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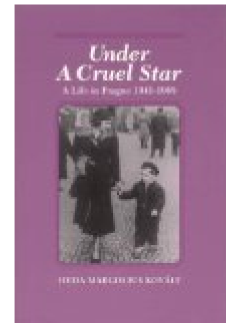
Heda Margolius Kovaly. *Under A Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941-1968.* New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997. 192 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8419-1377-6.



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Under The Red Star

This book is at once an emotionally touching memoir, a problematic historical document, and an immensely useful teaching text for undergraduates. Heda Kovaly's story and engaging narrative personality bring the region's history to life, despite the book's limited historical analysis. The text's very faults might provide an opportunity for lively classroom discussion, especially if paired with other recollections of Stalinism that address topics Kovaly omits or oversimplifies.[1]

Kovaly's moving story was first published twenty years ago, in the shadow of the Prague Spring. Initially, Kovaly's book served only as an extended prologue to a philosophical treatise on the events of 1968 by emigre philosopher Erazim Kohak.[2] In an unsuccessful attempt to make these two texts more parallel, Kovaly's work was given the same chapter headings and subheadings as Kohak's: an artificial and unwieldy division of Kovaly's tense, sparely told story. Alfred Kazin, reviewing the English-language edition for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1973, noted the imbalance in the volume. His review all but ignored the treatise, commenting that "[Kohak's] chapters are rational, sensible and intellectually admirable without touching the heart. Heda Kovaly's chapters are the burning facts ..."[3]

Those facts speak more plainly in this edition, a new printing of a 1986 translation. Generally faithful to the Czech original, this text does more justice to Kovaly's own authorial voice. This edition has dropped not just Kohak's treatise but also the first edition's antiquated phrasing and typographical errors. For readers unfamiliar with the history of Eastern Europe, Kovaly added paragraphs explaining Stalin's cult of personality, the slow thaw of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia as opposed to elsewhere in the region, and the dreary daily reality of life in Stalinist Prague. The climax of the narrative is now obviously the events surrounding the arrest and execution of Kovaly's husband, Rudolf Margolius, the country's Deputy Minister for Foreign Trade, one of the fourteen "conspirators" sentenced to hang for treason in the Czechoslovak Stalinist show trials of 1952. The Prague Spring and the Soviet invasion now form the story's despairing conclusion.

Kovaly's book is not a Holocaust memoir, although her narrative bears the imprint of that event. She opens the book with the deportation of her family from Prague to the Lodz ghetto in 1941; a brief chapter describes some of her experiences in Auschwitz. Her story, however, really begins in the closing days of the war, when she and a few fellow inmates from Auschwitz escaped from the ranks of the prisoners being marched from Poland into Reich Germany. Kovaly flees to Prague, still occupied by the Nazis, where not being able to present identity papers means deportation or worse, and where street searches are daily occurrences. One by one, she visits friends, hoping for help or a place to hide. Most refuse; she chooses not to endanger the few brave ones. Desperate and ill, Kovaly finally makes contact with and is hidden by the partisans, and aids them in the fight to liberate Prague. After the war, she is reunited with her former love, Rudolf, who also survived the camps. Rudolf soon joins the Communist party, as does Heda–more for

Rudolf's sake than out of ideological conviction. Rudolf is swept into its higher reaches and grows increasingly isolated from his wife and the world around him. Yet even Rudolf cannot avoid seeing the growing terror caused by waves of arrests. In November 1951, he himself is arrested.

Kovaly devotes most of the rest of the book to the nightmare her life became after Rudolf's imprisonment and later execution. Though not interrogated herself, she was persecuted by the government: fired from one job and denied others, essentially forced out of her apartment, and forced to leave the hospital prematurely when dangerously ill. During these years of official harassment, she was hard-pressed to feed herself and her son. After 1956, her persecution lessened. Finally, in 1963, years after the rest of the Bloc pardoned those executed in show trials, the Czechoslovak Communists decided to quietly rehabilitate their victims. They invited Kovaly to their headquarters to be told of her husband's pardon, which would be published in an internal Party document. To their surprise, she demanded a public exoneration and retrial, as well as a public admission of the government's guilt. She left their offices empty-handed but defiant, and responded similarly to other attempts to placate her.

