



**THE
LEFT
SIDE**

OF HISTORY

WORLD WAR II AND THE
UNFULFILLED PROMISE
OF COMMUNISM
IN EASTERN EUROPE

KRISTEN GHODSEE

Kristen Ghodsee

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Cover (from left): Frank Thompson in 1939;

Elena Lagadinova in 1945

FOR MY DAUGHTER—
may she always have heroes

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PROLOGUE **COMMUNISM 2.0?**

How do you write a book by mistake? I am still trying to sort this one out. In 2010, I began research for a different project on the activities of a communist-era women's committee in Bulgaria. This was going to be my fourth book on this small, southeast European country, but it would be my first about life before 1989. Spending time in the archives in the capital city of Sofia was a nice change of pace from the rural fieldwork I had done before. As I lost myself in the boxes and folders of documents, I became obsessed with the past. For me this past had a specific face—that of Major Frank Thompson, a twenty-three-year-old British officer sent to Bulgaria to help support a local partisan resistance force against the country's pro-German monarchy in 1944. But this interest in World War II guerrillas was tangential to my project. I never intended to write a book about it.

The beginning of this new archival research, however, coincided with the start of the Greek anti-austerity riots. While I tried to lose myself in historical records, the ongoing political chaos in Bulgaria's southern neighbor kept distracting me. In April 2012, a seventy-seven-year-old retired pharmacist committed suicide in Athens. Dimitris Christoulas shot himself in the head in the middle of Syntagma Square just across from the Greek parliament. Civil unrest in Greece intensified as the ex-pharmacist became another martyr of the Eurozone crisis. In his suicide note, Christoulas com-

pared the current Greek government with the Greek leaders who had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.

The political chaos spread from Greece to Bulgaria in February 2013. Massive demonstrations against foreign-owned electricity distribution monopolies forced the Bulgarian government to resign after violent clashes between police and protestors. Bulgarians, like their Greek neighbors, were fed up with the corruption of their political elites. Bulgaria was the poorest country in the European Union, and many citizens lived in crushing poverty that no democratically elected government had been able to reverse. A caretaker cabinet took power and scheduled snap elections for May 2013, but there was growing doubt that another round of voting would be enough to solve Bulgaria's deeper economic problems. In towns and villages across the country, ordinary men and women gave up hope.

One day in March, I left the archives to grab a snack. There was a foul stench in the air, but I was not able to figure out what it was. I was back at my desk about an hour later when I learned that a fifty-one-year-old man had dumped a can of kerosene over his head and set himself alight in front of the Bulgarian presidency, only a block away from the archives. This self-immolation was the sixth in the span of about a month. From the notes some of the victims left behind, it was clear that these were political acts, born of extreme frustration and despair.

I tried to continue with my original research project, but grew more distracted by current events in Europe. Across the Continent, it was easy to see how the crushing social effects of austerity had fatigued and radicalized populations. Protests were taking place in other countries besides Greece and Bulgaria. In Spain, the *indignados* (the outraged ones) had continued their massive, anti-austerity protests for more than four years. Protests spread in Italy as well. In September 2013, thousands of Poles took to the streets of Warsaw demanding the resignation of the government. Marching under the banner of "Solidarity," Poles demonstrated against their worsening economy.

The anti-austerity indignation fueled popular support for relatively new political parties on the far right. Since the beginning of the Greek anti-austerity riots, a neo-Nazi party called Golden Dawn had been gaining popularity among those Greeks frustrated by the economic situation and aggravated by European Union pressure and intervention. Black-shirted, torch-bearing rioters had massed in Athens shouting, "Greece is only for the Greeks." Golden Dawn began setting up Greek-only food banks and doing Greek-only blood drives.

Golden Dawn gangs (with the implicit support of the Greek police) started by targeting Muslims and immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, but then turned their attentions to Greeks with leftist political sympathies. In September 2013, fifty Golden Dawn activists carrying crow-bars and bats attacked a group of fellow Greeks who were distributing literature in a working-class, immigrant neighborhood in Athens. Nine victims of this attack were sent to the hospital with serious injuries. A few days later, a Golden Dawn activist stabbed to death a left-wing hip-hop artist, sparking new riots. The streets of Greece's capital were filled with teargas as Greeks protested against both the economic conditions and their fascist spawn.

