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Postprint / Postprint
Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Brunnbauer, U. (2022). How and where do we write the history of state socialism? Some preliminary reflections. In A. Luleva (Ed.), *Everyday Socialism: Promises, Realities, and Strategies* (pp. 7-25). Sofia: Marin Drinov Publishing House. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-80697-0

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Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

In: Ana Luleva (Hg.): Everyday Socialism: Promises, Realities, and Strategies. Sofia: Marin Drinov Publishing House, 2022, 7–25.

HOW AND WHERE DO WE WRITE THE HISTORY OF STATE SOCIALISM? SOME PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

Ulf Brunnbauer

Two (very) different histories

On May 5, 2000, the Bulgarian Law on Declaring the Criminal Nature of the Communist Regime in Bulgaria came into force (Българският правен портал 2021).

Article One reads as follows:

> The Bulgarian Communist Party came to power on September 9, 1944 with the help of a foreign power, declared war on Bulgaria, in violation of the Tŭrnovo constitution in force at that time. The Bulgarian Communist Party was responsible for the government of the state in the period from September 9, 1944 until November 10, 1989, which led the country into a national catastrophe.

Article Two details ten crimes, for which the communist leaders were said to be responsible. Among these were:

> The deliberate and targeted destruction of the traditional values of European civilization; the deliberate violation of basic human rights and liberties; the moral and economic decline of the state; the collapse of the moral values of the people and an attack on their religious freedom; the conduct of uninterrupted terror against those who did not agree with the system of government and against whole groups of the population; the abuse of education, science, and culture for political and ideological goals.

And so on, and so forth. Article Four declares that all activities during the mentioned period, which were focused on resistance and the overthrowing of the communist regime and its ideology, were "just and morally justified, and they deserve respect." In 2016, parliament amended the law, calling for the removal of communist symbols from the public realm. While this proposition, to my knowledge, remained dead words on paper, it was another sign of widespread efforts in post-communist Europe to dictate official interpretations of the past. Laws like this Bulgarian one that declared communist rule "criminal," and similar history-related laws in other countries, aim to take the task of evaluating whole historical periods away from the field of public and academic deliberation, by imposing truth by legislative fiat (Soroka and Krawatzek 2019). Such laws are often a perversion of transitional justice. They serve neither the truth nor any reckoning with the past but rather translate the ideologies of political majorities into law.

One could embark on a discussion of the underlying philosophy and political epistemology of such efforts, but such an endeavor would lead me away from the main topic of this essay, namely: what are the spatial and temporal contexts in which we should write the history of state socialism? I mention this example from Bulgaria only to highlight the following important point: when historians reflect on the nature of state socialism and its memory, we do not operate in an unpolitical field. On the contrary, this issue is highly politicized as political parties struggle to prescribe specific interpretations of the communist period. At the EU level, for example, conservative MEPs from Eastern Europe filed a motion in 2009 to pass a resolution in European Parliament that would condemn all totalitarian crimes in Europe and "recognise Communism, Nazism, and fascism as a shared legacy, and conduct an honest and thorough debate on all the totalitarian crimes of the past century" (European Parliament 2021). The resolution eventually passed by the European Parliament was less equivocal and emphasized the centrality of the Holocaust (European Parliament 2021). Nevertheless, it is evident that the task of writing the history of state socialism has not been left to historians.

This does not mean that historians do not pursue their own political agenda when trying to make sense of almost half a century of communist rule in East Central and Southeastern Europe. While anti-communist historians highlight crimes committed by the communist regimes and emphasize the failure of the planned economy, left-wing historians look for features that could be resuscitated from the communist experience. A good example is Kristen Ghodsee's nice 2015 book *The Left Side of History*. She traces the lives and struggles of two communist partisans in Bulgaria; the British mayor Frank Thompson, who joined the Bulgarian partisans; and the girl Elena Lagadinova, the youngest female member of the Bulgarian anti-fascist resistance. The author makes no secret of her sympathy for her story's protagonists. Reflecting the strong anti-communist rhetoric in Bulgaria of the time, she stresses that it was hard for her "to think of these people simply as *red scum*" (Ghodsee 2015: *XVI*). She makes the important point that we need to take seriously the ideals of many rank-and-file communists, especially those in the World War Two resistance movements who risked their lives for national liberation, social emancipation, and a better world. In a different context, Mary Fulbrook, a historian of the GDR, highlighted the possibility that post-war communist leaders and functionaries really wanted to improve the livelihoods of their constituents (Fulbrook 2005: 351).

