

PREFACE **ECHOES OFF THE IRON CURTAIN**

Those who rejoice at the present-day difficulties of the Soviet Union and who look forward to the collapse of the empire might wish to recall that such transformations normally occur at very great cost, and not always in a predictable fashion.

Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers

A little over twenty years ago an empire imploded. The tectonic plates of history shifted, and an entire political and economic system collapsed into a newly formed chasm of the soon-to-be past. That system was based on an ideological foundation so revolutionary and so far reaching that almost no one who lived during the twentieth century remained untouched by it. After 1945, in almost every country around the world, the contours of daily life were shaped by an escalating global conflict that brought the Earth the closest it has ever been to violent self-destruction. In this modern era dominated by fears of global warming and rapid climate change, it is all too easy to forget that it was not so long ago when schoolchildren grew up worrying about total nuclear annihilation. Indeed, I spent most of my own teenage years obsessed with what seemed to be the inevitability of mutually assured destruction.

It all started humbly enough, with some ideas about where

profits come from, how class conflict has apparently shaped human history, and how humans are progressing toward more and more social justice. In 1848 two men, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, published a short pamphlet called *The Communist Manifesto*. By the end of that year there were uprisings across Europe. These early revolutions were brutally crushed, but the specter of communism haunted Europe and laid the groundwork for the Russian Revolution of 1917. Vladimir Lenin would come to power in Russia and create the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the world's first officially communist country. In 1919 Lenin formed the Communist International (Comintern), an organization dedicated to the violent overthrow of the international bourgeoisie. From the very beginning the West feared communist ideology and its relentless attacks on private property and free markets; the Great Depression in the Western countries allowed the Soviets to develop their planned economy and attain superpower status in just a few short decades. From a backward feudal empire of peasants, Russia emerged as an industrial giant by the 1940s. It used its power and resources to influence workers and peasants across the world to join the international revolution. And for a while it looked like the Russians just might win.

The communist message gained incredible momentum through the first half of the twentieth century (see the timeline in appendix A). After Russia, Mongolia became the second communist country in 1921. China added one billion people (or about one-fourth of the world's population) to the communist camp when Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China in 1949. Albania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland all became communist countries after World War II. Germany was divided and the eastern part became the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Only massive Western intervention prevented Greece and Turkey from joining the communist world as well. Then it was Southeast Asia: North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Communist insurgents suddenly seemed to be everywhere. Although the United States was able to hold the North Koreans to the thirty-eighth parallel, it would suffer a humiliating defeat in Vietnam.

The Middle East also started to "turn red." South Yemen became a communist country. Egypt, Syria, and Iraq all became Soviet allies, with the leader of Egypt nationalizing the Suez Canal. Only Western intervention in Iran prevented leftist nationalization of the oil industry. As communist influence spread, Western financial interests were seriously threatened and

transnational corporations were in constant fear of expropriation. In 1959 the revolution in Cuba (just ninety miles from Florida) brought the communist threat closer than it had ever been to the United States, and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 would bring the world close to the brink of total nuclear destruction for the first time.

Many countries in Latin America and Africa were constantly fighting communist insurgencies as well. In 1970, the year that I was born, Chile would democratically elect a Socialist leader, leaving the United States no choice but to support a coup d'état and install a brutal military dictator to protect the rights of property owners. Nicaragua would become a communist country in 1979. In Africa, Angola, Tanzania, and Ethiopia would all have leftist revolutions. The Soviets would invade Afghanistan to support a local Communist government, and more and more nations would look to the USSR for political and economic aid. At its height, the communist ideology nominally controlled the lives and worldviews about a third of the Earth's population. As I grew up during the 1970s and 1980s, it seemed to me that the West was on the losing side of the ideological battle. I believed that the Soviets would eventually make good on their promise to bury the capitalist system. And then one day it just collapsed. In one cataclysmic convulsion of geopolitics the threat of world domination by the Soviet Union disappeared almost overnight. I was nineteen when the Berlin Wall fell and only twenty-one when the Soviet Union finally imploded in 1991. These events were sudden and had a profound impact on the generation of young people that had been raised with the idea that the Cold War would most likely end with a nuclear holocaust.

