

Kristen Rogheh Ghodsee. *The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-5835-0.



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In the last hundred years of the development of human thought, one particular organizing idea engendered to express the collective aspiration of working-class people has also become the most antagonizing ideology of contemporary history. Communism—the belief in the transnational collectivity of the proletariat—inspired revolutions and imagined the possibility of a world in which every laboring body was entitled to a measure of prosperity and happiness. However, the very same belief in a people’s rule and collective welfare gave rise to oppressive, authoritative regimes that hijacked the communist ideals to produce police states ruled by brutality, fear, and economic inefficiencies. Today, after the collapse of the communist regimes in eastern Europe, a complex ideology is often reduced to a simple black-and-white equation that is usually translated by the reigning coalition of scholars, analysts, and opinion makers thus: the failure of the Soviet-style experimentation with the communist ideal proved that it is just that—an ideal without practicality. Moreover, its violent disintegration only strengthens the be-

lief that capitalism, now synonymous with democracy, reigns supreme as the ultimate aspiration of all contemporary humankind.

The story of communism, however, is far from being so simplistic and one-dimensional. It demands an honest, unflinching exploration, devoid of the persistent negativity that surrounds the highly politicized, often purposively manipulated public perception of this critical period of modern history. This is exactly the kind of challenge for Kristen Ghodsee, who does an outstanding job in revealing the untold story of communism in her latest book, *The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe*. Ghodsee, a master ethnographer and author of several award-winning books on Bulgaria’s cultural history, proves an able storyteller, uncovering the complexities of cultural memories in eastern Europe while personalizing their everyday occurrence. As in her previous books, *The Red Riviera: Gender, Tourism and Postsocialism on the Black Sea* (2005) and *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday*

Life after Communism (2011), her work focuses on the recent history of Bulgaria, a country in the region of which she clearly has an intimate and direct knowledge. Her skills as a seasoned ethnographer and “part-time” Bulgarian resident shine in her astute analysis of the cultural and social circumstances that account for what has become the convoluted and highly controversial history of communism.

Ghodsee’s goal is to answer a simple yet contentious question: What was/is communism, and how did it become so reviled and demonized, both in the West and more importantly, in eastern Europe, the region which saw so many incarnations of this powerful ideology? To do so, she uses a less conventional approach, at least as far as academic writing is concerned. Instead of focusing on a meta-analysis of the political and social complexities that surround the rise and fall of communism, she chooses to recast the story of communism not as a grand historic narrative, but as a personal one—a story told through the rise and fall of two seemingly unrelated, yet intertwined human fates: an Englishman by the name of Frank Thompson and a young Bulgarian girl named Elena Lagadinova. Major Frank Thompson, brother of historian E. P. Thompson, crossed paths with Elena, the youngest guerilla fighter in the communist “partisan” resistance movement in Bulgaria. At first, their seemingly disparate paths in life appear impossible to place in the same story, let alone in the same geographical location. And yet, with her keen eye for detail and talent for finding the most obscure yet illuminating cultural cues, Ghodsee takes us on a journey following Thompson’s path of discovery and sacrifice.

In part 1, the first three chapters of the book follow both Ghodsee’s personal interest in Thompson’s story and the details of his life in Britain, where he cultivated a sophisticated understanding of the ideals of the communist movement. His military involvement with the British army was a result of his desire to engage with the struggle of

the Bulgarian antifascist movement he learned about in following the trial of Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov, accused of setting the Reichstag on fire in 1933. Major Thompson found his way into tiny Bulgaria as a member of the Special Operation Executive, a unit which sent British officers to work together with local resistance movements. Growing further captivated by the ideals of communism and the Bulgarian spirit of resistance against the Nazi occupation, Thompson ran into the Lagadinovs, whose story we discover in the next nine chapters of the book. Ghodsee tells an engaging story of courage and perseverance, of sacrifice and naive idealism, all leading us to understand how and why people of such disparate backgrounds and upbringing—an intellectual in the United Kingdom and a family of peasants in Bulgaria—were inspired and united by the what she describes as the common aspiration for a “world in which peasants and workers control their own fate” (p. 189).

Thompson’s devotion to helping the partisans is captured well by Ghodsee’s writing. Meeting the Lagadinov brothers’ brigade made him more confident in his mission, but it also led to his ultimate demise. After a stakeout, Thompson and his comrades were captured by Bulgarian gendarmes and executed, shot by a firing squad; his body was tossed in a mass unmarked grave. His personal sacrifice, selfless to some and reckless to others, was used by the resistance movement as an example of the moral high ground to which true communists ought to adhere. Ghodsee’s narrative also follows the not so glorious daily life of the partisan, as he or she often trailed through a mundane routine. The story seamlessly transitions from the death of an idealist Brit into the rise to fame and distinction of the youngest partisan in Bulgarian history, the Lagadinov sister. Elena, also known as “the Amazon,” becomes the main character and Ghodsee’s most intimate principal informant in the remainder of the book. This second section focuses on the role of the partisan movement in stabilizing the country in the post-World War II peri-

od, becoming the backbone of the Communist Party in Bulgaria and symbolizing the eventual moral bankruptcy of the regime.

Elena's story reveals a remarkable and touching personal account of the rise and fall of the communist ideal—from Elena's rise to prominence as the token female leader, instrumental to engaging women in the new policies of domestic and industrial labor; to her family story as a mother, a prominent scientist, an internationally renowned women's rights leader, and an outspoken advocate; to her humble, no-frills, low-profile life as a pensioner in the postcommunist realities of present-day Bulgaria. With Ghodsee's expertise as a scholar of gender, she captures the complexities of Lagadinova's story, encapsulating her personal struggles coming to terms with how her grand ideals went wrong and how the lived experiences of people during those times reflected the intricate story of communism. As Ghodsee herself argues, "learning about the communist era was like trying to find the center of an onion. The official layer of history told by the professional historians was wrapped around the remembered experiences of those who lived through it" (p. 157).

While peeling away the layers of the onion, Ghodsee also makes us aware of the manipulative, revisionist attempts—often enabled by foreign players and interested parties—to shroud the "true" story of communism in mystery by deliberately fabricating stories of communist abuse, oppression, and brutality. As Ghodsee contends, "since the global economic crisis in 2008, government and corporations are especially eager to remind the public about the evils of communism" (p. 198). She illustrates how history can be hijacked and manipulated, returning to Thompson's personal story as she reveals that the very people who executed him are now celebrated as victims of communism, immortalized in their own monuments, while the partisans' own places of rest are defaced and purposely destroyed.

The Left Side of History is a remarkable account of Bulgaria's current history of triumph and despair, wrapped in the aspirations, hopes, and tragic failures of humans. It is told with astute historical accuracy and striking intimacy concerning the personal stories of Bulgarian communist activists, as well as ordinary people whose lives were indelibly marked by the rise and demise of communism. Ghodsee's narrative provides a somber reminder that, despite the current economic and political impasse of the postcommunism transition, it is important to remember that not all who "fought on the left side of history were Marxist zealots bent on world domination" but ordinary people whose dreams and hopes were guided by a common desire to improve the lives of everyone (p. 199).

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