From such observations, Ghodsee makes a more general argument on why we should not throw communism (as an idea) into the dustbin of history. "If the very idea of a communist ideal is obliterated, tarred over with the black brush of Stalinism, then the remaining alternative to unfettered neoliberalism will be the hate-filled, scapegoating, nationalist rhetoric of the far right" (Ghodsee 2015). Furthermore, she asserts, "we must be open to the possibility that communism had beneficial effects in terms of industrialization, mass education, literacy, and women's rights." Communism, in her account, consisted of "individual men and women making individual decisions in a confused and sometimes chaotic world." Within her reading, there is still something in the history of state socialism for an emancipatory political project to draw upon today. This is especially true of the period after the financial crisis that began in 2008–9, a crisis that ran the neoliberal project into the ground,

and the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has dramatically highlighted and amplified social inequality.

While the aforementioned interpretations of state socialism differ in terms of obvious differences in their authors' policy preferences, we can also take them as indicators of one fundamental insight of recent research on state socialism: as Pavel Kolář (2016) notes, this era can hardly be painted in clear-cut black and white but has many zones of gray in different shades. Even the early years of communist rule in Eastern or Southeastern Europe cannot be reduced to Stalinist terror. It seems that "ordinary" people and their vernacular evaluations and memories of the socialist period recognized this heterogeneity earlier than many historians, the latter thinking in terms of either success or failure, either good or evil, when evaluating this period. Today, monochromatic interpretations that do not account for differences and ambivalences across time and space, and that do not reflect on the divergence present in different social groups' experiences, are no longer feasible.

Yet, this does not mean that we should stop thinking about how to conceptualize state socialism. What is its place in twentieth (and twenty-first?) century history? What big story can we discern out of the myriad of small stories that made up the multiplicity of life under communist rule? In the following section, I will briefly discuss three temporal and spatial contexts in which state socialism can make sense, by asking: (1) what is state socialism's place in the longue durée of Eastern Europe's historical legacies; (2) how does state socialism relate to general European history; and (3) what is state socialism's place in global history – and vice versa.

The (dis-)advantages of hindsight

For some time, theorizing state socialism was not the strongest suit of historians of the period. When the archives opened up in the 1990s, historians were preoccupied with digging for new evidence and unearthing previously unknown facts. While this archival mania produced a lot of important and valuable results, it did not initially lead to great conceptual breakthroughs (but rather to factual ones). The most innovative attempts to (re)define the socialist period at that time came from social anthropologists, many of whom had experience of fieldwork during communism. No account of the historiography of state socialism would be complete if it did not include, or did not even start with research by ethnologists, such as Katherine Verdery, Chris Hann, David Kideckel, Caroline Humphrey, Gerald Creed, Joel Halpern, Michael Burawoy, and the projects in Bulgaria that Klaus Roth established (cf. Hann 1993; Roth 2005). We should also mention the powerful interpretations of the socialist system, made by social scientists of that time. Notable critical thinkers from Hungary – such as Agnes Heller, Ivan Szelényi, Györgyi Konrád, Ferenc Ferher, and János Kornai – have left us with still useful concepts such as "soft budget constraints," a "dictatorship of needs," and "the intellectuals on the road to class power." These are the giants on whose shoulders we build, yet interestingly, there is no comprehensive meta-analysis of their lasting contribution to our understanding of state socialism (Verdery et al. 2005).

But historians are generally not the most prolific theoreticians. We tell stories that in the best-case scenario contribute to a larger narrative. Yet, historians have at least one epistemological advantage (over ethnologists, for example), which however may also be a great disadvantage:

the benefit of hindsight. We think that we know how the story has ended, and ideally we can say why. In order to tell a larger story, retrospection is, of course, necessary: what might have seemed to be a "success" – such as high rates of industrial growth in Eastern Europe in the 1960s, to take an example from the socialist experience – might come across as utter failure thirty years later after these industries had collapsed. Only through time does it become clear how past decisions link to later developments, and in light of these, we can reevaluate the wisdom of the decision makers ex-post. Only a larger time frame allows us to see how small stories link to larger ones, and how the large and small stories coproduce each other. A larger time frame also elucidates the mechanisms through which disparate events are interconnected and add up to something that we can call a process and not just a random collection of things that happened. For historians, knowing how the story has ended is crucial for developing causal explanations. Historical explanations are grounded in chronologies, often rendered as narratives (Osterhammel 2007).

