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Bulgaria

Introduction

The debates about the nature of the socialist system in Bulgaria have been intense since the end of communist rule. Political liberalization allowed the public expression of viewpoints that for many years had been forbidden and persecuted in Bulgaria. The participants in this debate, many of whom have strong emotional involvement, expressed different, sometimes incompatible views based on their personal experiences and political orientations. These range from the demonization of state socialism as a criminal regime to openly apologetic views. As a result, there is still no consensus in Bulgaria about the communist period.¹

The memory of the socialist period is to a large extent determined by the post-socialist reality. Today, almost 30 years after its inception, the so-called transition in Bulgaria is marked by sentiments of betrayed hopes, which result in declining confidence in state institutions and pessimism about the future. In political debates, history – and in particular the recent past – is used for political purposes by political actors. The politicization of history contributes to the decline of differentiated/in-depth knowledge of the socialist period. In 2014, on the question of which event marked the end of Communism, “40 percent of the youngest generation (16–30 years old) could not say whether it was the collapse of the Berlin, Moscow, Sofia or Chinese Wall.”²

At the same time, the socialist past remains a contentious political subject. In 2000, parliament passed the “Law on Declaring the Criminal Nature of the Communist Regime in Bulgaria,” which was amended in 2016. The amendment called, among others, for the removal of symbols of communism from the public realm. Such attempts to establish certain “truths” by law indicate the importance of the preservation of divergent legacies of state socialism as a countermeasure: archives of experience highlight different realities of interaction between the state and society. They are a source of knowledge about human agency but also the constraints it faces from powerful state structures. The archives of the cultural opposition in particular tell a powerful story of

1 See e.g. Todorova, Dimou, and Troebst, *Remembering Communism*.

2 Alpha Research National Representative Survey in 2014. Accessed February 18, 2018. http://alpharesearch.bg/bg/socialni_izsledvania/socialni_publicacii/prehodat_-mitove-i-pamet-25-godini-po-kasno.831.html.

struggles of usually powerless individuals not only to gain control over their lives but also to change society. Whether one agrees with their agendas or not, they are testament to the force of ideas and hopes for a better future.

A brief sketch of political developments, 1944–1989

The specificities of cultural opposition in Bulgaria can be understood only against the backdrop of the main features of communist rule in the country. This story began on September 9, 1944, one day after the Red Army had crossed the Romanian-Bulgarian border. Under the watchful eyes of Soviet troops, the anti-fascist coalition of the Fatherland Front took power on September 9. Although Bulgaria subsequently joined the Allied Countries in their fight against Nazi Germany, it was considered a defeated country after the end of the war. Until the signing of a peace treaty, it was under allied control. This implied that the communists had to contain their urge to seize absolute power. A certain pluralism was maintained until 1947, with non-communists in the government and opposition parties present in parliament.³

At the same time, the government took harsh and swift measures against those who were considered supporters of the ancient regime. Under the slogan “Rooting out Fascism,” thousands of members of the former elite were brought before so-called People’s Courts between December 1944 and April 1945. An estimated number of 9,000 to 11,000 people were sentenced, and circa 2,700 of them were sentenced to death and executed. Among them were sixty-seven members of the previous national assembly, twenty-two former government ministers, forty-seven generals of the Bulgarian army, the three regents (who acted in lieu of the king, who was a minor), and three former prime ministers.⁴ This purge of the old elite left a lasting mark of terror, especially on the consciousness of “bourgeois” families.

After the signing of the peace treaty in February 1947, the Bulgarian communists quickly moved to obliterate the remaining vestiges of democracy. The remaining opposition parties were disbanded and their “progressive” factions merged with the communists. Opposition deputies in parliament lost immunity. The most influential opposition politician, peasant party leader Nikola Petkov, was arrested on trumped-up charges in August 1947 and sentenced to death; his execution in September marked the beginning of one-party rule in Bulgaria. Apart from oppositional parties, church leaders were persecuted as well. The small Catholic Church and various protestant denomina-

3 Baeva and Kalinova, *Bŭlgarskite prehodi*, 70. For a good overview of the political and social history of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, gathering leading Bulgarian historians, see Znepolski, *Istoriia na Narodna Republika Bŭlgariia*. A note on transliteration: we follow a simplified version of the Library of Congress’s standard.

4 Baeva and Kalinova, *Bŭlgarskite prehodi*, 60.

tions received particularly cruel treatment because of their transnational structure.

The communist regime was very repressive especially during the years of Stalinism. One reason for this was the Soviet-Yugoslav break in June 1948: after that, real or alleged supporters of Tito were purged in Bulgaria as well. More than 6,000 individuals were arrested, 3,700 of them were sent to labor camps, and 1,500 were executed.⁵ The most prominent victim was Traycho Kostov, one of the leaders of the Bulgarian Communist Party and former Deputy Prime Minister, who was executed after a show trial. More than 100,000 party members were expelled from the party, having been accused of sympathies with Tito or other ideological deviations, after party membership had grown at breakneck speed in the preceding years.