The far right was making a comeback in Bulgaria as well. The snap elections in May 2013 brought to power a new government, which took office with the support of a nationalist party called Ataka (Attack), characterized in no small part by its harshly negative attitude toward Bulgarians of Turkish or Roma descent. The leader of Ataka threatened peaceful antigovernment protesters with "civil war" and had seized upon the political frustration of poor ethnic Bulgarians outside of Sofia. Ataka's popular support paved the way for other far-right parties, offering similar anti-Turkish and anti-Roma rhetoric.

Watching the situation in Europe, and especially in Bulgaria and Greece, I could not help but think that this had all happened before: a massive economic recession followed by the rise of xenophobic right-wing parties using the language of nationalism to mobilize popular support for projects of ethnic purification. The irony here was that this time it was primarily the Germans who were leading the EU into imposing austerity on countries like Greece. Of all nations, it seemed to me that Germany should be the first to realize that severe belt-tightening imposed by foreign powers can lead to the democratic election of less-than-desirable political parties.

Given the widespread dissatisfaction with global capitalism and the politics of austerity, the resurgence of right-wing, nationalistic discourse was perhaps no surprise. Men and women across Europe were looking for alternatives to globalization and its promotion of outsourcing and immigration as tools to control labor costs. Like the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, the anti-austerity protests in Europe started out as a movement against the global financial crisis, but not in favor of any particular alternative. The far right had merely seized upon preexisting popular outrage and twisted it to its own purposes.

In the wake of the economic crisis that began in 2008, neoliberal capitalism, particularly as practiced in the poorest parts of Europe, was clearly



“Death to Capitalism” with a hammer and sickle and a red star

having its problems. People were suffering; people were angry; people were looking for viable political alternatives. As I watched the rise of right-wing parties with trepidation, I found myself reflecting more and more on the local history of World War II, specifically about Frank Thompson and the Bulgarian partisans he had been sent to assist. They had openly called themselves “communists,” and they believed in the transnational solidarity of all working people. They struggled against the Nazis and their allies on the far right. Thompson and the Bulgarian partisans fought on what one might call the left side of history, a left that has been deemed out of bounds in mainstream political discourse for decades.

But now I started noticing new graffiti around Sofia. Slogans like “Oligarchy = Capitalism” and “No Poor” began to appear in red spray paint on the sides of buildings, always accompanied by a red star and a hammer and sickle. On a bus stop, I saw the acronym СССР, the Cyrillic version of USSR. On Boulevard Bulgaria, I stumbled upon a series of slogans spray painted in red where they would be visible to thousands of motorists as they inched their way through the center of Sofia during the morning and evening rush hours. Walking farther toward the National Palace of Culture, I saw the slogan “Death to Capitalism!” A bit farther down someone had simply written the word Комунизм. Communism.

“Have you noticed all the communist graffiti around Sofia?” I asked one of my closest Bulgarian friends.

He nodded. “Yes,” he said. “And anarchist, too.”

“I’ve never seen so much of it before,” I said.

“There has never been so much.” He exhaled a lungful of smoke from a Marlboro Red.

“Do you think it is just a couple of kids?” I said.

My friend shrugged. “I think it is frustration. A lot of people are tired of democracy. It’s not working.”

Like my friend, most Bulgarians do not make a semantic distinction between the words “democracy” and “capitalism.” For them, the capitalist ideal of the profit motive and unrestrained free markets goes hand in hand with so-called free elections, which all too often seem controlled by the economic elite who can afford the most advertising. For many Bulgarians, everyday life was much worse after the collapse of communism in 1989 and the introduction of “free” elections and “free” markets.¹ As I returned to take pictures of the pro-communist graffiti with my camera phone a week later, I wondered if the political future of Bulgaria could literally be discerned from the writing on the wall.

