

The Spirit of Socialism: Culture and Belief at the Soviet Collapse

BY JOSEPH KELLNER. Cornell University Press, 2025, 258 pp.

Kellner, a historian, proposes an insightful interpretation of the immense popularity of bizarre theories and new spiritual movements that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union. He features cult figures such as the mathematician Anatoly Fomenko, whose “New Chronology” theory posited that all of world history had transpired in a single millennium. Professional historians denounced Fomenko as a charlatan, but his countless fans remained undeterred. Another is a former traffic officer who proclaimed himself the messiah and founded a sect in Siberia. The search for alternative spiritual authority was driven by the profound disorientation caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, but as Kellner shows, it was also rooted in the late Soviet decades, when communist ideology had lost its legitimacy and could no longer provide answers to fundamental existential questions. This prompted a quest for alternative teachings and beliefs, such as yoga and telepathy. These practices were semiclandestine and limited in scope, but Soviet policies—such as internationalism with a focus on the East, especially India, and the state’s promotion of the unlimited power of science—had unwittingly encouraged such pursuits.

Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Growing Up Godless: Nonreligious Childhoods in Contemporary England

BY ANNA STRHAN AND RACHAEL SHILLITOE. Princeton University Press, 2025, 256 pp.

Across Europe, religious identification is declining steeply among young people. Over a third of them report having no religion at all. In this engaging work, two sociologists conduct interviews to find out what British youth think about religion, what influences their thinking, and what alternative spiritual and philosophical values and beliefs they hold. Many children raised by devout parents and teachers still embrace their parents’ beliefs, but ever-fewer young people raised in less committed or entirely nonreligious families and schools espouse religious faith. The authors’ interviews bear eloquent witness to the thoughtful process through which young people “growing up godless” reason toward an agnostic or atheist stance. Far from being selfish, self-absorbed, or nihilistic, such nonreligious children reason their way to a deep commitment to tolerant universal values of “respect” and “choice” in a diverse world.

The Quest for Individual Freedom: A Twentieth-Century European History
BY MORITZ FÖLLMER. Cambridge University Press, 2025, 264 pp.

This book traces the spread of social, political, cultural, sexual, and lifestyle freedoms over the past century in Europe. In retrospect, the expansion of freedom proved an inexorable trend, yet the path it took was contradictory and uneven, often accelerated or slowed by external constraints and inherited cultural views. Although successive wars imposed harsh conscription, they also liberated women to work, allowed men to leave their communities and experience a broader world, and ultimately spread the conviction that free citizens must be inspired to serve their country voluntarily. The growing power of the state produced the ideologies of fascism and communism but ultimately led to the acceptance of robust state intervention to protect individual rights and built sturdy social welfare nets. The social mores that underpinned widening female, sexual, reproductive, and lifestyle freedoms spread outward from urban centers in northern Europe and have withstood backlashes from authoritarian governments and organized religion. Today, Europeans face renewed polarization over the meaning of freedom, fueled by the Internet, populism, multiculturalism, and the erosion of the social welfare state.

You Can Kill Each Other After I Leave: Refugees, Fascism, and Bloodshed in Greece

BY PATRICK STRICKLAND.
Melville House, 2025, 320 pp.

Charged by opposition to surges in immigration, the rise of the far right has polarized countries across Europe. In this engaging book, a veteran journalist portrays the last two decades of Greek politics as an epic battle between far-right, violently anti-immigrant groups, which he terms “fascists,” and the left-wing civic and political groups that resist them. His portrayal of the hopeless and dangerous life of immigrants evokes sympathy. His account of the violent neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party evokes antipathy: votaries of the far right have murdered immigrants and leftists, built deep links to Greek law enforcement that give greater latitude to their thuggery, and gained modest representation in the parliament. Although this Manichean interpretation contains much truth, the book overlooks—until the last few pages—that the entire leadership of Golden Dawn was convicted and jailed in 2020 for running a criminal organization. An overriding democratic majority of Greeks continue to favor meaningful limits on immigration for more moderate reasons—not because the public is in thrall to neo-Nazi ideology. Perhaps Europe is not as polarized as it seems on the surface.

The Long Shadow of German Colonialism: Amnesia, Denialism, and Revisionism

BY HENNING MELBER. Hurst, 2024, 416 pp.

Melber, a distinguished scholar who was once an anticolonial activist, argues that Germany has not come to terms with its imperial history from before World War I, when it ruled parts of present-day Cameroon, China, Namibia, Togo, Zanzibar, and part of New Guinea and some nearby South Sea islands. German colonialism was brutal if also feeble in some cases, but the book leaves little doubt that the Germans conducted a genocide in Namibia, building five concentration camps for the Herero and Nama peoples and killing tens of thousands. The author points out that colonial atrocities do not occupy the prominent position in German national memory held by the extensive Nazi atrocities. Still, historians and commentators have done much in recent years to set the record straight, and (with the exception of the extreme-right Alternative for Germany party) German politicians accept national responsibility for past colonial crimes. In the end, the author's primary concern is Germany's unwillingness either to pledge formal "reparations" to the residents of its former colonies or to promise more than a billion dollars over three decades in development funding, a sum smaller than what Germany gave over the prior three decades. The book reminds readers that the injustices of colonialism are rarely redressed to the satisfaction of its victims and their descendants.

The Director

BY DANIEL KEHLMANN.

TRANSLATED BY ROSS BENJAMIN. Summit Books, 2025, 352 pp.

Kehlmann is widely considered to be among the leading contemporary German writers of fiction. He is particularly known for historical novels that distill eternal human dilemmas into everyday experience, all rendered in concise and accessible prose. His books are at once sad and funny, heady and chatty, realistic and absurdist, cynical and uplifting. *The Director* tracks the historical case of G. W. Pabst, one of the greatest filmmakers of the Weimar era, the period in Germany between the end of World War I in 1918 and the rise of the Nazis in 1933. Unlike his compatriots Fritz Lang and Fritz Murnau, Pabst rejected émigré life in Hollywood and, despite his communist sympathies, returned to Europe from the United States in the 1930s. After first swearing never to collaborate with the Nazi regime, he ended up directing films for its propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels. In banal yet often painful detail, Kehlmann reimagines the mix of pressure, vanity, humiliation, and resignation that can lead a great artist to ignore ethical imperatives and become complicit with authoritarians—a theme that feels especially timely today.