

Reviews

Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life after Communism. By KRISTEN GHODSEE. Pp. 232. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2011. \$22.95. Paperback. ISBN 9780822351023.

Following recent interest in everyday life in the former Eastern bloc, Kristen Ghodsee offers fifteen intriguing portraits of life in post-socialist Bulgaria, with a brief detour to former Yugoslavia. Based on extensive fieldwork and personal attachment to the country (Ghodsee has a daughter with a Bulgarian), these narratives not only offer glimpses into the thinking, experiences, and practices of a number of informants from various backgrounds, but also actively reflect on the role of the ethnographer. Through her memories, the author exposes how ethnographic observation has shaped her own opinions while also being aware that her presence has affected, and even interfered in the lives of the people she describes. Thus, combined with the preface and afterword, the essays constitute a reflection on the economic and social reasons for the increased nostalgia for socialism in Bulgaria.

The book's scholarly title and publication by a major academic publisher may come as something of a surprise to readers; the author herself notes that 'this is not a book intended for my scholarly peers' (p. xiv). Instead, Ghodsee addresses students and a more general audience, which accounts for the highly readable quality of her writing, as well as the occasionally overly didactic tone. The content of the book itself is marked by similar contrasts, purporting in the preface to be a collection of ethnographies, but straddling the boundaries of ethnography, memoir, travelogue, and fiction. The book thus rests on a number of different aims and positions, which make it engaging, but at times rather difficult to navigate.

Four of the fifteen short chapters bear the subtitle 'Ethnographic fiction', printed obscurely in small letters in the top right-hand corner of each of the title pages. Although possibly the fault of the publisher rather than the author herself, this may cause some confusion. The author's decision to publish fiction alongside more traditional ethnographic writing is certainly a refreshing move that questions the boundaries between the remembered and the imagined, although it is perhaps not emphasized enough within the book itself. The author notes in the preface: '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' (p. xiii). However, the people encountered in some of the chapters are revealed to be fictional characters only in the afterword. This may lead readers who wish to consult only single chapters of the book to overlook the distinction.

The inclusion of fictional chapters is also problematic because the realities described by the fictional pieces do not necessarily support the general picture painted by the factual ones. The chapters based on the author's memories introduce us to people such as Kaloyan, Misho, and Dimitar, who are critical of post-socialist Bulgarian realities despite having become rather successful. The fictional pieces tell a different story, one of people downtrodden by the new social inequalities of the transition, people who are cheated and robbed by the capitalist system. And while it

is clear that the author based her fictional characters on the real people she had met during her fieldwork, one cannot help but wonder whether she is not deliberately painting a much darker picture of Bulgarian realities than the one she actually encountered. This, after all, supports her main line of argument that 'ordinary' Bulgarians have fared much worse since 1989 than they did under socialism. Ghodsee describes the latter period in idealistic terms, focusing on the material conditions of people's lives and praising the unparalleled social security and guaranteed employment. Furthermore, she insists on the benign aims of the communist regime, arguing that 'communist governments justified their rule by appealing to noble goals, and the rhetoric of equality and justice allowed many people to ignore the more negative aspects of the regime' (p. 179). This move towards reviewing the period from outside the narrative of totalitarianism is indeed valuable and necessary, particularly in light of Ghodsee's target audience of western students. Nevertheless, the author's embrace of socialist values without any particular discussion of the oppression of the system will appear uncritical even to readers familiar with the recent scholarly turn to the study of the 'everyday' under socialism. In spite of its eclectic format and the occasional one-sidedness of its argument, Ghodsee's book will prove insightful to those investigating the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe, as well as those reflecting on the practice of ethnography itself.

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