LIVING AFTER THE FALL

CRISTOFER SCARBORO

**Living after the Fall.
Contingent Biographies in Postsocialist Space**

I spent my sabbatical year at the American Research Center in Sofia during the 25th anniversary of what Bulgarians call ‘the changes’ of 1989. In the time since 2014, Bulgarians have been actively questioning the political, economic, and social systems that emerged from the wreckage of the communist experiment. In 2014, political protests were omnipresent as I walked to the central state archives on Moskovska Street, eating *banitsa* and drinking strong coffee. Some of my favourite moments of the year were spent talking to these protesters about the nature of the liberal democratic capitalist project—bought and sold as a new and improved form of modernity. Generally, the people I spoke with were displeased (they were protesters after all). Toward the end of my time in Bulgaria, one of these protesters accompanied my family to the ‘picnic of freedom’, held in Borisova gradina in Sofia to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the collapse of communism. As Zheliu Zhelev, the first postsocialist president of Bulgaria (for whom I have a great deal of respect), continued to hold forth about the transition and the arrival of freedom in the face of tyranny, my friend leaned over and hissed, ‘What kind of freedom is this?’

The specter of communism (the literal, afterlife specter) continues to haunt Southeastern Europe. The papers in this special section of *Südosteuropa* all explore the experiences of people living after the collapse of communism—the ways in which matters of identity and place can be constructed and understood in a world transformed. At their root, these questions—of how space is claimed, how life is explained, and how meaning is to be found—are historiographical. They seek to trace beginnings and identify a direction for the future. In the stories of life in Bulgaria after the changes, the absence of communism is overwhelmingly present. The authors of the essays presented here ultimately ask: how do we live after the fall?

GUEST EDITOR

Cristofer Scarboro

is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of History at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, USA.

He is currently working on a monograph on the collapse of the socialist ‘good life’ in Bulgaria, entitled *The Revenge of the More*.

It turns out that, at a fundamental level, we are all continually striving to answer Katherine Verdery's question: 'What was socialism, and what comes next?'¹ In Verdery's formulation, socialism rests firmly in the past: it is something which *was*. Yet the collapse of 1989 stands here as the starting point for the authors' discussions: the failure of Eastern European state socialism has to be explained. Such explanations color our understanding of what came next. How do we explain the ironies of transition, of changes which, paradoxically, never lead to *change*?² In this postsocialist world, identities—collective and otherwise—are characterized by flux. Consensus is hard to come by. This is great news for social scientists, but it is, perhaps, more problematic for those tasked with living permanently in the present, whose immediate lives are divorced from the past and for whom there is no agreed direction forward.

Perhaps the paradox of unchanging 'changes' lies in the fact that, as Maria Todorova helpfully notes in her introduction to *Remembering Communism*, the 'transition is officially over'.³ What we have seen emerge, in the wake of 1989, is a new property class, growing income inequality, rising prices, mass emigration, and popular anxiety about the prospects of positive future developments. We regard this unhappy scenario as the consequence of a process of interminable flux: we have, apparently, not yet arrived at the destination.⁴ In reality, we are now only tangentially 'living after the fall', and the consequences of this are unsettling.

It was not supposed to be this difficult. 1989 was simultaneously the end of history and an era of new beginnings. The year heralded both a 'return to Europe' and, subsequently, the emergence of a 'new Europe'. Narratives of communism trod a few well-worn paths to the same conclusions. At first, commentators championed the work of dissidents who rode on the wave of change, replacing the sclerotic regimes of Eastern Europe in a carnival of revolution.⁵ The powerless demonstrated their power and gave birth to a geography of freedoms, the freedoms celebrated twenty-five years later, not only on park

¹ Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, Princeton/NJ 1996.

² Michael Burawoy / Katherine Verdery, Introduction, in: Michael Burawoy / Katherine Verdery, eds, *Uncertain Transition. Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, Lanham/MD et al. 1999, 1-17, 14.

