

A photograph of a memorial site. The ground is covered with a large number of red carnations. A small, rectangular portrait of a woman with dark hair is placed among the flowers. A red ribbon with white text is draped across the scene. The background shows some greenery and a white surface, possibly snow or a wall.

KRISTEN GHODSEE

RED HANGOVER

LEGACIES OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY COMMUNISM

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Cover art: The grave of Rosa Luxemburg in

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Photo by Kristen R. Ghodsee.

Para mi abuelita, Cristina Lugo

HANGOVER (NOUN)

- 1 A thing or person remaining or left over;
a remainder or survival, an after-effect.

- 2 The unpleasant after-effects of
(esp. alcoholic) dissipation.

Oxford English Dictionary

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PRELUDE: FREUNDSCHAFT

Two pairs of earrings, four bracelets, and a mixtape inspired me to write this book. I was in the Stadtmuseum in the German city of Jena, peering into the various display cases of an exhibit called *Freundschaft! Mythos und Realität im Alltag der DDR* (Friendship! Myth and reality in everyday life in the GDR [German Democratic Republic]). The exhibit ruminated on the official and unofficial uses of the word “friendship” in the context of communist East Germany between 1949 and 1989. In one case, the museum’s curators displayed the personal items of a teenage girl who had gone to a Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth) summer camp in 1985. There, accompanying some photos and a letter she sent home to her parents, sat a white cassette tape, some plastic bracelets, and two pairs of oversized, cheap earrings, the kind once fashionable in the mid-1980s when every girl’s hair was two stories too high.

Back in 1985, I spent several weeks of my summer at a camp in the Cuyamaca Mountains one hour east of San Diego. When I left home, I remember packing several pairs of the same horrible earrings, some plastic bangles, and a stack of mixtapes with my favorite songs recorded off the local Top 40 radio station. Standing in Jena thirty years later, I experienced one of those moments of radical empathy, and tried to imagine what my life would have been like if I’d gone to summer camp in communist East Germany rather than in capitalist California. This girl and I might have shared the same passion for similar material objects, but we would have been ideological enemies, surviving our adolescences on different sides of the Iron Curtain.

From the placard on the display case, I understood that this girl was born in 1971, one year after me. Somewhere out there, this girl was now a woman about my age, and I longed to talk to her, to ask her what she remembered



FIGURE PRELUDE.1. A billboard for the *Freundschaft* exhibit in Jena.



FIGURE PRELUDE.2. Items from the East German *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (Free German Youth).

about that summer of 1985, and how things had worked out for her since. This German girl would have been eighteen when the Berlin Wall fell, and nineteen when her country ceased to exist. She would have just graduated from secondary school, and probably listened to Madonna and Fine Young Cannibals as I did: “Express Yourself,” “Like a Prayer,” and “She Drives Me Crazy.” But where I had the luxury of geopolitical continuity in my personal life, this East German faced a young adulthood of dramatic social and economic upheaval.

When I left the museum, I wandered through the cobblestone alleyways leading off the main market square. I saw posters for two upcoming demonstrations in Jena. The right-wing, anti-immigrant political party Alternative for Germany (AfD) would organize a rally and a march in the *Marktplatz* while Germany’s left-wing party, Die Linke (The Left), in a coalition with other centrist and leftist parties, would organize a counterdemonstration in front of the church. The counterprotesters had plastered the small city with posters saying “FCK AfD” and “refugees welcome,” and I guessed that the center/left demonstrators would outnumber their right-wing counterparts.

But after the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, and the spate of sexual assaults on women in Cologne on New Year’s Eve, many Germans feared for their future. The political appeal of the far right increased across the country, but particularly in the former states of the now-defunct Deutsche Demokratische Republik. In the eastern city of Dresden, “concerned citizens” formed a group called PEGIDA, which stood for Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamicization of the Occident).¹ Many ordinary men and women frustrated with their governments’ open-door asylum policies supported PEGIDA. On January 11, 2016, as LEGIDA (the Leipzig branch of PEGIDA) celebrated its one-year anniversary, about two hundred masked neo-Nazis marched through the immigrant-friendly neighborhood of Connewitz, smashing cars and windows with axes and baseball bats.² One month later, in the sleepy village of Clausnitz, a few kilometers from the Czech border, an angry mob of Germans tried to prevent a bus full of refugees from reaching a shelter.³ Men and women in the crowd shouted “Wir sind das Volk!” (We are the people), a slogan used by anticommunist protestors in 1989. Twenty-five years ago, this chant reminded the leaders of the GDR that democracy meant rule by the people. Two days after the incident in Clausnitz, a hotel destined to house Muslim refugees caught fire in the Saxon town of Bautzen.⁴ Onlookers cheered as the roof burned. Federal politicians condemned the growth of right-wing xenophobia in the former states of the GDR as ever more eastern

FIGURE
PRELUDE.3.
“Together
against
Fascism,” a
poster for the
anti-AfD rally
in Jena.



