

# Book Review: Free: Coming of Age at the End of History by Lea Ypi

In her award-winning memoir **Free**, Lea Ypi reflects on the paradoxes of freedom through her recollections of coming of age at the collapse of communist Albania in December 1990 and its transition from Enver Hoxha's dictatorship to a presumably freer, capitalist and more democratic nation. This stylistically elegant and thought-provoking book is a significant contribution to understanding a period of Albania's transition still left underexplored and will be read for many years to come, writes **Andi Haxhiu**.

If you are interested in this book review, you can [watch a video](#) and [listen to a podcast](#) of Lea Ypi discussing **Free** at LSE, recorded on 1 November 2021. Professor Lea Ypi will also be reflecting on **'The Future of Democracy'** with [Dr Mukulika Banerjee](#) and [Dr Yascha Mounk](#) as part of the upcoming [LSE Festival 2022](#), running from Monday 13 June to Saturday 18 June 2022.

**Free: Coming of Age at the End of History. Lea Ypi. Penguin. 2021**

Lea Ypi's book, [Free: Coming of Age at the End of History](#), arrived in Prishtina, Kosovo's capital city, on 5 January 2022. *Free* has been translated into nineteen languages and has received immense international support, having [won the RSL Ondaatje Prize](#) and been shortlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize, the Costa Biography Award and the Slightly Foxed Best First Biography Prize. Considering the author's success with the book and the outstanding reviews following its publication, Prishtina might have been just another routine destination in the book's promotion schedule.

However, despite my initial hesitancy, I travelled from Edinburgh to my hometown to meet Ypi, a Professor of Political Theory in LSE Department of Government, whom I have long admired for her scholarly contributions through [The Meaning of Partisanship](#) (co-authored with Jonathan White), [Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency](#) and [The Architectonic of Reason](#). The theoretical complexity of Ypi's work has always been riveting and enticing in academic circles. Nevertheless, it was through *Free* that Ypi received extensive commercial coverage and recognition for the masterful crafting of a book that exposes the paradoxes of freedom through the blissful ignorance of a child coming of age at the end of history.



Ypi's story starts at the dawn of the collapse of Europe's last Stalinist state, Albania, in December 1990. Through an exquisite literary writing gift, she illustrates Albania's transition from leader Enver Hoxha's violent and murderous dictatorship to a presumably freer, capitalist, liberal and more democratic country. This rupture posed an opportunity for Ypi to retroactively theorise and reflect on the meaning of freedom. Yet, the author's longstanding philosophical and scholarly preoccupations with migration, justice and freedom are often intrinsically related to this episode in her life.

Trapped between two conflicting narratives following the collapse of communist Albania, Ypi's experience of freedom inexplicably transformed when she understood that her parents clearly did not care about 'visiting Uncle Enver's grave nor about keeping his photo in [their] living room' anymore (47). As she adroitly puts it in the latter stages of the book: 'Things were one way, and then they were the other. I was someone, then I became someone else' (117). This profound assertion that illustrates unexpected change is what simultaneously encapsulates the uncertainties of coming of age at a cleavage in history. To rephrase Rosa Luxemburg in this context: 'Ypi has not made history out of her free will. But she has made history, nevertheless.' *Free* is a significant literary contribution to a period of Albania's transition still left underexplored due to an unwritten pact of silence.



Image Credit: '[Street scene in Durrës with propaganda posters](#)' by [Robert Schediwy](#) licensed under [CC BY SA 3.0](#)

*Free* is definitely an easy read, but it is also throughout a thought-provoking nonfiction book that explores the relationship between freedom and hope through figurative, poetic language. It is also an elaboration of how Ypi's experience of liberalism can be equated with 'broken promises, the destruction of solidarity, the right to inherit privilege, and turning a blind eye to injustices' (253). A stylistically elegant and often emotionally overwhelming narrative unfolds multifaceted dilemmas and questions on freedom through exploring family dynamics, dialogues and tensions.

