seen as ‘one of us’) with an equal emphasis on the need for leaders to be seen as acting for the group interest and as advancing group goals (i.e. ‘doing it for us’ and ‘making us matter’).

Critically, however, the *identity leadership* model does not take the nature of group identity for granted. Leaders play an active part in ‘crafting a sense of us’ such that they come to be seen as being representative

of the ingroup and their programs and accomplishments are seen as the realization of group norms and values. They do so, both in the sense of creating a sense of shared identity between people (Reicher, Haslam, et al., 2005) and in the sense of defining the content of this identity in terms of norms, values and beliefs (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

There are two ways in which leaders seek to craft social identities. One is rhetorical. Leaders use language to define who 'we' are. To achieve prototypicality, they tell stories about their upbringing which merge personal and collective histories. To legitimate their policies and validate their actions, they characterize both these and the group identity in terms that elide the two (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). By the same token, they characterize the policies and actions of their opponents as being at odds with the terms of group identity and as threatening or undermining group interests (Maskor et al., 2021; Mols et al., *in press*; Portice & Reicher, 2018). All in all, effective leaders need to be effective *entrepreneurs of identity* (Reicher, Hopkins, et al., 2005).

The other means of crafting identity are performative and practical. That is, leaders organize local events (e.g. rallies, demonstrations, festivals and commemorations) in ways that exemplify their vision of the groups and the intergroup relations in the wider world. For example, the Nazi Nuremberg rallies were theatrically staged to place Hitler as a lone leader in front of and above the serried ranks of followers. Hierarchy, order and even the materials from which the Nuremberg arena was built (granite and hard German oak) served to exemplify the Nazi vision of society (Mosse, 1975; Spotts, 2003). Similarly, Reicher and Haslam (2017) analysed Donald Trump's rallies during the 2016 US presidential election campaign. These were carefully choreographed as 'morality plays' in which a crowd bedecked in American flags was able to overcome its enemies (e.g. protesters and media) through the agency of their leader – Trump – and thereby become great again (Reicher & Haslam, 2017). Therefore, as well as being *identity entrepreneurs*, then, effective leaders also need to be effective *impresarios of identity*.

From theory to practice

While identity leadership theory provides a rich and multi-dimensional account of leadership effectiveness, not all aspects of the theory have received equal attention in practice. Specifically, while the theory emphasizes that creating a sense of 'us' is both a matter of creating a mutual sense of groupness and also of ascribing a particular content to the group, the former has been addressed far more than the latter. There have been multiple studies of how leaders define the boundaries of the group, the norms and values of the group, the interests of the group and what sort of people are prototypical of the group (e.g. Reicher et al., 2006; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Similarly, while the theory emphasizes that category definitions are created through both rhetoric and performative practices, the former has been addressed thoroughly and the latter all but ignored in psychological research (barring the study of Trump rallies mentioned above).

One possible explanation for such selective attention comes from a familiar skew in the contexts where collective action and leadership are studied. As a growing number of authors have pointed out, psychological research, in general, is overwhelmingly conducted in countries that are WEIRD: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (Henrich et al., 2010). Although only 12% of the world's population lives in such countries, they comprise 96% of those studied in articles published in top psychology journals (Arnett, 2008). A similar critique can be made of the collective action literature which is predominantly conducted in liberal-democratic societies (see Ayanian et al., 2021; Uluğ & Acar, 2019; for recent exceptions). Yet, as Desilver (2019) documents, at the end of 2017, out of 167 countries, 57% were democracies of some kind, but the remaining 43% had at least some elements of autocracy or were fully autocratic.

Yet the nature of collective action is likely to be very different in more and less repressive societies (Vollhardt et al., 2020). The factors leading to participation, the challenges people need to overcome in order to assemble, the types of strategy that produce change and hence the type of leadership which

makes for effective mobilization may all differ as repression increases (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Rosales & Langhout, 2020).

To take just one obvious example, in those countries where freedom of assembly is denied, the mere act of coming together as a group or crowd cannot be taken for granted. It becomes more of a problem to assemble, but, by that token, the assembly becomes more of an accomplishment with a much greater impact on relations between the opposition and the state (Haslam & Reicher, 2012). Similar considerations apply to countries which lack freedom of speech. Here, the space for rhetorical strategies – either to mobilize people to assemble or to motivate them once assembled – becomes considerably more restricted. The arrival of a speaker is likely to bring about the intervention of the riot police. Hence, it becomes necessary to use more subtle symbolic and performative devices to create contexts in which people can come together and express their collective identity.