Germans felt their voices ignored. As I walked through the streets of Jena back to my university apartment, I wondered about that girl in the museum and the woman she had become. If she still lived in town, which rally would she be attending? With which side would she sympathize, and why?

The year 2017 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the creation of the world's first socialist state. Much of the twentieth century was defined by the presence of this Soviet superpower and its challenge to the political economy of greed and exploitation that underpinned the capitalist system. Built on ideals of self-determinism and social egalitarianism, the Soviet Union became a symbolic beacon of hope not only to people struggling against European imperialism and continued colonial domination, but also to Western workers locked in labor conflicts with ava-

ricious employers. Even after the cruel brutalities of Stalinism and the economic deficiencies of “really existing socialism”⁵ became clear, leftists continued to imagine alternative pathways to pure communism, the supposed highest stage of human history. When Eastern Bloc communism collapsed between 1989 and 1991, the whole project seemed consigned to the dustbin of history. The entire decade of the 1990s was one big ideological gloat-fest for the Cold War’s winners. Ding dong, the Reds are dead.

The end of the Cold War created an unprecedented opportunity to create a more stable, peaceful, and equitable world, for the Western countries to show moral strength and help rebuild the economies of the former Eastern Bloc in the way they once assisted the West Germans and the Japanese after World War II. Instead, the ideological war against communism continued as if the Cold War had never ended. The communist ideal became straitjacketed to the horrors of Stalinism for at least half a century. Of course, none of the twentieth-century experiments with the communist ideal ever came close to achieving communism in the Marxist sense, a future moment when the state would wither away. To be technically correct, the countries of Eastern Europe should be called state socialist countries, in the sense that the nationalized means of production were always controlled by a centralized state serving as a dictatorship of the proletariat. For Karl Marx, this was only a stage on the way to true communism, a necessary stepping-stone to a brighter future. But because they justified their actions in terms of the communist ideal, and because scholars and politicians in the West always referred to these countries as “communist,” I use the terms “communist” and “socialist” interchangeably throughout the book.

Since the late 1990s, I’ve been doing research and writing books about the experiences of ordinary people who lived through the end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe. My work endeavored to capture a recent past, one that would soon fade and be forgotten. But that day in Jena, I felt the past alive in the present and understood that the legacies of the fall of communism infused current European political realities. Why else would East Germans in 2016 resurrect a protest slogan from 1989? Indeed, once I started thinking about it, all of the major crises of the previous year—the Greek debt crisis, the Russian annexation of Crimea, the Syrian civil war, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the massive increase in migration to Europe—could be linked back to mistakes made after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc when fantasies about the world historic triumph of free markets and liberal democracy blinded Western leaders to the human costs of regime change. If the communist ideal had become tainted by its association with

twentieth-century Eastern European regimes, today the democratic ideal was increasingly sullied by its links to neoliberal capitalism. How much violence and human misery had been justified in the name of promoting democracy or regime change?

By 2016, Europe teetered on the brink of disintegration as popular right-wing leaders in Poland and Hungary declared their countries “illiberal democracies” and flouted European Union quotas for the distribution of refugees fleeing the conflicts born of Western-supported efforts to bring democracy to the Middle East. Even within the so-called consolidated democracies at the heart of Europe, electorates grew increasingly polarized as a xenophobic right whipped up fear and hatred of the Islamic other. At the same time, Great Britain voted for Brexit and nations within the border-free Schengen Area rushed to reestablish passport controls and instituted new limitations on asylum seekers. Terrorist attacks in France and Germany have sent otherwise moderate and tolerant citizens into the arms of growing nationalist parties.

I wrote most of this book between December 2015 and May 2016 while I lived in Jena, working at a research college affiliated with the Friedrich Schiller University. The center hosted a variety of academic fellows (historians, sociologists, literary scholars), all doing research on the history of twentieth-century Eastern Europe. Most of my fellow scholars hailed from the former communist countries: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Ukraine. As one of only two Americans, I spent those five months immersed in a community of experts on the contemporary history and politics of Eastern Europe. Although I was working on a different book, I couldn’t help but be caught up in current events. The ethnographer in me needed to talk to people, to make sense of the deeper histories behind the headlines. When my Czech office mate, who was fourteen in 1989, bemoaned the imposition of new border controls and told me that freedom of travel had been “the best thing about the end of communism,” I decided to stop and reflect on the political chaos emerging around me. I might be living in the last days of the European Union, I thought, and I felt compelled to write about that specific moment in time and how it related to the end of the Cold War a quarter of a century earlier. When Timothy Garton Ash, reflecting on the British Brexit vote to leave the European Union, wrote, “It feels almost as bad a day as the day of the fall of the Berlin Wall was good,” I felt even more certain that the chickens of 1989 were finally coming home to roost.⁶

All of the essays included in this book come from my own experiences living, working, studying, and traveling in the former socialist countries of



FIGURE PRELUDE.4. East German memorabilia in the *Freundschaft* exhibit.

