

Post-communist Nostalgia

Beitrag vom: 06.04.2018

Rezension von Prof. Pamela Saur Redaktionell betreut von Dr. Mark Keck-Szajbel M.A. Andrzej Klimczuk

The title of this book, *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, identifies a term widely used since the fall of European communism in 1989-90. Common assumptions are that many residents of East and East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union are poorly adjusted. They harbor a pathological longing for the "good old days" under communism when they were taken care of by their governments and had no need to cope with change or to develop the initiative needed in capitalism. The authors of the generally well-researched if selective studies collected here look beyond the catch-phrase of the title and its associated generalizations. Articles discuss multiple aspects of citizens' relationships to the communist or socialist past in a dozen countries. Subjects include both lived experiences and memories and views expressed in songs, films, and books. Contributors are anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and professors in artistic fields. They are mostly from American universities, but they report on research conducted in the countries under discussion and their bibliographies include numerous entries in languages other than English. The result is an informative, cohesive, and well-organized book that dispels oversimplified and sometimes prejudicial myths and assumptions. To be sure, the book also introduces many nations, populations, and issues, thereby demonstrating that its subject is too vast to cover completely in a single volume. Several pertinent photographs are presented, including images of Bulgarian restaurants decorated with paraphernalia from the socialist era.

The Introduction and first chapter note that nostalgia, originally a medical term for grieving homesickness, is neither unitary nor stable. Studies in post-communist countries have yielded various expressions of positive and negative attitudes toward the past. In the Introduction, Maria Todorova cites two studies of Poland that report a majority of "positive attitudes toward socialism." She quotes Frances Pine, who concluded from studies of Poles, "When people evoked the 'good' socialist pasts, they were not denying the corruption, the shortages, the queues and the endless intrusions and infringements of the state; rather, they were choosing to emphasize other aspects: economic security, full employment, universal healthcare and education" (5). Nostalgia is rarely a literal desire to return to state socialism, but rather a desire to recapture aspects of one's past life, viewed as innocent, secure, or at least intelligible.

Scholar and artist Svetlana Boym distinguishes between "restorative nostalgia," which is "based on the belief that the lost home can actually be reconstructed" and "reflective nostalgia," which is "skeptical, ironic, elusive, and more artistically productive" (246). Harriet Murav sees both types in works by the Russian-Jewish author Aleksandr Melikhov. His 1994 book *Exile from Eden* "expresses an ironic and melancholic longing for the Soviet Union, the homeland that never accepted him as a Jew." Ten years later he published *Red Zion* in which the narrator "fulfills his wish for national belonging by returning to the Soviet Jewish homeland" (215).

Studies of particular populations are varied. For example, articles on Bulgaria are devoted to farmers, former Socialist Humanist Brigadiers, and history teachers. Gerald W. Creed finds that in agrarian history, post-communist economic hardship has played a greater role than nostalgic ideology or sentiment. According to Cristofer Scarboro, former Brigadiers were devoted to volunteer labor for a better future from the 1940s until 1989. Many kept nostalgic memoirs expressing their commitment to work, willingness to sacrifice, and struggle for the common good, while criticising the Bulgarian socialism of the 1960s and 1970s, when their ideals had faded. In his study "Dignity in Transition," Tim Pilbrow assesses views of contemporary Bulgarian history teachers who also taught under state socialism when curricular materials could not be questioned. Rather than nostalgia, their statements expressed their commitment to finding continuity in their national history, to reclaiming dignity for their nation and profession, and to teaching students how to question and reexamine the past.

In her essay "Nostalgia for the JNA?" Tanja Petrović discusses military experiences shared by men from the six republics comprising the former Yugoslavia who served in the JNA (Yugoslav People's Army). These veterans, who may have even fought on opposing sides of the 1990s conflict, are united by their tattoos, war stories, a few novels and films, and even by the fact that their memories may seem outdated. Their emotionally tinged memories may be classified as "Yugo-nostalgia," but, for most, Petrović's interviews with the veterans reveal that their main significance is less political than based on brotherhood and an initiation into manhood.

In "Invisible-Inaudible: Albanian Memories of Socialism after the War in Kosovo," Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers comments on a notable absence in postwar Kosovo of statues, streets, or other tributes to the memory of Marshall Tito or the communist past. In the 1990s, Serbian symbols proliferated in Kosovo, aimed at provoking local Albanians. Massive renaming occurred in 1999, not so much to renounce Tito, but to erase signs of Serb hegemony under Milosević in the 1980s and 1990s. In postwar Kosovo, public memory of Yugoslav socialism was rare until the declaration of independence in 2008. Many people do have fond memories of communist national ceremonies and their service as "young pioneers," but the author of the piece acknowledges that her survey on "Yugo-Nostalgia" was limited to a small sample of her own acquaintances.