One consequence of limiting research to non-repressive contexts is, therefore, precisely to take the right to assemble and the right to free speech for granted and thereby pay little attention to the forms of identity leadership necessary to create a sense of ‘us’ that are more prevalent in such situations – such as finding ways of achieving a public presence without the possibility of speaking out. In other words, the limitations on what issues identity leadership research has addressed and on where it has been conducted may be intertwined.

There is one further limitation in identity leadership research, not necessarily restricted to collective action leadership in repressive contexts, which we wish to highlight here. That is, while there are studies of leaders themselves and of their own understanding of what makes for effective leadership (e.g. Selvanathan et al., 2020), work on identity leadership tends to look at what leaders do and how it impacts followers rather than addressing leaders' own understandings (Haslam et al., 2015, 2020). In consequence, even if we can show that leaders gain effectiveness by creating and defining group identities and that they do so through processes of *entrepreneurship* and *impresarioship*, we do not know whether they are aware of these processes, whether they consciously deploy them and knowingly deploy them differently as a function of the level of repression in their society.

In order to address these various limitations, then, we need to analyse the actions and perspectives of collective action leaders in repressive contexts, with a particular focus on whether and how they seek to create shared social identities amongst their followers. Bratislava's 1988 ‘Candlelight Demonstration’, which took place in the repressive context of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1948–1989), provides the perfect context in which to conduct such an analysis. As Prins (1990) has argued, this was a society in which free speech and free assembly were suppressed, where people were socially atomized and where the regime survived by ensuring that individualized private opposition could not be collectivized as public dissent. In such a context, coming together despite the regime was a potentially revolutionary act.

The present study

The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was founded after World War II, as part of the Soviet Union's satellite zone (Heimann, 2011). The ‘communist’ regime was characterized by a highly repressive single-party government, even though, in 1975, Czechoslovakia signed the Helsinki Accords which asserted ‘respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief’ (Gordon Skilling, 1976). In practice, the regime sought to remodel culture and control every aspect of people's daily lives, including the freedom of religion (Corley, 1993; Doellinger, 2002). This involved closing monasteries, imprisonment of priests and transportation of many others (as well as nuns) to work camps (Persak & Kaminski, 2005). It also involved discriminating against lay Catholics in workplace and education settings, for example, preventing them from obtaining certain qualifications or pursuing certain careers (Jakubčín, 2010).

The Communist Party thought that if Catholics were treated as ‘lesser humans’ in the newly forming communist society, which endorsed atheist principles, they would eventually abandon their religion (Šimulčík, 2018, 2022). In the event, such extreme oppression led to growing resistance. An unofficial

'Underground Church' was formed which organized small meetings, smuggled in religious literature, self-published magazines (also called 'samizdat') and organized pilgrimages and retreats to nature (Šimulčík, 2022). Over time this Church grew in numbers and, in 1987, almost 500,000 people in Czechoslovakia signed a petition demanding the protection of religious rights (Šimulčík, 2018). This was an unprecedented act of resistance in the country. Out of the success of the petition came the idea to organize the 'Candlelight Demonstration' – the first such public demonstration not only in Czechoslovakia but in all of Eastern Europe for over a decade (Kenney, 2003).

In 1988, the 'Underground Church' received a letter, secretly smuggled from a community of Slovaks living in exile abroad. The letter asked them to join a series of protests for the protection of human rights in Czechoslovakia. These were planned to take place in front of multiple Czechoslovak embassies on 25 March 1988. In the event, the embassy demonstrations never happened and the 'Candlelight Demonstration' ended up as the only protest on that date (Kenney, 2003).

The Catholic priesthood supported the demonstration but did not physically organize it. The official organizers were lay Catholics. They, and their demonstration, were seen as a significant threat to the regime which took a series of measures to try and stop the event (Šimulčík, 2018). These ranged from distractions (e.g. showing a very popular film – *Angelika* – on TV at the same time as the demonstration), to discouragement (sending university students home the day before the event, changing public transport to make it more difficult to reach the Square) to overt repression (arresting known leaders before the event; blocking streets leading to the Square; using water cannon to disperse the crowds; arresting 138 people; Šimulčík, 2018). These measures were partially effective in stopping several thousands of people from joining the demonstration. Nonetheless, between 6:00 PM and 6:30 PM on 25 Friday, some 5000 people gathered in the Square, sang the national anthem, lit candles and prayed. The event continues to be commemorated as 25 March has since been designated as 'Struggle for Human Rights Day' in Slovakia.

