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State Security, *Slav-Bulgarian History* and Democracy in the 1990s: Nationalism and National Populism[1]

In February 1994 in *The New York Review of Books*, Joseph Brodsky published an open letter to Czech President, Vaclav Havel, in response to a speech he had delivered in a previous issue of the same magazine. The letter shows an attitude towards what Havel calls the 'post-communist nightmare', and by implication this also means a reflection on communism. Brodsky addresses Havel publicly as a writer

[1] Note from the editors: This paper was submitted by the author in early September 2023. Unexpectedly, on 22nd October 2023, Sirma Danova passed away after a serious illness. After consultation with her family and those responsible for her intellectual legacy, the editorial team decided to proceed with the submission. The text went through a review process. Any revisions that were in line with the author's intention and were within the power of the editors were taken into account. Regarding the final version of the paper, the editors were guided by the last will of the author, as well as the materials made available by Doc. Nadejda Stoyanova from Sofia University, who was appointed by Danova to prepare for publishing the book that she worked on in the last months of her life. Published in July 2024, the book consists of a chapter

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to a writer – as a witness of a police state to a witness of another police state marked by 'the arbitrariness of existence' (Brodsky, 1994). Communism is the inner prison in which the scarcity of space is compensated for by an excess of time, Brodsky says, noting that time sooner or later turns the human being into a contemplative. With obvious sympathy and deep respect for one of the ideologists of Charter 77, Brodsky objects to a substantial point in the Czech president's speech: communism is not a political problem in which an asymmetry between the good man and bad institutions is found; it is a human problem, the fruit of a 'an extraordinary anthropological backslide', 'a problem of our species' (Brodsky, 1994). This ultimately gives another perspective on society and history that is purely anthropological and is based on the insight that human nature is vicious. This insight, which refuses to fully identify society with the victim – least because this same society numerically features some executioners – opposes the historical perspective in Havel's speech.

The police state in totalitarian Bulgaria was an institution that had an evolving structure. After 1989, the disintegration of this structure was slow, and the surviving network of interactions has an impact on Bulgarian society to this day. In the 1990s, the crimes of the totalitarian system began to be highlighted with the participation of its agents, who – with the help of the media – were immediately embedded in the current political establishment. Such was the case with the miraculous appearance of *Slav-Bulgarian History*, which had been secretly taken out of Zograf Monastery, where it had been kept for more than 200 years, and thrown, wrapped in a newspaper, in front of the office of the director of the National Historical Museum, Bozhidar Dimitrov, in 1996. It then became clear to the general public that Paisius's manuscript had been transferred from Zograf under Todor Zhivkov, and the transition to democracy turned out to be the context in which the acquisition had to be legitimised. In other words, Paisius's draft is subject to legalisation, if not by law – which would have been impossible against the backdrop of a seizure long planned and realised by State Security – then at least through 'legend'. Shortly before the Director of the National Intelligence Service, General Brigo Asparuhov, quit his job, in 1996 he decided, according to some interpretations, to save – and, according to others, to get rid of – *Slav-Bulgarian History*, which had been in his office treasury for a long time. He gave it to Bozhidar Dimitrov and ordered him to invent a legend.

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that is a Bulgarian version of this paper (cf. Данова, 2024, pp. 178–204). Hereby, we would like to express our gratitude to Doc. Stoyanova, as well as to the reviewers and editors of the text, hoping that this contribution is as close as possible to the author's views on the research subject. *Dear Sirma, rest in peace!*

Thus, the director of the National Historical Museum (NHM) invented the story of the anonymous man who threw the manuscript in front of his office. This story, however, turned out to be genre-vulnerable, and its shelf life proved to be short-lived. Designed as a legend, it became a row with major public repercussions. The danger of an international conflict between Bulgaria and Greece was serious.

The subject of this research is the rhetorical moves of this non-existent legend and its interpretations in the 1990s. We will consider the case of the disclosure of the seizure of *Slav-Bulgarian History* as an example of the traumas Bulgarian democracy has experienced: active former collaborators of the State Security Service; criminal collaboration between knowledge-production institutions, cultural institutions and business, and national populism sustained by the media. Patriotism, inherited from the national communism of the 1970s and 1980s, was used as a moral justification for the secret operations of State Security regarding the illegal removal of cultural property from Bulgarian monasteries. Nationalism is the last stronghold of lawlessness, which in retrospect seeks to justify the operation under communism of the secret services and their staff and non-staff collaborators. With regard to the present, nationalism benefits politically from a harsh economic crisis.[2] Of course, this is a deceitfully staged nationalism which manipulates public opinion with the help of the media. After several decades of the Bulgarian Communist Party's atheistic policy, Bulgarians' ignorance about the Mount of Athos is easy to abuse. The viewer's ignorance is well exploited by the social actors of the Bulgarian transition and has a special place in the invention of the patriotic plot.

