

WHAT HAS SOCIALISM EVER DONE FOR WOMEN?

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On March 9, 2018, the *Financial Times* — not exactly a bastion of pro-socialist sentiment — had some nice things to say about Communism. In a special report on “Women in Technology,” *FT* discussed the reasons for large percentages of women in the tech sectors of Bulgaria and Romania.¹ When examining the European data, it turned out that eight of the ten countries with the highest percentages of women working in technology were former state-socialist countries where “the Soviet legacy” of promoting women in math, science, and engineering had created a social environment conducive to women’s success in these fields, even three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Back in 2015, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) health report revealed that six of the top ten countries with the highest percentage of female doctors were also on the other side of the former Iron Curtain.² An astounding three-fourths

¹ Kerin Hope, “Bulgaria builds on legacy of female engineering elite,” *Financial Times*, March 9, 2018.

² OECD, *Health at a Glance 2015: oecd Indicators* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015), 83,

of all doctors in Estonia were women, compared to only one-third of the doctors in the United States. Yet another report from The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found that, as compared to Western Europe, Eastern European countries had much higher percentages of women working in the fields of scientific research and development.³ As recently as 2012, two-thirds of judges in Russia were women.⁴ In all cases, the explanation for the disparity was the long history of state-socialist commitments to women's education and employment. Despite decades of feminist activism in the West, women in the former socialist countries still enjoy greater access to jobs in prestigious economic sectors.

Despite the data, it's still hard to have a conversation about what socialism might have gotten right. Two 2017 *New York Times* op-eds suggesting that twentieth-century Communism had done some good things for women were met with howls of outrage from *Fox News* and the troll armies of the alt-right.⁵ The historical memory of twentieth-century state socialism is so contested that many leftists — anarchists and democratic socialists alike — try to run from it, lest they look like apologists for Soviet horrors.⁶ Feminists, too, dismiss the achievements of women in the former Eastern Bloc because they were imposed from the top down and within a context of political autocracy.⁷ More importantly, state-socialist women rejected the basic premise of Western liberal

http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/health_glance-2015-en.

3 UNESCO, "Women in Science," UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Fact Sheet No. 43, March, 2017.

4 Ekaterina Ivanova, "Gender Imbalance in Russian Judiciary: Feminization of Profession," *Journal of Social Policy Studies* 13 (2015): 579-594.

5 Kristen Ghodsee, "Why Women Had Better Sex Under Socialism," *New York Times*, August 12, 2017; Helen Gao, "How Did Women Fare in China's Communist Revolution?" *New York Times*, September 25, 2017.

6 Kristen Ghodsee and Scott Sehon, "Anti-anti-communism," *Aeon*, March 22, 2018.

7 Nanette Funk, "A very tangled knot: Official state socialist women's organizations, women's agency and feminism in Eastern European state socialism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21 no. 4 (November 2014): 344-360; Kristen Ghodsee, "Untangling the knot: A response to Nanette Funk," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22 no. 2 (May 2015): 248-252.

feminism: men and women should be treated the same. Socialists always believed that men and women were equal, but different, and that the state had a strong role to play in ensuring that women's reproductive biology did not disadvantage them.

During the early years of the Cold War, American leaders considered state-socialist promotion of women into the formal labor force evidence of Communism's mutation of God-given gender roles and its "unnatural" (and therefore evil) designs on the destruction of the family. American women might have been mobilized into production during World War II, but as the historian Elaine Tyler May has shown, they were shoved back into the kitchen as soon as the soldiers returned.⁸ In contrast, Russia lost nearly 2 percent of its population in World War I and the Soviet Union lost a whopping 14 percent in World War II.⁹ The other countries of Eastern Europe also lost hundreds of thousands of their citizens in the Second World War (Poland topped five million casualties) and sustained massive destruction to property and infrastructure. They couldn't afford to push women back into the kitchen.¹⁰ War deaths produced labor shortages that created opportunities for women, which did not disappear after the demographic imbalances were corrected. The preservation of women's formal labor force participation — even in the face of precipitous declines in the birth rate — stemmed partially from an ideological commitment to women's emancipation rooted in the core theories of socialism and to women's own growing demands for economic independence from men. For example, in the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet leaders considered ways to reduce women's double burden of formal employment and family responsibilities. Researchers asked women

8 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

9 Nadège Mougel, "World War I Casualties," *REPERES*, 2011; Elizabeth Brainerd, "Uncounted Costs of World War II: The Effects of Changing Sex Ratios on Marriage and Fertility of Russian Women," National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, 2007.

10 "World War II Casualties," *REPERES*, 2011, trans. Julie Gratz.

in the USSR if they would stay home if their husbands could afford to support them; a full 80 percent said they preferred to work.¹¹

The diverging policies of the two Germanys after 1949 also demonstrates how the East and West treated their women differently after the war. The West Germans returned to the traditional breadwinner/housewife model of the nuclear family (despite male labor shortages) whereas the East Germans required the formal employment of women to undermine the persistence of the patriarchal family.¹² This commitment to women's education and professional development characterized all socialist regimes to varying degrees. They also attempted to socialize women's domestic work through the building of communal cafeterias, laundries, mending cooperatives, and childcare facilities. Moreover, Communist parties introduced radical revisions to family law: ensuring the equality of men and women, liberalizing divorce, equalizing the treatment of legitimate and illegitimate children, and (in most, but not all, countries) guaranteeing women's reproductive rights.¹³

Did the state-socialist countries live up to their promises regarding women's emancipation? Did women in Eastern Europe enjoy greater levels of emancipation compared to their counterparts in the West? These are the questions we discuss in this brief overview of the situation of women in the state-socialist countries of Eastern Europe before 1989. Despite the authoritarian nature of these regimes, we believe that those concerned with promoting gender equity can learn from the experiences of Eastern Europe, because their top-down solutions (while never living up to all of their promises) did promote social and cultural changes that allowed women to better balance their personal

11 Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 38.

12 Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

13 Kristen Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (New York: Nation Books, 2018).

and professional lives compared to their counterparts in the advanced capitalist West.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW?

