

Kristen Ghodsee: *The Left Side of History. World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015. 231 pp. – ISBN 978-0-8223-5835-0.

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The author is an expert anthropologist who has chosen Bulgaria as her target country for quite some time. She is also someone who has not succumbed to the dominant Zeitgeist, which suggests that the Fall of the Wall in 1989 has ushered in a period of prosperity, freedom and democracy for Eastern Europe. An astute observer, who does not mince words, she calls things by their name: “After 1989, Bulgaria became a democratic country, but it also became a miserable one.” (p. 129) “There was inequality under communism, but it was a pale shadow of the vast inequalities that would follow its collapse.” (p. 117)

But, even better, Kristen Ghodsee is not only a realist; she has also kept alive the sense that it is necessary to retain an acute utopian vision. In the final paragraph of her book, she approvingly quotes Miguel de Cervantes who had nothing good to say about people who exclusively “see life as it is, and not as it should be.” How can a realist observer favorably cite the seemingly paradoxical recommendation of a sixteenth century author who refused to believe that the world as he knew it was also the only realistic world? The very last sentence in *The Left Side of History* gives away the secret: “This book is written for all of those people who still believe that some value can come from tilting at windmills.” (p. 203) Realism can easily be coupled with a utopian vision. And a fine-tuned diagnostic of everyday life does not in the least preclude the desire to help create a better world.

Bulgaria, today the poorest member of the European Union, was and remains a case in point of the need to challenge the dominant paradigm. In a country that was allied in World War II with Hitler and Mussolini, resistance fighters faced a double hurdle. Not only was the military might of the Axis power mobilized to crush them, but domestic public opinion was likewise frequently in their disfavor. Bulgaria having chosen to fight on Hitler’s side, resistance fighters were automatically regarded as troublemakers and as anti-patriotic, the last quality being the polar opposite of what gave courage to the maquis in the vast majority of countries under the Nazi boot. This desperate situation only changed when the wheel of fortune began to turn against the fascist military alliance in the wake of Stalingrad. Until the winter of 1942/3, Bulgarian resistance fighters were not only on the run from the official powers, but they also had to hide from the rural population which was often more than eager to inform the authorities on the whereabouts of the hunted men and women.

As elsewhere in the Balkans and in Italy as well, it were not only men who, quite literally, picked up guns to fight against fascism. As a good anthropologist, Kristen Ghodsee selected two representative individual biographies for her reconstruction of the contradictory reality of Bulgarian anti-fascism: one is the fourteen-year-old Elena Lagadinova, later on a courageous

advocate of feminist concerns in Communist Bulgaria; the other unsung hero is the older brother of the later co-founder of the British New Left and world-renowned social historian and peace activist, E.P. Thompson. Frank Thompson, a British SOE operative choosing to join the Bulgarian resistance in January 1944, and Elena Lagadinova form an unlikely pair of subjects for the narrative of the history of Communism and antifascism in Bulgaria, but the author effectively manages to weave together the life stories of these two resistance activists who never met in real life. Frank Thompson was killed in the summer of 1944. Yet through the detailed description of the action and the fighting conditions of both Thompson and Lagadinova, Kristen Ghodsee ably reconstructs the motivations of a fourteen-year-old Bulgarian girl, who grew up in a family of poor peddlers, and a Winchester- and Oxford-educated British Communist to engage in a desperate struggle to tilt at windmills. In September 1944 the tide of history was temporarily staved off, as it was the Bulgarian Fatherland Front which liberated Bulgaria; it was not the Red Army which imposed communism on this much-victimized country.

In finely spun reconstructions of the tissues of Frank Thompson's life, and in a series of long interviews with the elderly Elena Lagadinova, Ghodsee does what only an anthropologist – or a novelist – can do exceedingly well: to reconstruct the mentality and the motivations of a generation of Communist activists who gave their best – and often their lives – to make this world a better world. In an utterly refreshing manner, the author goes against the grain of much supposed received wisdom, which sees communism as an unmitigated force of evil – then as now –, pointing to the vast gulf between the emancipatory desires and goals of rank-and-file communists and the frequently Manichean manipulations of the post-liberation Stalinist leadership. Moreover, Ghodsee also knows how to compare and contrast the positive elements of social policy in Communist Bulgaria with the dog-eat-dog world of post-1989 'free' Bulgaria. She cites from one of the interviews with Elena Lagadinova: "So many people are without medicine. So many children are on the street; they are not going to school. Prostitutes make more money than doctors and judges. The young people leave to the West and never come back." (p. 124) On balance, two fifth of Eastern Europeans are worse off than they were before 1989; only one fifth has benefited materially from the changes after 1989. In Bulgaria, this balance sheet is likely to be even more in disfavor of the fortunes of the poor. Still, Ghodsee reports that, even in contemporary Bulgaria, "it might be easier to assert that the moon landing was staged than it would be to argue that there was anything good about the communist past." (p. 133)

The final nail in the coffin? Boris Lukanov, Frank Thompson's murderer, who was sentenced to death and executed after liberation, is today officially remembered, along with others in his military unit, "as innocent victims of communism". (p. 195) "Many of these 'victims' cut off the heads of the partisans Thompson came to help, shoved pikes up their severed necks and mounted them in village squares. (...) Some of these men ordered the burning of houses, the rapes, the torture, and the indiscriminate murders of peasants and anyone who questioned the absolute authority of the king. Others summarily executed uniformed British officers in blatant violation of the Geneva Convention." (p. 194) Freedom and democracy arrived on Bulgaria's shores, indeed – along with brutal social inequalities and utterly vicious lies. Kristen Ghodsee's timely volume testifies to the crying need for a counter-narrative – and it provides an inspiration for others, who wish to step into her – and Elena Lagadinova's and Frank Thompson's – footsteps to question authority.