

INTRODUCTION **THE ROAD TO BULGARIA, 1983–1990**

In September of 1989 I dropped out of college and left the country because I thought the world was going to end. I was only nineteen years old and had little money. I was alone and knew no one in Europe, but none of that really mattered. There were enough nuclear weapons on the planet to destroy the Earth a thousand times over. In retrospect, it was a crazy decision, and it was one that would end up shaping the rest of my life. Of course, I had no idea of this at the time.

You see, I gained political consciousness during the Reagan era; I was the child of a Cold War going hot. Growing up in San Diego, I was surrounded by the children of soldiers in all four branches of the American military. The kids at my school were all vaguely aware that the next war might be the last one humans ever fought. I think I watched the 1983 television film *The Day After* at a particularly vulnerable age. The graphic representation of a nuclear attack on the United States scared the hell out of me. After the movie there was a special *ABC News Viewpoint* program discussing the pros and cons of nuclear weapons. The panel guests were Henry Kissinger, Carl Sagan, Brent Scowcroft, William F. Buckley Jr., Elie Wiesel, and Robert McNamara. During the debate, I remember Carl Sagan explaining that the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union was like “two men standing waist deep in gasoline; one with three

matches, the other with five.” It was a vivid and effective mental image that seared into my young mind how close we already were to the brink of planetary annihilation.

I am not sure exactly when it happened, but at some point before I turned fourteen, I decided that it was unlikely that I would live to see twenty-five. Given the proliferation of missiles on either side of the Iron Curtain, I was pretty convinced that the entire world was going to be destroyed in a nuclear holocaust. This would make me a particularly nihilistic adolescent. Since the whole Earth was inevitably going to be reduced to a smoldering ash heap, there was really no point to anything. I was not alone in this feeling; a lot of my friends also rationalized not doing their homework because our city would certainly be hit in the first round of any nuclear attack.

I had a lot of questions about the political ideologies whose incommensurability had created this situation. So I joined the Model United Nations Club in middle school. This was a club filled mostly with geeky boys trying to intellectualize their way out of the discomforts of puberty. Model United Nations (MUN) was like a competitive debate team. We had conferences at other schools where discerning social studies teachers judged our role-playing abilities. Each school participating in a conference would be allocated a certain number of countries, and the school would have to provide a minimum of three representatives for each country—one for the General Assembly, one for an ad hoc political committee, and one for the Economic and Social Council. In addition, most school teams were given one country with a seat on the Security Council. If the school team was really lucky, it would be assigned a country that was one of the five permanent members of the Security Council: the United States, France, the United Kingdom, China, and the USSR. This was every middle school MUNER’s dream: veto power.

For each assigned country, a team of three or four students would have to research the foreign policy of its government and its past voting record at the real United Nations in New York in order to role-play that country effectively at the student conference. In all of their spare time, the boys in my club would study up on the United States, Britain, and France, praying fervently that we would be asked to represent one of the veto wielding “good guys” at our next conference. No one wanted to be China, because all they ever did was abstain. And no one wanted to be the Union of

Soviet Socialist Republics, because they were the bad guys. No one, that is, save for me.

Maybe it was because I was a girl and I knew that they would never give me the chance to role-play a “good” country with veto power, or maybe it was because I was a contrarian, but I became the Eastern Bloc specialist of our club. I was hoping that some day we would be assigned the USSR and that I would get a shot at the Security Council and a chance to win the gavel (the highest prize of the competition). I read voraciously about the Russians, about Marxism-Leninism, about the Soviet space program, and about collectivized agriculture. I read everything that I could get my hands on, hoping to understand the Soviet worldview so that I could more accurately represent them and convincingly argue their position on the key world issues of the day: the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and nuclear proliferation among others.

I learned that the Soviets believed in a centrally controlled economy, where the government owned all of the factories and productive units in society and guaranteed citizens lifetime full employment in exchange for their political obedience to the Communist Party. Most communist countries began this process by expropriating the wealth of the bourgeois class, basically taking the rich people’s money by force and making it the state’s property on behalf of the workers. This process of expropriation was usually achieved through violent revolution, and the Soviets supported leftist insurgencies across the globe, hoping to destroy the capitalists so that humankind could move on to the next phase of history. What fascinated me most as I read about these communist movements was that they always claimed a moral high ground. The insurgents always claimed that they represented the interests of the poor and downtrodden masses against the rich and privileged elites. No matter what the USSR did, they justified their actions by appealing to equality, economic rights, and social justice, a package of powerful concepts to have in my MUN tool kit.