Pre-history: state security and national communism of the 1970s and 1980s

The 1970s and 1980s were the time of so-called 'real socialism', or the period when it became clear that the bright future had not happened. Only the 'Brezhnev timelessness' and what Vaclav Havel called in another essay 'the destruction of history' with the variation 'the destruction of historical authenticity'

[2] See Albena Hranova's brilliant article "Communist Nationalism", where the author shows how and why nationalism is 'the last refuge of the communist doctrine of the 1970s and 1980s' (Хранова, 2012).

had happened (Havel, 1988, pp. 14–21). The loss of the historical horizon means the loss of existential meaning.[3] The maintenance of the ideological 'fiery utopia' became increasingly impossible. One of the mechanisms for such a fixation was anniversaries. In his essay 'Histories and Totalitarianism', published shortly before he became president of Czechoslovakia, Havel said that, in the totalitarian apparatus, history itself began to be consistently and regularly replaced by the calendar of the new socialist celebration:

> History was replaced by pseudo-history, by a calendar of rhythmically recurring anniversaries, congresses, celebrations and mass gymnastic events; in other words, by precisely the kind of artificial activity that is not an open-ended play of agents confronting one another but a onedimensional, transparent and utterly predictable self-manifestation (and self-celebration) of a single central agent of truth and power. (Havel, 1988, p. 15)

In its genesis, the institution of the jubilee was linked to the utopian ideological component, but under real socialism it worked in favour of dystopia for the regime. Since it is a mechanism of impact on a massive scale, the state aimed to reserve not only the celebration time but also daily life for its preparation. Thus, the Party's celebration became the only direct and secure horizon.

Over these years in Bulgaria, two large-scale anniversaries were being prepared: one was the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state; the other was dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party on Buzludzha in 1891. The second celebration was hampered by November 10, 1989, which does not take away from the efforts already made. The institutionalization of anniversaries demonstrated the outright turn of communism towards right-wing and far-right-wing phenomena associated with nationalism, given that in these years a project conceived by eminent historians of State Security (lecturers at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia), namely the *Revival Process*,[4] gained momentum. The loss of the utopian component is the basis of the movement of communism towards national communism.

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[3] Cf. how Ivaylo Znepolski integrates his analysis of this essay into the theme of 'the end of communist dreaming' in his book on Bulgarian Communism (Знеполски, 2008, pp. 264–269).

[4] *Revival process* is the attempt of the Bulgarian Communist Party to 'homogenise' the population, resulting in the forced assimilation of Muslims (Turks, Pomaks, Tatars, Roma) over the communist period. One of the mechanisms of this so-called 'homogenisation' was the forced change of names of the Bulgarian ethnic Turks.

In the book *Legitimacy Machine – The Role of State Security in the Communist State*, Momchil Metodiev notes that since 1967, when the Sixth State Security Department was formed, the State Security had been activated to 'compensate for the lack of political trust in the communist system' (Методиев, 2008, p. 18). According to Metodiev, the state encouraged patriotism and moderate nationalism to compensate for distrust (Методиев, 2008, p. 291).

As an ideology, national communism also found its institutional justification: in 1973, the 14th Department with the First General Administration (FGA) of the State Security, the so-called Cultural and Historical Intelligence, was established (Методиев, 2008, p. 121). The Department was under the direct subordination of the newly appointed deputy chairwoman of the Committee for Arts and Culture, Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), Todor Zhivkov. It aimed to train collaborators for intelligence operations abroad, collecting sources on Bulgarian history and culture, and transferring relics, artefacts and documents 'through unofficial channels' (Христов, 2012, p. 68). The phrase 'unofficial way' is found in the archives of the State Security Service and belongs to the historian and thracologist Alexander Fol, the true ideologist of cultural intelligence, very close to Lyudmila Zhivkova. When Fol gave the idea for the seizure of *History*, he was only 38 years old. He was in for a spectacular career: deputy chairman of Cultural Historical Intelligence, Minister of Education, Director of the Institute of Thracology, and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. He was the founder of an entire area of Bulgarian historiography, 'Thracology', which played a major role in designing communist nationalism because of its 'autochthonous tendency' (Маринов, 2015, p. 99) to seek and find the increasingly ancient roots of the nation in an esoteric and intuitive way.

