



Becoming Communist

Ideals, Dreams, and Nightmares

Review essay by **Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild**

Kelly Hignett, Melanie Ilic, Dalia Leinarte, and Corina Snitar, *Women's Experiences of Repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge, 2018, xiii, 196 pp., \$123.09 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-04692-4.

Lisa Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, xiii, 278 pp., \$29.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-131-622690-2.



Both these books are important for their emphasis on the quotidian in two different contexts. Lisa Kirschenbaum focuses on realizing communism through individual idealists' experiences in the midst of a civil war and its lasting effects, and Kelly Hignett, Melanie Ilic, Dalia Leinarte, and Corina Snitar discuss specific instances of repression of real or imagined opposition to communism in the 1937 Soviet purges, 1940s Lithuania, and 1950s Czechoslovakia and Romania.

Lisa Kirschenbaum seeks, by "focusing on the everyday lives of international communists," to provide "a grassroots history of international communism" (2).

Much of the scholarship about communist involvement in the Spanish Civil War has concentrated on how much or whether Moscow controlled local communist parties. While acknowledging this debate, Kirschenbaum chooses to focus on "the everyday work of creating a transnational revolutionary network" (5). She organizes her book into three sections. The first part introduces Americans and Spaniards who "studied and worked in Moscow in the 1930s" (5). Several are then followed throughout the monograph. The second part follows some of the Lenin School alumni who studied in Moscow to Spain and explores "the transnational contacts central to so many who participated in the International Brigades" (5). Approximately thirty-five thousand people joined the brigades. The third part "tracks the personal and institutional connections among those who participated in the Spanish war through World War II and the early years of the cold war" (5).



Kirschenbaum has done prodigious research for her book. Her bibliography is extensive, including published works in English, French, Russian, and Spanish, as well as archival materials located in the United States, Russia, and Spain. She traces the story from the idealism of the early days, through attempts to perfect the behavior of those at the Lenin School and purge them of racism, classism, and sexism, to the lived experience in Spain during the civil war, to the general fight against fascism during World War II, to the short-lived euphoria of victory against fascism, to the revelations of Khrushchev's secret speech and the acknowledgment of Stalin's massive crimes. Her focus on particular individuals and their daily lives as they tried to actualize their ideals is compelling and a significant addition to the literature about the reach of international communism and its impact on individuals who dedicated themselves to the cause. The staying power of this dedication can be seen in the ways in which many who participated in the International Brigades reinterpreted their actions in the light of the revelations about the Stalinist state. She argues: "For many veterans, the memory of 'the cause of all advanced and progressive humanity,' remained an essential one, even as the fact that Stalin had coined the phrase became increasingly troubling—both personally and politically" (236). Using the US-based Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB) as an example, she notes the ways in which this group has reframed the issue of their participation in the Spanish Civil War to emphasize its idealistic aspects: "At VALB reunions, the veterans' literal and metaphorical grandchildren still raise their fists in antifascist salute and sing the *Internationale*, not in tribute to the Soviet Union or Stalin, but to remember a moment of palpable international solidarity when everyone knew the same song in dozens of languages" (245).

It is impossible in a short review to give a full sense of the breadth and depth of all Kirschenbaum uncovers in this book, which is the product of years of study and research. This is a significant addition to the literature about international communism, the Spanish Civil War, and the transnational networks created in this time and reformulated later.

In another attempt to focus on revolutionary idealism and reality as experienced by ordinary citizens, especially women, Kelly Hignett, Melanie Ilic, Dalia Leinarte, and Corina Snitar make an important contribution to scholarship about terror and repression in the Eastern bloc after World War II by highlighting such often overlooked topics as "the impact of the repressions as an everyday experience," the long-lasting legacy of state terror, extending over generations, and its impact on women. Ilic surveys Soviet women's experiences of 1937; Leinarte explores the effects of Soviet repression in Lithuania in 1941 and later in the 1940s; Hignett addresses Czech women's experiences of repression from 1948 to 1968; and Snitar discusses the suppression of student protesters and partisans in 1950s Romania.

All these essays are notable for their deep research and detailed presentation of the levels to which the state authorities, and the many who implemented their orders, went to suppress the mere whiff of opposition. The descriptions of indifference, cruelty, sadism, and the reducing of human beings to the most base levels are staggering and provide overwhelming evidence, if that is still needed, of the brutality of the Stalinist state and its followers in Eastern Europe. The specificity of the evidence

should dispel any notion that the experience in the Eastern bloc states was somehow more benign than in the Soviet police state.