This initiative, bravery, and intolerance of officialdom characterize Kovaly throughout the book. Whether in Auschwitz, occupied Prague, Party meetings, the hospital, or on her way into exile, Kovaly is never less than her own person, and confronts the system forthrightly. The reader cannot help but admire her and be moved by her story–one reason among many why Kovaly's memoir is a valuable teaching tool. In the book's last chapter, Kovaly gets caught up in the heady days of the Prague Spring, then flees for the border in a panic after learning of the Soviet invasion, only to be turned back by overly diligent young border guards, then wavers between staying and leaving for weeks before finally boarding a train for France. Particularly in this part of the book, her prose possesses both clarity and tragic momentum: the reader shares her joy, shock and terror, as well as her indecision and wistfulness.

The memoir's undeniable pathos is one reason for its widespread presence on course syllabi. Another is probably its simplicity, its absence of complex prose or elaborate interpretation. Yet this very simplicity brings up important issues in the history classroom. Kovaly's memoir is an easy and appealing read, but it tends to flatten out complicated historical problems, posing them either in terms of personal experience or in terms of transcendent good or evil. Generally, Kovaly's text eschews analysis, opting instead for a portrayal of experience: instructors will want to remedy this absence.

Kovaly's story is, in essence, a moral fable, and the conclusions she draws are unsurprising but never stated explicitly. A summary, then: First, Communism in Czechoslovakia was misguided and doomed to failure from the outset, overly faithful to its Russian model and thus inappropriate for a more developed and "advanced" country. Second, except for Kovaly's husband and a few other idealists, the Communist hierarchy was inherently corrupt, and its Stalin-era reign of terror was a natural development. Communism made possible the ascent of society's worst dregs, false and opportunistic carpetbaggers who seized on ideological platitudes and rode them to power. Finally, the experiences of Nazism and then Communism perverted all that was good in the Czech spirit, and even the youthful energy of the Prague Spring could not entirely restore Czech society. In Kovaly's eyes, much of Czech history and society can be separated into two easily recognizable camps. Interwar democrats, post-war idealists, and all young people–good; apparatchiks and everyone content to obey the regime's directives–bad. Kovaly does contextualize Communism's popularity in post-war Czechoslovakia, as I explain below; however, the context is clearly provided in bitter hindsight.

Few of Kovaly's characters emerge as developed, well-rounded human beings. For the most part, they are flat types. Her husband Rudolf, for example, though unwilling to acknowledge the system's faults, is nonetheless presented as a nearly perfect man, utterly virtuous and principled. Kovaly's friend, Mrs. Machova, is the representative of the authentic working class (as opposed to the working class of Communist propaganda): canny, steadfast, and invariably present in Kovaly's darkest hours. We get to know Kovaly's character better than anyone else in the book, and, while her persona is portrayed in more complex detail than the other characters, in one important sense she draws herself with the same blunt tool. Unlike many Czechoslovaks during this period, Kovaly not only never truly believed in Communism or the Soviet Union as a model; she never even voted Communist, despite her husband's staunch faith and high position. Her skepticism toward the party was as unwavering as her husband's commitment to it.

One of the most important of Kovaly's representative types is Franta, a former officer in the Czechoslovak Army, who lived out the war quietly in Prague and re-

fused to hide Kovaly in 1945. Again, Kovaly does not analyze her characters; but it seems that for her Franta embodies the pragmatic rationality of Masaryk's interwar democracy, and the inadequacy of its norms and values when faced with the extremity of the war. She describes Franta this way:

He had survived the entire war living quietly, inconspicuously, in Prague. He had done nothing dishonorable. He had not collaborated with the Nazis nor had he denounced anyone. But he had not taken any risks either. ...it had never entered his mind that he should join the resistance. He had lived out the war like a hibernating animal" (p. 57).

In justifying his decision to refuse Kovaly shelter, Franta uses dubious logic: " 'Forgive me, but I can't imagine how you can save yourself. You clearly did what you thought best... but it goes against all reason... Am I justified in risking my or anyone else's life for something I consider a lost cause? What sense does it make anyway to risk one life for another? ' " (p. 29). He then admits his cowardice.

