



PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE

Photo by Kristen Ghodsee.

The Politics of Anamnesis: Communist Nostalgia, Ethnography and a Challenge for European Studies

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In the summer of 2010, a little more than six months after the date marking the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Center of Women's Studies and Policies (CWSP) in Sofia did something unprecedented for a non-governmental women's organization in Bulgaria. The CWSP had the audacity to suggest that communism had done some good things. Specifically, it instigated a discussion about how much the communist government had done for Bulgarian women between 1944 and 1958. This was an incredibly brave step in an intellectual climate that is hostile to the communist past, and the CWSP took it very carefully. For years, women's NGOs have been deriding the communist era, focusing only in the most negative aspects of the past: the lack of civil society, the double burden, the consumer shortages, and the institutional disregard for issues such as domestic violence and sexual harassment. Inconvenient facts, such as the sudden increase in women's literacy, education and professional qualifications after WWII, the massive incorporation of women into the formal labor force and the generous support system of child allowances, alimony, maternity leaves, crèches and kindergartens put in place to support working mothers, were downplayed or ignored. The CWSP wanted to change all of that.

The center sparked the debate by showing a propaganda film, which

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had been produced in the early 1950s: *Аз съм трактористка (I Am a Woman Tractor Driver)*, directed by Lada Boyadjieva. The short film is the tale of a young peasant woman who dreams of joining a female tractor brigade. It is based on the true story of the women's tractor brigade "Zoya Kosmodemianskaia" in the Bulgarian town of Pazardjik. The CWSP learned of this film because its heroine happened to be the still-living grandmother of one of the women working on the center's staff. The young employee's mother and aunt are also in the film as babies. The grandmother had never mentioned anything about the existence of the film until 2009, when she finally asked her granddaughter to find the film so that her family could watch it before her death.

The film highlights how one poor peasant woman, inspired by communist ideals about sex equality, became empowered through her work in a profession coded as masculine. It is a moving narrative told from the point of view of one woman defying tradition, embracing modernity, and finding personal happiness and success. It is also the true story of someone who is still alive, someone who can attend the various screenings together with her granddaughter, and someone who is willing to admit in public that communism was the best thing that ever happened to her and her peasant family. Despite its naked pro-communist message, CWSP Director Tatanya Kmetova insists that the film "is an excellent example of women's empowerment."¹

The CWSP has now screened the film to several audiences in Bulgaria, and it so happened that I met with an old friend who had recently seen the film. She had stayed to listen to the discussion that followed, a discussion that had been led by the grandmother, the film's heroine. My friend, whom I will call Irina, and I met in the garden of a little bar on Ivan Shishman Street in Sofia. Irina was an elegant woman in her early 50s, who had lived more than half of her life before 1989. She was a professor and a specialist in Bulgarian women's

history, someone whose scholarly work I greatly admired. For the many years that I had known her, however, she had always been very critical of the communist past. As someone who had lived through it as an aspiring academic, Irina had been a strident advocate for democracy.

So you can imagine my surprise when, after listening to her describe the film screening and the discussion that followed, Irina looked me straight in the eye and quietly said, "You know, Kristen, I never believed it before. But now I begin to realize that for ordinary people, communism was a better system. Maybe for women, too. Maybe for most Bulgarians, it was a good thing."

She spoke these words in a low voice, as if she was afraid someone was going to overhear us. Irina seemed momentarily worried that she had spoken something unspeakable, something that might change my opinion of her. I was, after all, an American, even if she knew that my work was precisely about trying to understand how ordinary people experienced communism and the transition to capitalism that followed. In that moment, I realized how transgressive an act it was for the CWSP to be showing that film in Bulgaria. Although Bulgaria has already enjoyed more than two decades of the freedom of speech and the freedom of conscience that theoretically accompanied the coming of democracy, it was still almost impossible to have an open discussion about the positive aspects of the communist past, or indeed to even consider that there were any positive aspects at all. As early as 2000, Susan Gal and Gail Kligman pointed out that "the apparent plurality and openness of the media [in Eastern Europe] obscure the fact that certain issues remain undiscussed, some perspectives on gender relations and possible futures are suppressed."²

The reluctance of intellectuals to reassess the communist past is in stark contrast to the opinion polls that show a growing fondness for the pre-1989 era. For instance, using the 2001

¹ Personal e-mail from Tatanya Kmetova to the author, October 19, 2011.

² Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.