The expression 'unofficial way' is a euphemism for the word 'theft'. Other semantically similar definitions are 'seizure', 'transfer', 'retraction', and 'implicit event'. The lexical decision to use the word 'rescue' marks a high point in the conceptualisation of the special operation. We come across this word in an interview between the investigative journalist Hristo Hristov and the former director of the National Intelligence Service (NIS), General Brigo Asparuhov, and in many other interviews (Христов, 2012, p. 246). Hristo Hristov is the author of the book *Operation Marathon. The Truth about the Theft of Paisius's History by the State Security in Zograf*, published by a happy coincidence

in 2012, which marked the 250th anniversary of the writing of *Slav-Bulgarian History. Operation Marathon* is valuable because drawing on the fully preserved case file highlights the conception, the main players, and the entire network of interconnections and dependencies under which the special operation to get *Slav-Bulgarian History* out of Zograf Monastery on the Holy Mount of Athos happened. The documents cited in the book unquestionably absolve the monastic brotherhood of the monastery, in particular the librarian, Father Pachomius, who was accused by former State Security agents of complicity in the 1990s, when the case gained popularity.

Momchil Metodiev points out that the secret Cultural and Historical Intelligence Department – along with its explicit duplicates the Cultural Heritage Offices and the Committee for Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – are priorities in the Party's budget under the auspices of Lyudmila Zhivkova. Looking through the audit of the funds spent, Metodiev is adamant that the Foreign Ministry officials 'were not guided just by patriotic motives' (Методиев, 2008, p. 127). Patriots, respectively national populists, were suspected of being inauthentic and were labelled in cultural periodicals as 'unwilling nationalists' (Кьосев, 2005, p. 263), 'false patriots' (Тодоров, 2005, p. 194), 'quasi-patriots' (Стоянов, 2008, p. 44).

Hristo Hristov, too, devotes a special place to 'patriotic games' in his book. As an investigative journalist with solid experience with State Security files, he is the author of research that can also be defined as a documentary history of the recent past in terms of genre. Hristov's works include *Kill the Tramp. Bulgarian and British National Policy on the Georgi Markov Case* (2006), *Todor Zhivkov. A Biography* (2009), and *The Empire of Overseas Firms* (2015). Hristov came across the Citadel case, which was later joined by the top-secret Operation Marathon upon the opening of the bishops' files.[5] Citadel, the code name of Zograf Monastery, turned out to be a major development of the 14th Department of the First State Security Department regarding Greece. It is of utmost importance that the issue of seizing Paisius's *History* was raised early enough – as early as 1971. Operation Marathon (1971–1985) also planned the confiscation of Dragan's Minae and Patriarch Euthimius's Service Book (Христов, 2012, p. 20). Although Bulgaria copied Russia's cultural heritage policy, Hristov defines the First State Security Department as a structure 'without analogue' in the countries

[5] He announced this at the book's premiere in Plovdiv in January 2013 (Екип Марица, 2013).

of the Eastern Bloc (Христов, 2012, p. 96). To the question of what would happen if cultural property were transferred legally, as in the case of Serbia, the journalist replied that the whole conspiracy existed for the sake of the institution, that is salaries, business trips abroad, gifts and bribes (cf. Христов, 2012, p. 142).

Here is the background to Operation Marathon, which Hristov discovered according to the archived case 'Citadel'. In the 1944–1972 period, Bulgaria was not interested in Zograf Monastery and the ten sketes that belonged to it. It did not maintain, donate or send monks and scholars. The monastery faced the prospect of losing its Slav-Bulgarian character because of the few remaining clergymen of Bulgarian descent. The crisis was so severe that the brotherhood was governed in the 1965–1975 period by a Romanian abbot, Dometius, who played a significant role in its split. The state did not support Zograf Monastery, even when part of the south wing burned down in 1976. The state rediscovered Zograf Monastery in the second half of the 1970s, coinciding with a new wave of repression against the Church in the country (Методиев, 2010, p. 540). The first state visits by Alexander Fol as Deputy Minister of Culture coincided with this period, followed by the top-level visit of Alexander Lilov, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in 1988 (Методиев, 2010, pp. 541–542). For the top officials of the People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB), the monastery was above all a depository of valuables, a 'museum institution' (Методиев, 2010, p. 572), not a holy shrine. Upon learning of gold treasure in the monastery through probes carried out by agents, State Security planned on acquiring it. Colonel Hristo Marinchev was assigned to work on the Citadel; he was transferred to the newly established 14th Department of the First General Administration from the Sixth Department of the State Security Service for Combating Ideological Subversion, where he worked for the Department of Clergy. Besides, he served as deputy chairman of the Committee for Church Affairs of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During Operation Marathon (1972–1985), intelligence agents, some of them trained in photography, were sent to the monastery to investigate the substitution of the authentic manuscript with a copy. All agents' names involved in the operation were highlighted by Hristo Hristov, except for a secret collaborator 'Hadzhiev', who was responsible for photographing the documents. He is one of the most infamous figures of the special operation and the longest-serving resident of Zograf Monastery – Archimandrite