Eastern Europe that are now members (or aspiring members) of the European Union. Since 1998, I have lived for about three and a half years in Bulgaria and nineteen months in both eastern and western Germany. Back in the summer of 1990, I also spent two months traveling in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the soon-to-disappear GDR. In the last quarter of a century, I have been a frequent visitor to Eastern Europe, doing research, attending seminars, and delivering invited lectures from Belgrade to Warsaw. As I traveled through the region (often by car or train), I witnessed landscapes pockmarked with the remains of communism: abandoned fields, crumbling factories, decrepit high-rise apartment blocks. I became fascinated with the legacies of twentieth-century communism, and the essays in this book emerge from my personal desire to understand the varied politics of Central and Eastern Europe after 1989.

Amid the essays, I have also included four short stories. In two cases, the fictionalized episodes build upon events or circumstances of which I had only secondhand knowledge. I digested these stories and used my imagination and understanding of local cultures to flesh out the details. In a third case, I dabbled in a little speculative science fiction, imagining a future version of myself applying for political asylum in Germany after the election of someone like Donald Trump. I played on the German history of de-Nazification

FIGURE
PRELUDE.5.
A sign on
a lamppost
in Berlin in
August 2016:
“Here a Nazi
could hang.”



and postcommunist lustration to ask whether we can hold individuals responsible for inaction in the face of tyranny. When I first drafted the text of this fictitious future interview with German immigration officials, Donald Trump had not yet won the Republican nomination, and most of my early readers thought the story unrealistic. No one would remember Trump, they said, when the book came out, so I created a different character, one young enough to declare himself president for life in my little alternative universe. And finally, I could not resist the opportunity to include a political allegory, a fable exploring the vulnerability of democracy in the style of other politically charged animal fables of the past. Just as the popular stereotype of communism is rarely uncoupled from the state repression of the twentieth-century experience of it, today I fear that the democratic ideal is becoming inseparable from the social chaos neoliberal capitalism has wreaked in its name. My hope is that these essays and stories provoke discussion and debate; if I haven't angered someone out there, I'm not doing my job.

The essays and stories are divided into four thematic sections. Part I, Post-socialist Freedoms, collects together individual essays and stories about the lived realities of postsocialism in the Balkans. Part II, Reuniting the Divided, travels north and examines the politics of German reunification in 1990 and the broader impacts of Western triumphalism on the nations of Eastern Europe and on the shape of the post-Cold War global economy. Part III, Blackwashing History, collects three essays examining the politics of history and



FIGURE PRELUDE.6. “Islam, no thank you.” A PEGIDA supporter in Munich in March 2016.

the uses and abuses of public memory where twentieth-century communism is concerned. Finally, part IV, “Democracy Is the Worst Form of Government, Except All Those Other Forms That Have Been Tried from Time to Time” builds on this famous quote from a 1947 speech by Winston Churchill.⁷ For over seventy years, democracy has been widely accepted as the lesser of all evils. My final essay focuses specifically on the unhappy marriage of democracy and capitalism and the wholesale rejection of anything having to do with socialism or communism after the end of the Cold War, including its recognition of the fundamental contradictions embedded within capitalism. My core argument is that those desperate to rescue the democratic ideal today insist that democracy must be separated from the disenfranchisement and gross inequities of neoliberal, free-market capitalism. They admit the damage done by reckless deregulation and the rise of oligarchs and plutocrats that undermine the functioning of liberal polities today. But in the same breath, they often insist that all experiments with twentieth-century state socialism in Eastern Europe must be forever linked to the worst crimes of Stalinism. The democratic ideal must be saved at all costs, precisely because the communist ideal inevitably leads to the gulag. Thus, scholars and politicians assert that one ideal political form can be corrupted by economic realities and historical exigencies while denying that another political ideal might have



FIGURE PRELUDE.7. “No Volk, No ‘Fatherland,’ No *Führer*.”

suffered the same fate. It is this hypocrisy that prevents critical reengagements with the state socialist past, and which I believe has led to the swing to the far right in many former state socialist countries, and increasingly among Western democracies as well. Frustrated voters embrace nationalism as the only viable defense against the ravages of global capitalism.

