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Bulgarian Stalinism Revisited

Any attempt to set the chronological boundaries of Bulgarian Stalinism puts us in the middle of two continuing debates. The first one is the great controversy about who unraveled the wartime alliance and when, subsequently starting the Cold War and provoking the division of Europe. An implicit subplot to this story is whether Stalin had a master plan to Bolshevize Eastern Europe and if so what place Bulgaria held in it.¹ The second one is the domestic Bulgarian debate about the nature of the autochthonous developments in 1944–47 and their correlation to endogenous and exogenous factors driving these developments.

The pre-1989 Bulgarian historiography tended to present the period as a struggle between the progressive forces and the reactionary counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie. A voluminous literature studied meticulously “the historical prerequisites for the socialist revolution” and the “correlation between the external and the internal factor,” stressing the importance of the latter. The role of the communist party (then called Bulgarian Workers’ Party) and the scope of the communist-led anti-fascist resistance were grossly exaggerated. The role of the Soviet Union was acknowledged with gratitude, but it was gradually reduced to that of “an active support.”² The period was characterized as the defeat of the bourgeois opposition, the establishment and consolidation of

¹ For an analysis of recent scholarship, see Melvyn P. Leffler, “The Cold War: What ‘Do We Now Know?’” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (April 1999); Eduard Mark, *Revolution by Degrees: Stalin’s National-Front Strategy for Europe, 1941–1947*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project, Working Paper No. 31, Washington, D.C., February 2001.

² *Kratka istoriia na Bulgaria*, “Nauka i izkustvo,” Sofia, 1983, p. 416.

the peoples' democracy and the defense of national sovereignty.³ The period was treated rather parenthetically in official Bulgarian historiography as an unpleasant and embarrassing incident. In general, it was believed that the communist takeover in Bulgaria was accomplished without significant resistance and that Bulgarian Stalinism was milder than elsewhere in the region. Explanations were sought and found in the traditional leftism of one of Europe's most egalitarian countries, in the relative strength of the Bulgarian communist party, but first and foremost, in the historical friendship with Russia—"Grand Father Ivan" who fought the Russian-Turkish war in 1877-78 and liberated Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire.

Like elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the term "Stalinism" is new for Bulgarian scholarship. In Bulgaria, too, Stalin's name inspired such awe and reverence that long after his death it was avoided. Besides, being directly associated with crimes, camps, brutality, and paranoia was ideologically dangerous. In 1967 philosopher Assen Ignatov was castigated for using the anti-Marxist notion "Stalinism" in an article published in an Austrian journal on the intellectuals' role in socialism.

If "Stalinism" is used to characterize the period instead of the habitual euphemisms, then its lower chronological boundary should be moved to include the years 1944-47. As it will be argued further, Stalinism in the Bulgarian case started from day one. If "high/pure" Stalinism has been usually dated from 1947-48 to 1953, the upper boundary is also rather debatable. De-Stalinization was slow and hesitant in 1953-56. In April 1956 the Bulgarian Communist Party held a special plenum—the legendary April Plenum, a landmark event in the Party's history which exposed the "deformities and deviations" of the "cult of personality" of Bulgaria's "little Stalin" Vulko Chervenkov. A special commission investigated the most notorious cases of abuse of power, of which the most prominent was the spectacular legal murder of Traicho Kostov, the third man in the Party's *nomenklatura*. A number of detainees were liberated from camps and prisons, the important party functionaries among them were rehabilitated, and the party solemnly took a new line, which for the next thirty-three years was called "the April Line." Todor Zhivkov—a rather grey, second echelon figure,

³ Voin Bozhinov, *Zashtitata na natsionalnata nezavisimost na Bulgaria, 1944-1947* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bulgarskata akademiia na naukite, 1962).

who had been by no means an innocent bystander in the event—was chosen personally by Khrushchev to be the main figure of the Plenum. By distancing himself decisively from his predecessor, Zhivkov became the uncontested leader of the Party for the next three decades. According to the official line Stalinism was rejected in 1956 and replaced by *Zhivkovism*, which lasted until November 1989.

Whatever young Zhivkov's intentions might have been, he could not go very far. The Hungarian Revolution put an end to the Bulgarian timid thaw. Discussions and criticism in the party and society were abruptly interrupted, camps were re-opened for the "usual suspects" (being closed as late as 1962), and thousands of students were preemptively expelled from the universities. The Party restored its iron grip on Bulgarian society.

In the late 1970s several carefully selected historians were given the opportunity to work in the Party Archives on carefully selected topics from this period. Accordingly, they were able to shed light on the period and its basic personalities, remaining however strictly within the official doctrine. The work of the renowned historian Mito Issusov should be mentioned first and foremost. His two seminal books on Traicho Kostov and Stalin's role in Bulgaria were published immediately after the fall of the communist regime, but they were well researched in Bulgarian and Soviet archives and had been partly known much earlier.⁴ Much to the horror of the ideological Cerberuses, Professor Issusov liked to present his iconoclastic findings on Bulgarian Stalinism at the annual conferences of the young historians.

Revisiting Stalinism in the true sense of the word could happen only after 1989. In the early 1990s Bulgarian archives—the Central State Archive, the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Party—were declassified and restructured. Despite severe resistance and with a considerable delay, the Archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, including those of the State Security (DS), were made accessible too. In general, Bulgarian society has been slow to assess, critically, its recent past. The main reason is the unwillingness of the Socialist Party, which, under the conditions of the negotiated, peaceful,

⁴ Mito Issusov, *Poslednata Godina na Traicho Kostov* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo Hristo Botev, 1990); and *Stalin I Bulgaria* (Sofia: University Publ. St Kliment Ohridski, 1991).

