

*Free: A Child and a Country at the End of History*, Lea Ypi (2021, W.W. Norton & Co.)

Parents living under a repressive dictatorship can't tell their children the truth about almost anything. It's too dangerous. Their children are taught at school to venerate their country's glorious leader and to hate his enemies, all those who might oppose him or think differently about the regime. So what happens to those families when the leader is overthrown, as in Poland or East Germany, or dies with no like-minded successor, as in Spain? When the children discover that their families have lied to them all these years?

Lea Ypi's vivid memoir of her childhood shows us a set of answers to these questions. Born in Albania, one of the poorest and most despotic of the Stalinist states formed after the Second World War, she lived through the downfall of the Enver Hoxha regime and then through the turmoil that followed that downfall, when rapacious opportunists tore society apart in the name of market capitalism. Now a professor of political theory at the London School of Economics, she has written this memoir as a meditation on the meaning of freedom.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first, Ypi describes her confusions and understandings as an 11-year-old child, devoted to "Uncle Enver" and baffled by her family's silences, until, upon the collapse of socialism, she learns the shocking truth about her father's and mother's pasts. In the second part she describes her experience of life in Albania after socialism until the day she left for college in Italy, never to return. Her reports of her ideas as a child and the discussions she had with her friends at that time are strikingly realistic and often very funny, and she makes her grandmother, father, and mother fully realized living presences—they were remarkable people. As a child, she felt free and believed, as she was taught, that Hoxha had brought Albanians freedom. As an adolescent, she puzzled over the different views of her father and mother as to what it meant to be free and whether they were. These are not abstract philosophical questions.

Ypi writes simply and well, and makes us consider the personal costs of a dictatorial regime and the costs of recovering from it, costs that Western democracies often fail to understand. She also makes us think again about freedom: how free are we, and how free could we possibly be, and in what does that freedom consist? The book appeared in the UK last year to much acclaim, and has only now been published in the United States. It deserves all the praise it has received.