Across Eastern Europe today, a growing cohort of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and gender-studies scholars are exploring how state socialism liberated women, trying to nuance the monolithic bleak image Westerners have of life behind the Iron Curtain.¹⁴ Few of these scholars question that the socialist countries had some “women-friendly” policies that improved the material conditions of ordinary people’s lives. Instead, the debate focuses on the regimes’ failure to challenge patriarchal authority in the home and the lack of state support for women’s autonomy outside of their roles as mothers. Western scholars and some Eastern European feminists have also criticized these policies as a kind of “emancipation from above” that proved ineffective and, in the long run, detrimental because they undermined the emergence of grassroots women’s movements. In her 2015 article “How We Survived Post-Communism (and Didn’t Laugh),” Slavenka Drakulić explains:

Emancipation from above — as I call it — was the main difference between the lives of women under communism and those of women in western democracies. Emancipatory law was built into the communist legal system, guaranteeing to women all the basic rights — from voting to property ownership, from education to divorce, from equal pay for equal work to the right to control their bodies The formal equality of women in the communist world was observed mostly in public life and in institutions. The private sphere, on the other hand, was dominated by male chauvinism. This meant a lot of unreported domestic violence,

14 “Forum: Is ‘Communist Feminism’ a Contradictio in Terminus?,” *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History* 1, no. 1 (2007); and “Ten Years After: Communism and Feminism Revisited” *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History* 10, no. 11 (2016).

for example. It also meant that men usually had no obligations at home, which left women with less time for themselves. It was not only the lack of freedom — and time — that prevented women fighting for changes but, more importantly, a lack of belief that change was necessary. Someone else up there was in charge of thinking about that for you. And because change came from the powers that be, women were made to believe there was no need for change or room for improvement.¹⁵

Socialist states may not have fully delivered on their promises to women, and Eastern European women struggled under the double burden of formal employment and domestic labor. But there were real gains. The problem is how to document them in a measured way.

We can start by comparing legal codes. On paper, state-socialist countries look much better than Western countries on women's issues and family entitlements for much of the Cold War. The Soviet Union established full legal equality for women in 1917 whereas the United States still has not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution.¹⁶ Similarly, almost every other country in the world has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), often called the women's bill of rights. The United States joins Iran, Palau, Somalia, Sudan, and Tonga as a member of the handful of nations that have not yet ratified a treaty that took effect in 1981.¹⁷ The Bulgarian constitution actually guaranteed Bulgarian mothers the right to maternity leaves. Of course, there is often a vast chasm between *de jure* and *de facto* equality. Laws mean little if they are not enforced.

As a second tactic, we can examine the archival records of state-socialist women's committees — organs of the state responsible for

15 Slavenka Drakulić, "How We Survived Post-Communism (and Didn't Laugh)," *Eurozine.com*, June 5, 2015/

16 Editorial Board, "Illinois should ratify the Equal Rights Amendment," *Chicago Tribune*, April 13, 2018.

17 Lisa Baldez, "U.S. drops the ball on women's rights," *CNN.com*, March 8, 2013.

women's political issues — and the minutes of Politburo meetings to search for evidence that women's rights were being promoted in the highest levels of government. This is the tactic taken by the historian Wang Zheng in her excellent study of the All-China Women's Federation.¹⁸ But even if one can get access to all of the relevant archives, there remains the problem of intention: Did Communist leaders really care about women's lives? Or did they merely want to use women to further state interests like increasing the birth rate or making the workforce more productive? Transcripts of mere words cannot tell us about intentions.

Interviews with women who grew up under state socialism in Eastern Europe have also provided complex accounts of the past. Of course, oral history has many known methodological problems including nostalgia for lost youth and personal (and often subconscious) assumptions of what interview subjects think their interviewers want to hear. An American interviewer might get a different answer than a local interlocutor, for instance. And when Eastern European women describe positive aspects of the past, they often make their assessment in direct comparison with their situation in the present. In Ghodsee's extensive research in post-socialist Bulgaria, she has found that those who would count themselves as among the "losers" of the political and economic changes (those socially marginalized due to ethnicity, age, class, or gender) are most likely to provide positive reports of the social security and economic stability of the pre-1989 era.¹⁹ Alternatively, those who have benefitted the most from the changes, especially the new urban elites, are most likely to share their memories of the horrors of Communism. Indeed, as Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druța have argued, post-socialist elites deploy a type of "zombie socialism" to prevent popular resistance to the violence and misery of contemporary klepto-capitalism:

18 Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

19 Kristen Ghodsee, "Red Nostalgia? Communism, Women's Emancipation, and Economic Transformation in Bulgaria," *L'Homme: Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 23-36.

The obsessive references to the socialist past have had constitutive powers, creating a particularly strong version of neoliberalism. Zombie socialism arguments have become a convenient and strategic ideological device for furthering social dumping, increasing inequalities, and reducing support for redistributive policies. In this sense, in its post-1989 negation, socialism continues to be extremely relevant: the usage of spectral and mythological representations of socialism has, for the winners of transition, the capacity to preempt social justice claims and to structure political relations in the allocation of wealth.²⁰

In other words, negative tales of life before 1989 are used to justify current economic outcomes, which the “winners” of transition are loathe to change, lest they lose their newfound wealth and privilege.

A similar methodological problem haunts public-opinion surveys about the past. For example, a 2013 poll of 1,055 adult Romanians found that only a third reported that their lives were *worse* before 1989: 44 percent said their lives were better, and 16 percent said there was no change. These results were gendered in fascinating ways: 47 percent of women believed that state socialism was better for their country, but only 42 percent of men reported the same. Similarly, whereas 36 percent of men claimed that their lives were worse before 1989, only 31 percent of women believed that their personal life was worse off under Communism than under democracy.²¹ Romania, ruled by the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, was once one of the most brutal regimes in Eastern Europe, but, today, it is one of the poorest countries in the EU. It is difficult to tease out whether respondents remember their lives under socialism in a more positive light because their lives are so hard now. At the end of the day, oral histories and public-opinion surveys about the past — whether positive or negative — are difficult to use as

20 Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druța, “Zombie socialism and the rise of neoliberalism in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 4-5, (2016): 521-544.

21 INSCOP Research, “Barometrul,” November 2013, <http://www.inscop.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/INSCOP-noiembrie-15TORIE.pdf>.

definitive sources of truth on their own.

One final strategy is to review the scholarship that was produced before 1989 — both by researchers in the Eastern Bloc countries and by Western academics interested in learning from (or discrediting) the purported achievements of women under state socialism. Both of these possible avenues have their own drawbacks; the Eastern Bloc countries were more likely to exaggerate their achievements and play down their shortcomings whereas the Western scholars probably did the reverse. But reading between the lines of these sources might allow us a glimpse of the truth, particularly if we combine a critical reading of this scholarship with other evidence gleaned from legal codes, archival sources, oral histories, and public-opinion surveys.

Taking into account all of these thorny methodological issues, what can we say about the realities of women's lives under Communism? Some things were good, some things were bad, and a lot of things depended on who you were, when you grew up, and where you lived. All women lived under authoritarian regimes and, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the year and the country, faced the realities of consumer shortages, travel restrictions, curtailed political freedoms, and the caprices of the domestic secret police. But despite these very real downsides, state-socialist governments supported women's rights in ways that dramatically improved the material conditions of hundreds of millions of women's lives, giving them opportunities for personal advancement and economic independence from men long before the West caught up.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE WOMAN QUESTION

Twentieth-century state-socialist regimes formulated their policies on women's emancipation based on three key texts: August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* (1879), Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), and Lily Braun's *Die Frauenfrage* (*The Woman Question* [1901]). From these texts, state socialists drew

three core ideas: first, the institution of bourgeois monogamous marriage existed to preserve private property (men needed faithful wives to produce legitimate heirs). This reduced women to chattel. Second, women would only truly be free if they worked beside men in a socialist society in which all workers shared the fruits of their labor through collective ownership of the means of production. Third, the state had to support women as mothers, providing resources to help them combine their work and family lives. Although there was a vibrant feminist movement across Europe and in the United States at this time, socialists distinguished themselves from what they called “bourgeois feminists” by insisting that mere legal equality was not enough. Rather than just trying to win the right to vote, attend university, and enter certain professions, the socialists wanted the state to actively intervene on behalf of women. They feared “bourgeois” feminism would not help working women and preferred to organize alongside men to radically reshape society for all workers, not just for upper-class women.