Bulgarian transition, has preserved strong positions and powerful levers to influence the issue. Currently, two opposing processes can be observed: the growing public and academic interest in the secrets of communist regime clashes with the tacit rehabilitation of events, people, or cultural traits of the communist regime. Amidst the fatigue and the apathy of the prolonged transition, condemnation of the communist regime is often stigmatized as “obsolete and primitive anti-Communism” and in “bad taste.”⁵

Bulgarian scholars of the period have also been able to take advantage of the “archival revolution” in Russia of the early 1990s and their good working relations with their Soviet/Russian colleagues. A long-term scholarly project, “Russia and Bulgaria in the 20th Century—New Documents, New Ideas,” materialized in several symposia and two excellent books covering the period’s most dramatic issues.⁶ Access to important Russian collections allows researchers to lift the curtain on the Soviet side of the story; archival material from the now accessible archives of important Soviet institutions like the Party, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, etc. is added to materials and documents from the conferences of the Comintern and Cominform⁷ and the fundamental editions of the *Nauchnii Centr po istorii stalinizma v Vostochnoi Evrope* at the Russian Academy of Sciences.⁸

In the last decade we have seen a true avalanche of important new books, memoirs of people from both sides of the barricades (the

⁵ There are several new institutions working to set up a comprehensive database on Bulgarian communism collecting memoirs, interviews, archival material, and books: New Bulgarian University, <http://www.nbu.bg/historyproject/index.htm>; The Institute for Studies of the Recent Past, <http://minaloto.org/>; Center for Advanced Studies, Bulgarian Communism, Critical Studies, Bibliography, Sofia, <http://www.red.cas.bg/id-36/home.html>.

⁶ *Bulgaria v sferata na suvetskite interesi (Bulgaro-ruski nauchni diskusii)*, Academicno Izdatelstvo “Prof. Marin Drinov,” Sofia, 1998; *Bulgaria I Rusia prez XX vek. Bulgaro-ruski nauchni diskusii* (Sofia: Gutemberg, 2000).

⁷ An Italian edition translated into English was published in Milan, 1994; the Russian one in Moscow, 1998.

⁸ *Vostochnaya Evropa v dokumentah rossiiskih arhivov; Tome 1: 1944–1953*. (Moscow-Novosibirsk, 1997); *Tome 2: 1949–1953* (Moscow-Novosibirsk: ROSSPEN, 1998); *Sovetskii faktor v Vostochnoi Evrope; Tome 1: 1944–1953*, (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999); *Tome 2: 1949–1953* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2002).

political figures and the victims, sometimes they exchanged places), diaries (including those of Georgi Dimitrov), biographies, etc. Local district archives, where work has only started, are promising to be real golden mines. Not all the secrets of the period have been revealed, but we can say that the period of Bulgarian Stalinism is now pretty well illuminated.

New findings on Bulgarian Stalinism could put the period in its proper context—the Sovietization of Eastern Europe. Recent scholarship is trying to call things by their proper names and find the true measure of the various events and phenomena. Research is being done in several concentric circles. The first circle is that of the great powers' politics—the geopolitical and balance of power considerations of each of the Big Three of the Grand Alliance. Then comes the circle of research focused on the Soviet/Stalinist policy *vis-à-vis* Bulgaria that has to answer whether the Kremlin was promoting its legitimate security interests beyond the Soviet Union's territory or promoting a world proletariat revolution, or the two things at the same time. Closely connected is the circle of questions regarding the relations between the Bulgarian communists and Moscow, and the degree of Soviet involvement and responsibility for what was happening inside the country. At the very center of this scheme is the study of the internal political struggles—a study going beyond the visibility of the inter-party struggles and searching for what had really happened on the ground, in the country's towns and villages. At the time, just like in a Greek tragedy, many of the actors on the Bulgarian and East European political scene played their roles without knowing the script that the "Gods" had written. So far, for the short two decades of active research on Bulgarian Stalinism, despite serious achievements, scholarship has not been able yet to properly conceptualize the multi-facet processes and to incorporate the different narratives into a single, overarching one.

Like elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the opening of the archives and the freedom of expression was a huge chance for Bulgarian historians. New evidence led to the re-assessment of the old questions, but it also suggested new ones. It has certainly not freed us from the inherited highly stereotypical, "black and white" thinking of the Cold War era.

As to Bulgarian Stalinism, we are very far from claiming that "we now know." It can be assumed, most neutrally, that as early as the autumn of 1941 the Soviet leadership was preparing plans for post-

war Europe and that Bulgaria had a place in them. Slavic, Orthodox, Russophile, the country which the tsars liked to see as a *zadunaiskaya guberniya* and which lay on the road to Russia's historical expansion to the Straits, was to be included in the USSR's sphere of interests. The messianism of pan-Slavism was blended with that of the international communist movement just like the world revolution turned into a *realpolitik* instrument for the achievement of a stronger and more secure Soviet Union.⁹ Furthermore Bulgaria's strong communist party was one of the most loyal and active sections of the Comintern, led by the influential figure of Georgi Dimitrov, the organization's Secretary General and author of the tactic of the popular fronts. In Bulgaria, an ally of Nazi Germany, Moscow organized and tightly controlled a small but noteworthy resistance movement from 1942 on—a Fatherland Front uniting four anti-fascist parties. Rather unexpectedly, on 5 September, the Soviet government declared war on Bulgaria. Three hundred thousand Ukrainians from the Third Front occupied the country. According to the terms of the armistice agreement the United States and the United Kingdom gave full authority to its Soviet commander, Marshal F.I. Tolbukhin and the "general supervision" to the Soviet representative on the Allied Control Commission General S.S. Biryuzov.¹⁰