But hindsight is a double-edged sword: it helps make sense of the past by giving the illusion of a closure. But it also raises the question of observer bias. My hindsight is not the same as that of those who wanted to make sense of the socialist period in the 1990s; the next generation of historians will see different endings than I do. History writing is informed by our recent past and present, and thus our vantage points move on a temporal scale, and are affected by paradigm shifts in this process; our own politics of history writing are also very context, that is, time specific. The lines of trends in the popularity of certain topics in the scholarship on state socialism is indicative of the relativity of historians' knowledge. In the 1990s, when, in fact, many historians were hesitant to tackle this period, most of the relevant scholarship dealt with the beginnings of the socialist period and especially the communist takeover. The attraction of the newly-opened archives as well as the public debates over transitional justice help explain why political history was so dominant in the early post-socialist historiography of socialism (of course, the traditional dominance of political history in the historiographies of the region played an important role in that as well) (Brunnbauer 2004). Historians asked what the communist takeover meant in the longer history of their nations; some reflected on this rupture in a search for precommunist legacies on which the new democracies could be build on.

In the 2010s, in contrast, questions of cultural and social history and the history of everyday life played a much more important role in the historiography of state socialism. This was driven not only by the fact that a new generation of historians trained in the age of the "cultural turn" entered the field but also by the urge to move beyond binary visions of a period. Its complexity became ever more obvious, not least because there was so much nostalgia among "ordinary people," which warranted explanation. The most recent innovations concern attempts to highlight the transnational linkages of state-socialist societies and their global entanglements. This, again, follows general patterns in international historical scholarship, which discuss the emergence of globality. This interest also reflects growing skepticism in the triumphant and self-congratulatory Western narrative of the post-war history of Europe and the world. It became clear that there are worlds beyond the West, and that these also produced globalization, and that the so-called *Second World* was an important part of this.

The importance of period-specific vantage points is visible also in the lack of jubilatory enthusiasm at the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain. Even in Germany, the mood in 2019 was subdued and marked more by selfreflection than self-congratulation. Why is this so? Today's political situation in Eastern Europe makes it difficult to sustain a neat narrative of a shift from totalitarian dictatorship to the ushering of democracy and civil rights. In most post-Soviet countries, people enjoy less freedom today than they did thirty years ago. Hungary has been turned into an elected autocracy, Poland is on the way to such a system, and the rule of law is in shambles in both countries. In Slovenia, the current prime minister makes no secret of his disgust for the free press and for intellectuals who dare to criticize him. Bulgaria ranks not even among the first hundred nations in the world when it comes to media freedom. Political scientists now talk of "democratic backsliding" when they speak about countries that were praised twenty years ago as beacons of successful democratization. In many parts of the region, the economic benefits of transformation are also questionable; even more importantly, this is the prevailing sentiment among many people. In the 1990s, the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 to many looked like the closure of a long detour from Europe, while now the Southeast and East European nations would "return" to Europe. From today's point of view, the 1990s do not look like the end of history; instead they look like a time when the roots were laid for a populist, neo-authoritarian countermovement. If post-socialism is not so much the *post* of socialism, but the *pre* of something else, then what does this mean for the historical place of state socialism?

Being able to look back, thus, is not sufficient for the creation of a meaningful meta-history, a big story. As vantage points move back and forth, the past moves as well. History is a moving target – this is one reason why writing it is so engaging but also frustrating. Present-day concerns and different visions for the future reposition the signposts of the historical flows that we are supposed to narrate. But the inverse relationship is true as well: if we change the past, we also have an impact on the future; new futures need new histories, which is exactly why some critics of present-day capitalism want to resuscitate the emancipatory streak present in socialism. Politicians are often well-aware of this connection, as the omnipresent memory struggles in Eastern Europe evince.

Let me make one final epistemological point before moving forward to consider the three areas I believe can help gain a sense of the bigger picture of state socialism. Knowing how a story ends implies another pitfall, that of teleology. We take a momentous event, like a war, a revolution, regime change, or the collapse of a state, and we recall the history of the entity only with this event in mind. We make sense of all the antecedents by evaluating them with respect to their relevance for the said end occurring – an event that we knew happened, and that therefore, creates a safe landing zone for our narrative. All the action then travels in only one direction. The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, has become famous – some would say infamous – for naming certain decisions *alternativlos*, that is, without alternative.

However, the future is always open-ended; historical actors face choices, even if they are extremely limited ones, and nobody can claim to really know what will come of their decisions in the long or even short run. Events that seem so natural – as if they *had* to take place – might have puzzled contemporaries, because they were not part of their horizon of expectation. The anthropologist Alexei Yurchak spoke about the collapse of the Soviet Union as something that

nobody had expected, but when it happened, nobody was surprised: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* is the evocative title of his brilliant analysis of the last generation of communists in the Soviet Union (Yurchak 2005). Teleological narratives were and continue to be particularly frequent occurrences in the historiography on Yugoslavia, as historians searched for the roots of its violent dissolution (an important endeavor in its own right). In their most extreme form, such histories presented Yugoslavia as a stillbirth from the beginning. This does not mean that such literature cannot be extremely useful (it is evident that certain decisions taken by Yugoslav policy makers much earlier than 1990 made the survival of the federation less likely). However, it has serious limitations because it presents the complex history of this complex country as if there were only one possible ending. So, let me conclude with the historian's confession that our greatest advantage over social scientists – hindsight and chronology as our instrument of causal explanation – can be a major drawback at the same time.