In theory, socialism would free women from patriarchal domination by educating them and fully incorporating them into the paid labor force. With their own professions, women would no longer have to marry for money and rely on men for their every need. Braun built on the ideas of Bebel and Engels by attending to women’s special needs as mothers. She argued that since motherhood was a service to society as a whole, the state should compensate women for their child-rearing labors. Ideally, this would enable women to be both mothers and workers. Much of the state-socialist program for women’s emancipation was set down in Copenhagen at the second International Socialist Women’s Conference in August 1910.

The Bolsheviks tried to enact some of the ideas of these socialist theorists. In December 1917, the new Soviet government passed two sweeping decrees replacing church marriage with civil marriage and liberalizing divorce. In October 1918, the Soviets passed a new family law that undid millennia of patriarchal and ecclesiastical authority over women’s lives. The new “Code of Laws concerning the Civil Registration

of Deaths, Births and Marriages” rejected legal and traditional practices that made women the property and dependents of their fathers or husbands. The Church lost its control over marriage and divorce. This code elevated women to the juridical equals of men, allowing married women to gain complete control over their own wages and property. The Soviet Union also abolished the legal category of illegitimacy so that all children were considered equal.²² In those heady days after the Revolution, the Bolsheviks believed that they could instigate the withering away of the traditional family with a handful of radical administrative decrees.²³

But Soviet leaders, especially Alexandra Kollontai, the Commissar of Social Welfare, understood that even if women worked outside of the home, their domestic duties did not disappear. To support women’s emancipation, the state began to build a vast network of communally run laundries, cafeterias, clothes-mending cooperatives, and children’s homes. The idea was that once liberated from the soul-crushing drudgery of housework, women would enter the public sphere on equal terms with men, pursuing their education, careers, and personal relationships as they wished. The Eighth Congress of the Communist Party adopted a resolution to increase its work among women in 1919.²⁴ That same year, Kollontai helped to establish the *Zhenotdel*, a special women’s section within the Central Committee of the Communist Party.²⁵ Then, in 1920, the Soviet Union became the first European country to legalize abortion on demand during the first trimester.²⁶

22 “Code of Laws concerning the Civil Registration of Deaths, Births and Marriages – October 17, 1918,” (English translation), <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/the-new-woman/the-new-woman-texts/code-of-laws-concerning-the-civil-registration-of-deaths-births-and-marriages/>.

23 Wendy Goldman, *Women, The State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy & Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

24 Beatrice Brodsky Farnsworth, “Bolshevism, The Woman Question, and Aleksandra Kollontai.” *The American Historical Review* 81 no. 2 (April 1976): 292-316, 296.

25 Elizabeth Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

26 Alexandre Avdeev, Alain Blum, and Irina Troitskaya, “The History of Abortion Statistics in Russia and the USSR from 1990 to 1991” *Population* 7 (1995): 452.

Looking back from our perch in the twenty-first century, it is hard to understand how radical these legislative reforms were in the late 1910s and 1920s. In terms of women's rights, they were unprecedented; no country in the world had such emancipatory policies toward women. Unfortunately, this early utopian vision of abolishing the family and liberating women proved unrealistic. The fledgling Soviet state — trying to cope with years of war, internal conflict, and famine — lacked the resources to pay for the socialization of all of the work women used to do in the home for free. Public laundries, canteens, and childcare facilities proved too expensive for the floundering Soviet economy. But more importantly, the provisions of the 1918 family law hurt, rather than helped, many Russian women.

Working women did not earn enough to support their families without a male breadwinner. Liberalized divorce laws meant many men abandoned women when they got pregnant, and the alimony laws proved difficult to enforce. Sex outside of marriage led to hundreds of thousands of unwanted children. The state lacked resources to care for these red orphans, which produced armies of homeless street urchins in the major cities. The 1920 liberalization of abortion allowed women to control their fertility, but then precipitated a massive plunge in the birth rate. As was well documented by the historian Wendy Goldman, the hasty attempt to abolish the family ultimately caused the suffering of millions. By 1926, many women, especially those in rural areas, clamored for the return of the old laws. The provisions of the original 1918 family code were slowly reversed. Stalin abolished most of them altogether in 1936.²⁷

BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

The early failures of Soviet women's emancipation and Stalin's return to the traditional nuclear family have colored many accounts of women's rights under state socialism in Eastern Europe. But labor shortages and

²⁷ Goldman, *Women, The State and Revolution*.

the infamous Five-Year Plans necessitated women's participation in the USSR's workforce, so Stalin remained committed to women's education and employment even as he outlawed abortion and discouraged divorce. The historian Anna Krylova has traced the slow integration of Soviet women into the military and the emergence of new egalitarian ideals of femininity throughout the 1930s.²⁸ For the most part, however, the Soviet government never lived up to its commitment to socialize domestic work. Even after Stalin's death when the government re-liberalized abortion, Soviet women were still being encouraged to have children and labored under a heavy double burden, best captured by Natalya Baranskaya in her controversial novella *A Week Like Any Other*.²⁹

The situation was slightly better in the countries of Eastern Europe, which started on their paths to state socialism after World War II. Although devastated by war, most of the countries of Eastern Europe were more industrialized in 1945 than Russia had been in 1917, when it had a largely feudal economy composed of illiterate peasants. Their relative development meant that postwar Eastern Bloc countries had more resources to enforce their first laws establishing equality of the sexes and the means to promote women's education and employment. Of course, there was a lot of variety among these countries — Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland were more urban and developed than the mostly rural nations of Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia — but they all instituted some version of the socialist program for women's emancipation laid out in Copenhagen back in 1910 and tested in the early years of the Soviet Union.