Later in the story, Franta, now reconciled with Kovaly even after failing her so profoundly, is used once again to represent the bankruptcy of rational prudence in the post-war context. At a party, he argues for the prewar democratic system against Zdenek, another friend of the Kovalys, who joined the Communist party when he joined the ranks of the wartime partisans. Kovaly's instincts direct her to take Franta's side during this debate, but despite her attraction to interwar democratic values, she cannot bring herself to accept Franta as her exemplar. In her eyes, Franta soundly loses this "debate between caution and courage" (p. 58). Franta's example powerfully illustrates Communism's appeal in postwar Czechoslovakia, and the unattractiveness of the prewar democracy seen in the light of its "failing"–i.e. Munich. Kovaly never draws attention to this resemblance, but her portrayal of Franta is practically a caricature of Edvard Benes, opting for undignified, pragmatic survival rather than courageous commitment and risk.

Kovaly herself seems to bridge this divide; she is both courageous and pragmatic, willing to take risks for those she loves but also deeply desirous of a quiet home and peaceful family life. Her risks and courage are not in defense of abstract ideals but rather of those she loves. In fact, Kovaly's book is marked by a lack of reliance on any kind of ideology or -ism. She describes her discomfort with communism's emphasis on the masses: "Right from the start, I took a dislike to the word ... Whenever I saw or heard it, I had a vision of an endless flock of sheep ..." (p. 67). Kovaly's liberal political opinions and distrust of the party help to make her easily comprehensible to post-Cold War American students.[4] At the same time, Kovaly explains why post-war intellectuals like her husband were persuaded by communist claims. She notes that she, too, wanted to believe in the good of the system: "That's what we were, the worst kind of idiots," she says, speaking for all of Czechoslovak society (p. 96).

Kovaly ascribes her anti-ideological skepticism to her gender: "That I myself did not succumb to the lure of ideology was certainly not because I was smarter than Rudolf but because I was a woman, a being much closer to reality and the basic things of life than he was" (p. 65). She also cites her gender to explain her emphasis on the people rather than ideas. As she says, "I was more interested in what was happening around me in the present, among the people I loved, than in the foggy spheres of ideology" (p. 65).

Whether this was related to her gender or not, it is true that Kovaly's book is also the story of her personal relationships, despite Kovaly's obvious initiative and self-reliance. Other Auschwitz prisoners helped and inspired her to escape, then helped her get to Prague; friends hid her and connected her to the partisans; friends helped her survive Rudolf's imprisonment and execution, helped her raise her son and recover from illness. Kovaly's narrative focuses on private experience, rather than public participation: it is through her closest relationships that she comes to feel the regime's power most profoundly. She says repeatedly that, after the war, "I did not feel like getting involved in politics. I kept saying to myself, 'All I want is an ordinary, quiet life' " (p. 68). Framing her experience in this way lends the book universal immediacy.

More specifically, Kovaly's gender ensured that her experience of everyday reality under Stalinism was very different from that of her husband. Communism's guarantee of equal rights for men and women translated, in practice, into all women taking on a "second shift." Women were expected to do all the housework, work outside the home, and take an active part in political life. In addition to working full days, Kovaly shopped for rapidly disappearing goods, stood in bread lines, attended endless political meetings, and spoke to other women trying to raise families in this new environment. She was never imprisoned, nor did she have Rudolf's luxury of ignoring any aspects of reality that did not jibe with the party's rosy statistics. As the working wife of a deputy minister,

she had a privileged status in her society and an intimate vantage point for observing it, but little power to change it. She experienced the best the system could offer, but also, after Rudolf's arrest and execution, the worst it could hurl at her short of imprisonment. Her contact with Czechoslovak society was extensive and rich. Thus the circumstances of her life, and her powers of observation, make her a valuable witness.

