

BOOK REVIEW

Kristen Ghodsee. *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2018. xv + 306 pp. Abbreviations and Acronyms. Note on Translation and Transliteration. Selected bibliography. Index. \$104.95. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1478001393.

“Western scholarship on international women’s rights tends to downplay the role of women’s organizing in the former state socialist countries even when the UN documents... contain countless examples of their influence” (237). So argues Kristen Ghodsee in her book-length corrective to Western-dominated narratives of feminist activism in the twentieth century, particularly during the Cold War period. Situating her study within the East-West Cold War paradigm and anti-communist scholarly blind spots, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* illuminates the leadership, organizing, and policy contributions of women activists in socialist states to the United Nations’ (UN) world conferences during the Decade for Women from 1975 to 1985. Ghodsee relies on her expertise in East European Studies to produce two compelling case studies, one of Bulgarian women and the state-sponsored Committee of the Bulgarian Women’s Movement (CBMW), and the other of Zambian women activists in the Women’s Brigade of the state’s United National Independence Party (UNIP). The case studies convincingly depict these women as significant voices in their home countries as well as effective advocates for women’s equality internationally.

Ghodsee draws on archival evidence from UN documents, local archives in Bulgaria and Zambia, and extensive oral interviews to build a narrative of socialist women’s “feminist” activism within the broader and at times constraining context of building a socialist state. The case studies powerfully demonstrate how Bulgarian and Zambian women’s organizing carried a feminist ethos—even as they denounced Western feminism as bourgeois and imperialist—and leveraged Cold War pressures to push UN members to invest in the global fight for women’s equality. For example, Ghodsee details the impact of the left-leaning Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) advocacy for an International Women’s Year (IWY) and plans to host a global conference in East Berlin in pushing the U.S. to

support a UN-led IWY and a world conference in Mexico to thwart the socialist leadership over these events (139). The author also details the efficacy and limits of the relationship between Bulgarian and Zambian women activists, which proved a powerful alliance in the UN, even as it also produced tensions surrounding resources and racial perceptions.

If the strength of Ghodsee's *Second World, Second Sex* is its insights into the influence of socialist state women activists on the United Nation's Decade for Women, its weakness is its limited attention to other socialist states in the Global South and non-state actors in the West. Ghodsee is not seeking to rehash the well-established "history of socialist and communist women in China or the Third World" (the Global South), but in not engaging this history the study misses an opportunity to highlight key aspects of Cold War politics that muddled an East-West dynamic. Ghodsee bypasses the impact of the Sino-Soviet split that played out in the UN and how it required decolonizing countries to negotiate a more complicated political terrain. This is notable in regard to Zambia, since that case study details little about how its longstanding relationship with China (which continues today with fraught political and economic entanglements) informed Zambian women's relationship with the CBWM and Zambia's conception of socialist non-alignment. In addition, Ghodsee's choice to center liberal state-sanctioned feminists in the United States and her reliance on Nancy Fraser's flawed analysis of U.S. feminism, which conflates liberal feminism's neoliberal turn with identity politics, obscures the ways in which Black feminists mobilized issues of racial discrimination and women's equality on the international stage, including through petitions to the UN and a range of transnational solidarity campaigns. Such campaigns afforded socialist states and the non-alignment movement greater political leverage to challenge the West as a model of democratic idealism. These politics are alluded to in the photo of a recently acquitted Angela Davis and Elena Lagadinova in Bulgaria as well as in the work of the WIDF, but never fully detailed. To be fair, this does not diminish Ghodsee's significant interventions, but it makes clear that a full narrative of women's international activism demands attention to the histories of both state and non-state actors.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Berger, Iris. 2014. "African Women's Movements in the Twentieth Century: A Hidden History." *African Studies Review* 57 (3): 1–19. doi:10.1017/asr.2014.89.

- Makombe, Rodwell. 2017. "Literature as a Medium for Social and Political Activism: The Case of Mashingaidze Gomo's *A Fine Madness*." *African Studies Review* 60 (2): 115–38. doi:[10.1017/asr.2017.51](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.51).
- Turriffin, Jane. 1993. "Aoua Kéita and the Nascent Women's Movement in the French Soudan." *African Studies Review* 36 (1): 59–89. doi:[10.2307/525508](https://doi.org/10.2307/525508).