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Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, Stefan Troebst, eds. *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe.* Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014. 640 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-963-386-034-2.

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Recollections of Communism

Back in the late 1990s, I focused my ethnographic research on Bulgarians employed in the tourism sector. I noticed a distinctly gendered difference in the way that men and women spoke about the communist past and their new capitalist present. In conversation with an American researcher (me), the men tended to celebrate the demise of communism and talk about the personal and professional opportunities available to them under the new system of free markets and labor competition. Women, on the other hand, tended to be more measured in their assessments of the past, often lamenting the closing of kindergartens and the reduction in maternity leaves and child allowances. The inability to collect child support from ex-husbands was another common complaint; before 1989, the state automatically transferred some of the fatherâs wages to the mother, but after âThe Changesâ (as Bulgarians called the transition), private employers provided no such service. With the judiciary in disarray, single mothers lost support at the historical moment when they needed it the most.

After returning from the field and finishing my dissertation, I published an article on what I called âred nostalgiaâ among Bulgarian women.[1] The article was an attempt to give voice to those I interviewed by examining the legitimacy of their various laments and trying to make some sense of what communism did and did not do for women and families. After conducting more ethnographic interviews and comparing these personal recollections with texts of pre-1989 laws and statutes on family issues, I argued that state efforts to support women as workers and mothers constituted one of the laudatory achievements of Bulgariaâs state socialist past. But no one wanted to hear this. Instead, peers accused me of perpetuating socialist myths. One of my external tenure reviewers apparently suggested that my scholarship might be too politically committed to be taken seriously. I learned two important lessons from that early experience: 1) the politics of doing scholarship on the communist era is anything but objective, and 2) it is best to be a senior, tenured professor before you say something that challenges the neat narrative of totalitarianism that exemplifies much post-1989 scholarship on Eastern

Europe.

It is therefore with great interest and delight that I have followed the work of the Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova and her long-standing efforts to complicate the way we remember the communist past. The volume reviewed here follows two previous volumes that emerged from the same research network: *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation* (2010) and *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (2012, edited with Zsuzsa Gille). This third volume follows in the footsteps of the first two by focusing on intersections and tensions between private and collective memory. In her introduction Todorova asserts that the volume puts an emphasis on âthe process of remembering rather than on providing a definitive study of a past period. This attention to the processual aspects of memory stresses the constant and consecutive reassessments and rearticulations of the communist experience and seeks to emphasize lived experience as inflected by present-day political and social exigenciesâ (p. 5).

The book collects together a wide variety of chapters focusing mostly on Romania and Bulgaria, and in her introduction, Todorova openly embraces the heterogeneity of the work presented. She writes: âThe specificity of this particular project was that it did not assign topics on a commonly agreed theme and research methods, but gave complete liberty to people to come in with their problematic, relating it very broadly to âremembering communismââ (p. 11). The pieces are therefore written by scholars from the region who have personal stakes in the way communism is remembered, and the subjective nature of the scholarship is intended to expose readers to the wide variety of perspectives and opinions on the topics covered.

The edited collection consists of seven sections after Maria Todorovaâs lucid and provocative introductory essay in which she presents âan ethnography of the projectâ (p. 8). The first section is called âThe State of the Art of Eastern European Remembrance,â and includes surveys of memory studies in Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland by Thomas Lindenberger, Cristina Petrescu and DragoÈ Petrescu, Iskra Baeva and Petya Kabakchieva, and Izabella Main, respectively. A fifth essay by co-editor Stefan Troebst explores the comparative memory of dictatorships in Eastern Europe and southern Europe. In this section, Lindenbergerâs essay wonderfully describes the challenges to professional historians in Germany in an era when the Federal Chancellery has a dedicated agency for ensuring the state governance of memory and history. His analysis of two popular German films, *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) and *The Lives of Others* (2006), explores the historiographic politics of the German Democratic Republic. One tendency within the historiography is to focus on the social history of everyday life while ignoring the political; the second tendency is to focus exclusively on the repressive state apparatus and the persecuted dissidents, ignoring the contours of the quotidian. Together these five introductory essays are an excellent introduction to memory studies in Eastern Europe and could be easily assigned in undergraduate and graduate courses about the region.