It seems incredible that only two decades later the rapid rise of communism and its spectacular fall would be almost completely forgotten. But collective forgetting is exactly what we have done, particularly among those born after 1989. In 2004 I hired a student research assistant to read through about seven hundred pages of congressional testimony titled the "Theory and Practice of Communism" from the 1970s. When she finished I asked her if she had learned anything interesting. She replied, "I learned that the KGB was actually a real thing. I just thought it was something they made up for [the tv show] *Alias*." When I recently asked a class of bright young college students to define *communism*, one raised his hand and explained it as "the political system of ancient Russia." I later inquired, "Why was the Cold War considered *cold*?" The students sat sheepishly. "What does it

mean to have a *cold war*?” I pressed. A hand went up tentatively. A young woman guessed, “Is it a war you fight in Siberia?”

As someone who has spent her entire adult life studying the social effects of the collapse of communism on the men and women who lived in the former Eastern Bloc, episodes like these often leave me incredulous. The events of 1989 cut loose the familiar mooring to which I had firmly lashed the cords of my entire worldview. Everything I knew and understood about the present and the future unexpectedly shifted. I could only begin to imagine what the fall of the Berlin Wall had been like for those who lived through it. As an ethnographer of the postsocialist era, my goal is to try to see the transition through the eyes of those who weathered the chaos of the changes. Rather than relying on nationally representative survey results or quick tours of the region to interview a handful of English-speaking elites, I have done over thirteen years of sustained research on one culture where I lived for over three years, learning the language and sharing daily life with the men and women that most social science research tends to ignore. I published two academic books on the transformation of communism (*The Red Riviera* with Duke University Press in 2005 and *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe* with Princeton University Press in 2009), both of which discussed larger economic and political issues through the stories of ordinary people. The books concerned themselves with the social theory of transition and how the end of communism differentially impacted men and women. They were the kinds of books I needed to write to engage with the scholarship in my field, to get an academic job, and become a tenured college professor.

Unlike my first two books, where the stories of daily life were always secondary to the larger theoretical arguments, I wanted to write a book that put the lives of individual men and women first. This book is a collection of essays and short stories about communism and its aftermath told from the perspective of everyday life. The majority are written in the first person, taken directly from my field notes, journal entries, and my memories of conversations or episodes that occurred in the twenty years between 1989 and 2009. All of the ethnographic pieces are based on real events that occurred while I was living and traveling in Eastern Europe, although I have changed all of the names and some of the identifying details of individual people to protect their identities. Furthermore, despite their origins in real events, it is important to remember that these chapters are filtered through my own recollections of how things happened and are inevitably told from

my point of view. As much as I have tried to present the perspectives of the men and women living through these changes, it is always me doing the observing and retelling—an omnipresent Western interlocutor. As a result of this, some of the chapters focus on my own experiences as I tried to navigate the ever-unpredictable realities of living in a postsocialist country, from being stuck in a train compartment with smugglers from Istanbul to Belgrade in 1990 to surviving a day of mysterious explosions in Sofia in 2008.

The chapters in this book are unified by their focus on everyday life after communism in Eastern Europe, but they span a period of twenty years and touch on a wide variety of themes. They are ethnographic snapshots of the circumstances of individual men and women as they struggled to work their way through the postsocialist period, mere moments in a time now past. Put together, they tell a story of human resilience in the face of adversity, but they are also important on their own. The anthropologist John Borneman has argued in his *Syrian Episodes* that more than just fitting in to a broader analytical narrative about a particular place and time, ethnographic writing can also have a purely “documentary function” as well, providing basic data for future analysis. Borneman is an advocate of the *episode*, ethnographic snapshots of cultural contact between observer and observed, which can give us insights into different worldviews without having to make specific arguments about how or why those worldviews are important. I love the idea of documentary ethnography, and I like to think of this book as raw footage, shot through the lens of my perception, lightly edited through the workshop of my memory, and then pieced together on film without a script to guide the plot.