Within this broad framework however important questions remain unanswered. Did Stalin have consistent far-reaching plans to Sovietize Bulgaria? Was the people's democracy a stillborn child, a tactical and propaganda tool for Soviet domination or an alternative new road to democracy?¹¹ If Soviet instructions and instructors had been instrumental in the establishing the new regime, wasn't there any feedback, any role for the so-called domestic factor of the revolution. In

⁹ For an extended analysis, see John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ See Cyril E. Black, "The Start of the Cold War in Bulgaria: A Personal View," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 2. (April 1979).

¹¹ Regretfully, we could not read Vesselin Dimitrov's *Stalin's Cold War: Soviet Foreign Policy, Democracy and Communism in Bulgaria, 1941–1948*, due from Palgrave Macmillan in 2008. Judging from its bibliographical description, the book promises to clarify these important linkages.

connection with this point, G. Nikova speaks of a slight tension between the Russian and the Bulgarian historians working on this problem. According to the Bulgarians, the Russian authors and collections of documents tend to emphasize the role of the domestic factor, omitting at the same time crucial actions and documents of the Soviet side.¹²

The new reading of the Stalinist period has brought to light a surprising amount of forgotten persons, events, jargon, newspapers, even jokes and nicknames—a whole layer of historical memory which was still alive under the ashes of prohibition and oppression. If there was one particular surprise for the Bulgarian society in confronting the new facts of the Stalinist period, it was the scale of the repressions and murders committed in 1944–53. One small episode illustrates this. In the spring of 1990 the newly born anti-communist opposition (UDF), advised by a well-meaning famous French advertising guru, used in its otherwise cheerful and colorful electoral campaign a map of Bulgaria, dotted with the communist labor camps, marked by skulls. The Bulgarians, however, were not ready for this truth; the shock and the disbelief caused by this map were so great, that as later analyses showed, the map cost the UDF at least 10 percent of the votes and the victory in the final run. In the next years the full extent of the communist terror was made clear—whether through tragic personal accounts or the dry language of the militia reports. The historical memory of the ruthlessness of the regime was easily re-activated. A decade later it is difficult to imagine how Bulgarian society was made to believe that the communist takeover was met with mass enthusiasm and only negligible resistance.

Numbers are notoriously unreliable, yet the picture of these years is horrifying. The waves of terror came one after the other, as if following the well-known Hannah Arendt's scheme of the Great Terror during the Bolshevik revolution. In early September, during the first ten days of the communist takeover 25,000–30,000 people were killed or disappeared. Some of them were police and army officers, mayors and clerks responsible for the persecution of the anti-fascist resistance; but the majority were mayors, lawyers, journalists, teachers,

¹² See Gospodinka Nikova, "Nai-novata bulgarska istoria v ogledaloto na ruskata istoriografija," *Istoricheski Pregled*, Vols. 1–2 (2005).

clergymen, or just well off, outstanding figures in their own town or village. There were spontaneous acts of revenge and class hatred, yet the scale cannot be ascribed only to a “revolutionary fury.” Punishment of fascists and collaborators occurred all over occupied Europe. During these “extra-judicial” score-settlings some 10,000 people were killed in France and another 15,000 were killed in Italy.¹³ The number of the victims in Bulgaria was approximately equal to the total number of the French and Italian victims. But France and Italy are not only much bigger countries, they also had experienced real occupation with real collaborators, fascists and traitors. In Bulgaria these first purges (the Russian word *chistka* was quickly adopted) had a different meaning: under the slogan of punishing the fascist elements, the mass murders were aimed mostly at the annihilation of all eventual potential class enemies. This was a well-guided “spontaneity.” A telegram signed “Central Committee” and dated 13 September 1944, informs Dimitrov (in Russian!): “In the first days of the Revolution we squared accounts with the most malicious enemies, fallen into our hands... The fight is not over. Armed members of the Party and the Comsomol will form striking commands for particularly important assignments.” Two weeks later, on October 1 the Central Committee reported: “Despite the discontent of our feeble allies at our revolutionary liquidation of the fascist *agentura*, we decided that the purge will go on for one more week. After that the purge will continue by lawful means.”¹⁴ Eyewitnesses testified that direct instruction came directly from Moscow from Dimitrov and Kolarov and that the special services of the Red Army came with ready lists of names.¹⁵

By October it was time to put an end to the “unauthorized” killings and to start the legal ones. Under pressure from General Biryuzov, a Decree was passed which established the People’s Court for the trial of all those accused of “monarcho-fascism,” war crimes, and collaboration. The People’s Court was set up under the Statutory Ordinance on the Trial of the Culprits for the Involvement of Bulgaria in the War against the Allied Powers and for the Related Crimes; it operated

¹³ Tony Judt, *Postwar* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 42.

¹⁴ <http://www.geocities.com/decommunization/Documents/T1.htm>.

