

## REVIEWS

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### WOMEN'S EVERYDAY LIFE AND THEIR LIFE STORIES IN THE TIME OF COMMUNISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN POLAND, ROMANIA, AND THE FORMER GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (GDR)

**Book Review:** *Eroine neștiute : viața cotidiană a femeilor în perioada comunistă în Polonia, România și RDG : studii de caz* [Unknown heroines: Women's everyday life during communism in Poland, Romania, and GDR: Case Studies] (2020), Dobre C.-F., Cetatea de scaun, Târgoviște, 329 pages, ISBN 978-606-537-504-8.

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This book deals with women's life accounts during communism in three countries (the German Democratic Republic, the People's Republic of Poland, and the Socialist Republic of Romania), aiming for answering, among others, to the following question: did women, in societies promising to achieve social equality, reach life conditions or status that would be different from those of the Western capitalist societies in the period of time being studied? This is a paradoxical question: there is absolutely no doubt that this is inherent and differentiating purpose of the communist utopia in these countries; perhaps it is not a contradiction to question whether this transformation took place, if it was inherent in the egalitarianism of the doctrine of real socialism.

The book describes and analyzes women's everyday lives in Poland, Romania, and the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), from the establishment of communist regimes until their fall in 1989. The research-

ers analyze memories and life accounts being shared through interviews (structured interviews and focus groups) to develop a comparative study on women's everyday life in these communist regimes. They highlight common issues, but they do not put nuances and national differences aside either, when necessary. One of the many merits of the book is that it ignores the unique national configuration and integrates women's accounts, who lived in this time in an overall account in the context of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, specifically in the three countries mentioned before.

Each regime had its own features, if they are to be remembered from a global perspective: Poland, due to its difficult and complex national history, among other reasons, had an "allergy to communism", being the place where the decline of communism began (let's remember the movement of the shipyard workers lead by Solidarity - Polish Trade Union), while the German Democratic Republic is described, in the book, as a "different experiment" destined to create the "new man", who should not have any relation to the Nazi past, just the German language; Romania is characterized "as being different in another way", to use the expression of one of the books by the Romanian historian Lucian Boia: "a country with the fewest communists, which becomes the country with the largest communist party, and where the dynastic communism (of the Ceaușescu family) ended in a bloody revolution", whose images went around the world in December 1989.

The book by Claudia-Florentina Dobre (Romania), Bernardete Jonda, Izabela Skórzynska and Anna Wachowiak (Poland), is divided into three parts; each part has its corresponding chapters and a double appendix: the interview grids and four women's accounts: Niculina Bordeianu and Mirela Radulescu (Romanians), Marysia Lubik and Halina (Poles). The first part of the book describes the general framework of these women's lives, from the end of the interwar period until the fall of communism, emphasizing the `gains` and `losses` of society, and obviously, taking into account the women's individual approach, who participate in the study, women from the three countries. The second part focuses on the research approach and the analysis of research results, that is to say, the accounts on their everyday lives in the three age cohorts: young women in the early years of communism, whose lives were crossed by the individual and collective experience of that time; those women who knew the so-called normalization of the three communist regimes and finally, the women who experienced only the last years of communism (80's of the last century).

The third part presents three emblematic situations (with their dramas, joys, and pains) lived by women from these three countries in the communist period: outright repression (Romania), migration in Poland and theft of their young children by the German Democratic Republic. The appendixes contain some representative interviews of the research.

The general issues that shape life accounts and underpin the specific questions answered by the women participating in the study are: war and its consequences, including poverty; the beginning of communism after the Second World War, childhood, education; work, family, failures and achievements, specific memories, different opinions on the experience of living in communist regimes and finally the interviewees were asked about the fate of their lives if they had not lived in these communist countries.

Some conclusions of this study are intriguing, and are, I believe, an expression of the paradoxical situation of the phenomena being studied: we can see what happened to women when the communist "utopia" took shape and became a reality: (1) After the takeover by the communists, they turned gender equality (at that time, equality of women and men) into an aim to the campaign of the modernization processes of the three countries being studied. (2) Women were considered a social group that had to be emancipated, even by force. They legally had the same rights as men. However, these regimes and their respective ideologies that proclaimed equality as one of their essential conditions, could not enforce them, that is to say, the legal discourse did not necessarily coincide with the social and individual reality of "emancipated" women (misogyny of leaders, the mode of patriarchal functioning – to put it in today's language–, among other factors, account for this discrepancy). (3) With different degrees of difference and depth, the women from these three countries lived a kind of "gendered habitus", using Pierre Bourdieu's category, who considered this social group to be a "kind of second-class citizens, when the political organization doubles the normal political organization". (4) The research confirms that there were social changes regarding gender roles in the communist period. Women enjoyed some benefits that improved their lives, especially access to education and work, but it should be noted that the capacity for action and the political space assigned to women was marginal and even ignored. (5) The researchers think that women, who shape everyday life in communism in these three countries, represented a driving force for social change, but also of the preservation of traditions. If the history of communism is appreciated in today's perspective, they conclude

that the communist regimes failed in their attempt to build an ideological society, in which the political factor controls not only public life, but also private life, as evidenced by the reports from the women participating in the study. (6) The women demonstrated, once again, that they can resist, even in the small but significant gestures of everyday life, such as a short skirt that was not allowed, a child more or one less against decisions of the state demographic policies, decoration of the interior of model houses, conservation and transmission of traditions associated with religious life and other non-conventional attitudes.

Three final comments: the book has a delicate and subtle balance between the theoretical (comprehensive and explanatory) and the empirical (use of life experiences and focus groups as a tool for social sciences and history) perspective that makes its reading enjoyable and easy. It raises an important question – how would contemporary critical feminist movements understand and interpret a book like the one being reviewed?. Some life accounts would establish a direct connection between the book, particularly in the case of Romanian women, and the film written and directed by Cristian Mungiu in 2007 (*4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days*) set in the last years of communism in Romania and that narrates the problems of two students who face the unwanted pregnancy of one of them at a time when abortion was prohibited by law, which makes the book even more interesting to read.

I conclude that the book offers us a balance perspective of individual and collective “losses” and “gains” of women, who tell us their difficult, hard and dramatic moments, often followed by moments of great humanity that served as support and give courage to individuals and to their families to live through the communist experience, which today seems to be distant from us and, at the same time, so incomprehensible and inconceivable for some people.

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