At a February 2011 protest against utility monopolies in Bulgaria's capital city, Sofia, a man holds up a sign that reads "Salary = 270 lv; Heat = 300 lv; Electricity = 220 lv; Water = 120 lv; Until when???"

Photo by Kristen Ghodsee.

New Europe Barometer, two Swedish political scientists found increasing nostalgia for the material security of communism across Eastern Europe, with a majority of post-communist citizens evaluating the command economic system in positive terms.³ Citizens of post-socialist states also perceived a large gap between the abstract principles of democracy and the political systems under which they currently lived.⁴ In a 2009 Pew

³ Joakim Ekman and Jonas Linde, "Communist Nostalgia and the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 21, no. 3 (September 2005): 354–74.

⁴ Pew Research Center, "Two Decades after the Wall's Fall: End of Communism Cheered but Now with More Reservations," *Pew Global Attitudes Project* (November 2009): 22.

Research Center study, a majority of respondents in eight of the post-socialist states surveyed agreed that a "strong economy" is more important than a "good democracy."⁵ East Europeans were also somewhat more likely to answer that it is more important "that the state play an active role in society so as to guarantee that nobody is in need" than "that everyone be free to pursue their life's goals without interference from the state," with responses in favor of needs over freedom ranging from 51 percent in the Czech Republic to 72 percent in Bulgaria.⁶ Another poll from September 2010 found that about 49 percent of Romanians believed that their lives under communism were better than they are now.⁷ While these surveys demonstrate that many East Europeans are ready to reopen a discussion about the pros and cons of twentieth-century communism, it still remains largely *verboten* in most intellectual circles to do so.⁸

In April 2010, the East German writer, Daniela Dahn, broke this unspoken but pervasive taboo in a talk at Johns Hopkins University. Dahn had been a political activist in the GDR in the years leading up to 1989 and was instrumental in drafting new laws to eradicate state censorship and guarantee a free press. Together with her fellow dissidents, she had participated in the process of imaging a new future for East Germany, a new democratic socialist future. She explained, "As I grew up in the GDR, I always longed to live in a democracy. But not in capitalism. I had no illusions about its tendency to economic and financial crises, its power to create a social divide between the rich and poor, and its inclination to military solutions."⁹

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ George Jahn, "In Romania, Turmoil Fuels Nostalgia for Communism," Associated Press, January 18, 2011.

⁸ Although there are important exceptions: Maria Todorova, Zsuzsa Gille, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Neringa Klumbyte, Zala Volčič, Tanja Petrović, Vladimir Tismaneanu, Mitja Velikonja, Ljubica Spaskovska, Maya Nadkarni and Jessica Greenberg, to but mention a few.

⁹ "The Legacy of Democratic Awakening: 20 Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall," Lecture at the American Institute for

In her talk, Dahn cited an opinion poll taken at the end of November 1989 that showed that 89 percent of East Germans preferred to take “the path to better, reformed socialism,” with only 5 percent supporting the “capitalist path.” Dahn and other East Germans longed for greater political rights and Western prosperity, but they also wanted to keep some of the social supports of socialism in place. East German intellectuals worked to draft a new constitution for the GDR, but it soon became clear that their efforts were in vain. Dahn reflected, “Many in the oppositional civil movements would have been grateful for more time to consider how the advantages of both sides could be retained. How the dictatorship could be overcome without subjecting the defenseless population to the rough climate of the market economy. How a humane balance between the market and the planned economies could be achieved. How the GDR’s defects could be corrected by the strength of its own grassroots democracy.”¹⁰

In the end, German reunification under the West German constitution was not the union of two equal parts to make a new whole. For many East Germans, reunification felt more like a territorial grab by the West, an “*Anschluss*” (annexation) in the words of Matthias Platzeck, the Social Democratic politician.¹¹ Although 67 percent of East Germans said that they did not feel like they were a part of a unified country in 2010,¹² the political context of discussions about communism in Germany today is even more fraught than it is in Bulgaria. Susan Neiman, a moral philosopher and the Director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, feels that the possibility of having a levelheaded discussion about communism is more difficult now than it was when the GDR still existed:

“What is truly surprising about the post-89 discussion of communism in Germany is that it is much less differentiated and nuanced than it was before the Wall fell. One burning (perhaps the most burning) question in postwar discussions of German history has been the comparison of Nazism and communism, which serves a variety of purposes; those who think the two are fundamentally similar are, among other things, using it to excuse the German turn towards fascism in the 30s. In the mid to late 1980s this erupted into an intense public discussion known as the “*Historikerstreit*” in which public figures from Jürgen Habermas to the publisher of *Der Spiegel* forcefully and subtly attacked those, like the historian Ernst Nolte, who viewed Nazism as a reaction to crimes that began in the Soviet Union. For some time afterwards, it was simply considered wrong to say anything that implied an equation of Nazism and communism.