As I slowly became the expert on Soviet foreign policy, arguing the Communists’ position in all of our practice sessions, I was now guaranteed the assignment of a socialist bloc country if there was one in our school’s allotment. Since almost all of the Eastern European countries followed the lead of the USSR, I could use the same Soviet rhetoric to represent any communist country (with the notable exception of Yugoslavia). My first socialist country was the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, which I

played in the General Assembly. I played Poland and Romania on a couple of ad hoc committees and then was finally assigned to be Bulgaria on the Security Council. Although I did not have veto power, I would be one of only fifteen delegates. Having experience on the council would increase my chances of getting put on it a second time. This was my chance to shine!

I spent weeks after school preparing for the conference. In 1985 Bulgaria was a relatively small country about the size of Delaware with a population of about nine million. It bordered Greece and Turkey to the south, Yugoslavia to the west, and Romania to the north. Its entire eastern border was on the Black Sea. A part of the Ottoman Empire for over five hundred years, the country regained its independence in 1878. Bulgaria was allied with the Germans during both World War I and World War II. In 1944 communist freedom fighters took over the government with Soviet support. For two years the country was technically a communist monarchy, but in 1946 they ousted the young king and established the People's Republic of Bulgaria. By 1985 the country had been under the control of one man for over a quarter of a century, and it was one of the USSR's most faithful allies. As a founding member of both the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (the Communist trading bloc) and the Warsaw Pact (the Communist mutual defense treaty), Bulgaria was at the core of the Eastern Bloc and always voted together with the USSR. This was going to be easy.

Being on the Security Council was an exhilarating experience. Since everyone was officially referred to as "the delegate from [country name]," most of us did not know each other by our real names. We addressed each other as the names of our respective countries. I was simply called "Bulgaria." The boy who was representing the USSR was a grade above me. He had long, thick, pale lashes that framed dark blue eyes. He wore a dark gray suit and a deep red tie with gold flecks and had mastered a fake Russian accent that he deployed with utmost confidence. I spent both days of the conference sitting next to him, and he would often lean over and whisper advice into my ear. On the second day he asked me, "Hey Bulgaria, you want to have lunch? We should strategize the socialist position on Israel in order to avoid the US veto." We sat out on a bench together in the bright San Diego sun very seriously discussing Middle East politics while eating our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I felt no embarrassment at spending so much time with him and letting him give me directions. After all, I was Bulgaria. My role was to do what the USSR told me to do. After the

conference, I told my girlfriends back at school that I had quite literally developed a *huge* crush on the Soviet Union.

In the eleventh grade, I finally got my chance at veto power. My high school was allotted the Soviet Union, and I was chosen to represent the USSR on the Security Council. I had spent most of my teenage years preparing for this one opportunity, and I studied like a fiend, memorizing the last three years worth of *US News and World Report*. I also spent everyday after school carefully listening to the new LP of the Irish rock band U2, using the lead singer's midsong monologues about apartheid in South Africa or dictatorships in Latin America as a study guide. I had been tipped off that the band was popular among the college students, and that they often culled MUN scenarios from U2's lyrics.

On November 16, 1986, all of the pretend delegates of the Security Council at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) all-high-school MUN conference were awakened at 3:00 a.m. for an emergency session. The scenario the college students had cooked up for us was a Soviet incursion into West Berlin. They gave us no explanation, only saying that there had been reports of Soviet troops pouring through the Brandenburg gate. As we all convened in the UCSD seminar room at 3:30 a.m., eyes still heavy with disrupted slumber, my head was spinning as I frantically tried to come up with some possible explanation for my adopted country's sudden aggression. The boy playing the United States was immediately recognized by the chair and launched into an impassioned condemnation of the Soviet Union.

