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Ghodsee examines societal shifts occurring in Post-Soviet Bulgaria, asking the question: How can an Islam, not traditional to Bulgarian Muslims, garner such a central role in two communities in postsocialist Bulgaria, while the rest of the oblast (i.e. state) and nation remain disinterested in religious renewal? (p. 5, 13). This research marks a shift from previous work in the anthropology of religion for the post-Soviet region: Anthropologists researching Islam in the former Soviet Union typically focused on how Islam traditional to the region was maintained in the face of Sovietization and state-imposed atheism. Anthropologists have noted that Islam was a religion of the shrine (Poliakov 1992) or the home (Privratsky 2001) and thus protected from Sovietization through traditional practice. Ghodsee, however, considers how Islam can serve as a totalizing meta-narrative in the face of globalization in a post-socialist context. A meta-narrative that provides alternative perspectives on history, progress, and humanity (p. 201) in order to address issues of social justice (p. 27) and immorality (p. 32) in the communities of Madan and Rudozem.

The author explores the economic, political, and societal factors that have been key to this religious transformation. After the fall of the Soviet state, the system of production, distribution, and sale/barter designed by the state collapsed. For the communities of Madan and Rudozem this meant the eventual demise of the mining industry that had been the source of economic stability and prosperity. Due to corruption and lack of political support for the communities in question, there was no plan for addressing the economic fallout. A similar lack of unity that characterized the traditional Islamic leadership in Bulgaria allowed foreign Islamic religious works to gain considerable influence. Both communities received Islam from outside Bulgaria and Turkey as a resource to address societal ills and reestablish systems of gendered valorization similar to those present during the economically more prosperous Soviet era.

Ghodsee interviews respondents from all walks of life; still, the experience of the miners remains the focal point of the ethnography. The miners of Madan and Rudozem were among the highest paid laborers in Bulgaria during the Soviet period, lifting the economic horizons for their families and communities. In addition, miners were emblematic of the soviet labor force, hailed as heroes of the proletariat. In stark contrast to this, once the mining industry failed the miners had simply become untrained laborers and burdens to their families.

The miners did not allow their industry to be shut down without a fight. They initially sought political attention by means of strikes, and at first, they had the support of the general public and politicians. Still, the lead and zinc mines were no longer profitable in the global market and over seven years both the public and politicians grew tired of the repeated strikes. Steps were taken to salvage the mines, but these agreements only allowed unscrupulous individuals to take ownership of the mining resources and liquidate them. In the end, the miners and their communities did not have the political backing necessary to effectively pursue new business options.

With the demise of the mining industry, the center of the community shifted from the mining headquarters to the newly built mosque (p. 59, 65). Islamic groups from the Middle East became involved in the Smolyan Oblast, establishing NGOs, paying for new Arab-style mosques, and providing scholarships for youth to be trained in Islam. They presented Arab Islam as the more “authentic” and “superior” form of the religion (p. 92). Their influence was
enhanced by the weakness of in-country Islamic officials who were occupied with political tussles and showed little regard for the well being of local Muslim communities (p. 128). Foreign Islamic religious workers and youth returning from training presented Q’uranic based Islam as free of Bulgarian and Turkish cultural accretions. Intergenerational tensions emerged between traditional Bulgarian Muslims of the older generation and the young people who called for a re-Islamization of their society. Such tensions have also been researched in other parts of Eurasia (Kuchumkulova 2007).

In spite of these tensions, an Islam not traditional to Madan or Ruzodem was appealing. Miners who had enjoyed prosperity and respect now spent their days depressed and often drunk. The mosque provided a place for men to find community and be valorized in their roles of leaders of their families. Women in these communities were also willing to stay at home and to dress modestly in public, wearing Arab-style garb, in the hope of societal renewal.

In her investigation, the author moves from the mines, to the mosques, and finally to the mothers at home. Ghodsee examines this negotiation of gender relations for the expected overall societal good and gender stability (pp. 25–26). According to Ghodsee, there was a nationwide movement to redefine the role of women during the Soviet era (1946–1989) and one specific to Madan and Rudozem in the post-Soviet era. During the Soviet period, the government encouraged women to leave their home settings and enter the workplace. Yet when the seamstresses in Madan were offered high wages, the mayor intervened, asking that women’s wages be kept down so as not to exceed those of the (predominantly male) miners (p. 184). After the collapse of the mining industry, a significant percentage of women in the two communities embraced, what they were told by ‘re-Islamizers’ as being, the proper Islamic role of staying at home (p. 189). Based on interviews with female respondents, Ghodsee portrays this as an effort to address their husbands’ drinking (p. 175) and domestic violence (pp. 105–106). Women made sacrifices to safeguard the male role as “leaders”. In both instances, the argument was that such changes would benefit the society as a whole. Ghodsee makes a convincing case through her use throughout the book of case law, historical records, and statistics to complement extensive ethnographic interviews.

In one of her most significant contributions of the book, Ghodsee argues that the Islam adopted presents a “third way.” Here she builds on the concept of a second way as presented by Slavoj Žižek (Žižek 2006). Žižek offers a hopeful picture, the second way illustrating the potential of combining the best of communism and capitalism. Ghodsee’s concept of the third way describes how citizens of Madan and Rudozem combined what they liked best from communism, capitalism, and Islam. Ghodsee points out how Islam and communism share common ideologies concerning the value of the community over the individual, social justice in opposition to exploitation, and a posited universal destiny (pp. 200–201). Islam and capitalism both affirm the importance of private property (p. 199).

The citizens of Madan and Rudozem took their personal narratives, embraced what Ghodsee terms a “meta-narrative of Islam” (pp. 200–201), and formulated a contextualized third way. Since we are considering these two communities as distinct from the rest of the nation, the contextualization process is locally-based. Ghodsee summarizes the process: “… the social embrace of Islam will be informed by the particular ideological histories of the places wherein it takes root” (p. 202). Ironically, the Islam that foreign religious workers argued as scriptural, and thus free of cultural accretions, serves as a cultural resource, according to Ghodsee, for yet another adaptation.

This is a superb ethnography, combining the stories of individuals, analysis of an array of historical facts, and knowledge of the social context along with a keen skill of synthetic analysis. The only shortcoming of the book is the minimal treatment of Central Asian material, since the author presents Bulgaria as the meeting place between East and West (p. 12). However, given
the length of the book, one cannot expect it to be comprehensive. The book will be of interest to
anthropologists specializing in religion, Europe or post-socialist contexts, as well researchers in
sociology, area studies, and religious studies. It is most appropriate for graduate level courses
and lends itself for use in interdisciplinary seminars.

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Graduate School of Intercultural Studies. He spent five years doing field research on Kazakh
proverbs and oral traditions. He is co-founder of the Socialist and Post-Socialist Area Studies
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