Polikarp Bachkovski.[6] The documents revealed a most impudent statement made by General Dimiter Stoyanov, Minister of the Interior, who was directly responsible for the 'revival process' and the assassination of Georgi Markov in London. During an official meeting of the 14th Department of the First General Administration – State Security, he asked, 'Why are not all the clergymen of the Holy Mountain our secret collaborators?' (Христов, 2012, p. 193). The monks' community at Zograf Monastery is like a self-cleaning ecosystem as not a single agent of State Security has been allowed to settle permanently at the brotherhood. Agent 'Hadzhiev', who had long photographed manuscripts at Zograf, was virtually isolated from the monastic community. Hristo Hristov's investigation confirms this.

General Marinchev's two attempts to personally carry out Operation Marathon failed. Subsequently, officers Ventsislav Aghain and Ivan Genev were infiltrated to work under diplomatic cover from the Athens and the Thessaloniki residences of the First General Administration, respectively.[7] On December 18, 1985, they exchanged the original for the copy; the reports explicitly mention that the librarian, Father Pachomius, was not aware. The State Security agents Aghain and Genev were accompanied by Dinko Pehlivanov, an advisor to the Ambassador in Athens; it was only after the special operation that he learned of the substitution. The original of Paisius's *History* was taken to Thessaloniki. From there it arrived in Athens by diplomatic mail and was then sent to Sofia again by diplomatic mail. Ivan Genev's report showed he was aware of having done 'highly patriotic work of national significance' (Христов, 2012, p. 192), emphasising, of course, the need to maintain complete secrecy regarding the operation. Subsequently, the three collaborators were awarded by the state. Minister of the Interior Dimitar Stoyanov brought the book to Todor Zhivkov, but he refused to take charge of it.[8] It was not clear where exactly the manu-

[6] See Hristo Hristov's research for information about the secret collaborators engaged by the State Security during Operation 'Marathon' (Христов, 2012, pp. 111–115, 128–134, 145–156, 159–173).

[7] For the first time, the names of the secret collaborators were mentioned in the press (*Galeriya* newspaper, issue 3, 23 October – 4 November 2009) in 2009, without the information being based on a documentary source, but this did not produce any public response (Христов, 2012, p. 15).

[8] The testimony belongs to Krasimir Raydovski, a former intelligence officer who was invited by the media to speak on the topic of Operation Marathon: 'The funniest thing was after they brought the book to Bulgaria. The Minister of the Interior Dimitar Stoyanov took it to Todor Zhivkov, who said, "Nice", and shrugged his shoulders. And the book stood for years in the intelligence treasury' (Христов, 2012, p. 222).

script was kept from 1986 to 1990; it was submitted to the National Intelligence Service for safekeeping as late as 1990.

The policy of the First General Administration regarding Bulgarian cultural heritage abroad verged upon historical nonsense. The valuables were stored in the notorious Room 13 on the 13th floor of the National Intelligence Service, with little or no care to secure them properly. There was no plan to integrate them into the cultural setting of the country as they had been acquired illegally. The special operations much more resembled evidence of loyalty to the government than patriotic concern. In principle, to involve all aspects of human nature, the totalitarian system cleverly handled meaninglessness, especially as regards the uselessness of labour. For ordinary people, the uselessness of labour resulted from the repressive dictates of the authorities. Concerning the top echelons of power, the meaninglessness of labour justified its very existence.