As with my previous collection of essays, *Lost in Transition*, I have written this book specifically for my students and other young people born after the events of 1989.⁸ For many of them, communism might as well be ancient history, but understanding this relatively recent past provides an essential foundation for making sense of the limits of our contemporary political imagination and the various threats posed to the democratic ideal today. I have by necessity provided only rudimentary background information, which some of my scholarly colleagues may find lacking in the appropriate academic nuance. I apologize for what may seem like hurried brushstrokes to those deeply embroiled in the production and consumption of scholarship on Central and Eastern Europe. But this book is not for you. I write instead for nonexperts curious about how the legacies of the Cold War impact European politics today. This does not mean that I am an apologist for twentieth-century East European communism. Plenty of books have been written about the often-surrealist hell imposed on the citizens of state socialist regimes, and

I fully recognize the downsides of central planning, travel restrictions, and the ubiquitous presence of the secret police. But here I plead for historical nuance, for a recognition that not everything was black and white and that the continued demonization of everything about the state socialist past has real impacts on the political landscape today.

Finally, I hope that someday that East German girl from the museum, the girl who is now a woman, reads this book and finds in it something to help her make sense of this crazy world we now share. Maybe she has kids about my daughter's age, and maybe she worries, as I worry, about how best to prepare the next generation for a life in which all the old rules seem obsolete. I hope that a better comprehension of our collective past will help us navigate an increasingly perilous future.

PART I. Postsocialist Freedoms

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1. Fires

According to scientists, the human body, provided sufficient fuel or kindling to ignite it, can burn for seven hours.¹ Of course, the human being usually expires earlier in the process, but not before experiencing the most excruciating agony imaginable. Being consumed by flames is the worst way to die, which perhaps explains why the ever-so-merciful medieval Catholic Church preferred to burn witches and heretics alive. Although faster and less painful suicide options abound, six Bulgarians decided to set themselves on fire during a forty-five-day period in 2013.

The drama started in February when Bulgarians poured out onto the streets of Sofia to protest a massive hike in their winter power bills.² The electricity distributors, now foreign-owned monopolies, unilaterally raised prices in the poorest country in the European Union, a nation where pensioners already had to choose among heat, light, medicine, and food. Few could afford all four. The initial antimonopoly demonstrations morphed into massive protests in front of parliament, with citizens demanding the resignation of their prime minister, Boyko Borissov. Exhausted by stagnant salaries and ever-rising utility costs, many Bulgarians believed that a popular social movement could improve their deteriorating realities. One man held up a poster that read, “Salary 270 leva, Heat 300 leva, Electricity 220 leva, Water 120 leva: How much

longer?” When the prime minister resigned and called for new elections, a spark of hope shone new light on the political possibilities of democracy. That spark ignited a flame of citizen participation that media observers called the “Bulgarian Spring,” a new blooming of civil society that would lift the country out of its long postcommunist quagmire.³ But not everyone was so optimistic.

On February 18, 2013, Traian Marechkov, a twenty-six-year-old unemployed environmentalist and social activist from the Bulgarian city of Veliko Tarnovo, walked to a crossroads and dumped gasoline on his head.⁴ Witnesses at the scene claimed that Marechkov waved off would-be rescuers, allowing his body to be consumed by the flames.⁵ According to one Bulgarian newspaper, Marechkov’s last words were, “I give my life for the people, my family, and Bulgaria, hoping that politics and the government will improve the standard of living for the people.”⁶ He died in the hospital two days later.⁷

On February 20, the day Bulgaria lost Marechkov, a thirty-six-year-old photographer and protest leader in the Black Sea coastal city of Varna, Plamen Goranov, mounted the steps of City Hall. He placed a placard on the ground demanding the resignation of Varna’s mayor, believed to have close connections with powerful local Mafia interests. According to security camera footage and the testimony of witnesses, Goranov informed the guards that he planned to set himself on fire. He spread a canvas on the ground and proceeded to pour five liters of gasoline over his head. He flicked a lighter and combusted into flames. Goranov died eleven days later on the Bulgarian national holiday that marks the country’s independence from five hundred years of Ottoman Turkish domination. Media pundits quickly likened Goranov’s self-immolation to that of the Czechoslovak student Jan Palach, who set himself alight to protest the Soviet invasion of his country after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. The *Guardian* and the *New York Times* ran emotional stories about how the sacrifice of Goranov might finally help Bulgaria fix its long-standing problems.⁸ Within seventy-two hours, the Varna mayor tendered his resignation.⁹

Self-immolation boasts a long history as a form of political protest. Because self-immolators use an accelerant such as gasoline, the flames begin to consume the flesh much faster than an accidental fire. According to doctors who treat burn victims, the first moments of a burn cause the most agony as the flames devour the top two layers of skin—the epidermis and the dermis—filled with sensitive nerve endings. Only once these outer layers of flesh peel away can the human mind begin to shut out the acute pain. Most self-immolators suffer third-degree burns, which, if they survive, require extensive skin grafts from other parts of their bodies to heal. Once the inferno