Of course I knew the Soviets would officially claim that they were supporting some kind of domestic revolution that was being squelched, but I had no specifics about local politics in West Berlin to make a convincing case to the rest of the Security Council delegates. There was no Internet back then, no Google. We did not even have laptop computers. I had to make something up. I had to think fast. The boy playing the United States was hungry for the gavel and this was my chance to steal it out from under his nose. I might never get a chance again.

The Security Council chair, a college student representing Ecuador who was also the judge, listened intently to the United States. The boy said nothing surprising or original, just a bunch of hackneyed lines about Soviet aggression, the situation in Afghanistan, and the global threats of totalitarianism and communism. The other high school students were still too

sleepy to pay much attention at this point; the delegate from Senegal wiped some crusted mucus from the corner of his left bloodshot eye and sat rolling it around between his thumb and forefinger, clearly wishing he could be back in bed. To my right the boy representing Papua New Guinea was actually asleep, his chin pinned to his chest.

The United States finished his speech with a dramatic flailing of his arms, his eyes resting on mine, challenging me to respond. The chair also looked in my direction and asked, “Would the delegate from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics care to make an opening statement?”

In a moment of panic and inspiration, I reached down under the table and removed one of my tennis shoes. I first slammed it on the table in front of me, and then hurled it across the room at the United States, shouting “You bourgeois, imperialist pig!”

Everyone in the room stared at me. Papua New Guinea’s head shot up; Senegal flicked his eye crust across the table. Ecuador’s mouth stood open. He looked to me, to the United States, and then to me. I thought I saw the corners of his thin mouth turn slightly upward. “Will the delegate from the Soviet Union kindly keep her footwear out of the debate?”

I smiled at him, confident that he had gotten the Khrushchev reference. I cleared my throat. “Capitalism and communism are thesis and antithesis. The conflict between them is inevitable, as is the progress of history. Only through conflict and confrontation can humankind reach its fullest potential, reach a new synthesis of political freedom and social justice,” I said, the Hegelian dialectics plunging uncomfortably from my tongue into the college seminar room. But I had everyone’s attention after the shoe. I continued, leaning both of my hands on the table in front of me and meeting the sleepy stares of the other fourteen delegates. My strategy was to convince them that a nuclear confrontation was inevitable given the buildup of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) on both sides. Either there would be a nuclear war or there wouldn’t. The Soviets were finally calling the bluff.

I knew the rules of this game well. The college students had prepared a scenario for us. As long as I stayed within the boundaries of political plausibility, I could introduce whatever justifications I wanted. I glanced at the gavel in the hand of the chair. I might just be able to win. It was a risky move on my part, but I really believed that a nuclear war between the superpowers was solidly within the realm of political plausibility. The question was: would the judges think so, too?

“The number of nuclear weapons currently in existence far exceeds the amount necessary to kill off the majority of the world’s population and destroy all major cities across the globe,” I said. “It now seems clear that the final conflict between capitalism and communism is inevitable. The Soviet leadership believes that the sooner this conflict occurs, the sooner communism can triumph over the bourgeois, imperialist phase of human history. The resolution of this conflict is both necessary and inevitable. History will show the United States to be the imperialist aggressor it is. A total nuclear assault on the part of both existing superpowers will destroy all private property, which will allow what is left of the human race to begin with a clean slate with no preexisting class divisions in society.”

I stopped once more and took a deep breath. The chair was nodding his head at me. I stood up straight, pushing my chest out toward the United States. “In short, ladies and gentlemen of the Security Council, the leadership of the Soviet Union has only initiated the inevitable: the total destruction of both the United States and the Soviet Union, so that human history will more quickly process to its logical conclusion, the ultimate triumph of social justice in a true proletarian democracy! Our nuclear arsenal stands fully armed and ready to meet any US aggression.”