These policies led to a rapid increase in the percentage of women working outside of the home across the socialist bloc. In 1950, the female share of the total labor force was 51.8 percent in the Soviet Union and 40.9 percent in Eastern Europe compared to 28.3 percent

28 Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

29 Natalya Baranskaya and Emily Lehrman, "Week Like Any Other," *Massachusetts Review* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1974): 657-703.

in North America and 29.6 percent in Western Europe. A quarter of a century later, women made up 49.7 percent of the Soviet Union's workforce and 43.7 percent of that in Eastern Europe compared to 37.4 percent in North America and 32.7 percent in Western Europe.³⁰ More importantly, despite the many hardships, women in the Soviet Union reported that they enjoyed their work. In a 1968 study of 421 Soviet women, 58 percent of those surveyed reported that they were "very happy" with their work. When asked why they worked, most said that they wanted the extra income for their families, but they also reported that they enjoyed the sociality and collectivity of working because it gave them an opportunity to get out of the home and meet other people on a daily basis. One-third of women found their work "interesting," and 35 percent claimed that they wanted "to feel useful to society."³¹

Doubters may suggest that Soviet citizens felt political pressure to report that they loved their jobs under Communism, so it is worth noting that this finding was replicated in a survey of former Soviet citizens who willingly immigrated to the United States. In the study, "Politics, Work, and Daily Life in the USSR: A Survey of Former Soviet Citizens," James R. Millar and his team interviewed a random sample of 2,793 men and women between the ages of twenty-one and seventy who had emigrated to the United States between January 1, 1979 and April 30, 1983 (from a total population of 33,618). The interviews (funded with monies from the Department of Defense, the CIA, and the State Department) asked respondents a wide variety of questions to help the US government better understand the quotidian experiences of average Soviet citizens. The Americans were shocked by the high rates of job satisfaction claimed by people who were otherwise dissatisfied enough with their lives to flee their homeland. "Jobs were reported as the most satisfying aspect of life in the Soviet Union," Millar writes in

30 International Labor Organization, "Women in Economic Activity: A Global Statistical Survey (1950-2000)," A Joint Publication of the International Labor Organization and INSTRAW, 1985.

31 Barbara Wolfe Jancar, *Women Under Communism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 182.

1987, reflecting on the fact that 25.5 percent of his sample reported being “very satisfied” with their jobs and an additional 37.7 percent claimed they were “somewhat satisfied.”³² This means that more than 63 percent of former Soviets felt satisfaction with their previous working lives, a finding which was gendered in striking ways: “Most interesting of all is the very strong degree of women’s satisfaction with their jobs, and this in the face of high male job satisfaction, too. Whatever the reason, wage discrimination and job segregation, which have been shown to prevail in the USSR as elsewhere in the industrialized world, do not seem to have taken the satisfaction out of women’s jobs in the USSR.”³³

In her 1978 book, *Women Under Communism*, political scientist Barbara Wolfe Jancar found evidence of similarly high levels of job satisfaction in Eastern Europe. Jancar reported this comment from a conversation she had with a teacher in Yugoslavia: “If you have a job, you have security, your pension, your future. Then, if you get a divorce, you know you will have something on which to live. Besides, no one can stay home with the children the whole day. It’s so boring. And all you have to talk to are your neighbors. If they work, there is no one. Your friends are at work.”³⁴

Indeed, other surveys conducted across the region before 1989 confirmed the idea that even if their husbands could support them, women wanted to work at least part time. The problem was that in many countries, women were forced to work full time, and women’s income was necessary to meet a family’s needs. Women were also concentrated in sectors of the economy that weren’t paid as well as those dominated by men. Men and women did receive equal wages if they held the same positions, but women were often funneled into agriculture and light industry or concentrated in white-collar and service professions such

32 James R. Millar, ed. *Politics, Work, and Daily Life: A Survey of Former Soviet Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 33, 45.

33 Millar, *Politics, Work, and Daily Life*, 51-52.

34 Barbara Wolfe Jancar, *Women Under Communism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 182.

as law, medicine, accounting, and teaching. Men went into mining, construction, engineering, and other physical or technical jobs more highly esteemed in the planned economy. Finally, the state-socialist policy of granting women extended maternity leaves — and the fact that mothers were almost always the ones to stay home when children were too sick to attend school — meant that men were more likely to be promoted into higher managerial and executive positions. Men were only imagined as workers, not parents, but women were always seen as both workers and mothers.³⁵

The circumstances of women’s employment varied from country to country. And it is important to remember that wage disparities meant less in countries where basic needs were subsidized and there was little to buy with disposable income. Although women were concentrated in less well-paid sectors of the economy, their jobs guaranteed them access to housing, education, health care, paid vacations, kindergartens, and their own independent pension funds. Furthermore, in some countries women could retire five years earlier than men in recognition of women’s domestic labors. State-socialist leaders conducted countless surveys showing the uneven distribution of housework and tried to convince men to lend a hand. As early as the 1950s, the East German government began encouraging men to take a more active role in the home,³⁶ and the Bulgarian women’s committee attempted to reeducate men and bring up a younger generation of boys willing to help with domestic tasks.³⁷

But Politburo decisions and magazine articles couldn’t easily undo entrenched gender roles, and women were so burdened by the dual tasks of formal employment and housework that they began having fewer children. Faced with the prospect of population decline (and

35 Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender After Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

36 Herzog, *Sex After Fascism*.

37 Kristen Ghodsee, “Pressuring the Politburo: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women’s Movement and State Socialist Feminism,” *Slavic Review* 73 no. 3, (Fall 2014): 538-562; Kristen Ghodsee, “Rethinking State Socialist Mass Women’s Organizations: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women’s Movement and the United Nations Decade

accompanying labor shortage), most women's committees pushed for the expansion of socialized childcare, laundries, and cafeterias. The idea was that if the state relieved women of some of their housework, women would have the time and energy to raise more children (Romania was an outlier here in that it also reversed a previously liberal abortion law). The success of socialization varied widely across Eastern Europe. Urban dwellers were more likely to use public laundries and kindergartens than people who lived in the country, and all populations were suspicious of the quality of the food served in public cafeterias. Then there was the social expectation that mothers should cook for their families, an expectation that many women embraced. Even if groceries were difficult to procure — one might have to go to four different shops to get everything for a meal — women still enjoyed cooking and found pride in the preparation of a fine dinner. Across the bloc, women also complained about the service in the public laundries, and would only bring their bedding in for washing, preferring to do their family clothes at home (contrary to Western stereotypes about the lack of household appliances, 77 percent of homes in the Soviet cities of Leningrad and Kostroma had washing machines in 1966).³⁸

Finally, there was the issue of childcare. State-socialist governments endeavored to create a kindergarten spot for every child, and some countries got close to this goal. Crèches were available for babies from ages one to three, but these were less popular. Fearing their children would receive inadequate attention in the crèche, many women preferred to stay home while their children were so young. The time spent on maternity leave came with a job guarantee and counted as labor service toward the accumulation of the woman's pension (unlike in the United States where a woman who leaves the labor force to care for children makes no contributions to her Social Security). The quality of the state-provided childcare varied, but it was subsidized, widely available, and utterly accepted as normal for mothers to leave their

for Women, 1975–1985,” *Journal of Women's History* 24 no. 4, (Winter 2012): 49–73.