On August 20, 2013, in a situation much like what had occurred in Bulgaria earlier that year, the Czech parliament voted to dissolve itself, paving the way for snap elections.² Many observers at the time suggested that the new Czech elections would mean a return to power for the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (referred to by the acronym KSČM). Although the Social Democrats would most likely win the plurality, in order to rule it would be necessary to form a coalition with the KSČM. The Social Democrats had already stated publicly that they were willing to do this. After more than two decades out of power, the Communist Party was poised to make a stunning comeback due to the lingering effects of the global financial crisis.³

In both Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, however, many made concerted efforts to smash any possibility of communism’s return, even in the face of a less-than-savory right-wing alternative. At the prospect of the return of Czech communists to parliament, former Czech president Vaclav Klaus flew into an apoplectic fit. The conservative Klaus argued that leftist radicals wanted to destroy Czech democracy. He issued a manifesto urging the “Democrats of Europe” to wake up to the resurgence of leftist parties and their promotion of “human-rightism, environmentalism, Europeanism, NGOism and homosexuality.”⁴

Klaus’s tirade was just one voice in a sea of detractors. In the quarter of a century since 1989, the complexities of ordinary people’s attitudes toward

the communist past have been bulldozed by both the official history and the popular imagination of this past. This “official” history is dominated by a wide coalition of scholars, activists, and politicians like Klaus operating on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. Books, articles, memory projects, museum exhibitions, and so forth have combined to paint a picture of communism as an irredeemable evil.⁵

At the exact moment when ordinary people are searching for political alternatives, many official historical institutes are supported (often with funds from the West) to discredit communism. For instance, in Bulgaria, one finds an official Institute for Studies of the Recent Past (ISRП), and in neighboring Romania an Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMRE).⁶ The majority of the scholarship emerging from these institutes focuses on the crimes of the communist era: the secret police, the wide network of informers collaborating with the state, and the testimonies of people sent to labor camps.

Such strident anticommunist rhetoric demonizes anyone who once called himself or herself a “communist” or who believed in the communist ideal. After 1989, in towns and villages across Bulgaria, statues of local heroes who lost their lives fighting against the Nazi-allied Bulgarian government during World War II were defaced and torn down because the people in question had been members of the Communist Party. The thousands of Bulgarian partisans are today remembered as “red scum.”

In her provocative book *The Communist Horizon* (2012), Jodi Dean offers a diagnosis of the widespread anticommunist rhetoric.⁷ As Dean notes, when we think of capitalism, we do not think only of its worst excesses, for example, slavery, price-gouging monopolies, rampant unemployment, or wild inequalities in wealth. The history of capitalism is allowed to be dynamic and nuanced. By contrast, if one utters the word “communism” in academic circles, an automatic chain of nefarious word association usually follows. First, Dean argues that communism is equated with the Soviet Union. Communist experiments in Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Mongolia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Zambia, Yemen, India, Angola, Mozambique, and so forth are ignored. Second, the entire seventy-year history of the USSR is reduced to include only the twenty-six years of Joseph Stalin’s rule, so that his worst crimes come to exemplify the so-called true nature of communism. The ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union is seen as the inevitable result of Stalinism and the economic stagnation and consumer shortages that plagued the planned economy. The experience of the Soviet Union, its violent authori-



An anticommunist sign from the protests in Sofia in the summer of 2013

tarianism and its economic inefficiencies, becomes the “proof” that communism is an ideal that can never work in practice. In the popular imagination, communism, therefore, becomes a static, fixed point, one that will *always* end with purges and the gulag.

An excellent example of the way that American conservatives automatically reduce all leftist politics to Stalinism occurred in the days following the death of the legendary folk singer Pete Seeger in January 2014. Those who opposed Seeger’s long and varied history of left activism immediately seized upon his early refusal to recognize Stalin as anything but a “hard driver.” Headlines like “Seeger Was a Useful Idiot for Stalin,” “Pete Seeger, Stalin and God,” “The Death of ‘Stalin’s Songbird,’” and “Obama Praises Stalinist and Folk Singer Pete Seeger” spread across the Internet. An image accompanying the article “Pete ‘Potemkin’ Seeger: Stalin’s Little Minstrel” on the website www.renewamerica.com featured an elderly Seeger singing to a rainbow-haloed image of Stalin superimposed into the frame. Writing for the *Daily Beast*, Michael Moynihan asserted, “Pete Seeger’s love of Stalinist ideals endured through the nightmare of pogroms and purge trials in the Soviet Union. His totalitarian sympathies should not be whitewashed.”⁸ It did not matter that Seeger openly renounced Stalin in his book *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* (1993),⁹ or that he actually left the Communist Party of the United States in 1949. For conservative journalists and historians, the

