

**Socialist Escapes: Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945 – 1989. Eds. Cathleen M. Giustino, Catherine J. Plum, and Alexander Vari. New York: Berghahn, 2013. ix, 284 pp. List of Figures. Preface. Bibliography. Index. Hard bound: Paper.**

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*Socialist Escapes: Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945 – 1989* is a rare book. It is rare because amidst a plethora of social sciences and historical literature it does not join a chorus of socialism's dismissal, and amidst a range of anthropological literature it does not simply investigate socialism's effects on people's everyday economic, cultural, and social lives. Rather, it seeks to highlight those effects that are usually neglected and negated: the possibility of pleasure and fun of living in the socialist world. It is, in fact, *Socialist Escapes'* ludic emphases, which provide the volume with a light tone, and that—paradoxically—convey a strong sense of normality of living “under socialism.” Methodologically, this is achieved by the contributors' deep immersion in socialist worlds, especially East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Building on extensive fieldwork, interviews, and observations, as well as fostering a comparative approach, the contributors to this volume bring discussions of agency and fun into conversation, thus expanding our understandings of both Eastern Europe and understandings of socialist politics that tend to focus on political power and depression.

*Socialist Escapes* traces the idea of fun through various practices in Eastern Europe, including music festivals, nature tourism, increasingly bohemian life-styles that include nudist practices and beach parties, hiking, and the spectacle sports of motorcycle racing and soccer. Of particular importance is the fact that the forms of entertainment and leisure investigated in this volume are not necessarily spectacular in the sense of being always visually or physically exciting, but that they provide a measure of freedom and autonomy to those who engage in or with them. For example, across many parts of the East European (and larger) socialist world, hiking, and to some extent mountain climbing, provided a pleasurable exit strategy from the demands of socialist economic and political party life. In fact, as numerous contributors including Dabrowski, Plum, Costache, Neuburger, and Keck-Szajbel convincingly show, the cultural and emotional practices of nature loving became so widespread and popular that individuals, families, and outdoor-oriented organizations and clubs left the more urban world on a regular basis to enjoy what we usually think of as wild and free nature.” In correlation, what seems important here is the fact that some spaces provided a greater degree of autonomy and freedom than others. So, apart from socialism's infamous “kitchen culture” that marked a private space in which people could often talk with a certain degree of frankness and trust, more public spaces such as motorcycling tracks, soccer stadiums, hotels, music festivals, and chateaux turned into sites where a variety of people and groups could and did experience pleasure and fun. Tompkins, Giustino, Vari, Fricke, and Poenaru in

particular trace the ways in which people express desires for diversion and leisure. However, as Fricke and Poenaru show, cultural practices of leisure also led to the formation of dissident-like (although this may be too strong a word) subcultures that were not always appreciated by their nations' respective parties. For example, soccer games and motorcycle races marked forms of leisure that removed spectators from the supervision of the state while also offering liberatory spaces away from the holiday resorts and camps organized by socialist parties. Together, the volume provides a much-needed antidote to stereotyped representations of socialism as monotonous, dreary, and dull.

If I could express one criticism, it would concern the book's title, especially the idiom "escapes." As a term, *escapes* is too resonant of avoidance, evasion, and elusion. It smacks of holiday and/or getaway. And, of course, this is what many of the volume contributors deal with: people hiking in mountains, attending soccer games, visiting chateaux, etc. At the same time, in relational ways the term also implies that Eastern European forms of state socialism produced- to paraphrase Cathleen Giustino —"dull everyday routines of work, school, and home" and, in metaphorical ways, produced a life marked as gray. Furthermore, *escapes* seems to accept an overarching logic that the party controlled "everything," and that the little autonomy that could be had could only be found in leisurely practices and entertainment. While I do not necessarily doubt the need for leisure, autonomy, or even escape, this need seems to allegedly exist only—or at least more—in and under socialism. As a cultural anthropologist and reviewer with some experience of working in socialist contexts myself, I would finally like to see analyses that transcend the conceptual iron curtain of East and West. This is not the job of the book under review, yet novel analytical routes might be beneficial for the anthropology of Europe and beyond. That way, we might also begin to understand concepts such as "socialism" and "escapes" in new light. Scholars and students of anthropology, sociology, political science, and Eastern European and Slavic studies are sure to enjoy this book.