38 Jancar, *Women Under Communism*, 50.

children at kindergarten. One Romanian woman recalled:

My mother was not particularly interested in children and relied on state provided daycare, which I attended starting at the age of two.

I remember zero indoctrination of any kind.

I remember excellent snacks and meals.

I remember dedicated staff and a very safe environment.

I remember a day long play environment, with arts & crafts & stories & outside play.

I remember naps in cribs/beds with fresh sheets and blankets ... (rather than US plastic mats on the floor).

I remember practicing folk dances and learning poems for biannual assemblies, etc. Then I went to elementary school where I also remember zero indoctrination. True, I left at 9 just short of becoming a pioneer, which I was really looking forward to. Then I came to freedom in the United States, where I was required to stand up and recite the pledge of allegiance every day.³⁹

GHODSEE & MEAD

Of course, not every child would report such a rosy memory of their kindergarten experience, but that is probably true everywhere in the world. What is key here is that the socialist state committed itself to providing universal, subsidized childcare for all working women and that it was normal for children to attend. Women felt no social pressure to stay home.

State-socialist governments also actively encouraged women and girls to study science and engineering. The Soviets were so successful at identifying and training their brightest women in technical fields that the United States felt compelled to do the same. After the 1957 launch of Sputnik, the United States Congress passed the 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which specifically included funds for the encouragement of women's education in math and science. In 1961, John F. Kennedy established the first Presidential Commission on the Status

³⁹ Personal communication from a listener of Doug Henwood's radio show, "Behind the News." Email from Doug Henwood, August 20, 2017.

of Women, citing national security concerns; American leaders feared that the Reds were winning the space race because they had double the brain power.⁴⁰ By 1970, 43 percent of Romanian students enrolled in engineering institutes were women, as were 39 percent of all engineering students in the USSR and 27 percent of students in Bulgaria. About one in five engineering students in Yugoslavia and Hungary were women in that same year.⁴¹ In 1976, women earned only 3.4 percent of bachelor's degrees in engineering in the United States.⁴² Because of their command economies, state-socialist countries could guarantee full employment to all graduates in their fields of expertise (although not always in the most desirable location). Nevertheless, it is probably safe to say that there were more women employed in engineering in the Eastern Bloc countries in 1975 than there are in the United States in 2018. After her research trips to study women's issues around the Eastern Bloc in the mid-1970s, Jancar reported: "The Communists' achievements in providing education for women were among the benefits of the system most frequently mentioned by the women I interviewed. One of the most frequently expressed beliefs was that only under 'socialism' were women able to work or be educated in significant proportions. Even those who had lived and worked for a while in the West were of the conviction that socialism alone had liberated women."⁴³

The difference of American and Soviet women's attitudes toward professional life was best captured in a quote reported by the economist Norton Dodge, who visited the USSR in 1955, 1962, and 1965 to examine the role of women in the Soviet economy. At a conference on women in the Soviet Union at Bryn Mawr College in May 1968, Dodge shared

40 John F. Kennedy, Executive Order 10980—Establishing the President's Commission on the Status of Women, *December 14, 1961*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58918>.

41 Jancar, *Women Under Communism*, 20.

42 Catherine Hill, Christianne Corbett, Adresse St. Rose, *Why So Few? Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics*, (Washington: American Association of University Women, 2010), 9.

43 Jancar, *Women Under Communism*, 195.

his recollections of a meeting in Moscow with Olympiada Kozlova, the director of the Engineering-Economic Institute. She had attended a conference on peace at Bryn Mawr several years earlier, and was shocked to find that during the breaks, the American attendees chatted about their husbands and their husbands' various jobs. "Here in the Soviet Union," Kozlova had told Dodge, "when we women get together, we talk about what we are doing, not what our husbands are doing!"⁴⁴

Dodge's report is typical of many of the Cold War comparisons of life under Communism and life under capitalism in that it contrasts the Soviet Union and the United States as shorthand for entire economic systems. So far, we have been implicitly doing the same. But this presents a few sticky issues. Firstly, there are cultural differences. The United States and the USSR did not have a shared history, language, or dominant religion. In fact, Cold War leaders used these dissimilarities to stoke mistrust of the Other on either side of the Iron Curtain. Perhaps even more significantly, the United States and the Soviet Union had vastly different levels of wealth: the US was rich, the USSR was poor. Some scholars have even argued that it was the difference in wealth that accounted for most of the differences between the twentieth-century superpowers, rather than their differently organized economies or ideologies.⁴⁵ To get a better sense of what socialist states did for women compared to their democratic capitalist contemporaries, we will look at Austria and Hungary. Not only are they geographic neighbors, they had a shared history for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This meant similar trade regimes, legal codes, and cultural norms. After World War II, Austria and Hungary found themselves on either side of the East-West divide, but their historical and cultural variables remained constant. This brings us as close as possible to isolating the effect of socialist policies on women's rights and participation in public life.

44 Donald R. Brown, ed., *The Role and Status of Women in the Soviet Union*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 58, endnote L.

45 Kate Brown, *Plutopia*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

AUSTRIA AND HUNGARY: A COMPARISON

There's an episode in the seventh season (from winter 2018) of the popular BBC drama *Call the Midwife*, set in 1963, in which the Turners — an east London doctor, his ex-nun-turned-secretary wife, and their three children — hire an *au pair* from Hungary. They expect her to be a dour woman, beat down by the dull oppression of Communism. She shows up in a miniskirt. She is not what they expect, but she radiates confidence and they love her. As is wont to happen in a television show about midwifery, the *au pair* becomes pregnant. When she finds out, she asks a doctor “How can I get an abortion?” She is told that she can't. “But in Hungary, abortion is legal up to twelve weeks,” she protests, perplexed. “This isn't a Communist country,” says the doctor. “We don't just give out abortions.” And that's that. The *au pair* attempts a self-induced abortion and nearly dies in a vegetable garden. She is found, rushed to the hospital, and, once recovered, shipped back to the continent.⁴⁶

This is a rare representation of a woman from an Eastern Bloc country in popular culture — not as mannish and defeated, but rather as *more* independent and accustomed to *more* rights than her “free” Western peers. But how would things have gone if she had stayed closer to home, perhaps working as an *au pair* for an Austrian family? The two states have a shared history as the seats of the Dual Monarchy prior to the First World War. They shared a similar legal code until World War I, but even in the interbellum period as Austria and Hungary were consolidated as nation states, Hungarian law borrowed much language from its Austrian neighbor.⁴⁷ During the Second World War, Hungary was nominally an axis power, while Austria was annexed by Germany in the infamous *Anschluss*. Both countries lost about 5 percent of their 1939 population in the war, and both Vienna and Budapest were bombed to rubble. But as Cold War divides calcified, Austria had the aid of the

⁴⁶ Heidi Thomas, *Call the Midwife*, directed by Claire Winyardem, Series 7, Episode 3 (February 4, 2018; London: BBC), television program.