Bulgaria's location at the geo-political fault line between East and West was one of the reasons for the continuously high degree of political control. It was the only Warsaw Pact country bordering two NATO member states (Greece and Turkey), and Yugoslavia was for years considered a hostile country as well. Until 1953, more than 4,000 families—many belonging to Muslim minorities—were forcefully resettled from the border areas. Another wave of repression hit the country in 1956–57, in the wake of the aborted Hungarian revolution. Recent research concluded that between 1944 and 1962, more than 23,000 people were sent to labor camps, 15,000 for political reasons. COURAGE collections document the horrors of the most notorious camp on the Belene Island in the Danube.⁶

A lasting legacy of repression was the substantial extension of the size and scope of the State Security (*Dürzhavna signurnost*).⁷ It grew into a massive institution of surveillance and repression, comparable to those in other state socialist countries. Party chief Vŭlko Chervenkov called it the “eyes and ears of the party.” It belonged to the Ministry of Interior, but superior control lay with the General Secretary of the Communist Party. In 1962, the State Security disposed of 6,200 personnel, including 4,300 operative officers. By the late 1980s, the number of agents had grown to between 12,300 and 13,000, who were aided by 50,000 to 65,000 secret informants and contributors. The State Security especially surveyed intellectuals, minorities, religious communities, people travelling abroad, and members of the younger generations.

One important reason for the growth of the repressive authorities was the armed resistance that emerged immediately after the takeover by the Fatherland Front. Throughout the country, armed groups emerged that fought

5 Lilkov and Hristov, “*Bivshi hora*” po kvalifikatsiata.

6 COURAGE Registry, s.v. “Tower Museum of Petko Ogoyski”, by Anelia Kasabova, Dr., 2018. Accessed: September 25, 2018.

7 The Commission holding the archive of the former state security has launched a series of edited documents: “Iz arhivite na DS”; see: <https://www.comdos.bg/>. For recent research on the State Security see Metodiev, *Dürzhavna signurnost*; Metodiev and Dermendzhieva, *Dürzhavna signurnost—predimstvo na nasledstvo*.

against the new government. They were called *goriani* because many of them hid in forests and the mountains. Similar to the situation in Romania, though, these groups had no consistent ideology or any central coordination. While their resistance did not jeopardize communist rule, it strengthened anxiety among the regime and the government's willingness to use force to crush opposition. Information about armed resistance was suppressed during communist rule and came to be known only after 1989.⁸

While direct physical repression was greatly reduced after the mid-1950s, the party-state kept constant pressure on real or presumed opposition— not least in the arena of cultural opposition. All Bulgarian collections described by COURAGE are testimony to this. Large scale physical repression was reserved for the Muslim minorities who resisted forceful assimilation by the state beginning in the first half of the 1970s. The single most massive campaign was against the large Turkish minority in the 1980s, members of which were forced to take Bulgarian names. The regime called the assimilation campaign the “Rebirth Process” (*vŭzroditelen protses*).⁹

At the same time, the Bulgarian communists also attempted to build legitimacy, that is, to rule by consent. A rise in material standards of living, evident especially in the 1960s and 1970s, was an important element of this. The party-state also made full use of culture in order to generate support, which is why the “cultural front” was so important.¹⁰ Party leader Zhivkov portrayed himself as a patron of the arts, giving privileges to writers and artists who toed the party line. The emphasis of patriotic themes by party propaganda was also an attempt to win over non-communist, nationalistic intellectuals. Ludmila Zhivkova's reign at the helm of official culture was emblematic of these developments. The daughter of Todor Zhivkov was Head of the State Department of Culture from 1975 until her death at a relatively young age in 1981.¹¹ We can speak of a limited liberalization of cultural life in order to help the regime gain some legitimacy.

However, many individuals continued to challenge fundamental principles of communist rule (see below). In these cases, the state mobilized its full repressive potential. One of the best known Bulgarian dissidents, the writer and journalist Georgi Markov, was killed by a State Security agent while in exile in London in 1978.¹² Critically-minded intellectuals were often in an on-and-off relationship with the state, as shown by the COURAGE collections on the filmmaker Binka Zheliazkova. She was a principled communist but still had some of her works banned, while others were officially praised despite her continuous critique of the regime and her innovative artistic approach.

8 *Gorianite, Sbornik dokumenti*; Giaurski, Kasabov, “Vŭorŭzhena sŭprotiva.”

9 See for example the collection COURAGE Registry, s.v. “Resistance of Turkish Minority in Bulgaria”, by Anelia Kasabova, Dr., 2018. Accessed: September 25, 2018.