“Those scruples have been largely missing in the past several years. People speak of “the two German dictatorships” as if it were obvious that Nazism and communism in the GDR were simply the same sort of animal.... I think much of the Cold War tendencies in current discussion have frankly political motives, conscious or not. As one friend of mine, a well-known writer born and raised in the GDR, told me recently, contemporary capitalism is far worse than anything he heard about capitalism in school – under communist propaganda! The crisis in capitalism gets worse; the culture is concerned to make sure that any alternative to capitalism appears simply evil.”¹³

As scholars in the field of European Studies, it seems especially essential that we challenge the political mind-lock with regard to the history and memory of communism. In this task, good ethnography can be an invaluable tool because it

Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University (April, 15 2010).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “The Dark Side of German Reunification,” Reuters, September 29, 2010.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Personal e-mail from Susan Neiman to the author, November 1, 2011.

gives voice to the ordinary people who lived through communism and have their own ideas and opinions about its positive and negative aspects. Since 1997, I have been doing ethnographic research on how non-elite Bulgarian men and women experienced the economic transition from communism and how the massive social and political changes affected the rhythms of everyday life. My first book, *The Red Riviera: Gender, Tourism and Postsocialism on the Black Sea* (Duke University Press, 2005), looked at women's labor in Bulgaria's resort tourism industry and how the corrupt privatization of previously state-owned assets differentially advantaged some Bulgarians at the expense of others. Although the privatization of previously state-owned enterprises and the liberalization of capital markets took different paths in different places, economic shock therapy had destabilizing effects in almost all of Eastern Europe. In the fire sale of public assets that followed 1989, oligarchs, mafia bosses and/or foreign investors snatched up national infrastructure at bargain prices. In Bulgaria, Western investors purchased entire industries with the sole intention of shutting them down in order to create new markets for their own goods. In other cases, factories, airlines or entire resorts were purchased, broken up and sold off for parts. Greek investors stripped Bulgarian hotels of furniture, toilets, sinks, windows and pipes, leaving the hollow shells of buildings and scores of unemployed workers behind.

My second book, *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe: Gender, Ethnicity and the Transformation of Islam in Postsocialist Bulgaria* (Princeton University Press, 2009), explored the fate of the residents of one of Bulgaria's 'rust belt' cities after 1989. The men and women of this city were Slavic Muslims who had been severely persecuted for their religious affiliations during the communist

period. They had also been the beneficiaries of a massive rural industrialization campaign that had transformed a sleepy little village into a thriving mountain metropolis in only a few short decades. When communism collapsed, many of these Slavic Muslims were thrilled that they would now enjoy the freedom to practice their religion. None of them expected that religious freedom would come at the cost of economic devastation. Although the

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wild, unregulated form of capitalism that was bundled with democratic ideals and exported to Eastern Europe did benefit some new elites, the majority of Bulgarians saw their living standards steadily decline. Through my ethnographic research I learned that many of these

men and women were embracing more 'orthodox' forms of Islam because it held out the possibility of a system where religious freedom and material security could co-exist.

My latest book, *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life after Communism* (Duke University Press, 2011), builds on my first two books and is an extended rumination on the introduction of democracy and capitalism in Bulgaria after 1989. By living among ordinary Bulgarians, I have come to understand that despite its oppressive and inefficient aspects, the communist system felt comfortable and familiar to many men and women who came of age after WWII. It is always important to remember that although people lived under totalitarian conditions, daily life for most people was not a life and death struggle. Certainly, people's choices were constrained by travel restrictions and by the government's stranglehold on free speech, free association and economic production. Central planning made it difficult for individuals to pursue their desired career paths and consumer shortages meant that the comforts of daily life were not always readily available. The secret police and their

informants were everywhere.

