The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe. By Kristen Ghodsee. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2015. 231 pp. Illustrations. Index. Maps. Notes: Paper.

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The Left Side of History by Kristen Ghodsee explores the lives of some of the young Communist partisans that fought against fascism in the name of socialism during World War II. It begins with the puzzle of how a street in Sofia, Bulgaria, came to be named after an Englishman during the Communist era. The first part of the book focuses on the details of the life of the street's namesake, Officer Frank Thompson. Thompson was a young British solider during World War II who Ghodsee was able to uncover through his personal letters and biographies published in the UK and Bulgaria. What emerges is a portrait of a young man who gives up a comfortable life in England to struggle, and eventually die as a socialist partisan in a firefight in the Bulgarian countryside. As a young man, Thompson becomes enamored by the principles of socialism and, during World War II, volunteers to assist Bulgarian partisans in their attempts to overthrow the Nazi-allied Bulgarian ruler, King Boris III. Ghodsee documents Thompson's short life, then goes on to explore the lives of some of the other partisans that fought fascism in the name of socialism.

Ghodsee's book, part life history and part ethnography, shifts from the life of Thompson to an examination of the question of anti-communist sentiment in the post-socialist era. This question is of particular relevance in the Bulgarian context, where the Communist Party has managed to garner significant support. Given the anti-communism of the 1990s, and the exuberant neoliberalism of the 2000s, it is remarkable that the Communist Party currently enjoys a surprising amount of popularity throughout the region. This popularity is not without contestation, however, and that tension lives at the heart of Ghodsee's narrative. She paints a particularly sympathetic portrait of the partisans, both Bulgarian and British, young idealists who dreamed of a more just world. Members of groups who would eventually come to see each other as antagonistic, have once fought together against a common Nazi enemy. The puzzle of a British soldier canonized as a hero in Communist Bulgaria is compelling, particularly in a post-Cold War framework.

The second half of the book consists of an ethnographic narrative of the post-socialist experiences of some of those partisans and others who lived much of their lives during the Communist era. Ghodsee has a particular gift for ethnographic description. She is most in her element when describing her meetings with women in their 70s and 80s who had grown up in the Communist era, some of whom had lived lives of relative privilege as former partisans or professionals. There are chapters about the work of women active in women's organizations sanctioned by the Communist Party to garner grassroots support of women's health initiatives. In rural areas, Ghodsee points to the valuable work towards advancing equality that women did as part of the Communist Party apparatus. Through these ethnographic vignettes, she challenges the

reader to evaluate their actions in light of their commitment to ideals and their impact on women's lives, and less through their relation to the Communist Party apparatus.

The book's conclusion juxtaposes the stories of the partisans introduced earlier in the book to that of a monument and a website dedicated to the "victims of communism" in Bulgaria. Ghodsee challenges the anti-communist impulse by pointing out the war crimes of several of the men listed on the monument in the name of the fascist Bulgarian government. With this parting chapter, she treads into waters that have not often been troubled. Are actions undertaken in the name of one regime inherently more or less righteous by virtue of their relation to the regime in power? Is the idealism of the Bulgarian partisans and their British antifascist allies during WWII overridden by the oppression of the totalitarian regimes of Stalinism and Soviet-style Communism? Perhaps the most profound sentence in the book comes in the acknowledgements section, "This book is written for all of those people who still believe that some value can come from tilting at windmills" (p. 203). The book does not offer conclusions. Rather, the reader is left pondering the implications of the tensions it raises.

At its heart, *The Left Side of History* is less an academic investigation and more a mosaic of people and events which can serve to further a much needed conversation about the shifting meanings of communism in contemporary Eastern Europe. It is well suited to be used as an accompaniment to other scholarly works on the region, as a source of inspiration for graduate students and researchers, as well as lay historians, in their quest for new questions to be investigated.