10 Elenkov, *Kulturniat front*; Brunnbauer, “Die sozialistische Lebensweise.”

11 Atanasova, “Lyudmila Zhivkova.”

12 Peleva, *Georgi Markov*; Hristov, *Ubiite “Skitnik.”*

The underlying problem was that the red line which defined what the regime would consider acceptable criticism and what it would not was deliberately kept unclear. This created constant insecurity among artists and intellectuals. There was a large and moving grey zone between the endorsement of official ideology and its rejection in the cultural sphere, as exemplified by research on the younger generations.¹³

Another reason for the ultimate instability of the communist regime in Bulgaria was the increasing openness of Bulgarian society to the West. This included a growing flow of information, thanks also to the 1975 Final Act of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Ultimately, Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* proved one challenge too many for a regime that stressed its proximity to the Soviets. Bulgarians who are traditionally sympathetic with Russian culture eagerly read books and journals coming from the rapidly opening-up Soviet Union. It is indicative that the first mass protests against the regime began in the 1980s in protest against the forced renaming campaign against the Bulgarian Turks.¹⁴ The opposition against this measure included not only Turks but also different Bulgarian intellectuals. It initiated the appearance of the first informal opposition organizations. A transnational issue triggered open mass protests: in November 1987, the citizens of the town of Ruse started to demonstrate against terrible air pollution. The polluter was a chemical factory located on the other side of the Danube in Romania. Yet the inhabitants of Ruse had grown angry at their government, which had done nothing to protect them and had withheld information. This local protest, described in a collection at the historical museum in Ruse, ultimately grew into a national cause.¹⁵

On November 10, 1989, the Politburo of the Communist Party forced Todor Zhivkov to resign. Very quickly, his successor Petar Mladenov initiated broad political liberalization. Free and fair multiparty parliamentary elections in June and the election of the former dissident Zheliu Zhelev as President of the Republic in August 1990 formally marked the successful transition to democracy.

History of Cultural Opposition in Communist Bulgaria

This role of Bulgarian intellectuals under communism, although often criticized as unsatisfactory by the intellectuals themselves and by contempo-

13 See e.g. Taylor, *Let's Twist Again*.

14 See Trifonov, "Miusulmanite v politikata"; Stoianov, *Turskoto naselenie*; Ialamov, *Istoriia na turskata obshtnost*; Ivanova, *Othvürulenite priobshteni*; Gruev and Kalionski, "Vüzroditelnia protses"; Levi, ed. *Istinata za vüzroditelniia protses*; Angelov, ed. *Strogo poveritelno!*; Angelov, *Borba bez orüzhie*.

15 A chronology of *Ekoglasnost* is provided in Aleksandrieva and Karakachanov, *Nezavisimo sdruzhenie Ekoglasnost*.

rary analysts, is, in fact, in full accordance with the concept of “dissent” during the Cold War.¹⁶ In the Bulgarian intellectual landscape, the conventional definition of “dissent” is accepted without much objection. The only people who strongly oppose the use of the label “dissident” to describe them are actually indisputably dissidents: they were or are the most popular and significant intellectuals, whose creative and moral presence had the strongest moral impact on different groups of Bulgarian society from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Yet what is contentious is the influence of “dissent” on political and public life: while during the time of socialism many analysts considered dissidents relatively insignificant, some post-socialist observers tend to exaggerate their importance. Adding to that confusion is the fact that multiple self-proclaimed dissidents came forward in the last three decades—people little known or completely unknown in the recent past. After 1989, a variety of previously unknown creative and civil actions in opposition to communist rule became known. Some of them were represented by a small number of long-term political prisoners, who had gained fame only in a very limited circle of people, i.e. without public impact. The problem of the lack of publicity makes the concept of “dissent” even more complex.

Preconditions

Bulgarian “dissidence” was distinctive, which does not mean that it was ineffective. Its specificity was largely determined by the legacies from the time before the establishment of communist rule. Ever since the establishment of the modern Bulgarian state in 1878, substantial violations of democracy were usually met only by individual but not organized opposition. Leading intellectuals repeatedly expressed their frustration that they had failed to organize massive civil protests for the protection of democracy in extreme moments, such as after the coups d'état of 1923 and 1934. This tradition continued after World War II.

During the first three decades of socialism, Bulgarian “dissent” was therefore expressed primarily through individual acts of opposition. This opposition aimed to capture the attention of the wider public, to fight fear, and to foster a critical consciousness among the people. Opposition meant not so much one-time events but rather the consistent defense of certain positions over the years. Bulgarian “dissent,” similar to that in other Eastern European countries, was mostly intellectual in its composition and nature. It did not perceive itself as dissident, neither did it accept heroic poses or expect rewards. It was a personal choice, but also a mission that imposed a high price and real consequences on its activists.

¹⁶ Popov, *Cheshkiat intelektualets*, 15.