mere fact that Seeger identified with communist ideals meant that his entire political ideology was Stalinist. As the economist Paul Krugman observed in an astute op-ed in the *New York Times*, “If you so much as mention income inequality, you’ll be denounced as the second coming of Joseph Stalin.”¹⁰

Jodi Dean’s analysis rang true to me as I contemplated the lives of Frank Thompson, the young Englishman who was murdered in Bulgaria in 1944, and the Bulgarian partisans who fought alongside him. These people were communists, but they were also idealists who fought and sometimes died for those ideals. As a boy in England, Frank Thompson loved poetry and philology. Before his death, he would learn to speak ten languages because he believed that a new world was coming, one in which the peoples of all countries would live together in peace. He was eighteen years old when he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. Frank Thompson was only nineteen when he volunteered for military service two days before the official British declaration of war against Adolf Hitler. At twenty-three he parachuted into Bulgarian-occupied Serbia to help supply the underground partisan resistance movement.

As I learned more about World War II in Bulgaria, I discovered a family of guerrilla fighters: a father, three brothers, and a young sister. This family, the Lagadinovs, also loved poetry. The father had founded a branch of the Bulgarian Communist Party in his hometown in the 1920s. The eldest son, Kostadin, became politically active as a teenager. For his part in distributing communist newspapers and pamphlets, Kostadin was persecuted and forced to flee to the Soviet Union when he was nineteen. There he spent years in exile before returning to Bulgaria to help lead the partisan resistance in 1941.

The middle and younger brothers of this Bulgarian family, Assen and Boris, also leftist activists, spent their childhoods in and out of trouble for spreading “dangerous” ideas. Their sister, the youngest member of the family, was the only female in the house (her mother had died when she was four). Little Elena began actively supporting her brothers when she was eleven years old. She was fourteen when the Bulgarian police burned down her natal home. She fled into the mountains to take up arms and join the resistance. The Lagadinovs huddled around their small fires reciting from memory the verses of the great Bulgarian poet Hristo Botev. In poetry, they found inspiration.

It was hard for me to think of these people simply as “red scum.” It seems that we need to go back and revisit the stories of people like Frank Thompson and the Lagadinovs. Communism may be making a bit of a comeback

in Europe, but it is also the case that some political elites are working harder than ever to stop it by blackwashing its history. Who will win this struggle? It is impossible to say. Anyone can see that there is massive frustration with global capitalism today, a deep yearning for some sort of alternative. If the very idea of a communist ideal is obliterated, tarred over with the black brush of Stalinism, then the remaining alternative to unfettered neoliberalism will be the hate-filled, scapegoating, nationalist rhetoric of the far right. I find this terrifying.

The pages that follow tell the tales of a handful of men and women who lived through some of the most tumultuous events of the twentieth century: World War II, the Cold War, and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. We need to understand people like Frank Thompson and the Lagadinovs. We should try to comprehend the cause they were fighting for, without the preconception of communism as one homogenous and undifferentiated evil. To be sure, we need to understand how their ideas could, and sometimes did, go wrong in practice. But we must also be open to the possibility that communism had beneficial effects in terms of industrialization, mass education, literacy, and women's rights. Most importantly, we should endeavor to understand how a political ideal, openly referred to as communist, could inspire both a privileged English gentleman and a poor peasant girl to take up arms and risk their lives.