The chair and the other kids in the room stared at me in awe. Senegal slapped his hand over his mouth. The delegate from the United States was immediately recognized and spat accusations of irrationality and aggression at me, and I could tell that he was a hawkish type. I felt that the other sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds in the room had bought into my scenario and taken my side. This outcome probably seemed inevitable to many of them, too. Whereas the MUN conference organizers had probably expected a garden-variety resolution condemning Soviet aggression, which would be vetoed by the USSR, I had single-handedly precipitated a mock nuclear holocaust by taunting the US delegate into launching a first strike. I then launched a retaliatory strike, firing ICBMs at all major metropolitan areas in North America and Western Europe. By the end of the session, the delegates of my Security Council unanimously passed a resolution condemning all nuclear weapons, even as we collectively realized that we had started the Third World War. The last paragraph of our resolution contained a warning to future generations not to repeat the mistakes we had made.

Out of four hundred or so high school kids, the judges decided that I was the most prepared and most persuasive delegate, even though I had de-

stroyed the world. They, too, believed that nuclear war between the United States and the USSR was solidly within the realm of political possibility. They awarded me the gavel. When I went up to receive my much coveted prize, I was elated. It was one of the most important moments in my life thus far. I was almost certain, however, that I would never be able to share it with grandchildren of my own.

As the decade wore on, my fear of nuclear war continued to grow, seeming ever more inevitable. The only distraction was school and my newfound obsession with U2 and their politically engaged rock music. As the band's popularity grew in the late 1980s, I found a community of like-minded kids among my fellow U2 fans; they knew about world events and took the possibility of nuclear annihilation seriously. In the year after I won the gavel, I attended four U2 shows in Southern California and Arizona and learned about organizations like Greenpeace and Amnesty International from the tables at these concerts. I was impressed that there were people trying to change things but could never let go of the idea that it probably wouldn't make any difference in the end. Still, for a few hours, I could forget about Mutual Assured Destruction and let myself be a normal teenage girl.

Just under two years later, I started my first year of college in September 1988. After only nine months, I dropped out. What was the point of studying and getting good grades to earn a degree when the human race might soon be reduced to living in caves? Even though I had a full scholarship and enjoyed my classes at UC Santa Cruz, it seemed foolish to waste what little time I thought I had left learning about the world from books when I could be seeing it for real. I worked three different jobs in the summer of 1989 to save enough money to fund my travels. I bought a one-way ticket to Madrid and left at the end of September. I knew that someone was bound to launch those nukes eventually. How pathetic would it be if the world ended while I was sitting somewhere taking an exam? Backpacking around the globe sounded like the better thing to do.

I spent five weeks in the fall of 1989 traveling around Spain and Portugal, but the train tickets were more expensive than I thought and it would soon be too cold to camp out. I would need more money if I were to keep on traveling indefinitely. I had to find a job. An Australian traveler in Lisbon told me that I would be able to find good work as a nanny in London for the winter months. It would be expensive to get to London, and I would be

close to broke if I did not find a job right away. It was a risk, but I did not know what else to do.

I went to Barcelona and found the bus station. I bought a one-way ticket to London, kissing it for luck. It was already early November, and I hoped that I could hole up in the UK for a few months until I saved up enough money to head down to Israel. It sounded like a good plan, but I was nervous. I was nineteen and alone in a bus station in Spain heading to London where I knew no one, hoping to find illegal work so I would not have to go home.

There was a small television mounted to the far corner of the bus station. I had not really paid any attention to it; they were showing some kind of cheesy Spanish soap operas. I was recording in my journal all of the details of the people I had met and the places I had been over the past few weeks when I noticed some of the other waiting passengers standing up to get closer to the tv. At first it was just a few people, but slowly a crowd started to form. There was whispering at first, then a loud murmur, and finally an excited chatter that made me wonder what was so interesting. I looked up, but the tv was too far away and I was too nearsighted to get a sense of what was going on. It was only when the two women behind the ticket counter and the people standing in line to buy tickets all wandered over to the little tv that I stood up to join the crowd.

There were people jumping up and down on the Berlin Wall.

For a moment I was sure that this was some kind of movie until I noticed that the little words in the upper corner of the screen said “Live from Berlin” in Spanish. The voice of the Spanish newscaster was incredulous as he described the scene. East Germans were flooding into West Berlin and no one was stopping them. Could it really be?