The populist discourse: Bozhidar Dimitrov

The monks learned of the seizure almost immediately and informed the Greek authorities. This placed Zograf Monastery in an extremely awkward situation for two reasons. As an institution that preserved a centuries-old heritage, the Bulgarian monastery on Mount Athos was compromised. Its autonomy from the communist authorities in Bulgaria also seemed eroded. As late as 1992, at a special press conference, the chairman of the Eforia Zografia, Peter Mitanov, reported the crime, pointing out that *Slav-Bulgarian History* was in the treasury of the director of the National Intelligence Service, General Brigo Asparuhov; only some circles were aware of this fact. In a report to Prosecutor General Ivan Tatarchev, Mitanov explained that he had learned this through his work as a restorer, when the *History* ended up in the hands of a colleague, probably to be photographed in preparation for a phototype edition.[9] The Prosecutor General ordered an inspection, which revealed that the original of *Slav-Bulgarian History* was indeed in the treasury of the National Intelligence Service. Petar Mitanov himself was suspected of the seizure, accused by former collaborators of the First General Administration of the State Security. Greece filed a lawsuit against an unknown

[9] See the whole address by Peter Mitanov to Ivan Tatarchev (Христов, 2012, pp. 223–226).

perpetrator. Meanwhile, Bulgarian delegations of top government officials bowed to the Xerox copy on display in a Plexiglas box at Zograf Monastery. In an interview about Hristo Hristov's book, General Asparuhov maintained that he did not know that Paisius's *History* was in his treasury. We learned from another publication by Hristov that *Slav-Bulgarian History* and the file of the future president of Bulgaria from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) Georgi Sedefchov Parvanov (agent 'Gotse'), 2002–2012,[10] were locked up in the same treasury of the Intelligence Service. This symbolic juxtaposition of a late medieval manuscript of national significance and a modern communist top-secret paper, probably also of national significance, is an early sign that President Parvanov's two terms of office[11] contributed considerably to the expansion of Bulgarian nationalism.

Asparuhov testified that after the case of the missing *Slav-Bulgarian History* was made public, he referred it to several institutions, but there was no response. It is known that the monks at Zograf sought assistance personally from President Zhelyu Zhelev, but to no avail. When Petar Stoyanov took office as President of the Republic of Bulgaria in 1997, the monks informed him as well. He ordered an inspection. There were perfect conditions at the beginning of his term for the case to become a political case. Here is what Petar Stoyanov told Hristo Hristov:

> The return of 'History' became a political campaign in favour of Georgi Parvanov under the baton of Bozhidar Dimitrov, then director of the National Historical Museum and an active member of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, before that a collaborator of the State Security, and now again director of the National Historical Museum and an active member of GERB.[12] It was a rather disgraceful campaign, which went under the slogan 'Petar Stoyanov betrays the Bulgarian national interest'. This kind of manipulation, so typical of the communist State Security, has always outraged me. But I would do the same now. Because the theft of 'History' is not a patriotic act, it is an immoral act. (Христов, 2012, p. 258)

[10] This became clear after the leader of the Democrats, Ivan Kostov, said that pages were missing from Georgi Parvanov's file, removed according to him shortly before the set-up of the Files Committee, chaired by Evtim Evtimov (April 2, 2007). After the row and the check, it turned out that the file of agent 'Gotse' had been stored when the Director of the NIS was that same general Brigo Asparuhov. See Христов (2011).

[11] See Boyko Penchev's article 'Features of Bulgarian Nationalism I': 'Yet the role of the presidential institution in reinforcing and legitimising today's pro-Russian and pro-socialist nationalism is obvious' (Пенчев, 2007).

[12] GERB is a centre-right, populist, conservative and pro-European political party in Bulgaria, founded in 2006.

When the scandal with the planted manuscript in NHM broke, Bozhidar Dimitrov's and Georgi Parvanov's affiliations to the State Security was only speculation. They were made public in 2001 (by an undercover secret collaborator 'Kardam') and in 2007, respectively (agent 'Gotse') (Методиев, 2008, p. 121). The scandal lasted for about a year. President Petar Stoyanov also consulted experts[13] but decided that *Slav-Bulgarian History* should be returned to Zograf Monastery.

We would like to draw considerable attention to the fact that the legend-scandal-sensation conceptualised by Bozhidar Dimitrov targeted a specific audience. Since it had long been known in cultural and political circles that *Slav-Bulgarian History* had been seized from Zograf Monastery illegally, the only addressee of the media spectacle was the Bulgarian audience, who were also potential voters. After decades of an official ban on Christian community life, the author of the legend explicitly took advantage of Bulgarians' ignorance regarding Mount Athos. Later, especially after the return of the manuscript to Zograf Monastery, and after pilgrim travel grew considerably, public awareness of the Bulgarian spiritual territory of Mount Athos changed. It is appropriate to say here that the holy shrine and the knowledge needed for the monastery's self-government were not revered by the political players who starred in Operation Marathon. As they were atheists, the monastery with the codename 'Citadel' was just a working site for them. In this respect, in an interview for the magazine Christianity and Culture in 2008, Petar Stoyanov emphasised the travesty of atheism as patriotism:

