

**Review of *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* by Kristen Ghodsee (Duke University Press)**

Steven Gotzler

ABSTRACT

Kristen Ghodsee's *Second World, Second Sex* recovers the historical legacy of women from the Eastern bloc and post-colonial Africa as political activists for women's rights and diplomats for socialist and non-aligned nations during the UN Decade for Women, 1975-1985. Ghodsee's account challenges the conventional wisdom of three-wave feminist history by documenting the critical interventions made by women in service of a vision of equality that was always already intersectional, and that refused to separate women's issues from questions of neo-colonialism, racism, and economic re-distribution. It offers a helpful and instructive reminder of socialist feminism's rich and global history of organization and action, a history that was created and fought for in large part by alliances of women from non-aligned and socialist countries during the Cold War and whose memory is all too often erased from dominant Western histories of the women's movement.

*Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War.* By Kristen Ghodsee. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, 328 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-0181-2. US List: \$26.95.

---

Kristen Ghodsee's *Second World, Second Sex* recovers the historical legacy of women from the Eastern bloc and post-colonial Africa as political activists for women's rights and diplomats for socialist and non-aligned nations during the UN Decade for Women, 1975-1985. Ghodsee offers a counter-measure to a double erasure in 20<sup>th</sup> century global history. First, by telling *her*stories of female subjects whose lives and labors have been all too often erased from standard historical narratives, even progressive ones. And second, by revealing the forgotten achievements of the socialist "second world," largely ignored by the post-Cold War triumphalism of establishment academic culture in the West. Ghodsee's account is culled from painstaking archival research mainly in Bulgaria and Zambia, as well as ethnographic work conducted in interviews with prominent surviving women from the period.

The book first provides a deep background of postwar women's activism in Bulgaria and Zambia, situating these stories within the wider context of Cold War rhetoric and superpower rivalry. Here Ghodsee intervenes in the historiography of feminism, arguing against narratives that either cast women working within socialist state-sponsored organizations as political dupes of their male compatriots, or that view African women merely as passive victims of traditionalist cultures of patriarchal domination. Instead, Ghodsee discloses a detailed history of women's activism in groups like the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement (CBWM) and the United National Independence Party-Women's League (UNIP-WL) that offers a different story about feminists in these countries as they struggled for, and achieved, real gains for women in the realms of employment, education and healthcare even while laboring under ideological conditions that, as Ghodsee is careful to acknowledge, all too often tended to essentialize women's reproductive roles as mothers and wives in the service of programs for economic modernization and nationalization.

Ghodsee also documents the long-standing connections between anti-feminism and anti-communism in U.S. politics, arguing that the hegemony of liberalism has tended to privilege independent women's groups as authentic, delegitimizing state-sponsored bodies like the CBWM, while instilling reductive or paternalistic attitudes towards non-Western cultures of femininity, and non-Western women's experience of them. Following Lila Abu-Lughod's query that asks whether Muslim women need saving, Ghodsee's history points to several female-led efforts in these countries. She cites Bulgaria's highly developed network of state-supported childcare centers, and the Zambian Intestate Succession Act of 1989, which granted protection for the economic rights of widows. Correctives such as these foreground the agency of women, both in the developing world and the Eastern bloc, not only as committed activists but as deft operatives navigating political systems that hindered the range of free expression and dissent available to women seeking to secure their share of post-revolutionary change.

The book's second half chronicles three UN World Conferences on Women, held in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985), where tensions flared between Western feminists led by the U.S. delegation, and an emergent coalition of delegates from the "second" and "third" worlds. Women from socialist and developing countries found common cause by asserting global political issues as central to addressing the roots of women's oppression. These efforts culminated in the School for Knowledge, Solidarity, and Friendship (1980) in Sofia that brought women from Asia and Africa for a forty-day course designed to enable reciprocal exchanges and encourage global solidarity. The Bulgarians provided practical lessons in activist training, and lectured on the benefits of socialism, whilst the visitors educated their hosts on the particular conditions and issues facing women in their countries. Together at the conferences, this coalition of women criticized U.S. foreign policy, denounced the treatment of Palestinians, and condemned the West's support for the brutal racist regime of apartheid.

Western leaders charged the coalition with hijacking the conferences for political purposes, painting them as puppets of the Soviet propaganda machine, lobbying instead for a focus on specifically "women's issues" like sexism and patriarchy. Meanwhile the women from socialist countries dismissed this exclusive focus on gender as bourgeois. In the process, these women became embroiled in the high-profile propaganda battles of the Cold War. As such, despite Ghodsee's optimistic account, one might also construe initiatives like the School for Solidarity as a form of Soviet soft-imperialism by proxy: using Bulgaria's reputation for women's activism to obtain access to trade and natural resources in the developing world. Nevertheless, as Ghodsee points out, superpower rivalry did open a valuable political "third space" where women from non-aligned countries could stake a position that resisted Western imperialism by looking to alternative models of state provision embodied by the socialist East.

Ghodsee's harshest critics accuse her of eliding the crimes perpetrated under Eastern socialist regimes and over-emphasizing their value as visionary social experiments. While she certainly makes no apologies for the "crimes of communism," Ghodsee also spends little time dwelling on them. Her focus is on the tangible material benefits and opportunities that governments offered women living in the formerly socialist world. Calling attention to the precarious condition of archival evidence in countries like Bulgaria and Zambia, Ghodsee is mindful of her reliance on firsthand testimony and the attendant "perils of oral history."<sup>i</sup> She acknowledges these limitations throughout the text, countering that while some bias may be inevitable, these women's stories still deserve to be heard in an effort to balance the scales with respect to the mass of historical bias that exists within

the well-funded archival infrastructure of the West. Ghodsee makes a compelling case. For instance, the “crimes of capitalism” never stopped anyone from lauding the political freedoms garnered under Western democracy, nor should they. Likewise, we ought to acknowledge the contradictions and complexities of the formerly socialist world, rather than shallowly disregarding it as a monolith of un-freedom.

*Second World, Second Sex* challenges the conventional wisdom of three-wave feminist history by documenting the critical interventions made by these women in service of a vision of women’s equality that was always already intersectional, and that refused to separate women’s issues from questions of neo-colonialism, racism, and economic re-distribution. Ghodsee’s book offers a helpful and instructive reminder of socialist feminism’s rich and global history of organization and action, a history that was created and fought for in large part by alliances of women from non-aligned and socialist countries during the Cold War, and whose memory is all too often erased from Western histories of the women’s movement during the “American century.”

---

<sup>i</sup> Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women’s Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2019), 217.