⁴⁷ Lajos Vékás, “The Codification of Private Law in Hungary in Historical Perspec-

Marshall Plan to rebuild. Hungary did not, and they needed all hands on deck to rebuild, including women's.⁴⁸ As sociologist Éva Fodor has written, in Hungary “the male worker and stay-at-home housewife family was neither economically nor politically feasible after World War II.”⁴⁹

Emerging from the war in the second half of the twentieth century, Austria and Hungary were separated by the Iron Curtain (although, unlike between East and West Germany, the border became increasingly permeable over time)⁵⁰ and the major difference between the states was a difference in their political economies: Communism versus capitalism. Hungary, like its Eastern neighbors, implemented a socialist gender regime in which women gained legal equality and entered the workforce en masse. According to Fodor, “Gender, or precisely ‘masculinity,’ served as a more useful resource for access to authority in capitalist Austria than in state socialist Hungary: women experienced a higher degree of exclusion from the dominant class in Austria than in Hungary.”⁵¹ In other words, femininity was less of a liability in public life in Hungary than in Austria. The Hungarian socialist state invested in women's emancipation, offering education and employment training, public childcare, cafeterias in the workplace, maternity leave, and abortion access.

In neighboring Austria, however, women remained in the home for the first three postwar decades. The emergence of a grassroots feminist movement happened in a similar fashion to the United States. The 1970s brought second-wave feminism to Austria, or, as it was called there

tive,” *51 Annales U. Sci. Budapestinensis Rolando Eotvos Nominatae* 51 (2010).

48 Nigel Swain, *Hungary: The Rise and Fall of Feasible Socialism*, (New York and London: Verso), 49.

49 Éva Fodor, *Working Difference: Women's Working Lives in Hungary and Austria, 1945-1995*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 33.

50 Michael Gehler and Maximilian Graf, “Austria, German Unification, and European Integration: A Brief Historical Background,” *Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars* no. 86 (March, 2018): 4, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/austria-german-unification-and-european-integration-brief-historical-background>.

51 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 25.

the “New Feminist Movement.” In 1975, a new family law was passed: women no longer needed their husband’s permission to work outside the home.⁵² This was a full generation after women’s participation in the workforce was normalized — in fact, required — in Hungary, regardless of how husbands felt about it. The 1975 Austrian family law also stated both parents were to have equal legal possession of their children.⁵³ Prior to 1975, fathers were solely responsible for decisions affecting children and women were legally obligated to follow their husband if he moved, effectively making the wife another of her husband’s children. Even on the most symbolic level, the Hungarian state granted women emancipation far before Austria: the 1952 Hungarian family law gave women the right to keep their birth name upon marriage. Austrian women could not do the same until 1995.⁵⁴

Three years after the 1975 family law, the governing Austrian social-democratic party created two new positions for state secretaries in charge of women’s concerns, one for “working women” and one for “general women’s issues.”⁵⁵ The year 1979 also saw the creation of the Austrian Equal Treatment Act, which prohibited gender-based discrimination in the labor market. Because state-socialist Hungary had a command economy rather than a free market economy, labor market discrimination was not a central issue. The Hungarian socialist state was more concerned with ensuring that women’s biological and social differences from men (pregnancy and child-rearing) could be accommodated in the workplace, rather than acting as if they did not exist. State-socialist leaders recognized that women have different roles from men. This may raise the hackles of a liberal feminist observer; however, as Fodor argues, party leaders used the difference principle

52 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 168.

53 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 113.

54 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 170.

55 Birgit Sauer, “What Happened to the Model Student? Austrian State Feminism since the 1990s” in *Changing State Feminism*, eds. Joyce Outshoorn and Johanna Kantola (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 41.

to include women rather than exclude them.⁵⁶ Without acknowledging that women faced a set of challenges in formal employment that men did not, how could they ever be fully incorporated?

The statistics bear out this difference. With a bump from a 1953 law requiring that women make up 30–50 percent of newly trained workers, the percentage of women in the labor force skyrocketed. In 1949, 35 percent of Hungarian women were employed outside the home. By 1970, 65 percent were, and two out of every five workers were women.⁵⁷ In the immediate postwar moment, Austrian women worked outside the home at about the same rate as their Hungarian sisters: in 1951, 35 percent of Austrian women were engaged in paid work. Two decades later, however, only 31 percent of Austrian women worked for wages.⁵⁸ Hungarian women also enjoyed increasingly lengthy maternity leaves throughout the regime. By the late 1960s, women could take up to three years of paid maternity leave.⁵⁹ Austrian women, meanwhile, could only take one year, unpaid, although some women received unemployment benefits during this time.⁶⁰ Without a state-socialist regime of workplace quotas, investment in women's education, and legal gender equality, Austrian women's participation in public life, at least insofar as it can be indicated by formal employment rates, actually regressed in the 1950s and 1960s.

Of course, working Hungarian women had the same domestic responsibilities as Austrian women who did not work for wages. There were still dirty clothes to wash, meals to cook, and children to look after, and deeply ingrained ideas about gendered work could not be rewritten as quickly as the family code. In response, the Hungarian state undertook a massive expansion of public childcare facilities. From

56 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 35.

57 Lynne Haney, *Inventing the Needy: Gender and the Politics of Welfare in Hungary* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2002), 33.

58 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 112.

59 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 171.

60 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 167.

1953 to 1965, the number of state-run crèches nearly quintupled. New kindergartens were also built, but at a slower pace (throughout the 1950s, the number of kindergartens increased by 40 percent). There were crèches and kindergartens in residential neighborhoods and in workplaces, so women could choose if it would be more convenient to drop off their children before or after the commute.⁶¹

As discussed in the previous section, sending children to kindergarten was extremely common. In fact, Hungarian state kindergartens were in such high demand that by 1965 there were only spaces for half the children whose families wanted them to attend.⁶² In an attempt to further alleviate the double burden, many workplaces operated canteens where workers could eat during the day and shops where they could purchase subsidized groceries. Large workplaces (those with more than four thousand employees) operated clinics where workers could see a doctor, get medicine, and even obtain baby food and milk for nursing mothers.⁶³ In Austria, on the other hand, day care was largely a nonissue until the 1980s. This was not because there was an abundance, but rather, because few Austrian women were in the workforce. In fact, Éva Fodor argues that the Austrian state was invested in keeping women *out* of the workforce in this time period.⁶⁴

Given the vastly different attitudes toward women's labor force participation, it should not come as a shock that there were more women in positions of authority in Hungary than in Austria. In 1972 in Hungary, working men were between two and three times as likely to be managers as working women. The same year in Austria, working men were more than five times as likely as working women to be managers — and many fewer women were in the workforce at all. Taken together, Hungarian women were much more likely than their Austrian peers to hold positions of authority in working life. Perhaps even

61 Haney, *Inventing the Needy*, 38.

62 Ibid.

63 Haney, *Inventing the Needy*, 42.

64 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 112.

more importantly, given the nature of the centrally planned economy, Hungarian women were also more likely to hold positions of authority in state administration than Austrian women. In 1972, Hungarian men were about twice as likely as women to hold position in state administration. At the same time, Austrian men were four times as likely to have positions in state administration as women. In fact, by the end of state socialism, in 1988, Hungarian women were more likely than men to work in the state bureaucracy.⁶⁵ Of course, women were largely excluded from the most inner circles of party leadership, but they did have some authority among the rank and file.