> It was clear that my view was totally at odds with that of the State Security-trained 'quasi-patriots' for a very simple reason, which they, unfortunately, never managed to understand: our 'patriots', despite 20 years of lighting the biggest candles in St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, are extreme atheists, and for them a theft from a monastery is no different than a routine operation of snatching something from the enemy's hands. I met these people and was shocked by the abyss that separated us. Brought up in hostility to the Church and its institutions, they looked upon the monastery and the Bulgarian monasticism there with absolute indifference and even contempt – a kind of shrine inhabited by obsessed, senile old men. (Стоянов, 2008, pp. 44–45)

[13] When making the decision, Peter Stoyanov also organised an expert panel. It included prof. Nadezhda Dragova, Svetlin Rusev, Krikor Azaryan, Bozhidar Dimitrov, Georgi Markov. Those who did not *support Slav-Bulgarian History* being returned to Zograf Monastery are historians B. Dimitrov and G. Markov, who were later highlighted as collaborators of State Security (Василев, 2013, p. 147).

Patriotism is the leitmotif of the proponents of the thesis that *Slav-Bulgarian History* should remain in Bulgaria. This fulcrum, however, is based on a great falsehood, based on the repeated indoctrination that by returning the manuscript it will fall into the hands of the 'Greeks' (cf. Стоянов, 2008, p. 46). Such an insinuation in the populist lexicon aims to update the pejorative image – stereotypical of the Bulgarian Revival – of Greeks being on the side of the 'enemy', according to Carl Schmitt's classical understanding of the *political*. This conveniently bypasses the fact that the 'Greeks' in Zograf Monastery were Bulgarian monks. The Constitution of Greece, adopted in 1927, stipulates that the Holy Mountain is a self-governing part of the Greek state. All monks were granted Greek citizenship (Методиев, 2010, p. 518), but this had nothing to do with ethnicity.

We will focus on Bozhidar Dimitrov's populist rhetorical moves as a symptom of the state Bulgarian democracy is in. We will build on the interview Hristo Hristov conducted with him about his book in 2012. Despite the time gap from 1996, the year the scandal broke out, Dimitrov continued to emphasise the cultural significance of the First General Administration. To the most important question, what necessitated the seizure of Paisius' original by the State Security, Dimitrov answered by changing the facts: 'The reason was the threat that the monastery might become Romanian' (Христов, 2012, p. 247). This statement was not confirmed by the surviving papers. *Slav-Bulgarian History* was stolen in 1985, and as early as 1976 the Bulgarian Father Euthimius became the abbot of the monastery. In reply to the journalist's logical objection that the Romanian abbot Dometius had been removed long before the State Security operation, Dimitrov said confidently: 'Well, yes, you know how slowly decisions are made *here*' (Христов, 2012, p. 249; italic is mine, SD.) This reveals another obvious rhetorical strategy in the populist speech of the director of the NHM: complete identification with the entire here-and-now apparatus of State Security by assuming someone else's responsibility. The pronoun 'us' is nothing but a metonymy of State Security. 'If you ask me what should have been taken, it would not have been *Slav-Bulgarian History* because it is not complete, it is only a draft, and pages are missing. *I would have taken* Dragan's Mine or Patriarch Euthimius' Service Book' (Христов, 2012, p. 248; italic is mine, SD.) This counterfactual argument expressed with future perfect tense in the past is meant to show that even at that moment Bozhidar Dimitrov identified himself with the intelligence officers who executed the special operation. This, in turn, reaffirms what has been repeatedly said in the media, namely

that the First General Administration is a structure of national importance to which he proudly belonged. The last quote conceals another populist strategy: logorrheic reporting of allegations without journalists being interested in them. This rhetorical move aims to avoid answering the concrete question or get out of the awkwardness of the question. Verbosity like this relies on not only seducing viewers with piquant facts but also distracting the interlocutor. What made an impression during the interview was that when the director of the NHM mixed up the facts for one reason or another, Hristov, as a very experienced journalist, did not immediately correct him but waited for an appropriate moment to do so. For example, throughout the interview, Dimitrov maintains it was Hristo Marinchev who seized *History* in 1984. After being corrected, he said at the very end of the interview:

> But you put too much faith in the files. Bear in mind that they were also written in a way in which some things had to be concealed. *By the way, I never wrote denunciations because I worked with exactly those types of papers and knew that these things would come out sooner or later.* And honestly speaking, I thought they would come out after my death, but it happened sooner. I wouldn't even write about my mother-in-law speaking out against the activities of the communist authorities although I wanted to very much. Keep in mind that no one asked me for denunciations either, including foreigners. I was also lucky with the person I worked with: Alexander Fol was a very high-level, very sophisticated man, he always used the polite form of the pronoun 'You' in the presence of people, and he insisted that he be addressed likewise. He wasn't a 'bourgeois bastard' as one lady wrote in a denunciation against him after he didn't pay attention to her. Concerning Vasil Gyuzelev, who also ignored her, she wrote he was 'petty bourgeoisie' because his father had an ice cream cart. (Христов, 2012, p. 252; italic is mine, SD.)