One of the main issues related to “dissent” in Bulgaria is the question of its origins. A useful approach to this question is to frame “dissent” as the rejection of adaptation to the norms of the systems, when individuals for example insist on their individual opinion on certain aesthetic questions. The first open counter-adaptive actions appeared right after the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1956) and the subsequent party forums in other socialist countries. Until then, socialism had been imposed in Bulgaria mainly through repression. In 1956, political life in Bulgaria changed: the leadership of the party was reshuffled (Todor Zhivkov became the unquestioned leader) and the public climate changed towards a certain degree of liberalization.¹⁷

At this point most Bulgarians had accepted socialism as a fact to which they had to adapt. Using numerous tools, the ruling party managed to create the impression and even the belief that there was no alternative to socialism. The defeated revolution in Hungary in 1956, which was an attempt to shake off Soviet domination, showed the futility of such efforts in a world divided by the two Super Powers. In 1968, this impression was reinforced by the fate of Czechoslovakia’s attempt to give socialism a “human face.” Meanwhile, in the face of numerous injustices in everyday life, critical and derogatory attitudes towards the state also emerged in Bulgaria, although they were not translated into public political acts.

The seeds of the expression of critical views had been sown in the 1940s and 1950s. For a period of ten years after the communist takeover, new names of artists and intellectuals gained recognition in public spaces. They created works of great popularity. In the early years after World War II, these intellectuals had supported the socialist ideal, in which they sincerely believed. Then, they benefited from the new institutions governing artistic life, such as the creative unions, and they were able to make themselves heard through the press and radio. Whether they were members of the Communist Party or non-party members, they were offered means by the state to gain public recognition.

This reputation was an indisputable premise and necessary precondition for the wider impact of critical messages, which some of them made after the so-called April Plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1956. The new “moral” authorities were mostly representatives of the artistic elite. Scholars in the humanities also belonged to this group, but they reached a far more limited range of people—mostly colleagues and students, insofar as that was possible in a system of universal state control in terms of security services whose employees were almost everywhere.¹⁸ Intellectuals and artists who had acquired popularity through public media and had been given the opportunity to express openly their counter-adaptive position acted

17 BHA, u. 1B, op. 5, a.e. 196, item 1, lines 3–10; *Marcheva, Todor Zhivkov*, 45–59.

18 Znepolski, *Kak se promeniata neshitata*.

as a corrective to the socio-political reality. They enjoyed wide popularity and influence thanks to their presence in the public space. Such people (like the prominent historian Nikolay Genchev) had a clear sense of their effect and devoted themselves to their roles as public speakers. Particularly extensive were the opportunities to impact public opinion for writers and artists working in cinema and theatre. They affected society through creative work and their civic positions. Their works showed how a person could integrate into society without losing his/her personality.

For these intellectuals, this kind of position of reflective distance from power, while not being directly confrontational, was quite natural. Most of them were members of the Communist Party and many had direct involvement in the antifascist activities before the end of World War II. They had faith in an ideal but most of them experienced a sense of disappointment about its realization. Still, they were confident enough in their beliefs and had the courage to respond to the conditions of their time. They lived with the belief of “the big idea—the conservation of faith in goodness.”¹⁹ Their biographies made it very difficult for the party-state to portray them as counter-revolutionaries. The government could not find easy ways to penalize or compromise them in front of the public. For non-party figures in various professional communities and for many ordinary citizens, the messages of these artists were extremely important. They were the most trusted moral authorities; their political fervor was admired by the young, who subsequently became their followers.

Individuals

The expressions of opposition among members of the artistic community and also certain representatives of the academic intelligentsia culminated immediately after the April Plenum in 1956. It was so big that it provoked fears in the ruling party and doubts about its ability to deal with it. Voices were heard demanding true freedom of artists and questioning the hegemony of Socialist Realism. Painters—as shown by the Collection “Forms of Resistance”—were among those who visibly created new forms of artistic expression. In 1957, several books were published revealing negative phenomena of socialism, such as the play *Fear* by Todor Genov, the short stories *Laskov Family* by Liuben Stanev, and *A False Case* by Emil Manov.

The party responded by ordering publications in specialized journals and the popular press that refuted these claims.²⁰ The party also organized meetings with the disobedient artists and backed sympathetic artists, who entered into polemics with the critical intelligentsia. It also resorted to repression. The poet Krum Penev, for example, was expelled from the Communist

19 Interview with Valeri Petrov from November 13, 1997. Interviewer: Natalia Hristova.

20 *Literaturen front*, nos. 41, 42, 48 (1957).

Party in 1958. This reaction, however, made the critical texts and their authors even more popular. The short story *A False Case* was printed in successive issues of the journal *Plamak* (Flame). It was spread from hand to hand, it was copied on typewriters, and collective readings and discussions of it were organized. Emil Manov received numerous letters of support from readers across the country.²¹ The following year, the films *Na malkia ostrov / On the Small Island* (screenwriter Valery Petrov, director Rangel Valchanov) and *Zhivotūt si teche tiho / Life Flows Quietly* (sc. Hristo Ganev, dir. Binka Zheliazkova) were completed. Both were criticized by the Central Committee, and the latter was not allowed to screen. In May 1956, the cafe *Bamboo* in Sofia was opened. It became a place of free thought, heated discussions, and dissemination of works that were hard to find due to censorship. Radoy Ralin and Krum Penev composed poems and epigrams against the Central Committee, which eventually became an integral part of urban folklore in Bulgaria.

