

Review of Ghodsee, Kristen. 2015. *The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe*. Duke University Press.

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Kristen Ghodsee claims she wrote this accessible, story-based book about the unfulfilled promises of communism by accident. However, the conditions that led to this accident are not entirely arbitrary. Ghodsee's political sensibilities shape the book's underlying premise that the collapse of communism has left a gap in contemporary political imagination when it comes to finding alternatives to post-Cold War forms of capitalist dispossession. In turn, archival research on a communist-era women's committee in Bulgaria and the encounter with Professor Freeman Dyson at Princeton guided Ghodsee towards analysis of the shared dreams and struggles of a British communist and Bulgarian partisans. The result is a historical ethnography of Bulgarian communism that is simultaneously a passionate call for the revival of the dream of communism itself.

Ghodsee draws an analogy between the current economic pressures and the rise of right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Greece, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, when economic crisis was followed by the rise of fascism. The difference between then and now is that back then communism fuelled alternative imaginations of the future, whereas today communism is being actively discredited. Today, there is dispossession, frustration, and even protests, but no dream. One could object and argue that nationalism is also a dream that, similar to communism, promises better worlds and better futures. But the book does not aim for comparative analysis of dreams. It is based on a priori moral judgment. As a result, communism emerges as the only morally legitimate faith that can fill the gap left by its own demise.

The first part of the book follows the personal stories and political struggles of Major Frank Thompson—a privileged Englishman, the Lagadinovs—a poor Bulgarian partisan family, and their partisan allies. All fight not only against fascism, but also for communism, which appears as a dream, utopia, a world with toys and books for all children (p. 103), a world where peasants and workers own land and factories (p. 65). The partisans exhibit "blind devotion to communism" (p. 65), but they rarely discuss what it would take to make heaven on earth after victory over fascism. Their daily life consists of heroic acts—surviving, getting supplies, protecting each other, and mounting subversive operations. So much so that means become ends: "it wasn't communism that inspired men to action, it was men's actions that made communism such an inspiration" (p. 191).

The second part of the book is based on interviews with members of the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement. Elena Lagadinova was a young female partisan, who became a geneticist and, subsequently, the leader of the Committee. Under her leadership, the Committee achieved rights to maternity leave and other socialized services for families, leading the UN to recognize Bulgaria as "a model country for women's issues" (p. 120). Anelia, in turn, "grew up in a world where Marxist critique of capitalism was official government dogma" (p. 150). As a writer for an international women's magazine, she wrote about the evils of capitalism. She did not believe any of it until postsocialist capitalism forced her to believe all of it.

Ghodsee argues that the achievements of communism and the generative force of the dream that it entailed are erased by pervasive anti-communism in public and political discourse. Ghodsee suggests that whereas capitalism is allowed a more nuanced history, communism gets reduced to the crimes of the communist era. This is largely true for much of post-Cold War public discourse and commemorative practices in Eastern Europe, but the story is more varied in Western academia—for example, the 1980s saw the emergence of sympathetic histories of communism that deployed the bottom-up approach also adopted by Ghodsee.

While engaging in critical analysis of the current political landscape in Europe and the United States, Ghodsee sheds the constraints of the kind of anthropological critique that insists on being political without being ideological. The analytical traction of contemporary anthropological critique lies in revealing things as they are or tracing how they have come to be. Its politics entails conjuring up hope and gesturing towards alternative presents or possible futures. In contrast, Ghodsee calls for an explicit ideological and normative project—"rather than solely focusing on things as they are, we should also focus on things as they should be" (p. 20). The book's pathos comes across as too simplistic at times, but its diagnosis of the failures of contemporary political imagination is convincing. It could also be read as a contribution to debates about the politics of critique in anthropology.

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