

**The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe.**

By KRISTEN GHODSEE. Pp. 256. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2015. £15.99. Paperback. ISBN: 9780822358350.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and more specifically since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008, western governments and corporations have been eager to remind the public of the evils of communism (p. 198). With her most recent book— *The Left Side of History*—Kristen Ghodsee challenges this prevailing yet one-dimensional view by exposing the stories of two communist partisans who fought behind the lines of Nazi-allied Bulgaria. First, the ambiguous story of Frank Thompson, brother of renowned historian E. P. Thompson, then fourteen-year-old Elena Lagadinova, the youngest female member of the anti-fascist resistance. The main significance of this book lay with Ghodsee's alternative definition of communism, one that is not predicated on Stalinism and the purges, but rather an ideal and social belief.

In the first half of this book, Ghodsee tells the story of how a young Frank Thompson, a student at Oxford University at the time, became sympathetic with communist ideology whilst pursuing his romantic interest with Iris Murdoch. Elena, on the other hand, first flirted with communism as her father and three brothers were Bulgarian partisans. After a few years of secretly providing material and moral support to them, Elena joined the movement and later became known as 'the amazon'. In the second half of the book, Ghodsee interviews various "red grandmothers", including Elena and other prominent women in Bulgaria and the GDR in order to ultimately show the ways in which they prospered from communism and the dire impact of market capitalism that they all experienced.

This book benefits from Ghodsee's creativity and raconteurism. It reads less like a traditional history book and more like a captivating piece of fiction. Ghodsee's seamless and engaging writing allows the reader to become so invested in each of the people she

writes about to the extent that one is moved when any one of them experience misfortune or success. Moreover, this book is a credit to Ghodsee's career as a social and gender historian as it sheds an important light on the role of women in the communist Eastern Bloc.

Ghodsee has highlighted many positive aspects of Communism in Bulgaria, which, as Ghodsee felt, have been hidden in an avalanche of anti-Communist demonisation. Whereas historians like E. H. Carr have stressed that little good came from Communism considering its cost in human suffering and the massive loss of life, Ghodsee rather highlights many positives. This includes the equality of opportunity for men and women, the guarantee of full employment and the stability and predictability of daily routines (p. 192). Ghodsee exposes the personal and optimistic nature of Communism, which is too readily overlooked.

As enlightening as this study is, it concedes some setbacks. Ghodsee often writes in significant detail about her personal actions, for example the precise way in which she ate watermelon and feta cheese when interviewing Elena in 2012. Whilst it adds personality to the text, it becomes a cumbersome part of the text, adding nothing to her argument. Additionally, Ghodsee's depiction of the political arena in the 1930s is too simplistic. The subjects of this book were not only anti-fascist but also staunchly Communist and, as Ghodsee explored no other political orientations, anti-fascism and Communism become synonymous in this book. This ignores the complex middle ground between the far right and the far left and, perhaps more importantly, overlooks those who opposed Nazism but did not align themselves with Communism.

Finally, Ghodsee writes about Thompson and Elena hagiographically and, whilst Ghodsee does not make it explicit, her admiration lies with their idealism and enthusiasm for a fairer world, not necessarily with their Communism. However, as this aspiration was deeply connected with their Communist tendencies and because this distinction is not

made clear, this text risks being read idealistically and could be dangerous to the impressionable. This book fails to appreciate the utopic nature of Communism and the fact that much of what was promised in the Communist ideology could never be implemented in reality. Rather, Ghodsee ought to make it clearer in her argument that these partisans were admirable because of their determination, irrespective of their political, economic and social beliefs.

Ultimately, this book is well written and easily accessible and therefore students and scholars of Communism, Bulgaria, gender and cultural history would welcome it in their respective fields. Nevertheless, because of its overly heroic and simplistic tone, Ghodsee's book really ought to be read alongside other, well-established texts.

MATTHEW MARTIN

*School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London*

*This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon the author's work non-commercially, as long as they credit the author and license their new creations under the identical terms. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.*