³ Maria Todorova, Introduction, in: Maria Todorova / Augusta Dimou / Stefan Troebst, eds, *Remembering Communism. Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe*, Budapest 2014, 1-25.

⁴ On these new world liberal democratic capitalist gated communities cf. Sonia A. Hirt, *Iron Curtains. Gates, Suburbs, and Privatization of Space in the Post-Socialist City*, Malden/MA 2012.

⁵ Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution. Central Europe 1989*, Princeton/NJ 2003; and Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down. The Collapse and Rebirth in Eastern Europe*, New York 2011. See also the work of Timothy Garton Ash, particularly *The Magic Lantern. The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, Prague*, New York 1999.

lawns in Sofia. Yet this optimism has now given way to uncertainty. Such films as Corneliu Porumboiu's '12:08 East of Bucharest' ask the question, 'What if you gave a revolution and no one came?'⁶ Much recent work has focused on the role of communist party elites—described collectively as an 'uncivil society'—who ultimately realized that they had more to gain by jettisoning state socialism than they did by maintaining the system.⁷ Historians have focused on the limitations of state planning, whose failures created a shortage economy that was unable to meet the demands of would-be socialist subjects dissatisfied with empty store shelves and two-cylinder cars.⁸ This resulted in the collapse of the old order and the establishment of the market.

Until recently, this collapse has generally been understood as the natural result of the inability of the state socialist system to fulfil its obligations in the 'big deal' (to borrow a phrase from Vera Dunham).⁹ As living standards declined, communism fell. The events of 1989 arrived as a result of unfulfilled desires. Much of this makes good sense. The rising expectations of a new socialist middle class—what I am calling the 'tyranny of the more'—doomed the socialist regimes to implement unending and merciless schedules with the intention of satisfying them. The inability to meet expectations led to the somewhat paradoxical, but very real, feeling on the part of Bulgarians and other (South)East Europeans that they were living in a time of scarcity in the midst of abundance. The melancholy freedom celebrated in that Sofia park in 2014 may indeed have

⁶ 12:08 East of Bucharest, directed by Corneliu Porumboiu, Tartan Video, 2006.

⁷ Steven Kotkin, *Uncivil Society. 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, New York 2010.

⁸ See Paulina Bren / Mary Neuburger, eds, *Communism Unwrapped. Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, Oxford 2012; David Crowley / Susan E. Reid, eds, *Pleasures in Socialism. Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, Evanston/IL 2010; Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV*, Ithaca/NY, London 2010; Patrick Hyder Patterson, *Bought and Sold. Living and Losing the Good Life in Yugoslavia*, Ithaca/NY, London 2011; Anne E. Gorsuch / Diane Koenker, eds, *Turizm. The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, Ithaca/NY, London 2006; and Krisztina Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete. Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary*, Bloomington, Indianapolis 2013. Specific to Bulgaria, see Evgeniia Kalinova, *Bulgarskata kultura i politicheskiat imperativ, 1944–1989*, Sofia 2011; Ivailo Znepolski, *Bulgarskiat komunizum: sotsiokulturni cherti i vlastova traektorii*, Sofia 2008. Much good work in Bulgaria is being done at the Institute for the Study of the Recent Past (*Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo*). See Pepka Boiadzhieva, *Sotsialnoto inzhenerstvo: politiki na prien vuv visshnite uchilishta prez komunisticheska rezhim v Bulgaria*, Sofia 2010; Daniel Vachkov / Martin Ivanov, eds, *Bulgarskiia vunshen dulg, 1944–1989: bankrutut na komunisticheskata ikonomika*, Sofia 2008; Ivailo Znepolski, ed, *Da poznaem komunizma: izsledvaniia*, Sofia 2012; Plamen Doynov, *Bulgarskiat sotsrealizum, 1956, 1968, 1989: norma i kriza*, Sofia 2011; Ivan Elenkov, *Kulturniyat front*, Sofia 2008; Martin Ivanov, *Reformatorstvo bez reformi: politicheskata ikonomika na Bulgarskiia komunizum 1963–1989*, Sofia 2008; Ivailo Znepolski, ed, *NRB: Ot nachaloto do kraia*, Sofia 2011.