Three different space-times

History takes place not only in time but also in space. This means we have to think not only about the appropriate time frame through which to make sense of any event or a series of events but also the geography of our story. In the following three subsections, I want to locate state socialism in three different spatial frameworks (space-times), in which it gains peculiar meanings and to which the exploration of state socialism can aid better understanding of the larger story: 1) Eastern Europe, 2) Europe, and 3) the world. Telling the history of state socialism in one of these frameworks will highlight different signposts and different scales of meaning. I should also say that these spatial references are neither mutually exclusive nor an exhaustive list. One could easily think of other spatial frameworks that could accommodate state socialism within a larger historical framework. Communist rule provided a certain degree of coherence to a region spanning from the Baltic to the Black and Adriatic Seas, which had otherwise been shaped by very different historical legacies. It brought together places and societies, which previously had little in common, in a relatively similar political and economic framework. Thinking about the effects of these different legacies on the concrete manifestations of communist rule and the social fabric of socialism would be another productive way of linking the post-war history of the region to its prewar histories and its present-day situation.

1) Eastern Europe

What is the place of state socialism in the history of Eastern Europe? It is obviously a crucial one. One could even claim that the concept of Eastern Europe is very much a Cold War creation. On the other hand, the answer to this question seems banal: were it not for the existence of the Soviet Union and the Soviet army's liberation of Eastern Europe from German occupation, it is hard to imagine that the communists would have established one-party rule, with the notable exceptions of Yugoslavia and Albania. But even there, the Soviet factors should not be discounted (although Yugoslav propagandists did what they could to downplay the support by the Soviets). This is why the prevailing conservative narrative, which presents communism as a violent import and a forced detour away from their nation's organic path, cannot be so easily rebuffed. Today, research has shown that Stalin most likely did not have a

master plan in 1945 to turn Eastern Europe communist; however, this outcome was the most likely one when the Western Allies began to fall out with the Soviets (and vice versa). Stalin and his allies knew that they could trust only communists in the "liberated" countries to turn them into a Soviet-friendly buffer zone on the way to Germany and the West (Kramer and Smetana 2014; Connelly 2020: 501). On the other hand, the Yugoslav story and also the swiftness of the communist takeover in places like Bulgaria complicates the image of state socialism as an alien ideology imposed from abroad. There were preexisting conditions.

Communists themselves portrayed their advance to power as a revolution and total break with the past. Indeed, much of what happened after 1945 seems new. Yet, it also fits into a larger history of Eastern Europe, which sets this part of the continent apart from other European regions. State socialism is another manifestation of the tension between strong discontinuity and path dependency that has characterized much of the region over the last two centuries. It is true that communist regimes – especially in their early years – destroyed, expelled, or removed much of the previous political and economic elite (insofar as they had survived Nazi and Soviet occupation in the first place). Yet, at the same time, they built on policy dispositions and institutions created by the disgraced prewar and wartime elites, especially with respect to authoritarian and hugely interventionist state policies. Let us consider the examples from Bulgaria: the restrictions on domestic mobility (one needed special permission to relocate from the countryside to Sofia and other large cities) were not a communist invention but were written into law by Bulgaria's wartime authoritarian regime. The communist regimes' efforts to "stimulate fertility" in the late 1960s equally built on a law decreed by the wartime government. The restrictive labor code and state intervention in setting wages and prices were other continuities across the famous September 9, 1944 divide. The same pertains to the state monopoly on agricultural exports, which were by far the largest export item of Bulgaria in the interwar period and also in the early days of socialism (Brunnbauer 2007; Wien 2007). Liberalism as a meaningful political force had been killed off in Eastern Europe long before communists came to power. Aside from that, the massive destruction and disruption of the war forced political actors to do something new.

State socialism is part of a larger story of etatism in a region in which private capital was insufficiently available for modernization, and where social elites traditionally clustered around and lived off the state. Interwar ideas of economic nationalism, as articulated for example by the Romanian economist Mihail Manoilescu, sowed the seeds for economic policies that stressed the role of the state in mobilizing and allocating capital. Regulated markets and high ratios of state ownership were by no means communist innovations in Eastern Europe – what the communists did was to radicalize such policies and to stick to them until the very end. But they built on a phase of state-supported, import-substitution industrialization that had set in after the Great Depression, when ideas of protectionism, autarchy, and barter-trade (clearing) replaced the previous free-trade paradigm (Kubů and Schultz 2004; Teichova 1988). The developmental state in Eastern Europe was not an invention of communist governments – but they did perfect it. The legacy of the lack of a separation between state, society, and the economy, and the dominant role of the state bureaucracy in this triangle, are visible even today.