¹⁵ Georgi Gunev, *Kum brega na svobodata ili za Nikola Petkov i negovoto vreme* (Sofia: Informatzionno obsluzhivane AD, 1992), p. 24.

between November 1944 and April 1945.¹⁶ The defendants were the Regents and the Tsar's advisors, cabinet ministers of all governments and all members of the parliament from the years 1941–44, senior state and military officials. The People's Court tried 135 cases against 11,122 defendants, of whom 2,730 were sentenced to death, 1,516 were pronounced not guilty, and the rest were given different prison terms.¹⁷ Here again, proportionally to the population these numbers were unprecedented in European practice.¹⁸ Moreover, this happened in a country where there had been no fascist movement, which never sent troops to the Eastern front, and saved its 50,000 Jewish population. Very few of the defendants had really committed war crimes; most of them were just political opponents. The Court and the "spontaneous" purges managed to decapitate the pre-war political, economic, and cultural elites and virtually destroyed the old center and right of Bulgarian politics.¹⁹

Then came the turn of the opposition within the Fatherland Front; by March, Stalin was losing patience: a second Fatherland Front cabinet was formed without the representatives of the opposition. "The elections are over and your opposition can go to hell"—he told Dimitrov. In June 1946 the first of the many trials began against the social democrat Pastuhov and the Agrarian leader G.M. Dimitrov (*in*

¹⁶ Dinyu Sharlanov and Polya Meshkova, *Bulgarskata gilotina: Taimite mehanizmi na Narodnia sud* (Sofia: Agentzia Demokratzia, 1994); Peter Semerdjiev, *Narodniat sud v Bulgaria, 1944–1945* (Sophia: Makedonia Press, 1997); Dinyu Sharlanov, Lyubomir Ognyanov, and Plamen Tzvetkov, "Bulgaria pod komunisticheskoto robstvo: Prestuplenia, suprotiva i represii," in *Cherna kniga na komunizma, 2. chast. Istoria i pamet za komunizma v Evrope*, Po idea i pod redaktziata na Stéphane Courtois, (Sofia: Prozoretz, 2004).

¹⁷ By sheer chance Dimitar Peshev, the MP who initiated the campaign in defense of the Bulgarian Jews was sentenced to "just" 15 years of forced labor. With an exceptional professional mastery his Jewish attorney Yossif Yasharov saved his life. The other MPs were less lucky: 20 out of the 43 of them who had signed the letter of protest against the plan of genocide were sentenced to death, six to life imprisonment, eight received prison sentences of 15 years, four were sentenced to a term of 5 years imprisonment, and one to a year in prison. See M. Bar-Zohar, *Beyond Hitler's Grasp: The Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews* (Holbrook: Adams Media Corporation, 1998).

¹⁸ See Tony Judt, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–62.

¹⁹ R.J. Crampton, *The Balkans Since the Second World War* (London: Pearson Education, 2002), p. 57.

absentia). The army was spared until 1946; later mass purges among the officers were carried out under fabricated accusations of military conspiracies (*Neutral Officer* and *Military Union*). Thousands of the victims' family members were expelled from their city homes and interned to distant villages, many sent to camps.²⁰

Bulgaria was one of the first East European countries to organize labor camps (Work Education Centers—TVO) for “the politically dangerous people”: as early as 20 December 1944 a special ordinance-law was adopted signed by ministers of all parties and the regents (many of them unsuspecting of their future fate). In violation of the 1879 Turnovo Constitution it gave exclusive rights to the Interior Ministry to incarcerate people without charge or trial. The exact numbers of people passed in 1944–62 through the camp system of 88 camps and labor “boarding houses” is still difficult to pinpoint; it varies from 25,000 to 184,000.²¹ The “democratization” of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church then followed. In 1948, after years of severe persecutions of clergymen, the government curtailed religious freedoms by forcing Orthodox clergy into a Union of Bulgarian Priests, taking control of Muslim religious institutions, and in 1949 dissolving Bulgarian branches of Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) presented the most serious challenge to the Bulgarian Stalinists' hegemony. Solidly entrenched in an egalitarian peasant society, the great Agrarian party with its long history, ideology, and leaders was by far the country's most numerous and organized political force and a formidable opponent.²² In this respect, the political situation of Bulgaria stood out.

²⁰ Penka Stoyanova and Emil Iliev, *Politicheski opasni litza: Vudvoriavania, trudova mobilizatzia, izselvania v Bulgaria sled 1944* (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo Sv. Kliment Ohridski, 1991); Hristo Hristov, *Sekretnoto delo za lagerite* (Sofia: ‘Ivan Vazov’, 2000); Hristo Devedjiev, *Stalinization of Bulgarian Society 1949–1953* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Co, 1975).

²¹ Dinyu Sharlanov, Lyubomir Ognyanov, and Plamen Tzvetkov, *op.cit.*, pp. 307–8.

²² On BANU, see Nissan Oren, *Revolution Administered: Agrarianism and Communism in Bulgaria* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); John D. Bell, *Peasants in Power: Alexander Stamboliski and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, 1899–1923* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1974).