Turning to popular culture, a piece by Oana Popescu-Sandu features the 1999 song lines by the Romanian pop-rock band Taxi: "Cryogeny/Saves Romania/Let us all freeze up/Until 2100 or so" (113). In 1999, Romania faced many problems: miners' marches, a corrupt legal system, and a poor economy. Taxi recommended a national cryogenic freeze which could refer to "inertia, resistance to and fear of change" or to "the desire to protect oneself at all costs" (114). Also mentioned is the 1993 film *Niki and Flo*, in which a disoriented retired colonel dons his uniform on National Army Day and commits a murder-suicide. The author comments, "In Taxi's song and in the film, the past is not a solution to the issues of the present, not even as refuge from the present. This

is because the past is increasingly unstable—it is vanishing. [...] [O]fficial Communist history is largely rejected, but its replacement is late in taking shape because events are contested and obscured" (117 f.). In another essay, Donna A. Buchanan sketches musical trends in Bulgaria. She mentions the 1993 Poduene Blues Band's joyful album, *Communism Is on Its Way Out*. Soon after its appearance, however, musicians faced massive cuts in state support, and "disillusionment and impatience with continued hardship set in" (133). Nevertheless, she asserts that optimism is found thereafter in the "cosmopolitan ethnopop genres" that validate "minorities, border populations, and Western popular culture" (136).

An article by Diana Georgescu highlights the continuing presence of Romanian strongman Nicolae Ceaușescu long after his execution. His name and visage have appeared in songs, comic performances, advertisements, and street protest placards. Some have labeled the images "'revivals' of communism" or "unhealthy manifestations of 'nostalgia' for Communist times and strong leaders" (155). Others have rejected their humor and irony as trivializing, but Georgescu sees irony as a valuable tool of critical analysis of the past. The enduring presence of another dictator, Marshall Tito, is evoked in a piece by Fedja Burić on the esteem Tito still enjoys in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He is buried there and "Yugo-nostalgia" is strong, especially among Bosnian Moslem men.

Several essays discuss pertinent films, including Daphne Berdahl's analysis of the popular German comedy *Good-Bye Lenin* (2003), known as expressing "Ostalgie" (nostalgia for the socialist GDR). In the movie, a dedicated communist woman has a heart attack. While she is in a coma, the Berlin Wall falls and Germany is reunited. Fearing that the truth would be too hard on her, her adult son takes measures, including fake newscasts, to hide the situation. Berdahl brings out ambiguous attitudes in the film as well as "tensions and gaps between appearance and reality, between fact and fiction" (181). She calls the film "a ritual of farewell," stating, "There are many goodbyes in this film: to childhood, family secrets, fantasies, a mother, a state" (184). A piece by Anke Pinkert analyzes earlier German films, concluding, "Although a sense of loss is palpable in many of these post-Communist films of the early 1990s, none goes so far as to regret the demise of the GDR or to nostalgically reinvest in its recuperation" (268).

In "But it's Ours," Maya Nadkarni discusses the popular Hungarian comedy *The Witness*, produced in 1969 but released in the 1980s, which mocked absurd communist party machinations. In one scene, a lemon is celebrated as a "Hungarian orange" – "a little bit yellow, a little bit sour. But it's ours!" (190). During the last years of the regime, the "Hungarian orange" came to symbolize the irrationality and inauthenticity of the communist system. Nevertheless, in early post-socialist Hungary nostalgia became popular, even a theme for parties and new businesses. Such nostalgic "kitsch" "had little to do with a desire for restoration or return. Rather, it helped to produce the difference between the 'Soviet' past and the 'Western' present by rewriting the Socialist era solely in terms of Soviet occupation" (194).

In the volume's Postscript, co-editor Zsuzsa Gille asserts that "post-Communist nostalgia is not simply a shorthand; it is a misnomer." She enumerates five points, summarized here:

- Lamenting the losses that came with the collapse of state socialism does not imply wishing it back.

- Not all post-Communist nostalgia references communism.
- Not all talk about communism is nostalgic.
- Some want no talk at all. But that too is a form of memory work.
- Most of our contributors called attention to the relatively rapid changes in attitudes toward the past (286 f).

"Misnomer" or not, the term "post-communist nostalgia" will continue to be used, abused, and debated. However, this illuminating book shows that the term evokes multiple phenomena that have arisen, and will continue to arise. It offers much valuable information, while at the same time demonstrating that its broad subject matter merits a good deal of further exploration.



Zitierweise:

Prof. Pamela Saur: Rezension zu: Maria Todorova, Zsuzsa Gille: Post-communist Nostalgia, 2010, in:
<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/2651#r6894>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/2651?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=6894>