Ideals of a strong state resonated with many people also because they had experienced disruption and dislocation of catastrophic proportions. Timothy Snyder has called Eastern Europe the "bloodlands," referring to the incredible death toll of the Holocaust, of German occupation, and of Stalinist terror (Snyder 2011). Snyder's book has found its critics; yet, it helps us keep in mind that the experience of discontinuity, of war, of state destruction, and state resurrection was peculiar to the societies of Southeast and Eastern Europe. This experience sets it apart from Western Europe, and in these societies, people are often fearful for the very existence of their nation – a leitmotif in John Connelly's recent, magisterial treatment of the history of the region (Connelly 2020).

Deeply traumatized after World War Two, societies that were almost totally destructed in some places were a fruitful ground for political forces that promised a cleansing of past sins alongside renewal and protection. This longing for transformative change that would make the nation strong enough to avoid similar catastrophes proved to be a major source of support for communist rule, to the extent that it enjoyed such support. It is not by chance that one of the first transformative acts of the new post-war regimes was to expel people of "alien" nationality: especially, but not only, Germans. The "national communism" of the 1960s and 1970s, which developed in its most extreme forms in Romania and Albania, but was clearly not foreign to Bulgaria as well, is a manifestation of the communists' attempt to present themselves as the historic accomplishers of nation-building (Edgar 2014; Tismaneanu 2012). It was predicated on the promise to defend and develop the nation, set against a background of hostile foreign powers and traumatic past experiences. In addition, it aligned nicely with an economic system in which the state controlled and allocated the resources of the nation, embodied in the almost mystic "economic plan."

Yet, the hypertrophy of the state during state socialism should not be confused with a love for state institutions. On the contrary, repeated experiences of interventionist statehood, and of rule perceived as, or genuinely foreign, left widespread distrust in formal institutions and their bureaucrats across the region. This is another linkage between state socialism and the larger story of Eastern Europe: there is a dissonance between high popular expectations from the state and widely shared nationalist sentiments on the one hand, but a general lack of popular trust in the state and its representatives, on the other. Communism as a form of rule fitted this pattern well and intensified it. Communist regimes stimulated legal nihilism by the obvious absence of the rule of law, by their arbitrary wielding of power, and their failure to live up to their lofty promises. As a result, people came to distrust their rulers – and the rulers distrusted their people. State institutions were not ingrained in popular acceptance but often had to take recourse to forcibly impose their will because they lacked legitimacy.

The state could not expect compliance; rules were often not seen as legitimate, even when they made sense. From the perspective of "ordinary" people, this seemed like "anarchy," as Katherine Verdery observed (Verdery 1996: 8). The state may have projected fear, but it also projected little authority. This opened the space for a myriad of everyday practices to "domesticate" the policies of the socialist state (*pace* Gerald Creed) by exploiting the conundrum in which communist functionaries often found themselves (Creed 1998). Such functionaries knew that their ideology did not match up with social reality, and they often depended on informal social practices to bridge this gulf, which made them turn a blind eye

to illegitimate practices (e.g. in providing the population with food). This helped stabilize the state-socialist system, and to some degree, it helped integrate societies into the state; yet, it ultimately fed cynicism and familism. The socialist dictatorship created its own negation not only in the form of dissent (whose societal impact was all but limited) but also of everyday subversions and countermovements. The sociologist Michael Burawoy spoke of counter-socialisms on the shopfloor (Burawoy 2012).

This is, of course, a picture made of extremely broad strokes. Yet, thinking of state socialism as a kind of climax of Eastern European state and nation making, and of its inherent contradictions, also helps in understanding regional variation. The European Value Survey data, for example, points to measurable differences in institutional trust between different parts of Eastern Europe. Some historians speak of "phantom borders" that have an effect long after "real" borders have disappeared (Hirschhausen et al. 2015). Different precommunist institutional traditions, therefore, left a mark on the communist regimes and the organization of the societies under those regimes. Another example would be the difference between countries that had been industrialized prior to 1945, and those that experienced massive industrialization only under state socialism. Shopfloor relations and workers' cultures differed, although there was a certain convergence in time (Heumos 2005; Pittaway 2012). (Such broad brushstrokes can thus be useful in thinking about the relative leveling effects that state socialism had.) Despite the many differences between them, socialist countries (in Europe) had more in common with each other than these countries had ever had before (and arguably after). They were also much more like one another than like West European countries. Despite national particularities, the institutional arrangements were quite similar in all state-socialist countries (Yugoslavia being the most important exception). The political economy rested on the same pillars: planning, state ownership, "soft budget constraints," and shortages (Verdery 1996).