This paper is principally based on interviews with the remaining leaders of the 'Candlelight Demonstration'. We use these interviews to address three main questions (linked to our analysis of the limitations of the literature on leadership in collective action):

First, to what extent were these leaders concerned with creating a sense of shared membership and to what extent was this accomplished specifically through performative means. That is, did these leaders act as *impresarios of identity*, and, if so, how?

Second, in what ways were the actions of these leaders framed by the repressive context in which the demonstration took place?

Third, how aware were these leaders of the psychological processes at play, of the importance of 'creating a sense of us' and hence, how explicitly were they oriented towards doing so?

METHOD

Participants and procedure

We interviewed five leaders of the 'Candlelight Demonstration', the only leaders of the event who remain alive. Two of those were the main leaders responsible for planning and organizing the demonstration in advance (coded as L1 and L2), and they were amongst those arrested before the event and hence unable to participate (cf. Šimulčík, 2018). We, therefore, interviewed three other members of the Underground Church (coded as L3–L5) who took leading roles on the day. We cross-checked leaders' accounts with other published sources on the Demonstration (e.g. Jašek et al., 2015; Kenney, 2003; Šimulčík, 2018). Leaders' names were anonymised and coded (see Table 1 for participant information). Interviews were semi-structured and were conducted in public places (e.g. cafes) in January 2019 in Bratislava, Slovakia.

Access and the sampling of participants were facilitated by the Nation's Memory Institute in Slovakia. It was based on their research and interviews with participants in the Candlelight Demonstration (e.g. Jašek et al., 2015). The first author recruited and interviewed all those leaders of the event who were

TABLE 1 Candlelight Demonstration leadership interviewees.

Participant code	Sex	Age	Position in Candlelight Demonstration
Leader 1	Male	73	Organizer the Candlelight Demonstration
Leader 2	Male	75	Official 'announcer' of the Candlelight Demonstration
Leader 3	Male	Late 60s	Leader of Underground Church
Leader 4	Male	62	Leader of Underground Church
Leader 5	Female	Late 60s	Leader of Underground Church

still alive in 2019 when our research was conducted. This author is a Slovak national, was brought up in Slovakia and is fluent in the Slovak language. Although she was born after the end of the Communist regime, she grew up with stories about life under Communism from both family and school. This facilitated the building of trust and rapport with the interviewees. None of these participants had a relation to the first author and they first met during the interview process. However, they could relate to her as they saw themselves as elders providing critical information to a younger member about her own history and culture.

In terms of factual details about what happened – and in particular about the actions of the demonstrators – these sources corroborated the accounts given to us by L3–L5. This is particularly important given that the events under discussion occurred over 30 years previously. Not only might this raise issues of memory (Brescò & Wagoner, 2015; Yow, 1994) but also responses may have been impacted by the interviewees' subsequent careers and interests (e.g. several of them were politicians post-Communism).

Each interview was in Slovak. It was tape-recorded (M length = 61 min, SD = 23 min, total duration = 245 min) and then transcribed and translated by the interviewer. Four interviews were conducted in total because two participants requested to answer the questions together (L4 and L5). The interview schedule was developed in English and subsequently translated into Slovak (see Appendix 1¹). It consisted of general topics with a list of issues to be covered under each. We would start each topic with an open question and only ask specific questions about these issues if they were not addressed spontaneously. We would also use additional questions to clarify and probe further on any interesting responses.

The topics concerned (1) leaders' backgrounds, (2) their decision to organize the demonstration, (3), the steps taken to mobilize people for the demonstration (if any), (4) their experience of the demonstration (if any) and (5) the perceived impact of the event on themselves and on the future opposition events.

The research was approved by the University ethics committee at the University of St Andrews.

We used inductive (bottom-up) thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Joffe, 2011), which was informed by the framework of the social identity approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2020). This process consisted of carefully reading through transcribed interviews and selectively coding the relevant parts of the transcripts. The first author generated the codes using a qualitative data analysis software, and then grouped them into potential categories related to the research questions, such as 'strategies to overcome repression', or 'creating a sense of shared social identity'. Disagreements between codes and categories in which they were grouped were discussed between the authors and resolved during this stage. For example, the code related to the leaders' decision to use candles in the Demonstration was linked to the section about leaders' strategic building of shared identity. However, the aspect of the candle as an object that was easily hidden from the sight of the police, coded as 'strategy to overcome repression' was linked to the section about the leader's tactics to make the gathering possible in a repressive setting. Based on this discussion, we created an initial

¹The full interview transcripts are confidential due to the nature of the data.

structure of themes. We then revised the themes, named them, and finally, wrote the analysis. This process was continuously reviewed in relation to the past literature multiple times before the final write-up. All three authors were involved in revising the codes and generating themes centred around identity leadership.