Taken together, I hope to create a picture of the quotidian, to capture what life was like for people living through the aftermath of 1989, and why it is that so many people look back with fondness on what seems to us in the West as an oppressive totalitarian era. Indeed, a series of public opinion polls taken in 2009 showed widespread nostalgia for the socialist era across East Europe, with many people believing that a strong economy is more important than a good democracy. Understanding the way ordinary people experienced both the opportunities and disappointments associated with the coming of democracy can shed light on the growing sense that something very important was lost with the passing of the communist era.

In order to explore these themes in greater depth, I have also included

four short stories written in the third person (to distinguish them from the first-person ethnographic chapters). These stories are also based on my fieldwork and personal experiences, emerging out of a complex understanding of the cultural nuances of everyday life after the end of communism. This work is an attempt to bring alive the joys and sufferings of ordinary people who, from our perspective in the West, were on the losing side of the Cold War. I want to make it clear that this is not a book meant for my scholarly peers. It is a book intended for students and nonspecialists, a mere introduction to what is admittedly a very complicated history. Some of my academic colleagues will no doubt balk at the breeziness with which I handle the theoretical intricacies of various topics. But my prime directive is to write an accessible text, even if this means exorcizing most of the footnotes. I want the individual essays and short stories to speak for themselves.

My hope is that the reader will walk a hundred or so pages in someone else's postcommunist shoes. Just as people can get lulled into thinking that history is unchanging, so too we can find ourselves convinced that there are facts about culture and religion that mechanistically determine who we are and what we believe. The word *communism* has such a negative connotation to so many Western ears that people are incredulous when they hear about the growing nostalgia for it emerging throughout the former Eastern Bloc, what the Germans call *Ostalgie*. When the Western press reports that there are Russian villages resurrecting their statues of Stalin, the people there are assumed to be irrational or deluded. Why, we ask, would anyone want to bring back such an oppressive and unsustainable system? When we hear about the increasing centralized authority of Vladimir Putin, students are quick to argue that Russians might have a collective proclivity toward authoritarianism. Even my scholarly colleagues in political science are quick to denounce every antidemocratic maneuver attempted by a post-socialist government without really thinking about why people might accept more state interference in their lives after twenty years of political instability and social upheaval.

It is only by examining everyday life that we can understand that even in a time of great oppression, state violence, or radical social change, most people still wake up in the morning, get dressed, wash their clothes, eat, drink, fall in love, have babies, and grow old. It is good to remember that while people may vote only once a year, they eat three times a day. Commu-

nist travel restrictions were almost universally despised, but family vacations abroad may quickly become meaningless if there are no jobs to take a vacation from. Life doesn't stop when the world turns upside down. Generations can be proverbially lost, but the mundane rhythm of daily life always continues on.

This is not a defense of twentieth-century totalitarianism. It is an attempt to make sense of what twentieth-century totalitarianism meant to the people that lived through it and how its sudden disappearance upended individual lives, including my own. For most of us in the West, these changes meant no more than having a new set of bad guys in the James Bond movies, but the collapse of communism had exponentially more profound effects in the region. Certainly there were winners, but there were many losers, men and women who are both the victims and heroes of one of the most dramatic historical upheavals in the last century.

This book is about sharing the experiences of those everyday men and women as they eat, sleep, learn, work, love, and dream of a better world. Yes, capitalism won. Yes, twentieth-century totalitarian communism is gone, and the world is probably better off for that. But its reverberations on individual people's lives will be with us for years to come. It is essential that we understand the intimate legacies of the end of the Cold War if only so that we appreciate the social implications of such a radical geopolitical change in so short a period of time. After all, next time it could be us.