2) State socialism as a European phenomenon

These rather superficial remarks invite counterfactual challenges. Would France not have looked like Poland had it not been liberated by the Soviets? Was state socialism ultimately not simply a result of geography, i.e. proximity to the Soviet Union, and the routes of the Soviet Army on their way to Berlin? Such objections cannot be easily discounted. Yet, my argument was that state socialism and the concrete forms it assumed in Eastern and Southeastern Europe were shaped in important ways by historical traditions and conditions specific to an area of postimperial reconfiguration and repeated attempts at catch-up development. Eastern Europe is one such area.

At the same time, communism as an ideology was not an East European invention, nor was it the only place in Europe confronted with the need to reconstruct after a devastating war; communist regimes in Eastern and Southeastern Europe were not the only ones on the periphery hoping that state-led efforts might kickstart economic development so as to close the wealth gap with Western Europe, which served as the frame of reference. A European contextualization thus shows that state socialism, especially its social and economic policies and some of their results, square well with major European post-war trends. The metaphor of the "return to Europe," so popular after 1989, rested on the false belief that state socialism

was some sort of departure from Europe. On the contrary, East European thinkers and politicians contributed to the making of a new Europe before the end of the Cold War, as James Mark, Bogdan Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska have shown:

> East European actors from the early 1970s played important roles in contributing to building a different Europe based on East–West reconciliation, cultural unity, and powerful forms of bordering to the South ("Fortress Europe"). (Mark et al. 2019)

Let me mention just a few catchwords that reference how state-socialist countries registered, by and large, similar developments to West European ones: the dramatic expansion of the welfare state (Inglot 2008; Tomka 2004), the educational revolution, the emergence of consumerism, or the emancipation of women. Obviously, there are important differences between different European countries, and the state-socialist countries displayed more similarities and synchronization among themselves than they did in relation to Western European ones. Democracy allowed for a greater variety of policy outcomes. But broadly speaking, many developments were remarkably similar. People became more prosperous and better educated, they increasingly lived in cities, grew older than their (grand)parents, had fewer children but invested more in them, were healthier than before (before they started to indulge in too much meat), began to travel for leisure and fun, started to kill themselves, and others with cars on a massive scale, watched a lot of television, and longed for peace across Europe. Among the youth, musical tastes, hobbies, and leisure activities were also not that different. Obviously, state socialism left its mark on many of these developments, sometimes in counterintuitive ways: whereas in most of the world, modernization was accompanied by a rise in the mean age at first marriage, in some state-socialist countries it actually dropped, because married couples found receiving housing from the state to be much easier.

Post-Cold War scholarship like that of Tony Judt in his seminal *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* has highlighted the similar trajectories of Europe's post-war societies (Judt 2005). These historians also make clear the mutual dependence of many developments in the East and West during the Cold War (Kaelble 2011). Welfare and consumption grew not only because of a more powerful and assertive working class and because of technological change but also because it was an important element in the competition between West and East. For some time – into the 1970s – there was, probably for the first time in modern history, a trend toward greater convergence of wealth levels as state-socialist societies managed to narrow the gap with the West (in GDP per person terms – but, in fact, less so than Greece did in the same period) (Berend 1996). The Cold War was not only a dividing force in Europe but also a unifier advancing similar processes of structural change. The Fordist enterprise provided, for example, for similar work regimes across the Iron Curtain (but it disappeared earlier in the West) (Link 2020).

Europe converged insofar as all over the continent, post-war governments were committed to policies of economic growth and expanding welfare, as a lesson learned from the depression of the 1930s. Across the board, new ways of integrating the working class (through social dialog, corporatism, and "self-management") were practiced. Free-market capitalism and Stalinist socialism represented the extremes, while most countries were somewhere in between. But even the most "mixed" economies, such as those in Scandinavia, France, or

Austria, with large state-owned sectors and a rather dirigiste state, remained capitalist in essence, that is, based on the dominance of the market and private entrepreneurship. The almost synchronous collapse of socialist economies shows that they had more in common with one another than with "Western" countries, despite the variations in their readiness to permit space for the market. Their political economy was constructed in a way that warded against incentivizing profitability. The operating principle was one of redistribution through the state, which positioned the state and its representatives at the center of everything (Kornai 1986: 10). From this principle, a lot of what we can observe as the specificities of everyday life under communism, such as the high degree of informality, follow. They are consequences of the logic of this political economy.

