

To the Midnight Sun

Stephen Saletan

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The compelling biography of a woman who escaped a totalitarian government, To the Midnight Sun celebrates a grandmother's legacy.

Stephen Saletan's raw family biography-cum-memoir *To the Midnight Sun* centers his grandmother, who escaped Soviet Russia and pursued self-discovery and cultural pride, to explain his own understanding of his Russian heritage.

Eda Grigorievna Bamuner was a student revolutionary in early twentieth-century Russia, when the government was still shadowed by imperialism. Though she longed to be a part of the movement that changed this situation for Russian citizens, she and her younger sister instead escaped Russia for the US just before the revolution began. She returned for visits later.

From the vantage of a Russian emigrant abroad, dichotomies in modern Russian history are explored at a distance, alongside notions of cultural absence: The book mourns Russia's lack of opportunities for ordinary citizens to exist without feelings of pressure or having their livelihoods dictated. The beauty of Russian culture is celebrated alongside acknowledgements that people "lived in a kind of prison," resulting in a perpetual sense of longing that blankets the text:

People in Europe in the years after World War II were seen as poor, hungry, ill-clothed, unsmiling, scrounging for daily essentials. Fifteen years later, the Russians were still the same way ... I could never reconcile how educated, professional, worldly people could end up living such threadbare lives.

Still, though its descriptions of contradictions in Russian culture are keen, the book is less direct when it comes to its subject's own story. It skims over the particulars of what she endured to address the political situations beyond them at greater length. For example, the book mentions that Bamuner developed a romantic relationship with a future military officer, Kliment Voroshilov, who was one of the only officers to survive Stalin's wrath, but beyond details of Voroshilov helping Bamuner's family survive in the USSR while she was away, the book is vague about this relationship. A clear sense of why Voroshilov stayed loyal to Bamuner after she left for the United States is missing.

The book's timeline is murky too. It moves between the past and present without sufficient transitions, and some of its anecdotes repeat. Further, major events are rushed through, as with Bamuner's arrival in, and early survival in, New York. Important details, such as how she managed to keep in contact with her family in Russia, are missing as well, causing narrative gaps. Furthermore, self-referential notes about Saletan's investigation into his grandmother's past run long, leading to lost momentum as the text continues.

Still, *To the Midnight Sun* is a compelling biography of a woman who escaped a totalitarian government and political oppression to make a new life for herself abroad.

BROOKE LEIGH HOWARD (December 25, 2024)

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