Finally, I do not come to these stories as an objective bystander attempting to answer broad theoretical questions. I write these words as someone who is trying to make sense of an uncertain future. Although I have been studying the region for the better part of two decades, this book is not a conventional history or a traditional ethnography. There is too much present in the past, and too much past in the present to be able to draw neat disciplinary boundaries. The complexity of the politics of cultural memory in Eastern Europe today transcends the bounds of any one scholarly field.¹¹

Nor am I trying to produce any kind of comprehensive or "revisionist" account of World War II in the Balkans. There are many books cited in the bibliography that provide a more thorough analysis of events. Rather than focus on the broad sweep of political or diplomatic history, I concentrate on the stories of a few men and women who lived this history. As an ethnographer, my goal is to share this little window onto the past, and how this window helped me to see that past in a new way. So I suppose this book is part memoir as well—a journey through my own discoveries and digressions. As an American, I grew up with a lot of stereotypes about communists, and espe-

cially communist leaders. While I wrote this book, I learned that there were men and women who struggled to make communism a better reality than it came to be in the end. There were dreamers among those whom I had been taught to view as self-serving hypocrites. I could not see this before I started digging in the archives and interviewing the handful of remaining survivors.

Sometime in the late 1980s, Stanford University invited E. P. Thompson to give a series of lectures. He focused these talks on the contested history of his older brother, Frank. E. P. explained that:

[It is we,] in the present, who must always give meaning to that inert and finished past. For history is forever unresolved, it remains as a field of unfinished possibilities, it lies behind us with all its contradictions of motives and cancelled intentions and we—acting in the present—reach back, refuse some possibilities and select and further others.¹²

In the pages that follow, I am reaching back to an unfinished past to rescue this small handful of clobbered idealists from the dustbin of memory. Social history teaches us to appreciate how ordinary people experienced significant events, and ethnography allows us to understand how individuals find meaning in their everyday lives. Small histories can reveal grand narratives, and grand narratives can inspire new ideas. Some prefer to start with the ideas. I think it's better to start with the stories.

NOTES

PROLOGUE: COMMUNISM 2.0?

1. Ironically, the streets were full of protesters during that summer as well. These were so-called middle-class protesters who were ostensibly opposed to the return of communism, even as communist and anarchist graffiti started to pop up around the capital. The snap elections held in May 2013 failed to produce a clear winner and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) returned to power with the assistance of the Movement for Rights and Freedom and Ataka. Since the BSP is widely seen as the successor party of the old Bulgarian Communist Party, a new group of protesters took to the streets to demand this new government's resignation after the BSP tried to appoint a well-known mafioso to a high government post. The BSP is a center-left party, and the anticommunist language of the protest was a rhetorical device to discredit the government. The BSP has very few left policies and is similar in character to all other existing political parties in Bulgaria—riddled with corruption and beholden to shady economic interests. Although there were important class differences between the Bulgarians protesting in the winter against the electricity distribution monopolies and the Bulgarians protesting in the summer and fall against the BSP, both groups are fundamentally opposed to the failure of Bulgarian democracy and the reality that all elected officials put the economic interests of business communities above the interests of the Bulgarian electorate. The key difference between political parties in Bulgaria is which business interests are given priority over the Bulgarian people. For center-right parties European business interests are favored and for center-left parties, Russian and domestic Bulgarian business interests are given priority. In both cases, it is the interests of citizens that are trampled. Some Bulgarians, like those scribbling graffiti on the walls in

Sofia, were beginning to realize that changing the government through elections would not improve the lot of ordinary people. There needs to be more systemic change. For further discussion of these 2013 protests, see Georgieff, “Kristen Ghodsee.”