The instructor using this book will no doubt want to address one important omission: Kovaly's text devotes little attention to Judaism, Jewishness, or Czechoslovak antisemitism. This seems odd, given her personal background. Both Kovaly and her husband lived out the war in concentration camps. Eleven out of the fourteen people sentenced in the Slansky trials were Jewish, and newspaper reportage on the trials repeatedly used the adjective "Zionist" as an epithet. However, Kovaly mentions antisemitism only a handful of times; moreover, she offers almost no commentary or explanation. The most telling incident occurs after Rudolf's arrest, when Kovaly goes to see Ludvik Frejka, head of the Party's Economic Commission, to ask for help. He tells her, "Only a year ago, I might have been able to pull a few strings. Then I was still a deserving Communist. Today they think of me only as a dirty Jew ..." (p. 116). Frejka himself was arrested a few weeks later, and eventually executed along with Kovaly's husband.

The reviewer is hard-put to explain this lacuna. On the one hand, Kovaly was not a practicing Jew. On the contrary, she seems to have been highly assimilated. Nowhere in the book does she mention Jewish practice. At one point after the war Kovaly mentions visiting a woman who advises her on how to make the United Nations canned pork ration taste typically Czech: hardly kosher food. Her husband's Communism probably precluded much attachment to Jewish practice. Still, Kovaly felt at least some affiliation with Judaism. She speaks of her happiness when Czechoslovakia offered aid to the fledgling Israeli state, for example. It seems striking that a survivor of Nazi death camps would avoid comment on officially-sponsored antisemitism in her own society, even given Kovaly's authorial preference for portrayal or demonstration rather than analysis. Kovaly experiences her husband's false accusation and betrayal at the hands of the party as a profound personal loss, and as proof of the regime's evil nature. She does not suggest any further reasons for the party's purging of its prominent Jews, nor what the purges might reveal about widespread latent antisemitism in Czechoslovakia.

No book is perfect, of course. As historical analysis this one has real limitations–among them unidimensional characterizations, absence of analysis, and omissions of some important topics. But for use in a classroom, to help students understand "life on the ground" in post-war Eastern Europe, this memoir is well-suited. Kovaly is a touching narrator; her story is memorable, and easily understood by those with little knowledge of the region. HABSBURG members teaching twentieth-century survey courses on Eastern Europe can thank Holmes and Meier for making sure this valuable text continues to be widely accessible.

Notes:

[1]. Most well-known analyses of East European Stalinism or Communist revolutions were authored by men, former members of the Communist elites who later became symbols of dissent, in sharp contrast to Kovaly. See for example Sandor Kopacsi's *In the Name of the Working Class* (New York: Grove Press, 1986); Czeslaw Milosz's *Captive Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953); and Milovan Djilas' *Conversations with Stalin* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962). Excerpts from Tereza Toranska's *Them* (New York, 1987) would also provide an interesting contrast to Kovaly.

[2]. Both the Czech and English versions of this book were published in 1973. See *Na vlastni kuzi: dialog pres barikadu* (Toronto: 68 Publishers, 1973; Praha: Ceskoslovensky spisovatel, 1992) and *The Victors and the Vanquished* (New York: Horizon Press, 1973.) Kovaly's text was published in Britain that same year without the treatise, under a different name and title: see Heda Margolius, *I Do Not Want to Remember: Auschwitz 1941-Prague 1968* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973).

[3]. Alfred Kazin, "The Victors and the Vanquished," *New York Times Review of Books* (August 19, 1973), p.5.

[4]. Other memoirs of Czechoslovak Stalinism are less opportune introductions to the period for undergraduate students. See, for example, Eugen Loebl, *My Mind On Trial* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Rosemary Kavan, *Freedom at a Price: An Englishwoman's Life in Czechoslovakia* (London: Verso, 1985); and Josefa Slanska, *Report on My Husband* (London: Hutchinson; New York: Atheneum 1969). Kavan is a compelling narrator, but as an Englishwoman she was less subject to official harassment and thus is less representative of the period. Also, Kavan's husband is presented as a brilliant bully; during his imprisonment, Kavan blossoms and discovers herself. Her memoir is

more her own personal journey than a presentation of her historical circumstances. Loebl was imprisoned for eleven years; his story, a la *Darkness At Noon*, describes his prison experiences, not Stalinism in Czechoslovakia. Finally, Slanska's story is one of unrelenting victimhood at the hands of the party she once served; she, too, was imprisoned, and cut off from contact with society. However, the first part of her book, excerpts from newspaper accounts of the trials, might be useful as a sampling of purple socialist prose.

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