If I had had the money, I would have gotten on the next bus to Berlin. I promised myself then that I would go as soon as I had enough of a cushion to buy a plane ticket home if I needed one. I did find a job in England for three months and after that spent a month working on a kibbutz in Israel. I passed that whole winter following the news as one former communist country after another embraced democracy without interference from the Russians.

In early June of 1990 I found myself in Turkey after having traveled overland from Egypt through Jordan, Iraq, and Syria. I was a seasoned trav-

eler now with a money belt full of British pounds and a knack for finding the cheapest hotels and surviving on bread, tomatoes, cheese, and water. The time had finally come. I applied at the Bulgarian consulate in Istanbul for a visa to visit my first communist country. The Bulgarians would have none of me; they only offered a thirty-hour transit visa so that I could take the train to either Yugoslavia or Romania. I flipped a coin and chose Yugoslavia.

As I boarded the train in Istanbul, I did not know what to expect. I had spent so many years studying the communist world for MUN, but I could not conjure up in my mind what that world might actually look like. The only thing I could imagine was some kind of Orwellian dystopia with no colors and people all dressed in exactly the same clothes. Would it look like one big jail? Or perhaps one big work camp? Over two decades later, I still remember that train ride as if it were yesterday. Once out of Turkey I was surprised to see the lush green Bulgarian countryside, punctuated with vibrant yellow fields of sunflowers. The cities were great sprawling expanses of grayness, but they were sprinkled with the varied colors of laundry hung out to dry on the balconies of the identical apartment blocks.

My longest stop in Bulgaria was in Plovdiv, the country's second largest city. On the way into the station, I had caught sight of one balcony in particular and spent some time in my compartment wondering about the people who lived there. It was a breezy day and there was laundry flapping restlessly in the wind. I had seen that there were two T-shirts (one red, one greenish), some dark socks, and what looked like it might be a pair of jeans or a pair of dark blue trousers. As I stared out the window I thought about the people that these clothes belonged to. I thought about the woman who had probably hung this laundry out to dry. These were ordinary people. Maybe there was a man and a woman and a couple of kids who had to do laundry like everyone else. They wore socks, which got smelly and needed to be washed.

It was such a mundane fact but it struck me like a lightning bolt. After all of those years of thinking about the Soviet Union and trying to understand how Communist leaders would respond to certain international crises in Security Council deliberations, it had never occurred to me to think about their socks. Those big Communists went home, took off their socks, and threw them in some pile of dirty clothes. They probably lost socks like I did. It was perfectly possible that some members of the Politburo went to work wearing an odd match. How could I have missed this basic fact that made



The author in Berlin in July 1990.

all of these people so much like me? In the midst of totalitarian oppression, people still had to wash their socks. For all of my research and fascination with the Communist bloc, I never stopped to think about the fact that there was a whole world of normality that had been hidden behind the rhetoric of the Cold War.

In that first summer after what most East Europeans simply called the Changes, I traveled through Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic for the better part of two months. It was a land of euphoria as young people took to the streets to test the limits of their newfound freedoms. For a twenty-year-old American with a newfound fascination for socks, I threw myself into the tumult of youthful jubilation that accompanied that summer. There were other Western travelers like me, curious to see what life was like behind the now crumbling Iron Curtain, but I spent my time with the young East Europeans, talking about music and food and sex and cigarette brands and movies and the places we wanted to travel to. We told jokes and laughed politely even when they were untranslatable. We marveled at how much our respective governments had tried to convince us that we should be enemies and how easy it was for us to become friends.

I was there, celebrating the end of an era, ecstatically toasting a future that I believed would be filled with peace and prosperity for all. The ugliness and brutality of the East European totalitarian regimes was finally gone. Where there had been dictatorship, there would now be democratic elections. Where there had been one state-controlled media, there would now be freedom of the press. Where there had been secret police and persecution, there would now be freedom of speech and assembly. Where there had been exit visas, there would now be freedom of travel. Where there had been shortages of basic goods, there would now be an endless consumer bonanza. With the hot July sun on our backs and a hearty dose of newfound ambition in our hearts, my new friends and I traded visions of a better world, exchanged addresses, and promised to keep in touch.

The world was not going to end.