In 1960, the country experienced a similar intellectual rebellion, again followed by government repression. In 1961, the editorial board of the satirical newspaper *Stūrshel* (Hornet) was changed and a number of intellectuals were expelled from the party. However, artists continued to embrace the illusion of genuine creative freedom, as a result of which the satirical *Improvisations* by Valeri Petrov and Radoi Ralin appeared.²² These works ignited a heated discussion about free speech, the essence of which is most accurately expressed by the poem of Liubomir Levchev "I love you free verse, even for the word freedom, which bears your name." Radoi Ralin issued his *Safety Pins*, and as a consequence was dismissed from the newspaper *Starshel*. The Burgas Theatre was for years a place for free thought and new creative experiments, led in no small part by directors Iulia Ognianova, Leon Daniel, Metodi Andonov, and Vili Tsankov. Critical writers Hristo Fotev and Stefan Tsanev published their first works of poetry, and the most avant-garde Bulgarian poet, Konstantin Pavlov, was also published during that time. The new movies *A biahme mladi* (We Were Young, 1961, screenplay by Hristo Ganev, dir. by Binka Zheliazkova), *Pleneno iato* (Captive Flock, 1962, screenplay Emil Manov, director Ducho Mundrov), and *Slūntseto i siankata* (Sun and Shadow, 1962, screenplay Valeri Petrov, dir. Rangel Vūlchanov) were brought to the screen. They all recalled the lost ideals of the heroes of the anti-Hitler resistance, a form of criticism to which the government was particularly susceptible.²³

In 1964, Emil Manov's play *Greshkata na Avel* (Abel's Error) became of great interest. It was staged by the Dimitrovgrad theatre director Asen Shopov, and in the summer of the same year it was selected for the National Review of Bulgarian Theatre, an annual meeting of new theatre productions of all around the country. During the presentation in Sofia, which was followed

21 Hristova, *Būlgarskiiat sluchai*, 111–31.

22 *Ibid.*, 240–53.

23 *Ibid.*, 194–204.

by public discussion, it was sharply criticized by some, but also stubbornly defended by authors and critical intellectuals. As a result of political pressure, the play was cancelled and the theatre in Dimitrovgrad was closed. This mobilized the townspeople, who sent protest telegrams in support of the authors of the play and their theatre. Visiting Dimitrovgrad, Todor Zhivkov was heckled, and he never visited this model socialist town again.²⁴

In 1968, another attempt to discipline intellectuals became emblematic of government repression. This concerned the book with revised folk epigrams by Radoi Ralin and Boris Dimovski entitled *Liuti chushki* (Hot Peppers). They were fired from their jobs in the publishing house *Bulgarian Artist*, as was any other member of the staff who had had any role in the publication of the book. The government made public 20 names of artists whom it regarded as “rightist” in order to put pressure on them; this included some of the most noted Bulgarian writers and artists of the time, such as Blaga Dimitrova, Hristo Ganey, Valeri Petrov, and Radoi Ralin.²⁵ All but three of the people on the list were members of the BCP, and all had the symbolic asset of participation in the antifascist movement before September 9, 1944.

In 1969, another play was subjected to merciless criticism: a staging by the Burgas Theatre of the play *Nie sme na 25 godini* (We are 25 years old), authored and directed by Nedialko Yordanov. It was dropped from the repertoire, but the popularity of the Burgas Theatre and of the poet Yordanov became so great that people from all over the country travelled to this seaside town to watch his other new productions. In the same year, the poetry book by Marko Ganchev *Biagashto dŭrvo* (Running Tree) was sanctioned with accusations of pessimism and unacceptable criticism of socialist reality. In 1970–71, the writers Gocho Gochev, Hristo Ganey, Valeri Petrov, and Marko Ganchev were expelled from the Party, and Blagoi Dimitrov was expelled from the Union of Bulgarian Writers, because they did not join the Party’s protest against the award of the Nobel Prize to Soviet writer Solzhenitsyn.²⁶

In the 1970s, discussions in creative circles became more and more liberated, while at the same time the number of repressive measures taken by the government increased. This period brought back the memory of the dynamic literary life of the 1920s and 1940s. The two books by Blaga Dimitrova and Iordan Vassilev *Mladostta na Bagriana i neinite spŭtnitsi* (Bagriana’s Youth) and *Dni cherni i beli* (Days of Black and White), published in 1975, were officially criticized, and the authors were not given any opportunity to defend themselves. But again, the repressive measures only increased readers’ interest in the works and authors, thus yielding the opposite result of what the government had hoped to achieve.²⁷ Creative protest in the upcoming years not only

24 Hristova, *Spetsifika*, 258–61.

25 BHA, u. 1B, op. 40, a. ed. 22.

26 Hristova, *Vlast i inteligentsiia*.

27 Hristova, *Spetsifika*, 337–38.

did not slow down but became stronger, even in the face of new instances of repression. The Polish Solidarity movement in 1980–81, for example, heightened the fears of the Bulgarian communists. This prompted them to seize the book *Fascism* by the philosopher Zheliu Zhelev and the novel *Litse (Face)* by Blaga Dimitrova in 1982 and to halt distribution of the film *Edna zhena na 33 (A Woman at 33)* by Boian Papazov and Hristo Hristov. The authors were punished, and this made them more popular. Zhelev's *Fascism* became one of the most widely read and influential scientific studies of the time. Critical theatre also attracted thousands of spectators to its salons, where the bond between actors and audiences was so strong that it created the sense of a collective, albeit only creative rebellion against the ruling party.