ANALYSIS

This analysis is divided into two themes, relating to the research questions outlined in the introduction. The first theme addresses whether leaders sought to create a sense of shared social identity amongst demonstrators, and their use of performative means in order to do so. In the second theme, we address whether and how the process of building shared identity is linked to the repressive context of the Demonstration. In both sections, we also investigate the extent to which leaders make explicit mention of the social and psychological processes underlying their decisions as leaders.

Theme 1: Strategies and practical considerations in building shared social identity

The leaders of the ‘Candlelight Demonstration’ aimed to mobilize as many people as possible to attend the event and they were clearly attuned to the importance of using unifying symbols and inclusive identities in order to do so. On the one hand, then, they turned to religious symbols because of their broad resonance amongst the Slovak population:

Extract 1. L1: *What unifies people the most is either a national anniversary or something connected to religion. In Slovakia, there was a problem that the national anniversaries weren't exactly Slovak... and let's be honest, for Slovakia even up until nowadays, the anniversaries associated with the First Czechoslovak Republic simply aren't as big of a deal here. For Czechs, it [national anniversary] could work but for us [Slovaks] simply not. However, there [in the Slovak region] was the power of religion and that is why Secret Church was able to mobilize people.*

On the other hand, they did not want to limit the demonstration to Catholics and therefore also invoked issues – notably human rights – which would appeal to all those opposed to the Communist regime. This was illustrated in a manifesto statement, the text of which was printed on a poster advertising the event and also read out on Western radio stations (such as ‘Free Europe’ and ‘Voice of America’) that broadcast to the region but were banned within it:

Extract 2. L1: *...we wanted to include something in the manifesto that would make the demonstration accessible to a wider public, not just Catholics, so that the demonstration would be for all people who perceived the regime as repressive. So, the third point of the manifesto was to restore the protection of human and citizen rights... and this was for all people. For Catholics and for atheists.*

Here we see a clear example of the leadership acting to create a ‘sense of us’. It is worth noting that the aim is less to ascribe a particular content to the group identity than to define the boundaries of the group as inclusively as possible. It is also worth noting that this is one of the few times when the interviewees positioned themselves as *entrepreneurs of identity*, using rhetoric to define the group. Much more commonly, they invoked the ways in which they choreographed the event in practical ways in order to enable people to assemble. To use the terms introduced above, they acted as *impresarios of identity*.

The first example of this lies in the choice of venue. The Demonstration was organized in Hviezdoslavovo Square in part for symbolic reasons:

Extract 3. L1: *...we picked Hviezdoslavovo [Square] instead [of SNP Square]. You know there were benches and trees and there was also the statue of Hviezdoslav which could be inspiring for the people as well as the Opera House on the other side of it, and the little church behind the Opera...*

The space has a particular meaning in relation to the national identity and both L1 and L2 emphasized that this is why they chose it. The Opera House is considered to be one of the most important buildings in Slovak culture and in the history of Slovak independence. Additionally, the Square is named after and has a statue of, the national poet P.O. Hviezdoslav who himself was a symbol of the fight for Slovak independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Finally, the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary positioned in the corner of the square adds a religious dimension to the mix. The nature of the space is therefore an important means of defining the nature of the crowd and, in occupying the space, the crowd makes an important performative point about who represents the Slovak people.

However, the choice of Hviezdoslavovo Square is not just about symbolism, not just about giving meaning to the crowd, it is also about more pragmatic considerations to do with assembling a crowd in the first place:

Extract 4. L1: *Firstly, we decided that the demonstration will take place in Hviezdoslavovo square because that is the most suitable square for these kinds of events in Bratislava. [...] it is big enough but also it is just for pedestrians and no cars have access to it. [...] We picked it [the time] in the way that most people will be able to come. We decided it will begin at 6:00 pm and end at 6:30 pm. We decided it will only last 30 minutes because we felt that 30 minutes would probably be enough because of the current state of things. And you know, at 6:00 pm people are already done with work and also those that needed to travel to Bratislava had enough time to arrive.*

The Square, in other words, is a good place to have a crowd. It is conveniently located with good public transport links. It is of a suitable size and is pedestrianized. And not only the place but also the time have been deliberately chosen to maximize assembly. In these various ways, the leaders put careful thought into how best to get the maximum number of people together. But they are equally clear that assembling people was a necessary but not sufficient element in the planning of the Demonstration. It was equally important that participants recognized each other as fellow members of a common crowd.