The focus on women, gender, and everyday life is welcome and long overdue. In her study, Ilic notes the significance of 1937, which “marked the height of the Great Terror, when the focus of the purges moved away from Communist Party members and the government elite to ordinary people, kulaks, suspect minority ethnic groups, wives and children of enemies of the people” (13). Her study is helpful not only for the extent and detail of her evidence but also for helpful nuances for further research. Her careful presentation includes birth dates as well as full names, including patronymics, for all those cited in the article. Her granular analysis of gendered differences in the response to and survival from the repression, and the effects on the families of those purged, is very helpful in understanding the wide and deep effects of Stalinist state actions.

Dalia Leinarte explores the effects of Stalinist terror in Lithuania, beginning in 1941. Intellectuals and peasants were the chief victims of these purges, which resulted in mass deportations to the far reaches of the Soviet Union. She provides evidence for the gendered responses of the Lithuanians, and compares their response to that of the Poles and Russians who they encountered along the way. She argues that Lithuanian women transcended some gender stereotypes more easily than Polish women and men, who clung to more traditional notions of femininity. But while Lithuanian women were more able to engage in traditionally male types of physical labor, they would sometimes sacrifice the last bits of food for their husbands, ensuring their death and that of their children (61). Leinarte provides important details about the day-to-day life of those Lithuanians caught up in the repressions, showing the depth of the depredations by the state and its agents, and how the victims were so completely stripped of their humanity.

Similarly, Hignett’s study of Czech women’s experience fleshes out the consequences of Stalinist repression and especially its effects on those (Hignett estimates around ninety thousand Czech citizens) caught up in the various purges and show trials from 1948 to 1954. Hignett has extensively surveyed the memoir literature, especially by women who survived the purges. She documents their experiences in the camps and/or as social outcasts, punished because of guilt by association to their disgraced husbands. She documents the harsh conditions in the camps, the forced labor, the vile food, the dehumanization, the “ritualized sexual humiliation and punishment used to degrade and defeminize [the women] during their internment” (93).

For those not incarcerated, Hignett provides detailed descriptions of what befell those tossed from their homes and relocated to the most decrepit housing. These, like the camp remembrances, are powerful and disturbing. Hedy Margolius Kovaly later recalled her relocation apartment, which had neither plumbing nor electricity: “there was no possibility of employment in the area. It was clear that under these circumstances my son and I would not have survived more than a few months. There are various ways to commit murder” (118).

For those incarcerated especially, the women had to become independent to survive. As Hignett notes, “many women emphasized their ability to adapt to, endure and resist the harsh realities of imprisonment” (97). More women than men survived. But their torment did not end with liberation from imprisonment. The women had

to cast aside traditional notions of dependence. They could not readapt to their old ways of being. In some cases returning husbands, badly scarred by their experiences, retained misogynist attitudes. Many marriages crumbled in these circumstances.

Corinna Snitar's essay about 1950s Romanian student protesters and peasant partisans concludes this volume. The 1956 Romanian student protests are much less well-known than the 1956 Hungarian uprising. Although influenced by events in Hungary, Snitar emphasizes that the protests arose out of anger about communist leaders privileging slavish adherence to the Stalinist line over concern about local conditions. She discusses both the student protests and their repression, and actions against partisans throughout the 1950s. Again, although most of the political prisoners were men, many women suffered repression, especially for their support roles for male partisans. Conditions in the prisons were similar to those experienced by the Soviet, Lithuanian, and Czech women, and marked by inadequate and rotten food, physical deprivation, random cruelty, failure to provide for proper hygiene, no provisions for menstruation or pregnancy, and the forcible removal of newborns from their mothers, among many other horrors. The trauma of these experiences is long lasting, and the fear of reimprisonment remains. Even now, long after the collapse of communism, Snitar found many women reluctant to talk about their experiences. As one woman reported: "I'm still afraid that someone will come to my house to take me away" (174).

This is an important collection, providing too often overlooked data on women and gender in peak periods of Stalinist repression, not only in the Soviet state but in other Eastern bloc nations. The ranks of the survivors of this repression are thinning; opportunities for the collection of eyewitness accounts are diminishing. The authors are to be commended for making visible evidence that further complicates the picture of life in totalitarian Stalinist states and their legacies.

Lisa Kirschenbaum, and Kelly Hignett, Melanie Ilic, Dalia Leinarte, and Corina Snitar have made significant contributions in addressing the issue of the complicated and troubling legacy of Stalinist states, their professed idealism and their repressive practices, and individual responses to the ideal and the reality. Lisa Kirschenbaum's work is useful for students of the Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and international communism; *Women's Experiences of Repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* would be of interest to those studying Stalinist-era policies applied both in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries. Both books are written clearly, in language accessible to general readers as well.

◆ About the Author

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