

Anthropology News



Bulgaria's Guerrilla Girl

Soyuz Postsocialist Studies Network
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Elena Lagadinova in 1944

In May of 1944, Bulgaria was at war with the United States, France, and Great Britain, and occupied large swaths of Northern Greece and Eastern Yugoslavia. Across the country, rag-tag bands of guerrillas resisted the Nazi-allied Bulgarian monarchy. In response to the growing threat of internal insurrection, King Boris III's government deployed the gendarmerie to stamp out the partisan threat.

The Ministry of Interior paid out a large bounty for each partisan head. Anyone caught aiding the guerrillas could be arrested, tortured, or shot. The gendarmerie had license to torch the homes of the families of suspected partisans, and they mounted the severed heads of their victims on pikes in village squares.

On May 31, 1944, the Bulgarian gendarmes arrived in Razlog, throwing grenades into the home of fourteen-year-old Elena Lagadinova. She barely escaped with her life, running barefoot into the foothills of the Pirin Mountains, and praying that the gendarmes would not capture her before she could find her three elder brothers. As her natal home was reduced to cinders, Elena Lagadinova took up arms and became Bulgaria's youngest female partisan.

Elena Lagadinova ranks among the most fascinating women in Bulgaria's contemporary history. I first met her in the summer of 2010 when she was already eighty-years-old. I was researching a book on state socialist women's international activism at the United Nations, and I sought her out because she had led the Bulgarian delegation to the first UN World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975. I had hoped to do one extended interview with her on Bulgaria's role during the United Nations Decade for Women. Instead, that one interview grew into hundreds of hours of conversation over the last five years.



Lagadinova spent the summer of 1944 fighting in the mountains, earning the nickname "the Amazon" for her courage and tenacity. Although her middle brother, Assen Lagadinov, was ambushed and decapitated by the gendarmerie, Lagadinova survived the war unscathed and went on to become something of an anti-fascist hero and role model. From Sofia to Moscow, children's magazines told Elena's story and encouraged boys and girls to "be brave like the Amazon."

After the war, Lagadinova married a fellow partisan,

Elena Lagadinova with Angela Davis in 1972

and moved to the Soviet Union to pursue a PhD in agrobiolgy. Upon her

return, Lagadinova passed the better part of thirteen years at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences manipulating wheat seeds to create more robust hybrids for planting on collectivized farms. For her work in plant genetics, the Bulgarian government awarded Lagadinova the national Order of Cyril and Methodius in 1959.

As her stature as a researcher grew, Lagadinova became increasingly critical of the politics surrounding science in the communist world. In May 1967, Lagadinova penned a passionate letter to Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, a letter that might have landed her in a labor camp when it was intercepted by the Bulgarian government.



Elena Lagadinova delivers a speech in Moscow in 1971

"One day, they sent a car for me while I was at the Academy. I was in my lab coat in the middle of an experiment. I told them to wait but they told me to come immediately. I thought I was being arrested," Lagadinova told me in 2011. "Instead, I learned that they were making me the first secretary of the Fatherland Front."

Lagadinova reluctantly left science for a new career in politics, becoming the President of the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement in 1968 and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1971. She served as the President of the Women's Committee for 22 years until its dissolution in 1990. In those two decades, Lagadinova changed the face of international women's organizing.

Lagadinova spearheaded efforts to help Bulgarian women better combine their responsibilities at work and in the home by expanding the availability of crèches and kindergartens and providing generous maternity leaves to women while their children were under the age of three. By the time of the first World Conference of Women in 1975, Bulgaria had one of the most progressive social systems in place for women, not only compared to the capitalist and developing worlds, but also compared to other socialist countries. The benefits extended to Bulgarian families were seen as a template for the rest of the world to emulate.

During the UN Decade for Women, Lagadinova crisscrossed the globe forging bilateral relationships with hundreds of women's organizations. The world's women elected her as the general rapporteur of the third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, and she was subsequently appointed to serve as a member of the board of trustees of the United Nations Institute for Training Women (instraw) from 1985 to 1988. Activists from Lusaka to Los Angeles testify that Lagadinova was a pragmatist who refused to mix politics with the concrete challenges

facing women around the world.



Elena Lagadinova and Kristen Ghodsee in May 2014

In 1991, the Claremont Graduate School in the United States awarded her their President's Medal of Outstanding Achievement. "To the benefit of all nations, you have taken...the world stage," read the Claremont president's speech. "Long before a new world order emerged, you envisioned one. You acted as if it already existed, and through your actions you contributed to its emergence. You reached beyond the narrow confines of party and nationality to create an international network of scholars and policymakers devoted to the improvement of women's lives. Through your work with the United Nations, you have influenced women's lives throughout the world, and through them the destinies of their families."

Lagadinova lives alone today, forgotten and uncelebrated. For the last 25 years she has watched her country make the difficult transition from communism to free market kleptocracy, but she still dreams that another kind of world is possible. One of the greatest pleasures of ethnographic research is spending time with people who made history, and in your own little way, ensuring that their legacies are remembered.

Kristen Ghodsee is contributing editor of the Soyuz column in Anthropology News

and the author of the forthcoming book: [The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe](#).

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[Barbara Rylko-Bauer](#) says:

December 26, 2014 at 9:03 am

Dear Kristen:

I look forward to your forthcoming book and found the YouTube trailer fascinating and very well done. It's great that you are engaging this less-known history and bringing out the complexities of the European experiences of WWII, and its aftermath. The story of Elena Lagadinova is amazing, intriguing, and deserves to be known and widely shared—both as biography and as part of larger historical ethnography. Congratulations!

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