After Bulgaria's defeat in WWI, the Agrarians managed to contain the rising revolutionary tide; in the early twenties they had ruled the country for three years; and in the late thirties after severe blows they were able to re-gain their important role in Bulgarian politics. After WWII, with the restoration of the party system, they were the party that grew most rapidly; by the end of 1944 their membership amounted to 750 thousand, plus another 230 thousand members of the Youth Organization. In the meantime, the Bulgarian communists (13,000 on the eve of the takeover) reached 250 thousand. N. Oren noticed another anomaly: unlike the other East European communist parties, which had reached their maximum strength during and after the war, the Bulgarian communists with their wartime record incomparable to the Yugoslav, Greek, or Albanian record, were weaker in 1944 than in the twenties.²³ In opposition since the summer of 1945, and led by a man with enormous personal courage, Nikola Petkov, BANU fought bravely against the spreading lawlessness, for democracy, freedom of speech, and for its own autonomy. There is no doubt that, had the terms of the game been equal, the Agrarians would have prevailed.²⁴ During the Union's short life (from 7 September 1945 to 26 August 1947), the Communist Party in Bulgaria faced an audacious and vocal opposition. Its press—the newspaper *Narodno Zemedelsko Zname* together with the Social Democrats' *Svoboden Narod*—spoke with a clear and loud voice.

In the 1946 elections for the Grand National Assembly, despite mass terror, murder of activists, and falsifications, the opposition won 1.2 million votes, 28 percent of the overall MP seats. Political opposition against the communists crystallized around two mass left wing parties, which in itself is a singular development in postwar Eastern Europe. This opposition kept on fighting against all odds hoping that with the Peace Treaty and the withdrawal of the Red Army, their chances would grow. What actually happened was exactly the opposite—the day the U.S. Congress ratified the treaty, Nikola Petkov was arrested in the National Assembly, accused of planning an anti-government coup and a military conspiracy, tortured and sentenced to death.²⁵ The rank and

²³ Nissan Oren, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Georgi Gunev, *op. cit.*, 105–47.

file of the two Fatherland Front parties joined the “bourgeois opposition” in the Bulgarian Gulag.

The crushing of the BANU “Nikola Petkov” marked the beginning of Bulgaria’s “high” Stalinism. The peculiarity of the Bulgarian case was that the bulk of the repressions had already taken place. The small political, cultural and economic elite that this peasant nation had been growing for the sixty-six years of its independent existence was practically wiped out: physically annihilated or intimidated into oblivion. The whole thin layer of urban culture disappeared, stamped as “rotten bourgeois.” Even more important was the breaking of the backbone of the peasantry comprising 80 percent of the population. The *tabula rasa* for the total Sovietization of the country was prepared in 1944–47.

There was only one obstacle left to the final atomization of Bulgarian society and it was the Party itself. Terror turned to the enemy within, the “enemy with the Party card.” The trial of Traicho Kostov—the deputy prime-minister and the most prominent “domestic” communist—was a chapter of Stalin’s show trials (Koči Dzodze, Rudolf Slansky, László Rajk) all aimed at crushing any intra-party opposition to the new line. Kostov was charged with ideological deviations, treason, anti-Sovietism, and collaboration with Tito against Stalin.²⁶ His execution in December 1949 was followed by the trials of hundreds of high placed and highly educated communist specialists in the economy, banking, military, the State Security, including the arrest and torture of the legendary partisan heroes, now generals in the People’s Army.²⁷

Like elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Stalin, who personally disliked Kostov, taught a final lesson of obedience—if somebody with the position and reputation of Kostov could be proven guilty overnight, nobody was immune. The purges in the Communist party registered another sad Bulgarian record: by June 1950 every fifth member of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP)—nearly 100 thousand people—had been expelled, accused of various deviations like nationalism, a bourgeois past, Titoism, Kostovism, or Trotskyism (presumably they knew

²⁶ Mito Issusov, *Poslednata godina na Traicho Kostov*.

²⁷ Their late memoirs produced a shock among the Party believers. Slavcho Trunski, *Nevuzmozhnata istina* (Sofia: Slavika RM, 1994); Dencho Znepolski, *Posmurnata izpoved* (Sofia: “Hristo Botev,” 1997).

who Trotsky was).²⁸ Curiously, in the camps and the other places of detention many high ranking communists shared suffering and humiliation with their “class enemies,” victims of earlier purges. Typically for the BCP, it was not divided so much between Moscovites and domestic communists—since the 1920s a great number of them had passed through emigration and the Comintern schools. The tensions in the party were rather generational and career-based. The Bulgarian communists saw how in the course of six months the three most prominent figures of the Bulgarian Communist Party had died (under suspicious circumstances?)—Georgi Dimitrov in June 1949, Traicho Kostov in December 1949, and Vassil Kolarov in January 1950. The purges delivered a heavy blow to the Party. They produced an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, they shook its entire hierarchy, and the Party lost its revolutionary spirit and turned into an obedient and faithful bureaucratic structure. It had been purged of all potential subversive or simply disloyal elements and sank into a mediocrity that would characterize it for the next 20 years until it grew its own intelligentsia. A new set of cadres was promoted—young, ignorant, inexperienced, insecure, easily manipulative, and loyal to the USSR and the party line, which in this case was one and the same.

Revisiting the Bulgarian case of Stalinism puts the whole argument about the people’s democracies in a new light.²⁹ In the well-recorded Stalin–Dimitrov communication we see a fatherly Stalin who is warmly advising the Bulgarian comrades: “The Soviet form is not the only one leading to socialism; there can be other alternatives like a democratic republic even under certain circumstances—a constitutional monarchy.” Further on:

...the tasks ahead are so immense, so much beyond the powers of one single party, that you need not a Soviet regime, but a democracy with freely elected parliament... Preserve the coalition of four parties... do

²⁸ L. Ognyanov ed., *Borbi I chistki v BKP 1948–1953*, in *Arhivite govoriat*, Tome 17, Sofia, 2001. This a collection of 270 documents from the former Central Party Archive.