⁹ Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time. Middle Class Values in Soviet Fiction*, Durham, London 1990.

been the freedom of conscience, of expression, and of movement—but it was also, perhaps most importantly, an expression of the unfulfilled desire to be free to live ‘like people in normal countries’. In the West, and in some quarters of Southeastern Europe, this desire has been translated into neoliberalism, where to be normal is to be left alone to pursue one’s own private consumerist pleasures. This, of course, squares nicely with Margaret Thatcher’s famous dictum that there is ‘no such thing as society’. The full quotation, from the popular magazine *Woman’s Own*, reads:

‘And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.’¹⁰

What does this mean for the prospects of the good society? One thing that the transition from socialism has made clear is that using consumer desires as a foundation for a new liberal democratic capitalist order is also a project fraught with difficulties. How many people living in the Balkans today would understand the world of postcommunism as one of scarcity amid abundance? Do not these systems teeter on a knife-edge, vulnerable to the tyranny of the more? The great recession of 2008 has refocused attention on the social dimensions of this question, causing us to re-evaluate (as people in Southeastern Europe have been doing for twenty-five years) the legacy of communism, and the message of its fall.¹¹ Now we wonder if it was (and is) possible to find comfort in retrospection. As I write, voters and columnists in the United States are echoing Mikhail Gorbachev’s oft-quoted observation: ‘We cannot go on living like this.’ The rise of Donald Trump and the inchoate ideology of ‘trumpism’—walls, racial profiling, and a war on ‘political correctness’—reflect a disillusionment with the status quo. British voters have voted to extricate themselves from the European project; nationalism is on the rise across the continent; and both the postwar consensus of 1945 and the optimism of 1989 seem to be on the ropes.

¹⁰ Douglas Keay, Interview with Margaret Thatcher, *Woman’s Own*, 31 October 1987. It is, of course, also fully in line with a world of late socialism understood as a retreat into the private sphere. See especially Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton, Oxford 2007. Perhaps one way to think about the changes is that ‘normalization’ in Eastern Europe simply occurred a generation earlier than in the West. I am intrigued by the new labour critique of ‘goulash capitalism’, which emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s. See Steve Fraser, *The Labor Question*, in: Steve Fraser / Gary Gerstle, eds, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order. 1930–1980*, Princeton, Oxford 1989, 55–83.

¹¹ Tony Judt famously declared the social question open in much of his later work. Its abandonment in the years following the collapse of communism ensured that ‘the years 1989–2009 were consumed by locusts’. Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land. A Treatise on Our Present Discontents*, London 2011, 138.

It seems only natural that, in this 'age of panic', we re-examine our own experiences of the socialist experiment.¹²

The essays in this collection remind us that these questions—of how we remember communism and how we live after its demise—are not merely academic. The aim of this special issue is twofold: 1) to enable us to understand more clearly the construction of identity in a time of transition; and 2) to rethink what we mean when we speak of a normal—perhaps even of a good—society. What happens when the old structures 'melt' away like a statue of Lenin, and cannot be reconfigured in an agreeable shape? What are the costs of the democratization of ideology?

New Temporal Orders—Structure and Post-Structure

What we are missing is a shared past. In her essay, 'Between Trauma and Nostalgia', Diana Georgescu points to the failure of the 'pedagogy of public memory'. A sense of collective identity and shared destiny are replaced by the 'authority of personal experience'. Attempts to create 'hegemonic framework[s] of remembrance' are seen as having foundered on the shoals of a democratized history. Orienting oneself in this trackless space can be bewildering.