As is well known, state socialism did not lead to paradise on earth. During the 1980s, when the structural shortcomings of state-socialist economies became ever more visible, communist regimes ran out of options to borrow from the West, and the wealth gap between East and West started to grow again. The socialist systems evidently lacked the ability to generate innovation and failed to adapt to the radically changed conditions in the international economy after the end of the Bretton Woods System (1971) as well as the oil-price shocks of 1974 and 1979. While the West moved beyond steel and coal – to paraphrase the German historian Raphael Lutz (2019)) – and embarked on a new phase of technology-driven structural change, state socialism appeared ever more ossified despite many things actually already changing beneath the surface.

By the end of the 1980s, the state-socialist economies were reminiscent of a living museum of European high modernity: Czechoslovakia, the GDR, Bulgaria, and Poland were among the world's most industrialized countries. Yet, at that time, this was not an indicator of progress anymore – to the contrary. Overindustrialization was neither economically nor politically viable because the maintenance of this growth model required ever-growing inputs – at a time when these countries were on the brink of financial bankruptcy. It also imposed huge social costs on these societies (Romania, again, was an extreme example, where Ceaușescu imposed brutal austerity on consumption to maintain industrialization). The socialist countries did not manage to move toward a model of intensive instead of extensive growth. Ultimately they could not escape the forces of history – the delay in the necessary structural adaptations only meant that the quick transformation of the 1990s would result in higher social costs than gradual reform.

Contextualizing state socialism against the background of European history, thus, does not only point to similarities but also helps understand better the specificities of state socialism. This is also a fair comparison because, for the communists and their societies (albeit for different reasons), Western Europe remained the dominant frame of reference. Placing state socialism firmly within Europe's space-time does not entail glossing over substantial differences in the historical development of East and West. State socialism was a European form of modernity, but a specific one (but the same could be said about the Iberian dictatorships). It was a huge, expensive, and in many cases involuntary social experiment that sought to achieve modernity via a noncapitalist path – building on ideas and political dispositions that had a clearly European pedigree.

The fact that the wider currents of European history were not necessarily derailed or reversed by state socialism is suggested by another curious impression: most of those post-socialist regions prospering today had also been industrialized and relatively prosperous before 1945 (Ther 2014). Is this another indicator that state socialism reproduced and even amplified structures that the various regimes came across when taking power?

3) State socialism as a global experience

Finally, let us inquire into the place of European state socialism in global history leaving aside the important fact that, at different times, socialist regimes could be found in almost all parts of the world (Hann 1993). Recent research has shown that communist regimes were agents of globalization and that global entanglements impacted their internal development. The Soviet Union, of course, understood itself as a global power and pursued worldwide policies; however, the smaller European socialist countries had ambitious global agendas as well – the best known is Yugoslavia's role in the non-aligned movement. But the others were present on the international scene as well. Bulgaria provided extensive support for liberation movements in the so-called *Third World*, Romania cooperated with less-developed nations within the UN, and most socialist countries invited people from the Global South to study or work in them. "Third World" developmentalists and modernizers looked closely at the European socialist experience and were keen to receive support from them for their own efforts (Mark et al. 2020). The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, established in 1964, provided an important forum for initiatives by socialist countries and "Third World" countries to make international trade more equitable. Solidarity with these countries became an important ideological mantra for communist regimes and a source of legitimacy (Mark and Apor 2015).

For "Third World" countries, this meant that until the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was another game in town – something that is true also today with the increasing global influence of China. On the part of state-socialist countries, the Cold War opened up new opportunities. Theodora Dragostinova, for example, has discussed the global cultural outreach of Bulgaria in the 1970s, showing how a small country could punch above its weight thanks to the peculiar nature of Cold War international relations (Dragostinova 2021). International institutions such as the United Nations, which socialist countries eagerly used for their agendas, and Cold War events such as the CSCE Final Accord in Helsinki, were momentous for the development of socialist countries. They were much less isolated than many people think. Some of them played a more important role internationally than today. It seems that "the wider world" was even more present in the media and popular consciousness during socialism than afterward when these countries experienced a process of parochialization and lost any global ambition.

The Cold War, in general, enhanced globalization because system competition encompassed the whole world. It was also a time of rapid technological innovation, stimulated by bloc competition and military strategies. Infrastructures of exchange expanded as well. Two of the main elements – the internet and the shipping container – which were also symbols of globalization, go back to Cold War military developments. It is no surprise, therefore, that recent authoritative treatments of and handbooks on the Cold War take a global history perspective (Westad 2010 and Leffler 2010).

State socialism not only pursued global policies, but its countries were also greatly shaped by such entanglements. The most relevant of these was arguably the decision of communist regimes to engage in international trade. Besnik Pula has convincingly shown that socialist countries (with the notable exception of Albania) became increasingly dependent on economic exchange with the West after the 1960s (Pula 2018). They tried to export in order to earn hard currency, which they needed to purchase technology from the West. Of greater consequence, they began to borrow massively from Western banks when these banks were awash with fresh money from the oil-producing countries in the mid-1970s.