This is how the interview ended. On the one hand, we allowed ourselves a longer quote because it well illustrates Bozhidar Dimitrov's vulgar and cynical linguistic idiosyncrasies. There is a considerable self-caricature, typical of populists, in which a rise in ratings is proportional to a fall in inhibitions. Secondly, in the statement 'I have never written denunciations' lies the theoretical possibility that secret collaborators could also have authored denunciations. We explicitly draw attention to this because the argument that 'informer' and 'secret collaborator' are two different commitments to State Security that are not linked has come out in multiple campaigns in the media these days to exonerate highlighted agents. In an article of 26 July 2009, editorially titled *Don't Blame Dimitrov for Collecting Sources about our Past*, Ivan Ilchev, historian and rector of Sofia University (2007–2015), distinguishes between the two roles in State Security, and combining the two roles is, in his view, 'the result

of a deliberate political reaction, which stands to reason for the period after 1989' (Илчев, 2009). Either way, whether we are talking about 'informers' or 'intelligence officers', entire professional fields include nuclei of staff and non-staff State Security officers.[14] These are the subjects of History and Philology (cf. Дечев, 2018; Методиев, 2008, p. 123), and it is these two fields that bear the major responsibility for the narrative of the new Bulgarian history and culture.

In 2018, historian Stefan Dechev dedicated a study to the 'phenomenon of Bozhidar Dimitrov', published in three parts on the Marginalia website. This was also the year of the death of the long-standing director of the NHM. The occasion for the piece is commemorative; it aroused great public attention and there were uncritical, apologetic qualifications in the media about the role of Dimitrov in Bulgarian history and public life. Scrupulously, Dechev chronologically arranges the contribution of the deceased, the damage he did, especially in the field of historiography, as well as the scandals in which he often got embroiled. Dechev's study can also be read as a genealogical cross-section of the 'Bozhidar Dimitrov phenomenon':

> To begin with, I think the phenomenon of 'Prof Bozhidar Dimitrov' was filling some gaps our society has perceived since the 1990s. We are talking about quick and frequent appearances in media outlets to suit their specific needs (pieces remained in the Trud newspaper for several weeks after his death) and the need for self-confidence at a time of crisis, even if gained thanks to a historical narrative that is devoid of any scientific value . Bulgarians were for many years aware of Bulgaria's humiliated position as the '16th Soviet Republic', and then came the Transition, with the demands of the International Monetary Fund. Over a million of our compatriots left the country. At that time, in Dimitrov's unbelievable stories about the glorious past, many Bulgarians sought solace and hope. To this day they are convinced that the proletarian internationalism of the time has been replaced by the ideologies of 'globalisation' and 'Sorosoidism', which are harmful to the country. And why not say that quite a few professional historians think like Dimitrov? (Дечев, 2018)

What inevitably remains after reading the text is the author's insistence that there were no sanctions against the creation of a 'chalga history'[15] (Илчев, 2005) and its uncontrolled publication by the Sofia University Publishing House. There is no serious backlash concerning the intertwining of private, state, church and business interests. The stylistic lapses and obscene language in Dimitrov's state-

[14] As far as I can tell, the difference between staff and non-staff collaborators is that staff collaborators undergo compulsory training in Russia (cf. Методиев, 2008, p. 291).

[15] This is a popular story in the style of Dimitrov, characterised by a largely fake and made-up factual narrative.

ments are not only left without a public response, but they are also particularly attractive to the media. Of course, his populism cannot be seen in isolation from the populism of other political figures of the period.