Leaders 1 and 2 referred to a previous demonstration organized by the Czech opposition in the 1970s which was unsuccessful because, although protestors managed to assemble in a square in Prague, they could not identify each-other as protestors. Hence, they could easily be dismissed by Government or misrecognised by the public as ‘passers-by’. This was something that the leaders of the Candlelight Demonstration explicitly wanted to avoid. Accordingly, they used three devices. The first was the use of candles; the second was the singing of the national anthem; the third was joint prayer:

Extract 5. L1: *... also, the question was how will the protesters distinguish themselves from the passers-by who coincidentally cross the square [...] We thought that for Catholics, but not just for Catholics, the candle is probably a good symbol. Also, anything else than a candle would be alarming for the police and they would arrest people. But anyone could have a candle hidden in their pocket and light it at 6:00 pm. You know... for Catholics, but not just for them...the candle is a very intimate symbol.*

Extract 6. L4: *...before the demonstration we planned that we will not speak publicly because we would be taken by the police immediately. Instead, we came up with the idea that we will sing the national anthem...you know, because everyone knows how to sing it, and once we start singing it, people will join. After that, we planned that we will pray for half an hour.*

As with the rhetorical use of social categories (see Extracts 1 and 2) so with these performative aspects of the events, the choice of categories is partly to do with ascribing content to the crowd. The candles denote Catholicism, and, more specifically, a sense of sacrifice and commemoration

for those who have passed away (Sedakova, 2015). Additionally, prayer also denotes religion, while the anthem denotes nationhood. But, more fundamentally, these devices were chosen because of their effectiveness in getting people to recognize each other as all being part of the same crowd. Thus, candles are an everyday object, easily accessible, portable and highly visible when needed. It allows people to see themselves as a crowd in a glimpse – even those who did not actually get into the square:

Extract 7. L2: *...we gave it [the demonstration] the characteristics of a candle...the candle was an ingenious idea. So, the one who had the candle was the one who is with us. This was amazing, especially because even if many people weren't able to get to the square, they were standing with candles in the side alleys.*

Equally, as is clear from Extract 6, the national anthem was chosen because it is known by all, can be sung by all, and hence unifies people in the singing of it. It is further worth noting the contrast to Extract 1 where the use of national anniversaries is rejected not because of a rejection of nationalism but that the anniversary (as opposed to the anthem) is a poor device to unify people as Slovaks.

There is one further dimension to the use of candles, anthems and prayer – as is made explicit (specifically in relation to candles) in Extract 5. That is, all of these are non-violent and non-threatening. They cannot be seen as provocative so they become harder to repress – and if they are repressed (and, as we have mentioned, the demonstration was violently dispersed at around 6.30 pm, half an hour after it began) then it will undermine the legitimacy of the regime. Indeed, as the leaders emphasize, the significance of the ‘Candlelight Demonstration’ lies in the fact that it was the first time that people successfully gathered as an oppositional crowd (‘L1: *not even Charter 77 was able to organise a successful demonstration. Yes, there was samizdat, there were petitions but getting people to the square firstly happened here in Bratislava*’), shifting power relations between state and people. The repression of the event played a major part in delegitimizing the Communist regime, paving the way and shaping the Velvet Revolution the following year in many ways – not least in making the square a taken-for-granted site (at least at the start) for gathering in opposition for those in Bratislava:

Extract 8. L2: *The main message of the demonstration is that the winners were the people who remained there, and this had caught interest of the whole world. The police with all their technique fought against people who held candles and prayed. This was a very powerful Gandhi-like statement of a peaceful resistance, and this is what influenced the Velvet Revolution and why it was peaceful as well.*

Theme 2: How the repressive context impacted mobilization strategies

We have just seen how the way in which leaders choreographed the ‘Candlelight Demonstration’ was profoundly shaped by the context of repression under the Czechoslovak Communist regime. What was done – lighting candles, singing the national anthem, praying – was carefully devised in order to limit the level of repression and maximize the costs of repression. The same is true of decisions about what protestors should not do.