2. Jana Micochovia and Robert Muller, “Czech Communists May Get Share of Power after Snap Elections,” Reuters, August 20, 2013, www.reuters.com.
3. Indeed, the KSČM was the only party of the already-existing parties in the lower house to increase its total number of votes in comparison with the election of 2010 (by 150,000 votes, or by 3.6 percent, respectively), gaining seven new seats. But the Social Democrats suffered a terrible electoral blow by the entrance of a new political party formed by agro-food billionaire Andrej Babiš. During the course of the election campaign this brand-new party went from nothing to become the second-largest party in the Czech Republic, winning 18.65 percent of the vote. See Seán Hanley, “How the Czech Social Democrats Were Derailed by a Billionaire Populist,” Policy Network, November 12, 2013, www.policy-network.net.
4. Czech News Agency, “Klaus: EU Leftist Radicals Want to Destroy Democracy,” *Prague Daily Monitor*, September 9, 2013, praguemonitor.com.
5. For instance, see the Platform for European Memory and Conscience (<http://www.memoryandconscience.eu>): “The project Platform of European Memory and Conscience brings together institutions and organisations from the V4 and other EU countries active in research, documentation, awareness raising and education about the totalitarian regimes which befell the Visegrad region in the 20th century.”
6. See the ISRP website at <http://www.minaloto.org/> and the IICCMRE website at http://www.iiccr.ro/index.html/about_iiccr/institute/?lang=en§ion=about_iiccr/institute.
7. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*.
8. Ronald Radosh, “Ronald Radosh: Seeger Was a Useful Idiot for Stalin,” *Providence Journal*, February 6, 2014; Mark Tooley, “Pete Seeger, Stalin and God,” *American Spectator*, January 31, 2014; Michael Moynihan, “The Death of ‘Stalin’s Songbird,’” *Daily Beast*, January 29, 2014, www.dailybeast.com; Will Rahn, “Obama Praises Stalinist and Folk Singer Pete Seeger,” *Daily Caller*, January 28, 2014, <http://dailycaller.com>; Ellis Washington, “Pete ‘Potemkin’ Seeger: Stalin’s Little Minstrel,” www.renewamerica.com, February 1, 2014; Moynihan, “The Death of ‘Stalin’s Songbird.’”
9. Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*.
10. Paul Krugman, “Crazy Climate Economics,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2014.
11. Indeed, the politics of remembering any history is contested, and I prefer not to digress into the many and extended debates about historiography that concern professional historians. On questions of social memory, see, for instance, the work of the French historian Pierre Nora: Nora, *Realms of Memory*, vols. 2

and 3. Another interesting provocation is about the nature of history as a category of nonfiction. Some scholars argue that everything is fiction. See, for instance, Ryan, “Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality.”

12. E. P. Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, 100.

CHAPTER 1: THE MYSTERIOUS MAJOR FRANK THOMPSON

1. Known affectionately to its fans as TNG. The episode in question was called “Relics.”
2. “The Dark Side of German Reunification,” Reuters, September 29, 2010.
3. See, for instance, the work of the German writer and journalist Daniela Dahn.

CHAPTER 2: A COMMUNIST BY ANY OTHER NAME . . .

1. Bergen, *War and Genocide*, 54–55.
2. Dyson, “Reflections: Disturbing the Universe—I,” 58.
3. Dyson, “Reflections,” 60.
4. Dyson, “Reflections,” 60.
5. Dyson, “Reflections,” 61.
6. Dyson, “Reflections,” 61.
7. Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, 40–41.
8. Thompson and Thompson, *There Is a Spirit in Europe*; Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*.
9. For biographical background on E. P. Thompson, see Palmer, *E.P. Thompson*.
10. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,” 105–143.
11. This quote is directly taken from the letters kept in Freeman Dyson’s personal files on Frank Thompson.
12. Neiman, *Moral Clarity*.

CHAPTER 3: “I SIMPLY WANT TO FIGHT”

1. Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, 50.
2. Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, 50.
3. Frank Thompson’s interest in Georgi Dimitrov is based on the writing of Simon Kusseff, which I found in the private papers of Freeman Dyson. Kusseff’s source for this information was interviews that he conducted with “Frank’s friends.” “Revised Transcript of a Tribute to Frank Thompson,” and “In Memoriam.”
4. Dimitrov, *And Yet It Moves!*, 15.
5. Dimitrov, *And Yet It Moves!*, 16–17.
6. Bell, *Bulgarian Communist Party from Blagoev to Zhivkov*, 47.
7. Two excellent studies on the Spanish Civil War are Beever, *Battle for Spain*; and Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*.
8. Thompson and Thompson, *There Is a Spirit in Europe*, 12.
9. Kusseff, “Revised Transcript of a Tribute to Frank Thompson”; and “In Memoriam.”