As the Courage Collections from Bulgaria show, this model of conscientious individuals who struggled to preserve moral integrity and cultural freedom was replicated on the level of lesser known figures of cultural life.²⁸ The government's affirmation of culture and the extensive network of state sponsored cultural institutions also created spaces for counter-adaptive appropriations and for the expression of non-conformist thoughts.

Organizations

The beginning of 1988 marks the beginning of organized "dissidence" in Bulgaria. The first informal organizations that openly challenged the regime were created: the Independent Society for the Protection of Human Rights in Bulgaria, headed by the former long-time political prisoner Ilia Minev; the Committee on the Protection of Religious Rights, Freedom of Conscience, and Religious Value, led by Hristofor Sabev (a graduate physicist, who later became a monk); the Independent Trade Union *Podkrepa* (Support), led by Konstantin Trenchev.²⁹ The creators of these organizations and their members were usually unknown to the general public. Their symbolic legitimacy was rooted in "martyrdom." Therefore, we should consider them not as "dissidents," but rather as figures of an emerging political opposition.

Two other civil fora, founded in 1988, were made up of intellectuals and were "dissident" in structure and content. The first was the Public Committee for the Environmental Protection of Ruse, known as the Ruse Club, established in March at the House of Cinema in Sofia after the screening of the documentary *Dishai / Breathe* (directed by Iurii Zhirov). This film documented the terrible air pollution in Ruse and the protests by the city's inhabitants against it. The council of the Committee included popular personalities led by the writer Georgi Mishev. All of them were members of the BCP.³⁰ Influential

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ivanov, *Politicheskoto protivopostaviane*, 124–39.

³⁰ One of the collections in the COURAGE Registry is devoted to the ecological protest movement in Ruse: COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Ecological Protests against the Chlorine Pollution in

personalities of cultural life, such as the writer Evtim Evtimov and the chairman of the Union of Bulgarian Artists Svetlin Rusev, published articles supporting the Committee and the movie. The government refused to register the Committee, and the party expelled some of its members.

The second major non-formal organization with political objectives, the Club for the Support of Openness and Reconstruction (*Klub za podkrepa na glasnostta i preustroistvoto*), was formed in November 1988 at Sofia University. The initiators of this “dissident” club were prominent Bulgarian intellectuals who had consistently defended aesthetic, scientific, and civic values. Again, it is no surprise that most of them were members of the Communist Party and had pre-1944 anti-fascist credentials. The membership of the Club soon rose from initially eighty-one (in some documents ninety or ninety-two) to 214 in June 1989.³¹ The Club was a closed intellectual organization, although it had declared itself open to all civilians. It was not anti-communist, as the participants constantly talked about the democratization and humanization of the system in the framework of “reconstruction.” But they also organized a number of petitions against the forced renaming of the Bulgarian Turks; they gave interviews for Radio Free Europe, and they held closed discussions on economic, demographic, and environmental issues, as well as on issues of Bulgarian history and culture. The authorities searched the homes of club members and resorted to persecution and arrests. Three people were expelled from the party and dismissed from their jobs.

Both organizations enjoyed considerable popularity, especially in large cities. Immediately after November 10, 1989, they organized rallies and they cofounded the first oppositional party, the Union of Democratic Forces.

“Dissidents” between memory and oblivion

In the years after communism in Bulgaria, “corrective” culture and “dissidence” were doomed to oblivion. While in 1990 the names of popular personalities from the cultural opposition were present in the public space, their stance as moral authorities soon began to erode. Gradually, they were pushed out of the media environment; new personalities, mostly experts involved in the transformation and a new class of professional politicians, came to the fore. The model of prominent individuals acting as a corrective on power had apparently lost its place in the post-communist public sphere. Intellectuals such as the Radoi Ralin, Hristo Ganev, and Zhelju Zhelev, who became president in 1990, managed for a while to translate their authority earned as critics of communist power into a moral guidance role in the early years of transition. But ultimately, attempts to maintain or reinvigorate the public role of the “dissenter” in a time of political pluralism failed.

Rusev”, by Anelia Kasabova, Dr., 2017. Accessed: September 25, 2018.
31 Vasilev, *Patila i radosti*, 281–82; Ivanova, *Bŭlgarskoto disidentstvo*, 141–47.