In general terms, the key priority was not to respond to aggressive behaviour by state forces and to stay calm in the face of provocation, thereby denying any excuse for the state to escalate their actions:

Extract 9. L4: *Obviously during the demonstration, there were some policemen that acted as if they were part of the demonstrators and they were pushing people on the ground, they were trying to provoke us into fighting...but we immediately understood that these aren't the real demonstrators. They had angry faces and they were attacking even old people... this is how they started our but after a couple of minutes, some people started kicking the police cars and so on. We knew that these weren't our people but their people.*

We knew we must have remained calm no matter what and that we couldn't be provoked into these kinds of behaviours.

More specifically, a decision was made not to have traditional elements of a demonstration such as banners – not because these were seen as unimportant but because they could be seen as confrontational and hence used as a justification for intervention:

Extract 10. L2: *He [refers to a dissident who emigrated to the USA] wanted to use a banner where a Russian boot would be stepping on [the map of] Slovakia...we knew we couldn't use banners or speeches because it would be too risky.*

The same logic was applied in a decision not to have speakers in the square. This was not because the leaders felt that leaders are unimportant. Clearly, they play a key role in articulating the cause and concerns of protestors. At the same time, they provide a clear target for state repression and for disrupting the event. Hence a conscious decision was made that the impact of simply being present and being seen to be present outweighed that of making specific claims heard:

Extract 11. L1: *In terms of the speaker, we made a decision not to have one because we were sure that the police will be present there and they would immediately arrest the speaker after saying one sentence. So, this important point of having a speaker which is a really important part of a demonstration couldn't be there. We thought that this interruption could ruin the whole demonstration.*

DISCUSSION

This paper is one of the few to look at the psychology of collective action leadership in a repressive context, and the first, to our knowledge, that does so by using the accounts of leaders themselves. Previous studies rely either on historical descriptions of events (e.g. Einwohner, 2003; Spotts, 2003) or on ethnographic analyses of what leaders do (Reicher & Haslam, 2017). Our approach has allowed us to address three key questions. The first is to do with *identity impresarioship*. That is, do leaders use performative as well as rhetorical means to create a sense of shared social identity amongst collective action participants? Moreover, are they as concerned with creating a sense of collectivity ('we are a part of a group') as with defining the content of that collectivity ('these are the things that we share as a group')? The second has to do with the impact of repression upon what collective action leaders do (and do not do). The third question concerns the degree to which leaders root their actions in psychological understandings of the antecedents and consequences of collective action.

As regards the first question, our analysis shows that – in common with previous analyses (Haslam et al., 2020) – there is plenty of evidence that the leaders of the 'Candlelight Demonstration' used well-explored rhetorical techniques, such as employing broad and inclusive categories to mobilize as many people as possible. They also put considerable effort in order to define the content of these categories as an amalgam of the religious, the national and the human rights-based. This was conveyed both by where the event was held (for a powerful example of the links between spatiality and identity see Hopkins & Dixon, 2006) and by what people did in the event. Above all, it was conveyed by the symbolism of the candle, which gave its name to the demonstration. In Slavic countries, the candle is a common symbol, which conveys notions of light and darkness, life and death. In all Slavic languages, the term 'candle' (sviečka in Slovak, svíčka in Czech) is phonetically similar to 'light' (svetlo in Slovak, světlo in Czech), and 'saint' or 'sacred' (svätý in Slovak, svatý in Czech). This highlights the sacredness of the object (Sedakova, 2015) but also its connection to progressive causes.

Important as all these elements were, they were ultimately secondary to the prime aim of the demonstration. The mere act of successfully gathering as a group in public, to see each other gathered together in public, and to be seen by others as a group gathered together in public would be an achievement. This

was something which had not been achieved for decades, which others had previously tried and failed to do, something that was seen as a major accomplishment and a source of great pride. As L1 put it: *'getting people to the Square happened first here in Bratislava'*.

What is striking in our interviews is how meticulously the leaders considered every detail of the event in order to make it possible. As we have seen, the choice of venue was due not only to its symbolic value but due to its accessibility, size and pedestrianized character; the choice of timing was to make it as easy as possible for people to attend after work and on their way home, the choice of activities (e.g. singing and praying) was made on the basis of being well-known and easy for all to perform. In particular, if the candle has a series of symbolic meanings, it also has none, nowadays, flashlights on phones are used at football matches and pop concerts to be an empty signifier of collectivity in the moment and also to make for powerful images of a unified crowd beyond the event. Both metaphorically and literally, the event made the opposition visible. It demonstrated their numbers. It thereby gave them significance and empowered them to go further (Drury & Reicher, 2009; Hopkins et al., 2019).