²⁹ People’s democracy—a myth or reality? See T.V. Volokitinia, G.P. Murashko, and A.F. Noskova, *Narodnaya Demokratiya: Mif ili Real’noct’: Obshchestvenno-politicheskiye Protzessi v Voctochnoi Evrope, 1944–1948* (Moscow: Nauka, 1993).

not create problems [...] you need an opposition—you are not a classless society like ours ...legalize it so that you can keep an eye on it, the parliamentary track might be slower but surer.

Your constitution—he preached—should be more right-wing than the Yugoslav one [...] you need a Labor party in order to unite your party with the other parties of the working people's like the Agrarians... A People's Party or the workers and peasants—that will be much more acceptable and appropriate for your case ...you'll get a broader base and a convenient disguise for the today's period...³⁰

If in 1945 Stalin criticized the Bulgarians for political maximalism, sectarianism, and dogmatism, by the summer of 1946 he changed the tone—they were reproached for political passivity, lack of principles, and delaying the revolutionary transformations.³¹

Theorizing, in fact, mattered much less than practice. At the time of this friendly correspondence the Bulgarian communists were continuing a deliberate policy of mass terror and brutal elimination of all adversaries of the regime. Like elsewhere in Eastern Europe from day one, they insisted on controlling the ministries of justice and interior. At a very early stage the two most important centers of power became the People's Militia and the Party's Central Committee.³² An editorial of the oppositional *Narodno zemedelsko zname* called this a double bookkeeping: on the one hand solemn declarations of the desire to establish peace and order, on the other—a *carte blanche* for continuing the terror and the murders.³³

The literature on the period is divided. There are a great number of personal stories and scholarly research on the victims, stressing their tragedy. There is also a growing literature on the political struggles of the period. The problem is that these two bodies of literature rarely refer to each other. Even in well-researched work the repressions are mentioned only hastily and parenthetically. Thus Mito Issusov flatly states that Stalin had nothing to do with the purges, that their motives

³⁰ Georgi Dimitrov, *Dnevnik: March 1933–February 1949* (Sofia: Ik Iztok Zapad, 1998), various entries.

³¹ Mito Issusov, *Stalin i Bulgaria*, p. 46.

³² Roumen Daskalov, quoted in *Kultura*, 13 December 2007.

³³ *Narodno zemedelsko zname*, 3 January 1947, as quoted in *Narodna demokratia ili diktatura. Hristomatia po istoria na Bulgaria 1944–1948* (Sofia: Literaturno forum, 1992), p. 98.

were domestic and followed the line of constant tensions, feuds, and a civil war from 1918 on.³⁴

Now that we know the scope and the inhumanity of the violence, it is difficult to accept the period of 1944–47 as a “democratic intermezzo.” Terror was not a collateral phenomenon; it represented the very essence of what was happening. The Bulgarian case shows that Stalin never lost his long-term perspective; if Stalinism meant a full monopoly of power, then this had been the aim of the Soviets and their Bulgarian comrades from the very first day of the communist takeover. The question is why or whether Bulgaria needed a terror of such proportions. The answer is not easy. It had occurred after all in a country which had managed to stay away from the great cataclysms of the war, especially if compared to its devastated Balkan neighbors. According to the Soviet writer, then wartime correspondent, Konstantin Paustovskii, when the Red Army stepped on Bulgarian territory, the soldiers experienced a cultural shock; they saw a prosperous and quiet agricultural country, crowds of friendly people offering them bread and grapes. This country had a lawful government, not compromised in collaboration with the Nazi and well disposed towards the Allied Forces. Its institutions, army, administration, elites, and intelligentsia were intact. This was a nation which had collectively wept and mourned its Tsar Boris who died unexpectedly in August 1943.³⁵ Even the much-appraised Ninth of September coup happened without a single bullet being shot and without a single drop of blood.

Bulgaria was not an idyll. Its parliamentary democracy was easily nullified; its political class was often corrupt, authoritarian, and venal. The resistance movement, which according to newly revised data consisted of 8,000 partisans and 20,000 supporters, was severely persecuted. According to the official Museum of the Revolutionary Movement all the victims of repressions in the period 1923–44 amounted to 5,639 people; almost half of them perished in the wars against fascism including in the Spanish Civil war and WWII. The wartime marshal

³⁴ Mito Issusov, *Stalin i Bulgaria*, p. 171.

³⁵ On the day of the Tsar’s funeral, Adolf Beckerle, the German minister to Sofia, wrote in his diary about the mass and sincere mourning and his amazement of the coherence of a nation in the middle of a war.

courts of Tsarstvo Bulgaria passed 1,590 death sentences, 199 of them were executed.³⁶

These numbers refute the thesis of the overzealous party historians, who created, retrospectively, the myth of a persistent latent civil war. The orgy of violence which grasped the country in the immediate aftermath of the communist takeover and went later on in tidal waves was unmatched by anything else in the nation's history. Nor does this scope of violence fit in Jan Gross's social history approach—to see the war as a revolution.³⁷ When the horrified leader of the Agrarians, Nikola Petkov, ran to Traicho Kostov and asked him to stop the killings, Kostov shrugged his shoulders: "This is a revolutionary situation!" Petkov was sincerely surprised: "What revolution? I don't see any barricades!"³⁸

Here is one of the possible explanations for the unprecedented scope of violence in Bulgaria—a revolutionary situation *had* to be created. Very much in line with Hannah Arendt's distinction between the societal tasks of the Nazis and Stalin, in order to turn a revolutionary dictatorship into a totalitarian rule the Bulgarian Stalinists had to create artificially this same atomized society that the war had created or prepared in the rest of Eastern Europe. The French-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, who felt obliged after the success of his *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* to also publish *Voices from the GULAG: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria* pertinently remarked: "Once terror has been installed—that is, once the people know that the threat of death or repression is not mere verbiage—society changed dramatically."³⁹ The memory of the terror, that is *fear*, lived on until the very end of communism and paralyzed people's will and mind.