Only the writer and émigré Georgi Markov enjoys considerable and stable popularity. The explanation for this—apart from his tragic fate (see above)—is his influential book *The Truth that Killed (In Absentia Reports)*, which he had read on Radio Free Europe. Fans of Markov focus on the anti-communist pathos of his texts. They use his biography very selectively, almost neglecting the part of his life and work in Bulgaria until 1969, which they believe would cast a shadow over his personality.³² It seems that some admirers of Markov attribute to him a more important historical role than to Zheliu Zhelev, the dissident philosopher-turned-president. It is indicative that a monument for Georgi Markov was erected in an elite neighborhood of Sofia, whereas late Zheliu Zhelev is commemorated only by a memorial plaque on his native house in the village of Veselinovo.

This also shows that the sustainability of the memory of the authors of corrective culture and “dissidence” can be achieved only through the preservation and presentation of their legacies. This is one of the goals of the COURAGE project, but it is also a goal of projects like “Living Memory. Intellectuals on Socialism and Post-Socialism” at New Bulgarian University, Sofia. This project conducts video interviews with selected representatives of the humanities and of artistic life in Bulgaria. It aims to document living memories represented by these individual stories and the reflections of the respondents about their creative paths.

The COURAGE Collections—Memory and Debates

The collections from Bulgaria in the COURAGE registry do not aim to impose “the truth” about the socialist period and dissent. The aim is to present the manifold forms of cultural opposition, increase the possibilities for comparisons, link collections with research efforts, and make them known to the wider public. While the selection of Bulgarian collections does not allow for a genuinely sociological survey (e.g. of ownership patterns), the collections do illustrate the wide variety of collecting practices in use.

The selection of collections for Bulgaria followed two main criteria: first to present the diversity of institutions and collectors; second to present different arenas, genres and forms of cultural opposition. In total it can be said that the achievements in collecting, storing, and promoting material pertaining to the socialist period in Bulgaria have been substantial. The leading role belongs to state “institutions of memory”: Archives State Agency (ASA), the National Library “St. St. Cyril and Methodius” (NLCM), and the Bulgarian National Film Archive (BNFA). Pursuant to the Law on the Compulsory Deposit of Printed and Other Works and the Law on the National Archival Funds,

³² An exception of this trend is the book Peleva, *Georgi Markov*, which offers an in-depth critical reading of his work before his emigration and presents a complete portrait of the writer.

these institutions store large funds of materials related to the development of culture during the period. They also undertake search activities and, to the extent that their limited financial resources permits, they purchase new materials. The registry includes several collections from these organizations devoted to notable critics of communist rule and the realities of state socialism, such as the funds on Hristo Ognianov and Zheliu Zhelev at the State Archive in Sofia³³ and the ad hoc collection on Binka Zheliazkova at the BNFA. These collections show expressions of counter-adaptive or corrective positions in several cultural fields: journalism, philosophy, and cinema. They highlight the importance of exile (Ognianov) and the potential political pathways of dissidents (Zhelev).

So-called ad hoc collections were created in the process of describing collections. They indicate ephemeral events (which did not leave a physical collection) or they refer to documents that are stored in an archive, but not in one coherent fund. An example of the former is the exhibition “Forms of Resistance” at the Sofia City Art Gallery—the paintings that were shown as examples of deviations from Socialist Realism are now back with their owners. An example of the latter is the “collection” of banned newspapers and of Samizdat journals at the National Library. It does not exist as a separate collection there, but the COURAGE entry “Only the forbidden newspapers remain in history!” (taken from an interview with a repressed editor) brings them to life. So, our collections put artefacts into new contexts and create relationships that open new perspectives on the history of cultural opposition.

Some of the collections give a good overview of the way in which the Bulgarian Communist Party tried to maintain absolute control in the sphere of culture. This rested not only on the shoulders of the secret police, but also on economic dominance and institutional structures. The collections show how the Bulgarian government followed the Soviet model of organizing culture, which meant state ownership of all cultural institutions. The centralized state established institutions with a clearly hierarchical structure that operated as gatekeepers. Professional associations, such as the Bulgarian Union of Writers, the Union of Bulgarian Artists, etc., were placed under direct party control and were charged with the task of distributing material privileges to their members but also with the task of acting as overseers. The state tried to liquidate private initiative in the cultural sphere.³⁴ The collections contain examples of punitive measures taken by the state against recalcitrant writers and artists, such as expulsion from the BCP and from professional unions (which amounted to a prohibition against pursuing an artistic profession). The pro-

33 Selecting funds from the ASA, access to them was crucial. The personal funds of intellectual dissidents such as Radoy Ralin, Todor Tsonev, and others are currently being organized and arranged and are not open for use.

34 Elenkov, *Kulturniia front*.

tagonists of our collections were subject to bans of their works; they experienced dismissals and other forms of censorship.