The book's dialogical nature is evident in the first chapter, 'Stalin', where teacher Nora's lectures and the young Ypi's curious character set the tone for the rest of the book. It is precisely the *uncontestedness* of Hoxha's regime that makes Ypi's innocent questions the epitome of doubt. Thus, the book's first sentence – 'I never asked about the meaning of freedom until the day I hugged Stalin' – introduces the first overlap between state-sponsored dogmatism and individual scepticism. As she vividly narrates the events of that day, eleven-year-old Ypi finds herself metres away from some protesters of the regime chanting 'Freedom, Democracy'. Despite her initial denial, the existing system was shifting while Ypi was clinging to the legs of Stalin's decapitated gigantic bronze statue. This is the moment when young Ypi starts questioning and, simultaneously, understanding the plural nature of histories.

Despite its powerful tone and fascinating explanations of complex historical episodes, the reconstruction of the 1990s December protests appears slightly contrived. To exemplify, [it has been claimed](#) that Durrës, Ypi's hometown, never had a Stalin statue; rather, Stalin was commemorated through a bust – which technically means that Stalin never had legs to cling on. Ypi's opening to the book thus appears to rather work as a metaphorical depiction of one's inability to let go of a reality that is unexpectedly changing.

Although perhaps overlooked by the international reader, these minor inaccurate depictions of Albania's collective memory have triggered '[vicious](#)' domestic reactions that criticised the book for intentional manipulation. Ypi's subjective literary recollection of Albania's prolonged unaddressed collective trauma with its Stalinist dictator, Hoxha, enraged numerous reactionary voices in Ypi's hometown who perceived *Free* as an apology for communism and criticised it for factual inconsistencies. What some readers have failed to fathom is that the book is not a historiographical account of communist and post-communist Albania. It is exactly here where Ypi's reputation as a respected scholar was (mis)used by certain circles to frame the book within the boundaries of academic rigour. However, *Free* is neither academic nor historiographical; it is a personal history that explains the continuous quest for freedom through witty humour, accessible language and metaphorical twists.

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Some of the book's reviews nonetheless missed facts that were repeatedly mentioned. For example, Stuart Jeffries's [otherwise informative Guardian review](#) shifts Ypi's Stalin story from the author's hometown, Durrës, to Albania's capital city, Tirana. Such readings of the book often unintentionally exoticise both the author's experience and the location where the story takes place. This unrelatability stands in contrast with the reading experiences of those who directly lived through Hoxha's traumatic dictatorship.

In my short interaction with Ypi in Prishtina, she fascinatingly pointed out the disparities between the recollection of her memories in English and Albanian. The first, Ypi argued, was much more emotionally distant. On the other hand, the Albanian version, *Të Lirë* – which is a rewritten version rather than a conventional translation of the English-language book – enabled the author to emotionally relive some of the dialogues that had taken place more than three decades ago. The recollection and reconstruction of these conversations, Ypi told me, were significantly more traumatic as the reminiscing took place in the authentic form of her mother tongue. Here, I understood why international and Albanian audiences had experienced Ypi's masterful text so distinctively.

Despite the gulf between overidentifying with and denying Ypi's narrative, it is safe to say that *Free* is not an attempt to manipulate the past because it does not aspire to monopolise the truth. Instead, it reconstructs Ypi's memories by converging her own subjective experiences, diaries and dialogues. Her philosophical preoccupations with freedom continuously traverse the lines between memory and imagination throughout the book. As psychologist [Frederic Bartlett](#) would argue, Ypi's remembering of the events portrayed so vividly are a product of the constructive process of integrating bits and pieces of information, rather than a literal replaying of the past. Therefore, the emphasis on minor historiographical inaccuracies in some of the responses to the book seems to be missing one crucial point: *Free* is based on a true story, but it is not *the* true story. It narrates the thin line between facts and literary imagination. It is a book written about the end of history that did not happen. A book that will stand the test of time and be read for many years to come.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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