Thus, the 'Candlelight Demonstration' provides powerful and graphic evidence of the need to complement analyses of *identity entrepreneurship* with *identity impresarioship* and analyses of the creation of identity content with identity sharedness. The key accomplishment of our leaders, as they themselves saw it, was to craft a context where for a brief half an hour, the idea of opposition became manifest in an oppositional crowd.

It is also evident from our analysis that the reason for taking such pride in this accomplishment has to do with the political context of the 'Candlelight Demonstration'. In WEIRD countries, where most collective action research is done (e.g. see van Zomeren et al., 2018) the right to assembly is largely guaranteed, the ability to gather together is taken for granted and attracts little attention. In the Czechoslovakia in 1988, things were very different. When a regime is set up to smash dissent, especially collective dissent, the significance of assembling a non-official crowd in public is considerably greater.

Equally, where freedom of expression is denied and expressions of dissent – whether on a banner or in a speech – are suppressed, then alternative forms of expression become more significant. Singing an anthem or holding a candle may be comparatively trivial acts in Western democracies. In Bratislava at the time, they were genuinely revolutionary acts. To put it differently, the repressive context helps explain why we find subtle performative acts replacing overt rhetorical statements. Having said this, it is important not to overstate the case and to avoid a simplistic distinction between *impresarioship* in repressive contexts and *entrepreneurship* in permissive contexts. Just as one can find examples of rhetorical leadership strategies in the 'Candlelight Demonstration' so we can find examples of performative leadership strategies in Western contexts (e.g. our analysis of Trump rallies; Reicher & Haslam, 2017) being a case in point. Indeed, if anything our argument is aimed at showing how much we have to learn in general by moving beyond the WEIRD world, by examining collective action and collective action leadership in repressive contexts, and how we need to pay more attention to identity sharedness and to *identity impresarioship* in all contexts.

Moving on to our third question, it is clear that the leaders of the 'Candlelight Demonstration' based their decisions and actions on a clearly thought-out conceptualisation of the mobilization process. They thought carefully about the way in which their rhetoric might impact the inclusiveness of the demonstration. They used their cultural knowledge to consider the suitability of different symbols not only in terms of their inclusiveness but also in terms of their traction for the intended audience and the way the use of these symbols would define the nature of the crowd (especially in the case of candles). They examined all the minutiae of the organization to make it as easy as possible for people to gather together (from the place to the time to the activities of the event).

Above all, everything they did was shaped by a consideration of how it would be represented by the regime and how their opponents would be likely to react. They knew that the regime would seek to portray them as provocateurs and use this as an excuse to intervene. Accordingly, they made the demonstration as non-provocative as possible so that if and when intervention did occur (as they knew it would) it would then serve to undermine the legitimating narratives of a regime that claimed to serve the nation and respect human rights, having just signed the Helsinki accords (cf. Kenney, 2003).

Of course, all this does not mean that the leaders explicitly theorized collective action mobilization in the terms we have outlined here, and by doing so this work may be useful in systematizing the insights of those practically involved in the business of mobilization. On the other hand, the knowledge and practice of these leaders, and the way in which their application of general principles (let us say about the importance of symbols) is dependent on rich cultural insights, is highly valuable in helping us to develop new theoretical insights (some of which we shall consider in the next section).

The key point here is that, in asking about leaders' awareness of the psychological processes at play in mobilization we are not implying that we have all the answers and testing the former against our superior knowledge. Rather, we are acknowledging the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, how neither is superior to the other and how those of us addressing the same domain (collective action) from different perspectives have much to gain by working together (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Limitations and future research

There are some obvious limitations to our study. On the one hand, the events we are addressing happened nearly 40 years ago, in which time memories may have faded and interpretations changed (Pennebaker & Gonzales, 2009). On the other hand, it is a small investigation, involving just five interviewees concerning a single event and hence constitutes a fragile basis for generalization.

The issue of memory and of reinterpretation is particularly important in our study for several reasons. Several of our respondents had subsequent political careers which may affect how they presented their role in 1988. Additionally, the 'Candlelight Demonstration' is now seen as a harbinger of the Velvet Revolution and hence may be accorded a significance it may not have had at the time. Yet these types of problems affect much retrospective data collection and yet oral histories and interviews are widely used not only by historians but also by psychologists (Bilewicz & Vollhardt, 2012; Kofta et al., 2019). There are three things which, in this particular case, give us confidence in the interviews.