Lucky for me, I was able to get back into college and to continue with my studies. Without the imminent fear of nuclear war my life became lighter, and for the first time I allowed myself to think about what I might like to do with my future. I wondered if my new friends in Eastern Europe were doing the same thing. Nine years would pass before I would return to the former Eastern Bloc for the second time—this time to the country that would not let me stay the first time. I was a graduate student at UC Berkeley and was trying to decide on a place to do fieldwork for my dissertation research. I had also met a young Bulgarian law student. It was a mixture of intellectual curiosity and infatuation that would lead me back to Bulgaria in January and March of 1998.

During those first two visits I was shocked to realize that the hopes and dreams of 1990 had not been realized. Although most people were still glad that communism was gone and agreed that the totalitarian past was best put behind them, the promises of democracy had not been realized. Many Bulgarians I met had started to question the transition process. Where there had been guaranteed full employment, there were now hundreds of thousands of people without work. Where there had been security and order, there was now chaos and unchecked criminal violence. Where there had been universal health care, the best doctors now worked in fee-only clinics for the new rich. Where there had been free university education, there were now private colleges. Where there had been a decent amount of gender equality, there was now outright discrimination against women. Where there had once been stable families and communities, there was

now an exodus of the young and qualified who sought better fortunes in the West. One taxi driver explained to me that “when you build a new house, you usually live in your old one while the new one is under construction.” In Bulgaria, he said, they had torn down the old house (communism) before the new one (capitalism) was ready. Everyone was now forced to live on the street.

Those of us living in the West heard very little about this during the 1990s. The news focused on high-level perspectives about the success of democracy and the triumphs of free markets in the region. Once more the lives (and socks) of ordinary people were left out of the story. It was clear to me in 1998 that there were people suffering in Bulgaria, that *democratzia* was not all that it was cracked up to be. From that wondrous summer in 1990 emerged a dark reality. People who had worked hard and built successful careers under the old system were cheated out of their well-deserved retirement. Men and women in the middle of their lives had to drastically change course just to stay afloat; they had to learn new skills, new languages, and an entirely new way of thinking. A whole generation of young people lost the futures for which they had been preparing themselves. Entire academic disciplines disappeared overnight; what do you do with a PhD in Marxist economics or dialectical materialism in a capitalist society? In short, daily life had been turned on its head. No one knew what the rules were anymore. And those most willing to test the boundaries were the ones who found themselves on top.

In the decades since 1989 much scholarly ink has been spilt on the Changes, what Western academics preferred to call “the economic transition” or the “economic transformation.” A whole new discipline of so-called transitology was created to allow economists, political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, modern historians, and interested policymakers to study the processes through which the former centrally planned economies became free market ones and through which dictatorships became democracies. Hundreds of dissertations were written on how to create stock exchanges and liberalize markets; when to reform the judiciary and what to do with Communist archives; whom to ban from public service and why it was necessary to restitute property previously expropriated by the Communists. Scholars puzzled over how to create civil society, promote political pluralism, fight corruption, protect minorities, and prevent civil war or ethnic conflict, particularly after the debacle that was the breakup of

the former Yugoslavia. Certainly these were very important questions. Understanding as momentous a social change as the transformation of communist societies into capitalist ones required a grand perspective.

But there was something that the nationally representative survey samples were missing and something that seemed more important to me than any of these other questions. Something that was more personal. I wanted to know: What was happening to the ordinary people who had to live through these changes? What had happened to the two Czech girls that I had camped with outside of Prague, or to the Serbian philosophy students with whom I debated Locke and Hume over a bottle of cheap red wine in that park in the center of Belgrade? Did they finish university, too? Were they married? Did they have children? Did they have jobs? Were they even still alive? Were things better now? Were they worse?

Thankfully, I was one of a whole new cohort of anthropologists and qualitative sociologists, both Western and East European, who set out to explore what had happened to the little people who had been “lost” in the transition. Over the twenty years that I have been visiting the region, my favorite souvenirs have always been the personal stories that I collected along the way. At first, they were scribbled out on the backs of dinner napkins or surreptitiously scratched out onto little note pads. Later, after I received more formal ethnographic training in graduate school, I became a compulsive writer of field notes, sitting down at my computer every night for an hour before allowing myself to go to sleep. I sometimes asked questions, but mostly I just listened. In bars and restaurants, in parks and plazas, in hotel lobbies and private kitchens, people seemed more than willing to talk about their daily lives. In English or in Bulgarian or in some crazy combination of sign language and polyglotinous grunting, I tried to understand what people were feeling about the unprecedented changes that were happening all around them. It was a curiosity that would become a career.