But today, after more than 20 years of democracy and capitalism, people are acutely aware that their choices are still constrained, albeit no longer by the state, but rather by the unpredictability of the free market system. Whereas most East Europeans could not travel abroad without exit visas in the era before 1989, today many of them are free to leave, but no longer have the financial resources to do so. Now, career choices are limited by faltering economies, high unemployment rates and the rising cost of tertiary education. Digital surveillance cameras are now more ubiquitous than state security forces once were. For many outside of the urban centers, the ill-managed transition from communism to capitalism has brought nothing but growing poverty, depopulation and hopelessness. People are inevitably going to compare economic systems, and given the chaos of the transition to capitalism it should be no surprise that many people now see communism in a more favorable light, even as they are aware of its many flaws.

Writing for the *Guardian* on November 9, 2009, Maria Todorova, the U.S.-based Bulgarian historian reflected, "Lamenting the losses that came with the collapse of state socialism does not imply wishing it back. Not all aspects are missed. Mainstream ideological treatment, however, would like us to believe that it was all one package, that one cannot have full employment without shortages, inter-ethnic peace without forced homogenisation, or free healthcare without totalitarianism."¹⁴

The conflation of social solidarity and economic security with totalitarianism is a legacy of Cold Warrior ideology, according to which any state interference in the market on behalf of the common good is coded as 'communist'. It has been difficult for scholars to trouble this hegemonic notion of 'communism' or to critically examine the ways that all of the various experiments with state socialism around the world are uncritically equated with the

¹⁴ Maria Todorova, "Daring to Remember Bulgaria, Pre-1989," *Guardian.co.uk* (November, 9 2009).

worst excesses of Stalinism. This mindset often prevents scholars from being able to think of 1989 as anything but a world-historic defeat of leftist totalitarianism and the triumphant ascendance of human rights, freedom and democracy.

The dominant political and intellectual climate that makes it almost impossible to see the communist past as anything but 'evil' is the product of one particular set of myths about the events of 1989. We in Western academic circles are rarely exposed to the voices of people like Daniela Dahn, who dreamed that the GDR might have taken the democracy without the capitalism. Few people have had the opportunity to listen to the grandmother who was the tractor driver, to consider the concrete ways she believed her life to have been transformed for the better. Many of my academic colleagues ignore or belittle the survey data on communist nostalgia, arguing that it is the sentiment of an older generation pining for their youth or perhaps that it is the manifestation of widespread false consciousness.

Some junior scholars, however, are beginning to question this "prohibition on thinking."¹⁵ After a talk I gave in Vienna in September 2011, I received this e-mail from a Bulgarian PhD student who was in the audience:

"Your work on Bulgaria is really motivating for me. It is very rarely done by people inside the country. It is difficult to talk about communist nostalgia and the failures of transition without being framed as a communist and someone who denies the crimes of the Zhivkov regime, and so the important issues you deal with are not even present in Bulgarian discourse and media."¹⁶

More often, however, I am confronted with stony faces and outright hostility by people

¹⁵ To borrow a phrase from Žižek; see Slavoj Žižek, "Afterward: Lenin's Choice," in *Revolution at the Gates* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).

¹⁶ Personal e-mail to the author, October 1, 2011.

unwilling to question how they know what they know about communism and what to do about the East Europeans who don't think it was as bad as we think they should. In the United States, where I am based, the label 'communist' still remains the epithet of choice for everything un-American, unpatriotic and treasonous. Right-wing pundits hurl the word around like ninja throwing stars. Every government attempt to regulate the banking industry, to impose tighter controls on Wall Street, to provide basic social services to the American people, or to raise income taxes on the mega-rich is still painted with the red brush of 'communism', a term that the American public still recoils from in hatred and fear, as if the Cold War never ended. And although Americans are the most hysterical anti-communists, I often find similar knee-jerk, anti-communist sentiments among Europeans as well.

About a month after my talk in Vienna, I gave another presentation on ordinary people's

changing memories of communism in Washington, D.C. During the question-answer period, an East German woman in the audience tried to convince me that East Germans had been ruined by too many years of living under totalitarianism, that their personal thoughts and opinions could not be trusted because they were suffering from irreversible psychological damage. This woman seemed simply unable to fathom the possibility that the frustration of her compatriots might be based on the real shortcomings of current economic realities. And yet, as the global capitalist economy stumbles along toward its third year of recession, perhaps it is time for those of us in European Studies to revisit the stories we collectively tell ourselves about 1989 and what came before. Now more than ever, it seems imperative to explore how those stories not only continue to determine the parameters of our scholarly inquiries, but also limit the expanse of our political imaginations.