And, finally, Austria and Hungary differed greatly in terms of access to abortion. In short, *Call the Midwife's au pair* wouldn't have fared much better in Austria than she did in Britain. In Hungary, as in most state-socialist countries, abortion was relatively available. Although officially medically regulated immediately after the war, in practice there were few barriers to abortion between 1945 and 1949.⁶⁶ With the consolidation of Communist power in postwar Hungary, however, abortion was criminalized. Partly under Soviet pressure, partly as Soviet mimicry, and partly in response to postwar labor shortages, Hungary imposed Stalinist restrictions on abortion until 1956. Liberalized access to abortion was a demand of the '56 revolution, and from 1956–1973 Hungary had one of the most progressive abortion policies in Europe. But by the late 1960s the birth rate began to decline, as it did in countries across the bloc. In 1973, over the protests of the Hungarian women's committee, social scientists, and students, the state introduced limits on who could get an abortion. Thanks in large part to the efforts of the women's committee, abortion was not broadly prohibited as it was in neighboring Romania.⁶⁷ It was now restricted to certain types of women deemed by the state either unfit or exempt

65 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 66.

66 Susan Gal, "Gender in the Post-socialist Transition: the Abortion Debate in Hungary," *East European Politics and Societies* 8 (1994): 256-286.

67 Fodor, *Working Difference*, 31.

from having children: unmarried women, those who had already done their reproductive duty and had at least two children, older women, women in poverty, or those for whom pregnancy would present health hazards.⁶⁸ Abortion committees were instituted to enforce these restrictions; however, the criteria were lenient enough that most women who wanted or needed an abortion found a way to get one.

Meanwhile, abortion was not even made legal in Austria until 1974 and, as in the United States, that law governs abortion to this day.⁶⁹ That law permits abortion in the first three months of pregnancy and requires that it must be performed in a public hospital by a physician. As the *Call the Midwife* example illustrates, in the mid-twentieth century, many Western states considered access to abortion indicative of Communist immorality even as women in their own countries sought dangerous illegal procedures. From a contemporary perspective, however, it is clear that state socialism granted women reproductive autonomy much earlier than capitalism.

And ironically, in a society based on the ideal of the collective, autonomy — or at least independence — is what's at stake with the other state-socialist programs for women as well. As Katherine Verdery has argued, and other scholars have echoed, state socialism made men and women equally dependent on the state.⁷⁰ The state effectively replaced men as the breadwinner. Once women no longer depended on their husbands for their basic needs of food, shelter, and medical care, they gained a measure of control over their own lives, even in regimes where political rights were curtailed. Is this not one of the foundational goals of feminism, to provide women with a measure of control over their own lives? In Austria, the legal reforms instituting women's rights were the result of feminist activism, the sort of bottom-up, grassroots

68 Gal, "Gender in the Post-socialist Transition," 264.

69 "Abortion Legislation in Europe," The Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Center, January, 2015, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/abortion-legislation/europe.php#austria>.

70 Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

agitation that many have argued is necessary for any real feminist agenda. They were not codified until thirty years after the equivalent laws in Hungary, however. And the so-called “top-down” socialist model of women’s emancipation undertook the project of socializing domestic labor that has yet to be replicated under capitalism.

AFTER 1989

So, what about now, when free markets reign supreme? As we approach the thirtieth anniversary of the Berlin Wall’s fall, the former Eastern Bloc countries remain stubbornly in transition. These days, Hungary is in the international spotlight for its extreme right-wing government and xenophobia more often than its promotion of women in the workforce. Between the postwar establishment of canteens in the workplace and the twenty-first-century headlines decrying Europe’s “little dictator” and premier “illiberal democracy,” Hungary — along with the rest of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union — experienced one of the most profound economic and social changes in the modern era.⁷¹ Overnight, constitutions were rewritten, major industries were privatized, and lifetimes’ worth of accomplishment lost their meaning. Free markets, as it turned out, were not just for fossil fuels and cigarettes. Women’s bodies could also be bought, sold, and used as advertisements to sell consumer goods. Post-socialism ushered in a bustling, and exploitative, sex industry as well as previously absent sexualized marketing campaigns.⁷²

As markets began to take an interest in women, the state stopped doing so. As many have argued, the transition period saw women’s

71 Branko Milanovic, “For Whom the Wall Fell? A Balance Sheet of Transition to Capitalism,” *Global Inequality*, November 3, 2014, <https://glineq.blogspot.de/2014/11/for-whom-wall-fell-balance-sheet-of.html>.

72 Libora Oates-Indruchová, “Transforming and Emerging: Discourses of Gender in the Czech Culture of the Transition Period” in *Advertising: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* 3, ed. Iain MacRury (New York: Routledge, 2012).

retreat from the workforce.⁷³ Absent the vigorous initiatives to include women in the workplace, many returned home. Although, as Ghodsee has argued, men were also hit hard by the changes, and many women may have fared better in the post-1989 service-industry labor market than their husbands because of the specific nature of the education and experience they had under Communism. Under state socialism, women tended to pursue university studies and were funneled into white-collar professions that were paid less than the manual labor and technical jobs that attracted men. This pre-1989 occupational segregation in fields like law, banking, medicine, academia, and tourism actually helped women after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Since capitalism values white-collar over blue-collar work, women were initially better positioned to succeed in newly competitive labor markets because of the human capital they had acquired under state socialism.⁷⁴

But women's advantages were quickly eroded by the dismantling of the once-generous social safety net and government attempts to force them back into the home. In the countries of Central Europe, for instance, new political leaders embraced policies of what has been called "refamilization." As public enterprises were auctioned off to private investors or simply closed down, the government could no longer maintain its commitment to guarantee full employment to all citizens. Since the private sector wasn't creating jobs fast enough to make up for the jobs lost in the public sector, unemployment grew dramatically. At the exact same moment, hundreds of day-care centers closed, and women lost access to affordable childcare. Some states compensated for the closing of crèches and kindergartens by extending formal maternity leave provisions for up to four years. But these new leaves paid less than the old ones under Communism, and women were not

73 See for example: Jacqui True, *Gender, Globalization, and Postsocialism: The Czech Republic After Communism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*

74 Kristen Ghodsee, *The Red Riviera: Gender, Tourism, and Postsocialism on the Black Sea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

guaranteed their jobs back, essentially forcing mothers back into the home.⁷⁵ For politicians, these policies helped reduce unemployment rates and saved money. Eastern European women now freely provided the care for which the state once paid.