First, we were careful to frame the discussion in ways that diminished the importance of self-presentational concerns (what discursive psychologists call these 'accountability concerns' – see Edwards & Potter, 1992; Ntontis et al., 2023). Thus, we made clear that the leaders' accounts would be anonymous. We interviewed them separately. We made clear that we were only interested in their role in the 'Candlelight Demonstration', and not their careers beyond. Second, we cross-checked any factual claims about the events against contemporaneous records and sources based on those (e.g. Jašek et al., 2015; Kenney, 2003; Šimulčík, 2018). We found no discrepancies between the two. Third, as well as cross-checking for accuracy, we evaluated the claims of the leaders in terms of their ability to explain the various distinctive features of the demonstration – where it happened, when it happened, and what was and wasn't done. As we have seen, the accounts do indeed make sense of the pattern of events. As in our work on collective behaviour more generally (e.g. Drury et al., 2020; Reicher, 1984), it is this convergence between a triangulated account of events and the psychological analysis which gives us confidence in the latter.

As for the limited scope of the study, we can only acknowledge that this paper marks no more than a first step into a domain of substantial significance – although it is also worth noting that, in interviewing all the remaining leaders of an epochal event, our paper may be of some historical as well as psychological interest. Certainly, we need more studies of collective action leadership across different repressive settings at different times with a view to examining the respective importance of rhetorical and performative strategies in creating and giving content to a sense of shared identity. To take just one obvious consideration, more recent studies might raise the use of the internet and social media by leaders (see Ghonim, 2012).

From our own analysis, two issues, in particular, seem to be worth pursuing. The first has to do with the use of symbols (Awad & Wagoner, 2020; Mols et al., *in press*) and the processes through

which they gain impact – both creating a sense of shared identity and ascribing meaning to that identity. Symbols may be particularly important in repressive settings where they can signify dissent without requiring overt statements of dissent and are therefore harder to suppress. Indeed, creative practices – like holding up blank sheets of paper to signify the lack of free speech – have allowed protests that otherwise would have been impossible. For instance, in a recent news article, Westfall (2022, para. 1) describes a recent blank sheet protest in China as ‘one of the greatest displays of public dissent in decades’.

A second issue has to do with developing further our understanding of the importance of *identity impresarioship*, its role in creating a sense of shared identity and the consequences of that sense in terms of empowerment and future action (cf. Drury & Reicher, 2005). A sense of efficacy is generally regarded as a key precursor of collective action participation (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Yet one of the implications of this study is that efficacy may also be a key consequence of participation. Indeed, one possible reading of our findings is that, especially under conditions of repression, leaders focus on getting people together so that they realize they have strength in numbers and that they are able to challenge the status quo. Elucidating the steps of this process is a priority for future research.

CONCLUSION

The ‘Candlelight Demonstration’ of 1988 quite literally made history. It did so because a dispersed opposition was able, for the first time, to come together and recognize each other as a unified crowd. This did not happen by chance. It was the result of meticulous planning by leaders who choreographed the event to make assembly as easy as possible, to facilitate the process of mutual recognition using shared symbols, and to make the cost of repression as great as possible to the regime. This study of the ‘Candlelight’ Demonstration opens up an investigation of how leaders act as *impresarios* of identity to create social categories, empower social groups and thereby initiate social change, especially under conditions of repression. It is a small first step but charts a much larger terrain that needs to be explored.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Klara Jurstakova: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Evangelos Ntonis:** Conceptualization; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Stephen Reicher:** Conceptualization; supervision; writing – review and editing.

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The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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This research was approved by the ethics board of the University of St Andrews.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview schedule

Background: Age and occupation; previous political involvement & any impact it had on people (surveillance, arrests, etc.); knowledge about other oppositional activities; previous experience of oppositional activities & feelings associated with participation; the impact of these activities (if any) on the people/their families; connections to others involved in oppositional activities; position/role in these activities/organizations (leaders/ordinary participants).

The decision to organize the event: What made people to organize this event; what were the initial reactions to organizing it; connections to other leaders; concerns about organizing this event; bases of the decision to organize the event; motivations associated with resistance; potential involvement with other opposition organizations, ways of promoting the event.

Experience of the event: A description of where they were and what they experienced; emotional experience of participation/non-participation due to arrests; a sense of connection to others at the event no matter if personally present or not; a sense of efficacy and empowerment in the event; powerful moments, perceptions of the police intervention, experience of harm/arrests.

Impact of the event: How the organization of the event/participation affected them personally/how it affected their family; how participation affected how they were treated by others (especially in their occupation/in public – both pre and post-1989); how participation affected their engagement in further dissent activities and their future political activities (after 1989); how they perceived the publicly available information about the event (news, commentaries); how they believe the event had a broader effect on society and future events.