I also watched my own ideas and opinions start to shift as I was sucked in and shaped by the social and economic upheavals around me. How could I have possibly remained immune? I was no mere scholar in Bulgaria. I married that Bulgarian law student from Berkeley and was slowly immersed into a massive constellation of familial relationships that took me years to figure out. I became the progenitor of a new half-American, half-Bulgarian citizen, sharing all of the anxieties of motherhood with women



The author's Bulgarian personal identity card from 1999. Note that it is forbidden to smile in photos used for official Bulgarian documents.

from all walks of life. As a parent, I constantly worried about what the years ahead would hold for my daughter and wondered what I could do to try to prepare her for what seemed to be an unpredictable future. Many of the women I met were also scared and unsure of the rules in this new capitalist world. They had no idea what values or talents to encourage in their children to help them survive. The rules were constantly shifting. I wanted to make sense of things for them as much as I wanted to make sense of things for myself.

Writing down the details of people's varied experiences, the things they said and did and how other people reacted to their actions, helped me to keep track of all of the cultural information I was taking in every day. Years later when I found myself in front of a college classroom, I learned that sharing anecdotes from these notes helped to make me a more effective teacher. Rather than trying to explain the shortcomings of command economics from a theoretical point of view, I often told my students stories of what it had been like to go shopping for cosmetics or clothing in Bulgaria before and after the Changes. Instead of trying to catalogue all of the different policies that communist governments had put into place to promote equality between men and women, I would share with them the life



Two Bulgarian girls in traditional dress in the Rhodope Mountain town of Smolyan.

histories of real Bulgarian women who managed to have both families and careers under the old system and the many challenges they later faced with the advent of free markets.

I soon learned that young people could study communism in their modern history textbooks, but they were not really able to grasp that it had been a “normal,” functioning system without seeing it through the eyes of the individuals who had lived within it. In my classes I wanted to teach my students about these different ways of viewing the world. Although the actual practice of communism in Eastern Europe had failed miserably, there were generations of men and women who had been raised to think about the world in a very different way, shaping their choices and forging their lives within a system that operated by a set of rules that they all knew and understood. And then one day it was gone. My students seemed fundamentally unable to comprehend the sheer magnitude of that change. I



An ad for a Bulgarian beer that simply says “Men know why.” When asked, most Bulgarians don’t actually know why.

asked them: How do people continue with life after the total destruction of the political and economic system within which they spent their entire lives? What happened to the state-owned enterprises where they worked? What happened to the money they had saved or to the pensions they had earned? What happened to their cities, their schools, their playgrounds, to the cemeteries where some of the tombstones bore red stars instead of crosses?

The scope of the Changes was immense. In the course of a few short years, hard-earned college degrees in Eastern Europe were rendered useless, massive enterprises went bankrupt, life savings were eaten up by hyperinflation and banking collapses while the promise of a comfortable retirement evaporated. The anthropologist Alexei Yurchak wrote a book about the last Soviet generation called *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*. This brilliant title captures the fascination that must inevitably accompany any study of the events of 1989. Why didn’t anyone see it coming?

I am always amazed by the stories of the men and women who decided to become official members of the Bulgarian Communist Party on Novem-

ber 8, 1989. I am shocked by the tales of the people who risked their lives to defect to the West just weeks before the wall came down. And what about the desperate souls who committed suicide just days before the entire world changed around them? Having lost all hope that he would ever find freedom or happiness, some young man killed himself perhaps just hours before communism collapsed. Yurchak's title reminds us that there are many circumstances in our lives that can seem rigid and unchangeable but that are actually contingent and unstable. Things around us can seem like they will be there forever; we only realize their ephemerality once they are gone.