If Stalinism as a political practice was introduced in Bulgaria immediately after the communist takeover of 9 September 1944, it developed into a full-blown system after a conference of communist party leaders

³⁶ Dinyu Sharlanov, Lyubomir Ognyanov and Plamen Tzvetkov, *op.cit.*, p. 306.

³⁷ Jan Gross, "War as Revolution," in Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii eds., *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944–1949* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

³⁸ Georgi Gunev, *op.cit.*, p. 60.

³⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, *Voices from the GULAG: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria* (University Park, Pennsylvania The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 7.

in Szklarska Poremba in September 1947. The period of high Stalinism is connected with the name of Vulko Chervenkov. Stalin made the right choice—a trusted *protégé*, Dimitrov’s relative, trained at the KGB school, Chervenkov would complete the conversion of the BCP into a one-man dictatorship. A comic replica of his Soviet mentor, the “little Bulgarian Stalin,” as he was called, combined top government and party positions, the control over the State Security plus the monopoly of the information channels with Moscow.⁴⁰ In no other East European state had there been such a concentration of power in the hands of one person, or such an over-centralized and fully controlled state apparatus.⁴¹

After the Tito–Stalin break, the Bulgarian Workers Party (communist) congress of June 1948 expressed the party’s staunch loyalty, subservience, and total obedience to the USSR, the All-Union Communist Party (bolseviks), and personally, to comrade Stalin. There was also the obligatory element of self-persecution for not realizing quickly enough the inevitability of the intensification of class struggle, for the lack of revolutionary vigilance and a solemn vow to purge ranks from hostile enemy forces.⁴² Following the universal pattern, at its Fifth Congress (1948), the BCP adopted Stalin’s thesis that the people’s democracy was a variant of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the blueprint for the construction of the Socialist society through industrialization, reconstruction of the village and socialist cultural revolution.

Bulgaria strictly adhered to the Stalinist model of party and state structures, of virtually merging the judicial with the executive and the legislative branches under the absolute dominance of the Party, with its formal parliamentarism, formal rights and freedoms, cadres organization (*nomenklatura*), etc.⁴³ Naturally, elections in 1949 were won by 97.59 percent and those in 1953 by 99.8 percent.

⁴⁰ Iliana Marcheva, *Todor Zhivkov—putiat kum vlastta: Politika i ikonomika v Bulgaria 1953–1964* (Sofia: Institut po istoria, BAN, 2000).

⁴¹ Lyubomir Ognianov, *Durzhavno-politicheskata sistema na Bulgaria 1944–1948* (Sofia: Standart DD, 2006); Stalinizmut v politicheskiya zhivot na Bulgaria (1948–1956), unpublished manuscript, 2007.

⁴² See *BKP v rezoluzzii i reshenia na kongresite i plenumite na TzK*, Tome III, (Sofia: Partizdat, 1954).

⁴³ For more details, see Iliana Marcheva, *op. cit.*; Evgenia Kalinova and Iskra Baeva, *Bulgarskite prehodi* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2002).

Collectivization, which in Bulgaria started as early as 1945, was given a strong push. In spite of intense peasant resistance,⁴⁴ the collectivization drive continued intermittently until the process was virtually complete in 1958 and the Party Congress could proudly report that Bulgaria was the second country after the USSR, where socialism had triumphed in the village. Mass Sovietization started early and probably went further than anywhere else in the region. In Slavic and Russophile Bulgaria, Sovietization looked wholehearted and zealous. The genuine Russophilia of the Bulgarians was overblown to grotesque proportions and fortified by the myth of the “double liberation.” There were numerous delegations traveling to and from the Soviet Union to exchange their experience in the building of socialism, a dense network of Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship societies, huge circulation of Soviet books, films, and magazines. Monuments were raised to the Red Army; the country’s third city (Varna), the biggest dam, and highest mountain peak were named after Stalin, Stalinist baroque decorated the new center of Sofia.⁴⁵ Based upon the myth of the “double liberation,” the Soviet–Bulgarian friendship—“eternal and indestructible”—became the strongest mantra of the regime.

Soviet specialist/advisors came in large numbers and were assigned to every central Bulgarian level—the Council of ministers, ministries, the army, the judiciary, the economy, etc., where they started directly imposing the Soviet model.⁴⁶ The advisors represented a whole subsystem of governance, subordinated directly to Moscow. And if in the field of economy the Soviet specialists’ role was considered mostly ben-

⁴⁴ Most indicatively, the first comprehensive study of Bulgarian collectivization appeared as late as in 1995. Vladimir Migevev, *Kolektivizatsiata na bulgarskoto selo (1948–1958)* (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo “Stopanstvo,” 1995).

⁴⁵ Vladimir Migevev, “Suvetskiiat opit, suvetskiiat primer v Bulgaria,” in *Bulgaria i Rusia prez XX vek. Bulgaro-ruski nauchni diskusii*; in the same, Sashka Milanova, “Suvetskoto vliianie vurhu politicheskiia zhivot na Bulgaria”; and Roumiana Bogdanova, “Moskva i ‘nationalnite’ putista kum socialism.”