While Georgescu describes a memory of the communist experience in Romania which vacillates between trauma and nostalgia, in Caterina Preda's research the anti-monuments occupying Lenin's former plinth in central Bucharest demonstrate an ironic and aesthetic triumph of individual readings mediated through the design of artists. Preda outlines the struggle to fill the literal spaces left by the collapse of communism. When the statue of Lenin, which had stood over Scânteia Square in Bucharest for 30 years, was carted away, the void was filled by Ioana Ciocan who, in her 'Project 1990', desacralized the space (from the perspective of communist eschatology) through the installation of ironical anti-monuments.¹³ The statues are—from the perspective of a non-believer—funny, prompting laughter to fill the ghostly spaces. I particularly enjoyed the Lenin made of candy and wheat porridge. But what about the anger? As the past becomes an anti-nostalgic and aesthetic project, it is democratized to the point of unintelligibility. The revolution—if it *was* a revolution—remains un-

¹² I owe this phrase to Ivaylo Ditchiev, professor of cultural anthropology at Sofia University, who helped me think through some of the implications of the 'great recession' in the Balkan context over many pleasant cups of coffee.

¹³ Despite Robert Kaplan's questionable conclusions, his inimitable prose captures the way in which the Lenin statue 'spiritually defeated everything around it'. Robert Kaplan, *In Europe's Shadow. Two Cold Wars and a Thirty Year Journey through Romania and Beyond*, New York 2016, 5.

finished, but not in the way we imagine.¹⁴ The certainty felt in the 1990s, that history—derailed in Eastern Europe during the Cold War—was now firmly back on track, has come into question.

The Good Society?

In this world of democracy and of the contingent self, what is left of the good society? Perhaps the shared experience, if not the lived experience, of socialism. 'Living after the fall' has also involved a re-reading of the self, as Fedja Buric notes as he revisits his childhood diary. While the young Buric—the author of the diary, not the author of the research article—absolutely demonstrates the mutability of identity and reveals the accidental nature of history, the one consistent (and continuing) theme is a loss of the 'normal', and especially in the face of war and forced displacement. The young Buric of the diary, and ultimately also the mature author of the research article, is engaged in searching for a sense of normality, whether in Mostar, in Turkey, in France, or in the United States. His violent exile from the 'common European home' haunts both his diary and his re-reading of it.

In an analogous vein, but in a different manner, Daniela Koleva expects, *vis a vis* the collapse as a shattering of reference systems, to find a 'confusion of tongues' and a 'culture of [endless] rewriting' of the self. The subjects of Koleva's essay seek to reconfigure—or maintain—their own sense of self in the face of this shifting terrain. The self has gained a measure of autonomy by jettisoning any claims to authenticity. The democratization of history has replaced answers with questions, exposing common purpose as a fiction.

Each of these studies gives consideration to collective, if not necessarily pleasant, experiences. In their discussions of memoirs, of statues made of candy, or of re-read war diaries, all repudiate (while ironically demonstrating) the atomization of society after the fall. In this regard, the accounts of those interviewed by Koleva—pulled from the first socialist generation in Bulgaria—stand out. Contrary to her expectations, in meeting them Koleva does not see 'a Babylonian confusion of tongues', but rather a relatively small and fixed set of responses to the postcommunist era. Each of these supposes some idea—pertaining to the past, the present, and even the future—of the common good and a common purpose.

All of the authors are cautious about celebrating the democratization of history in the quarter-century since the fall of communism in Southeastern Europe. Daniela Koleva aptly uses the metaphor of 'society as an archipelago',

¹⁴ James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*, New Haven 2010.

each island populated by those holding fixed, non-negotiable, readings of the past, making any shared visions of the future impossible. The research articles presented in this thematic section offer two types of help. They remind us that no past is non-negotiable, and that, once, there was a country.¹⁵

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Cristofer Scarboro Department of History, King's College,
133 N. River St., Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711. E-mail: CristoferScarboro@kings.edu

¹⁵ The reference here is Emir Kusturica's film 'Underground', CiBy Productions, 1995.