Of course, with the flow of information controlled by authoritarian governments, it is understandable that East Europeans did not know everything that was going on in their countries. In the Soviet Union the Communists had been in power for more than seventy years. In Eastern Europe they had been in control for the better part of four decades. Bulgaria had the same head of state, Todor Zhivkov, for about thirty-five years. Given the stranglehold these governments had on the political system, it makes sense that people might believe that everything was forever.

But this blindness to the possibility of the Soviet imperial collapse was ubiquitous in the West as well. In the United States alone billions of dollars had been spent collecting intelligence on the Soviet Union and training generations of Sovietologists to help the American government understand what was happening on the ground behind the Iron Curtain. But politicians and scholars in the West were just as surprised as Eastern European citizens. Indeed, the entire world was more or less caught off guard by the relatively unspectacular resolution of the Cold War, a war that many of us believed would end in the total destruction of the Earth. We got barely a whimper when we were expecting a bang. How had I ever become so convinced that the Cold War would end with total nuclear annihilation? How could I have been so blinded to the possibility that everything might eventually work itself out? These are questions that have been bugging me for the last twenty years.

Looking back on the transition from communism helps us to remember that the future is always contingent, and the rules of the game today may be very, very different tomorrow. Teaching about the collapse of communism is one way to get young people to understand that the way the world is now is not the way it has always been, nor the way it will always be. More importantly, seeing the world as it is should not prevent us from imagining



A socialist-era statue in Sofia.

how the world could (or perhaps should) be. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek really put his finger on something when he said that it is far easier for young people today to imagine total planetary environmental catastrophe than it is for them to imagine any significant changes in the political and economic system that will precipitate this catastrophe. How would we fare if capitalism suddenly disappeared? Few people even think to ask themselves this question. Yet there are millions of men and women still alive today who experienced the practical equivalent.

History teaches us that empires rise and fall, but the scale of the communist collapse was unprecedented. Within a few short years the maps of Eastern Europe and Central Asia had to be completely redrawn to accommodate the new countries that appeared following the implosion of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav wars. People who once lived together in a country called the USSR would be spread across fifteen new nations. People who once called themselves Yugoslavians would now be Serbians, Croats, Bosnians, Slovenes, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and most recently Kosovars. Czechoslovakians became Czechs and Slovaks. East Germans were reduced to just being *ossies* (Easterners) in a newly unified Germany,

their country swallowed up by the West. Even countries like Romania, Poland, Hungary, or Bulgaria, which remained geographically intact at the national level, did not escape the frenzy of renaming that swept across the former communist world. The names of streets, squares, universities, towns, and cities were commonly changed to reflect the coming of the new democratic era. An ordinary person could easily begin to feel like a stranger in the place where she had spent her entire life.

Of course, there were different circumstances in each of the Eastern Bloc countries, and they all faced specific challenges as they emerged into new democratic states. Although there were many differences, there were also many similarities, particularly in the ways in which ordinary people experienced changes on the ground. The focus in this book is mostly on Bulgaria because it is the country where I have spent the most time. Admittedly, Bulgaria was one of the closest allies of the USSR, and it is one of the countries that has fared least well since 1989—this does in some ways make the experience of Bulgarians unique. But Bulgaria also shared the same political and economic system with its socialist brother countries, and this system was dismantled at the same historical moment in the same geopolitical circumstances, upending an entire way of life to which people had become accustomed. The disappearance of the welfare state, the revocation of the promise of lifetime employment, the privatization of public property, the creation of free markets, the rise of new nationalisms, and the growing nostalgia for the past are characteristic of all countries emerging from communism. Thus, thinking about the Changes in Bulgaria can provide a lens through which to examine the process of economic and political transition more broadly.

Perhaps more importantly, Bulgaria is a country about which most Westerners have few preconceived notions. Unlike Russia or Poland or the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria has seldom been in the international spotlight, and few people know much about this relatively small country tucked into the most southeastern corner of Europe. Even with all of my background in current events, I did not know what to expect of Bulgaria when I first boarded that train in Istanbul back in June of 1990. It was the beginning of a journey to Belgrade, but I had no idea back then that it was also the beginning of a journey that would consume the next two decades of my life.