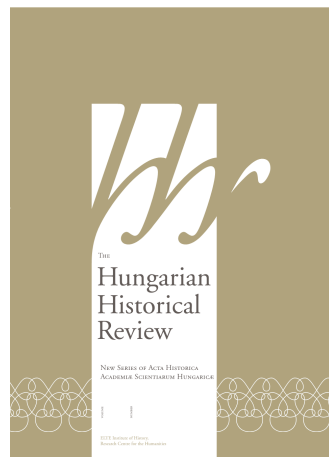


Zitierhinweis

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The Lost World of Socialists at Europe's Margins: Imagining Utopia, 1870s–1920s. By Maria Todorova. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 364 pp.

In some ways (and in her own words) Maria Todorova's book is a culmination of a trajectory which began with another "imagining," that of the Balkans: history as an emancipatory project which problematizes ideology and the erasure of liminal spaces and lives (p.252). The author sets out to recapture the appeal of socialism and its utopia at Europe's margins (for the first, pre-1900 generations of Bulgarian socialists), and she masterfully succeeds. The result is a book which will be of interest not only to scholars on the region or the ideology, but those interested in emotions, utopias, or the creation of the modern political subject.

Todorova concentrates on the period before 1917, a time when the notion of a socialist utopia was up for debate and had not yet found "earthly form." She challenges the dominant narrative of two types of social democracy (a Western and a Russian one), which she suggests constitutes an oversimplification of the ideas circulating at the time, when, despite the supposedly hegemonic ideological power of the Second International, other socialisms could flourish on their own merits. Bulgaria, with the strongest social democratic movement in Eastern Europe during that period, thus offers a perfect example with which to fracture this narrative, which situates socialism within working-class industrial societies or sees its arrival in rural communities as an aberration.

Part I of the book deals explicitly with this typology. It consists of two chapters in which Todorova describes the transfer of ideas into Bulgaria and the ways in which local socialists navigated nationalism in these formative years for the nation-state. As Todorova points out, socialism has almost been erased from the latest global histories, despite being the premier dissident idea of the nineteenth century. The first chapter strongly disproves the notion that Bulgarian socialism was transmitted mainly through Russian ideas and the Russian language, and Todorova masterfully shows the local political conditions which shaped the ideas of Bulgarian socialists. In chapter two, the author takes the Western socialists to task too, uncovering their prejudices against the fate of progressive projects in the Balkans at the time.

In Part II, Todorova concentrates on the creation of these generations of socialists through the use of a database and personal narratives. Nearly 3,500 socialists on whom we have data are tallied, allowing Todorova to show the

different trajectories that took them into the movement, from education to experiences of poverty. Here, Todorova combines the quantitative with the qualitative in the best way possible, drawing on many life histories to show the various “socialisms” that existed in Bulgaria, from anarchism and Tolstoyesque ideas to the various Marxist trends. The extent to which socialist ideas exerted a powerful influence on almost all key figures in the Bulgarian national revolutionary movement is notable, and this expands the argument beyond the relatively small socialist movement to the larger trends in popular ideas at the time. Chapter five also explicitly deals with the roles of women in the movement, showing convincingly that many women were socialists before they were wives and supported their socialist husbands in both hidden and open ways, helping them serve as leaders of the movement.

In the final part, Todorova zooms in the most, tackling the issue of scalability: are these lives singular or representative of something else? In three wonderful final chapters, she tells the stories of the socialist elder Angelina Boneva, the graphomaniac Todor Tsekov, and the socialist couple Koika Tineva and Nikola Sakarov. Each story brings out a different strand of her wider argument. She considers how personal stories are created and how memoirs and autobiographical tales differ. The socialist subjects here are far from those we know from similar work done on Soviet socialist diaries, for example. There is no overarching model of the “socialist self” to which these Bulgarians cleave, hence Todorova uncovers various strands of self-narration.

As in her previous work, Todorova sheds light on her own intellectual and archival journeys, and this adds another layer to this work. We see her chasing down references in provincial town archives or meditating on the erasure of personal details in diaries by descendants. This has been a noted feature of Todorova’s work and helps her craft a narrative which engages the reader on every page. She is attentive not just to the political and intellectual journeys of her protagonists, but also spends plenty of time showing how political the personal really is. Anecdotes abound, from tales of food being sent to Kautsky to glimpses into the love lives of some of the protagonists and touching personal notes, complete with flowers, shared by husbands and wives.

Thus, the arguments that Todorova advances intertwine. She digs up the historical debris of the failed project of socialism, rescuing it both from the Soviet shadow that overdetermined its pre-history and its contemporary losses. Carefully noting the limits of her sources, she nevertheless recaptures a world of human visions and emotions that shaped a utopia that was not yet there

and even after 1917 was contested. Through the personal narratives of various figures, she shows the broader divisions of Bulgarian socialism into Narrows and Broads, their internecine struggles, and the issues at stake. She convincingly shows that these socialist utopias were born out of the peculiar circumstances of post-independence Bulgaria: an imperfect but existing parliamentary democracy with a largely egalitarian social structure and a strong focus on education as cultural capital. These socialists thus constructed politics attuned to the Balkan circumstances, beyond German or Russian patronage. Though their imaginative vision was physically destroyed by the White Terror of 1923–25 and narratively destroyed by the hegemony of orthodox communist historiography after 1944, Todorova implores us nonetheless to take it seriously. Just because something failed doesn't mean it must be excised from history. And if we focus solely on things that did succeed (if the whole history of the vision of a socialist utopia is merely a way to explain the Soviet experiment), we miss things that did in fact happen, for Bulgarian socialism did create its own concepts and lived experience between 1870 and 1920.

Todorova's book is not just a historical tour-de-force, showing how emotions and ideologies continuously shape each other or how individuals form their own subjectivities. It is also not simply a beautiful narrative of extraordinary lives of ordinary people who sought to find their place in life. It can also be read as a call to take early socialism seriously as a project which gave rise to multiple ways of fighting for solidarity and a better world. It is no coincidence, in my view, that the poem "September" by Geo Milev, a Bulgarian socialist who died as a martyr to his cause, is frequently cited. Many people from all walks of life saw something vital in these ideas in Bulgaria and participated wholeheartedly in constructing themselves as participants in this project and the project itself as a unique movement.

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