⁴⁶ Al’bina Noskova, “Vozniknovenie sistemii sovetskikh sovetnikov v stranax Vostochnoi Evropi: (1949–1953),” in *Bulgaria v sferata na suvetskite interesi*; in the same, Lubomir Ognyanov “Suvetskoto vliianie vurhu organizatsiata i deinostta na organite na sudebnata vlast v Bulgaria (1949–1956);” Tat’ana Volokitina, “Moskva i politicheskie repressii v Vostochnoi Evrope v kontze 40-h godov: (Po dokumentam rossiskih arhivov);” and Gospodinka Nikova, “Politicheskite protzesi v Bulgaria 1949–1953.”

eficial, especially after the destruction of the old regime's cadres, there was one sphere where the advisors left most sinister traces. Soviet advisors were instrumental in the political trials, staged in political circles of Moscow and Sofia and the organs of State security. They brought Vyshinski's experience from the purge trials in the USSR, including special interrogation techniques, and combined successfully, in the words of a colleague, *Yezhovstina* with *Zhdahovstina*. The institution of the Soviet advisors is a typical white spot in the studies of the period; most of the studies remain descriptive and will be detailed only after the opening of the respective Soviet archives.

De-Stalinization in Bulgaria demonstrated several peculiarities too. It was slow, reluctant and limited. In 1953–56 there was a certain relaxation of the terror, some 10,000 political detainees had been released, and several of the most notorious Soviet advisors were sent back to Moscow. There was also certain ease in the collectivization drive and a shift in the economic planning away from heavy industry toward consumer goods. Vulko Chervenkov's fate however was sealed when at the 20th Congress of the CPSU its new leader Nikita Khrushchev denounced Chervenkov's patron Stalin and Stalin's cult of personality. Not quite aware what was happening, Chervenkov himself wrote the Party report on the necessity of de-Stalinization and exposing mistakes and deformities. But the Soviet leader had already other plans; he already signaled out the new secretary—Todor Zhivkov. At the April 1956 Plenum of the BCP, he read the main report. We know now that every point of this report had been carefully coordinated with the Soviet leadership and that during the plenum itself Zhivkov phoned Moscow at least three times. Chervenkov was proclaimed to be the only bearer and the main culprit for the mistakes (not yet crimes!) of Bulgarian Stalinism. He was branded for his cult of personality and for almost all existing problems—from lawlessness to agriculture. But the measures and decisions of this so acclaimed plenum were modest. Chervenkov was reduced to the rank of deputy prime minister and remained member of the Politbüro. When the Plenum's protocols were finally made public in 2002, it became clear why they had been kept secret for such a long time.⁴⁷ The record was in sharp contradiction

⁴⁷ *Aprilski plenum na TzK na BKP. Pulen stenografski protocol. TzK na BKP, Sofia, 2002.*

to the official legend; there was nothing heroic, changes were dictated from Moscow, they began and ended from above. In his memoirs Zhivkov wrote: "The April Plenum was basically neo-Stalinist. There could be no question of a change under the circumstances in the socialist community and the world. I was young; I had no experience or authority. Most of the people in Politburo were connected with the previous policy and wanted it to go on."⁴⁸ The Bulgarian 1956—writes Iskra Baeva—demonstrated what was specific about the country: the changes started and finished from above, without any participation of society.⁴⁹

Revisiting Stalinism helps us to better understand Bulgarian communism and Bulgarian "real socialism." Most of their basic features can be traced back to the years 1944–56 and consequently explained. The ruthless "social cleansing" of that period had prepared the ground for the uncontested rule of the communist party and for the personal regime of its Secretary General Todor Zhivkov. By the standards of Eastern Europe his regime was considered moderate—more corrupt and manipulative than openly oppressive. By skillful maneuverings (his favorite word which he wrongly pronounced), Zhivkov managed to manipulate the party, the intelligentsia, and society and parry all potential threats. His secret trick was one of total subjection and unconditional loyalty to Moscow. A favorite of Khrushchev, he was quick to woo all his successors and fell from power only after he failed to woo Gorbachev. The Soviet connection was the basic source of the legitimacy and the stability of Zhivkov's thirty-five year long rule. In his own words: "Bulgaria and the Soviet Union will act as a single body, breathing with the same lungs and nourished by the same blood stream."⁵⁰ Soviet resources and markets were the main factors for Bulgaria's accelerated growth. Soviet support was indispensable for Bulgaria's position in the Balkans and in the world.

Domestically, Zhivkov's regime, as present scholarship has increasingly revealed, was highly voluntaristic, verging on adventurism. Bulgarian development was characterized by megalomaniac projects

⁴⁸ Todor Zhivkov, *Sreshthu niakoi luzhi*, (Bourgas: Delfin Press, 1993).

⁴⁹ Iskra Baeva, *Iztochna Evropa sled Stalin: 1953–1956* (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Ohridski," 1995), p. 294. On the Plenum, see pp. 250–94.

⁵⁰ *Rabotnichesko Delo*, 20 September 1973.

like the hyper industrialization or Europe's most concentrated agriculture and huge blunders like the renaming of the one million Bulgarian Muslims in 1984–89. Why was all this possible? A recent biographer of Zhivkov gives a simple answer: because he *could*.⁵¹ Zhivkov had been an active participant (in a different quality) in the events of the Stalinist period and had correctly read its lessons.

⁵¹ Iskra Baeva, *Todor Zhivkov: Biografia* (Sofia: IK Kama, 2006).