Meanwhile, in Austria, the incorporation of women into the workforce and the institution of women's rights continued along the path laid out in the 1970s, although with slowing momentum. In 1994, these efforts were given a boost from the European Union's effort to incorporate a gender analysis into each of its new programs.⁷⁶ This method, called gender mainstreaming, tends to focus on equality between men and women, rather than on state accommodations for women's roles as mothers. It has also been criticized for diffusing state responsibility for gender equality to such a degree that no organization has appreciable power to enact policy.⁷⁷

Despite the seeming totality of post-socialist transition — or, as it is known in the region, “the changes” — some legacies of state socialism's investment in women's emancipation live on. According to statistics from the European Union's Eurostat database, the pay gap between men and women, though still existent, is smaller in Hungary than in Austria.⁷⁸ Hungarian women earn 86 forints for every 100 a man does while Austrian women earn 79.9 cents to an Austrian man's euro. The most striking statistical comparison is in childcare: just over 12 percent of Hungarian babies under three years old are enrolled in formal

75 Steven Saxonberg and Tomas Sirovatka, “Failing Family Policy in Post-Communist Central Europe,” *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* 8, no. 2 (2006): 185–202.

76 “History of Gender Mainstreaming at international level and EU level,” Gender-KompetenzZentrum, Humboldt-Universität Berlin, January 2, 2010, <http://www.genderkompetenz.info/eng/gender-competence-2003-2010/Gender%20Mainstreaming/Bases/history/international/index.html/>.

77 Barbara Einhorn, “Citizenship, Civil Society and Gender Mainstreaming: Contested Priorities in an Enlarging Europe” (presentation, Pan-European Conference on Gendering Democracy in an Enlarged Europe, Prague, Czech Republic, June 20, 2005).

78 “Gender pay gap in unadjusted form by NACE Rev. 2 activity – structure of earnings survey methodology (earn_gr_gpgr2)” in “Gender equality,” Database, Eurostat, accessed May 17, 2018, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>.

childcare while only 5.6 percent of Austrian babies are. This modest difference becomes extreme when children are slightly older. Nearly three-quarters of Hungarian children between three years old and the minimum compulsory school age attend formal childcare, while only one-quarter of Austrian children do.⁷⁹ One likely explanation for this discrepancy is the state-socialist culture of socialized crèches and kindergartens. Because kindergartens were subsidized and widely available, it became normal for parents to send their kids there while they worked. Now, those children who grew up attending crèches and kindergartens run by the socialist state have their own children. Their experience did not leave them scarred; rather, these parents raised going to day care are choosing the same for their children.

CONCLUSION

What are the stakes of studying women's emancipation under state socialism in Eastern Europe, and why even bother? Europe's twentieth-century experiment in socialism is receding quickly into the rearview mirror of history, but we'd be wrong to let it disappear entirely. Although the socialist state never fully eradicated patriarchy in the home, or explicitly dealt with issues of sexual harassment or domestic violence, it did strive to provide (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the era and country) some semblance of social security, economic stability, and work-life balance for its citizens. The radical lesson is that the state intervened and did some good things on behalf of women, things that markedly changed their lives — day cares, abortion, canteens, etc. Feminist activism, the way it looks in the West with painted signs and rallying cries, did not achieve these things. Bureaucrats did.

This may feel like a bleak lesson: how can we rally for state feminism

79 “Children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration - % over the population of each age group - EU-SILC survey (ilc_caindformal)” in “Gender equality,” Database, Eurostat, accessed May 17, 2018, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>.

when our states are headed by the likes of Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump? But maybe, just maybe, it could feel like a bright lesson. As feminists frequently at our wits' end, we must realize that there are more, and better, options. Consciousness raising, pamphlets, performance art, marches, and hashtag campaigns will not bring about the kind of permanent progress that most women need. Changing minds and hearts is not our only goal; we must also change the role of the state. The feminist demands we make can be radical in the true sense of the word: they can get to the root of the problem. It has become increasingly clear that the barriers to women's full participation in public life are not failures of individual willpower. We have leaned in, stepped up, and hung on, but our grit has amounted to very little. Without state support and an ambitious program of wealth redistribution — whether this is through increased taxation or from the profits generated through social ownership of public enterprises — women will continue to perform the unremunerated care work for capitalist societies, which will only increase as the baby-boomer generation enters old age.⁸⁰

Few would argue that life under socialism in Eastern Europe was good, generally. Consumer shortages and travel restrictions circumscribed many lives. At various times, in various places, political violence cut lives short and fractured families. And yet, by most every measure, women had a degree of education, economic independence, and legal standing that their Western peers would not have until much later and, once won, always seem on the verge of losing. Reviewing the limited successes of the state-socialist past is in no way a call to recreate the failed experiments of the twentieth-century Eastern European regimes. But we must be able to take stock of their accomplishments for what they were, to learn from them, and to move forward.

The historiography of women's lives under state socialism — and the historiography of state socialism generally — is deeply political. As

80 Malcom Harris, *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials*, (New York: Little Brown, 2017); Gabriel Winant, "Not Every Kid-Bond Matures," *n+1* 30 (Winter 2018).

we have each argued elsewhere, those who oppose any project of collective action or redistribution of wealth dredge up the boogeyman of zombie socialism to preempt any socialist movement before it begins.⁸¹ This is true, also, of those would keep women from power. Since the nineteenth century and the solidification of the state as we know it, women have had a particular interest in seeing that the state use its power on their behalf. This is still true today.

In the United States, women make up the majority of the Democratic Party, and the majority of women lean Democrat.⁸² Although it's a far cry from democratic socialism, to many people the Democrats represent the ideal of government working in the interests of people, of public services, public education, and public safety nets. If Social Security is gutted, it will be women who take care of elderly relatives. In the absence of affordable childcare, it is women who stay home to watch the kids. And this is why, at scale, women's emancipation and socialism pose a dual threat to both the wealthiest and most powerful (who are loathe to part with their billions, and, it must be noted, are mostly men) and the most reactionary (those who spend their days sending women rape-threats online and their nights marching with torches in nouveaux-Klan rallies). If journalists at the *Financial Times* and screenwriters at the BBC can assert the benefits of state socialism for women — whether these be in the large percentages of women working as engineers or in more liberal policies regarding reproductive rights — it is high time that feminists engage with the evidence and do the same. ✎

81 Julia Mead, "Why Millennials Aren't Afraid of Socialism," *Nation*, January 10, 2017; Ghodsee and Sehon, "Anti-anti-communism."

82 "Wide Gender Gap, Growing Educational Divide in Voters' Party Identification," Pew Research Center, March, 2018, <http://www.people-press.org/2018/03/20/wide-gender-gap-growing-educational-divide-in-voters-party-identification/>.