The State Security was one of the main instruments of the communist regime in the maintenance of control over intellectuals, who were always regarded as potential critics of the government. The collection of the Commission for the Disclosure of Documents and Announcing Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens with the State Security and the Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian People's Army (so-called Commission on Dossiers) gives insights into the patterns used in the recruitment of members of the intelligentsia by the State Security. In some cases, cooperation was on a voluntary basis on "patriotic grounds." But there were also examples of people being pressured with threats to discredit them or their families. The small private collection "Seeds of Fear," for example, shows the pressure used by the authorities on the immediate families of people classified as politically "unreliable" or as "enemies of the people."

However, the collections are a powerful testimony to the fact that, despite surveillance and persecution, many people dared to challenge the regime through the means of culture. The range of possible opposition activities was broad, as stated by an eyewitness: opposition could be "expressed in a series of non-eye-catching acts, gestures and words, such as a non-traditional reading of a work; an 'inappropriate' statement at a teachers' meeting; a reference to a forbidden fact or an author in front of students; reading with students of forbidden or semi-forbidden books; education in fearlessness and disobedience; singing of Russian White-Army songs; giving lessons for free, i.e. refusal to participate in the natural exchange of services against goods," says Teodora Panayotova, who together with her sister Boriana created the family archive "Life Beyond the Pattern of Communism." Private collections also reveal the diverse "seeds of courage and freedom," such as the defense of one's principles and faith. These could take place in esoteric movements, such as the White Brotherhood, or in rock music.

These experiences should not be belittled as mere personal stories.³⁵ Rather, they help us arrive at a more complex and nuanced picture of socialist Bulgaria. Assessing communism requires self-critical consideration. Edvin Sugarev stated that we need to "destroy the Berlin Wall in ourselves." Despite the manifold examples of conformism with and accommodation to the communist regime, this period can hardly be summed up as one marked by "indifference, cowardice and absurdity."³⁶

One aim of the selection of Bulgarian collections in the registry is to highlight the plight of ethnic minorities and the activities of those who fought for their rights under communism. A private collection, which so far has been

35 Sugarev, "Berlinskata stena e oshte v nas," Accessed August 22, 2018. <http://www.librev.com/index.php/component/content/article?id=739:2009-11-16-20-55-30>.

36 Ibid.

unknown in Bulgaria, in the Turkish city of Bursa contains interesting material on one of the most researched but also debated topics in Bulgarian historiography: the regime's attempt to assimilate the Turkish minority by force. The collection of more than 100 autobiographical video interviews documents the fate of Turks who fled the country. The terms used by the author of the collection, such as "namecide" and "ethnic genocide," might provoke heated responses. But it is important in the registry to document the self-presentation of participants in cultural opposition, which is an interesting field of study in its own right. The registry is a source which, like any other historical source, must be subjected to critical analysis.

In general, one of the aims of the Bulgarian collections is to shed light on lesser known moments of everyday life and forms of everyday opposition through lifestyles, such as in the collections "Everyday Life in Southwestern Bulgaria" and "Roma Archive." Both were created by one of the first centers for oral history in Bulgaria, the NGO Balkan Society for Autobiography and Social Communication at the University of Blagoevgrad. These collections present the point of views of "ordinary" people from different religious and ethnic communities. The personal stories reveal little known moments of everyday life, such as the experiences of and the resistance to collectivization; the encroachments of the state on the cultural traditions in villages and hidden forms of resistance. Especially valuable is the presentation of the daily life of the Roma minority, whose experiences are largely excluded from official historical narratives.

All Bulgarian collections present the constant pressure exerted by the state on free thinking artists and intellectuals, but they also present the practices of self-assertion and opposition used by artists and intellectuals. They reject the myth of the total obedience and conformism of Bulgarian intellectuals, which was purposefully created by the communist authorities. The collections also reveal new aspects of the emergence of mass protests and informal dissident organizations in the late 1980s. The collection "Ecological Protests against Chlorine Pollution" at the Regional Museum of History in Ruse shows how activities of museum curators can lead to enriching funds with new materials which reveal new perspectives on well-researched phenomena.

Also important is the fact that all represented institutions promote their collections by various means: they organize exhibitions, conferences, public presentations, and seminars; they participate widely in media events and look in particular for ways to attract young audiences and the general public. There is also a visible tendency of increasing trust between private collectors and state institutions (archives, libraries, museums). Petko Ogoyski, who created his own "Tower Museum" with original artefacts from his time in the Belene labor camp, is a case in point: he donated the main part of the original documents to the Central State Archives in 2012. Many founders and collectors of collections feel a sense of mission; they are developing activities to promote sharing the collected knowledge, sometimes by using new technologies. Some

of the collections—both private and public— reach wide audiences and thus stimulate critical thinking and public activism today, when it is easy to have the impression that we “have crashed in one place, with dreams broken,” as two famous Bulgarian music journalists commented.³⁷

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³⁷ “BG rokat na 80te paleshe revoliutsii. Interviu na Iskra Krapacheva s Rumen Ianev i Emil Bratanov,” *Standart*, June 7, 2015.

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