When, in the early 1980s, the US Federal Reserve raised its interest rates, borrowing costs grew for Eastern Europeans. The increased Cold War tensions under President Reagan also made Western banks hesitant to lend fresh money to communist governments. Poland and Yugoslavia practically defaulted on their debts at the end of the decade; this was a fate that Romania avoided yet with the greatest of human costs when in 1981, Ceaușescu made the decision to pay back the country's debts prematurely (Ban 2012). Attempted austerity measures by the government of Yugoslavia to meet IMF requirements at the end of the 1980s contributed to the country's dissolution. State-socialist systems – Yugoslavia as the country that most intensely traded with the West was the clearest-cut case – lacked the ability and flexibility to adopt their institutions to the requirements of international economic exchange. The international competition did not align well with economies built on redistribution, planning, and a commitment toward equality.

So, seen from a global perspective, state socialism is a reminder of the existence of different variants of globalization; there are not only multiple modernities (*pace* Eisenstadt) but also multiple globalities, and state-socialist Europeans pursued their own visions of global interconnectedness (Mark 2019). Socialism's failure to change the global economy on its own terms and to close the wealth gap with the West shows how hard it was globally to "catch up" in the post-war period. The few success stories – such as South Korea and Taiwan – invite a comparison between the long-term viability of different developmental efforts in a globalized world.

Conclusion

The last observation above leads us to my brief conclusion. This is the question of why we should continue to study Eastern Europe and its socialist era. In view of the rise of China and the resurgence of economic nationalism pursued by illiberal and populist governments in East-Central Europe, questions of state-led development have become topical again. Today, few authors would subscribe to Francis Fukuyama's excessively optimistic prediction of the "end of history," when the Cold War ended with what seemed at that time to be an unqualified triumph of the West. In the formerly socialist countries, history neither ended in 1989 nor when they joined the European Union.

Today, democratic backsliding in East-Central Europe renders this region a vanguard for undemocratic forces in other parts of Europe: Hungary and Poland show how easily presumably stable democratic institutions and the rule of law can be hollowed out even within the European Union. Most of these illiberal political leaders pursuing neo-authoritarian projects are committed anti-communists (Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński, to mention

only the best known). But their rhetoric and policies are not so different from what communist governments said and did in the 1970s and 1980s. Even their conservative social policies, which rest on notions of the traditional family, on heteronormativity, and on biological procreation (of course, of the "right" people and not, for example, of the Roma) could be taken from the communist playbook (obviously, minus its ideological commitment to emancipation). In economic policies, while the EU places limits on direct state intervention, these illiberal political leaders find ways to advance their idea of national capitalism in which the bourgeoisie is closely connected to the ruling regime. What we can observe is not "just" ordinary clientelism and cronyism but a deliberate attempt to bring "the commanding heights" of the economy, to use Lenin's term, under "national" control. This is a variation on economic nationalism, which is one of the leitmotifs of the region's twentieth-century history.

These developments are linked to the state-socialist past in at least two ways: first, some of them are rooted in institutions and arrangements created or reproduced under communism. Legal nihilism could be mentioned in this respect, or the very centralized nature of administrative systems, which makes it much easier for a devoted political party to gain control over the whole state apparatus and use it for its own purposes. Rule-of-law issues are another arena in which one can suspect direct continuities. The second connection is intermediate: the surge in populist governments since the late 2000s is a direct response to the failures of the so-called *transition*, especially of privatization and neoliberal market reforms, reforms often enacted by governments led by post-communist, social-democratic parties. This countermovement is strongly motivated by cultural fears, especially of immigrants, Islam, and homosexuals. But it is not only about identity politics: Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, or Vučić's Radicals in Serbia pursue a new form of statist developmentalism that is broadly popular (Bluhm and Varga 2020). Liberals just had not recognized how traumatic the experiences with Wild West capitalism and the fear of being "sold out" were in the 1990s and damaged liberalism as a political ideology.

At last, state socialism has created its own dialectic irony: it produced a radical free-market ideology that, when it had a chance to be implemented on the ruins of state socialism, left many people disillusioned with it. In crudely Hegelian terms, one could describe the right-wing populist reaction as a synthesis of socialism and its antithesis, liberalism. It is against both but also takes up elements of both. Again, the nation has become the ideological center of gravity, which the new populists purport to rescue from the vices of socialism and liberalism, both of which are described as alien. "Taking back control" is a slogan that easily resonates in a region that for too long suffered from too much external domination. But again, it seems that only a small clique will, in fact, take control, while most of society is excluded from meaningful political participation once again.

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