After the first section, the following sections are: âThinking Through Things: Popular Culture and the Everyday,â âMemories of Socialist Childhood,â âWhat was Socialist Labor?,â âThe Unfading Problem of the Secret Police,â âThe âCultural Frontâ Then and Now,â and âRemembering Extraordinary Events and the âSystem.ââ These five sections contain twenty-three contributions of varying quality, although they all present fascinating original research that will be of great value to those interested in state-of-the-art scholarship on Bulgaria and Romania. What is particularly refreshing is that a personal essay prefaces most of the pieces, positioning each writer in relation to their work. Simina BÄdicÄ, for instance, introduces her chapter âForbidden Images?: visual memories of Romanian communism before and after 1989,â by explaining: âI am a child of the 1980s. No mater how different my life is now from what could be imagined for a child born and raised in CeauÈescuâs last and craziest decade, I will always know I come from a different world. My academic research so far could be summarized as trying to explain and understand this different world and the people who inhabited itâ (p. 201).

Similarly, in the introduction to Nikolai Vukovâs brilliant analysis of the controversies surrounding the ritual celebrations of the 9th of September (the day of the victorious Bulgarian communist revolution or of the brutal, totalitarian coup dâetat, depending on who you ask), Vukov recalls his own childhood memories of being forced to eat meatballs he did not want to eat. Albena Hranova writes an intriguing chapter called ââLoan memoryâ: communism and the youngest generation,â and by way of introduction she laments her university students who think that communism was âa medieval event or regimeâ (p. 233). Tsvetana Manova writes about the brigadier movement in her Bulgarian home town and explains that âmy family–my ancestors and their ancestors–were all native inhabitants of the town of Pernik. Therefore, it is my place, a place I did not choose

or want, but cannot change for anotherâ (p. 341). All of these personal reflections bring an intimacy to the collection, one usually missing in other academic volumes, and one that humanizes and ties together the otherwise disparate elements of the subsections.

The editors clearly put in a Himalayan effort to bring together this collection and make the essays available in English. The volume could have benefited from a concluding chapter, which might have drawn together some common threads and suggested future avenues for research on this important and timely topic. Furthermore, for a large volume like this one, a comprehensive and detailed index proves necessary, but the one provided has no subentries under general entries like âBulgaria,â âcommunism,â âmemory,â and âRomania,â rendering it all but useless to anyone trying to navigate their way through the major themes of the book. Depending on the nature of oneâs interests, many of the individual chapters can be assigned in a university classroom, but *Remembering Communism* is more of a reference work suited for university libraries.

None of this, however, fundamentally undermines the important contribution the book makes to memory studies more generally and to the specific project of remembering communism in Eastern Europe. As someone based in the United States, where the word âcommunismâ is automatically and uncritically associated with the worst crimes of Stalinism, edited volumes like this one do much to make it safer for younger researchers to explore controversial topics and challenge the ideological status quo. The deep irony of studying the communist past is that democracy promised freedom of conscience and freedom of inquiry. Many institutions of higher learning laud the principle of academic freedom and resist political attempts to meddle in or direct scholarly pursuits. But in the case of the twentieth-century communist past, inquiry is hardly free, and, as Todorova points out in her introduction, the majority of scholarship produced has been funded by foundations and institutions charged with investigating the *crimes* of communism. For pushing back against this almost exclusive focus on the negative, *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe* is a most welcome and necessary addition to the literature.

Note

[1]. Kristen R. Ghodsee, âRed Nostalgia? Communism, Womenâs Emancipation, and Economic Transformation in Bulgaria,â *LâHomme: Zeitschrift fÃ¼r Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* (*LâHomme: Journal for Feminist History*) 15, no. 1 (2004): 23-36.

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