So far, we have shown how the peaceful dismantling of the totalitarian system allowed the evolution of national communism before 1989 to national populism afterwards. Being a relatively new phenomenon, populism as a discursive strategy is a sign of a crisis of democracy.[16] 'Populist discourse is that which creates an antagonistic boundary between the people and the elites' (Чернева & Вацов, 2022, p. 7). Such discourse contains a critical ethos insofar as it blames the authorities for serving foreign interests. In this sense, it is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. The 'populist turnaround' (Чернева & Вацов, 2022, p. 8) leads to a blurring of the boundaries between 'right' and 'left', as is characteristic of contemporary democracies in the US and Europe. Over the last decade, the leaders Trump, Putin, and Erdogan have had an enormous influence worldwide on the growth of the new populist wave, or the interpenetration between 'right' and 'left'. The Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe warns in her book *The Democratic Paradox* that 'the blurring of the frontiers between left and right, far from being an advance in a democratic direction, is jeopardizing the future of democracy (Mouffe, 2000, s. 7). By asserting this, she strongly objects to so-called 'third-way' theorists pushing 'right-wing' measures in the economy to solve social problems from left-wing parties. The danger that the nationalist rhetoric of the players and speakers of national populism could 'infect' the political elite could create the conditions needed for the reversibility of democracy.

No catharsis: retellings and interpretations of the *Slav-Bulgarian History* scandal of the 1990s

The scandal arising from the dilemma of *whether or not Slav-Bulgarian History should be returned to Zograf Monastery* has divided Bulgarian society. When President Stoyanov announced his decision to give the manuscript to the monks in Athos, the national-conservative political party VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, IMRO) was triggered

[16] See *Kultura* magazine, issue 03, 2022 with the theme of the issue 'The New Populisms'.

and announced that it would make a human chain in front of the National Historical Museum to prevent its removal (Христов, 2012, p. 228). The effects of the media spectacle are proven by the 3,000 signatures collected at UNWE (University of National and World Economy) for *History* to remain in Bulgaria. This is also the date of the statement of the collector Boyan Radev, whose affiliation to the communist services was later made public, that he donated 20 precious icons from his collection with inscriptions in Greek; it is not known how he got hold of them (Христов, 2012, p. 228). These public facts happened because of an ongoing analysis of the Peaceful Transition and the state of democracy. The Department of New Bulgarian Studies at the New Bulgarian University organised a conference on the discussion of the fate of Paisius's book (Кьосев, 2005, p. 247).[17] In Kultura newspaper, texts appeared by prominent literary scholars, cultural historians, linguists and theologians, who produced accounts of what had happened and offered interpretations, complicating the media-staged bipolarity of the conflict.[18] These are texts written during or shortly after the events, before the event was highlighted by the agents of State Security. In this connection, it is necessary to note that in all of these publications, without exception, without any conventionality or arrangements, the type of perpetrator was identified: the cop. Undoubtedly, in the year of the circulation of these articles in the Bulgarian cultural domain, no one thought of differentiating between 'informer' and 'secret collaborator' – these were later rhetorical practices to exonerate the officials of the First General Administration, a strategy to emancipate cultural work as more elite and noble than other departments of the State Security.

The publication of most of these texts in Kultura newspaper sets a general journalistic framework for the articles on the case, which, with their clear thesis, place the case in the current problems of the transition. We do not have the opportunity to examine in detail all the positions in the articles, but we will draw attention to two intertwining motives.

[17] I did not find a conference proceedings or program. I suppose that some of the texts published in Kultura magazine are presented there.

[18] See the article by Georgi Todorov, "Disgrace or Glory" (*Kultura*, December 20, 1996; Тодоров, 2005, pp. 191–197); Svetla Ivanova, "The Hurt Bulgarian Virtue" (*Kultura*, January 23, 1998; Иванова, 1998). Issue 11 of *Kultura*, March 20, 1998, featured three articles by Mikhail Nedelchev, "The Story of History's New Appearance" (Неделчев, 1998); Alexander Kyosev, "The Museum: Four Figures of Theft" (Кьосев, 2005, pp. 247–267); and Inna Peleva, "Homesick" (Пелева, 1998).

A significant common ground in the response to the *Slav-Bulgarian History* scandal is the view that nationalism and its semantic double, namely patriotism, proved to be favourable and safe ideological contrivances. Nationalism is an alibi for private interests. It also appeared to be the unmistakable substantive and stylistic framework within which the profession of 'cop' could sound proud: 'The story of *History's* miraculous emergence thus turned out to be another story of the legitimisation of cops as decent, honourable people' (Неделчев, 1998). I quote the final line of an article by Mihail Nedelchev, who says that he was invited as an expert linguist by Bozhidar Dimitrov to the National Historical Museum to identify the authenticity of the allegedly planted manuscript. The idea of legitimising the secret services of the communist era fits with Nedelchev's sad observation about the ceaseless start over and over again of the Peaceful Transition 'without any historical memory build-up' (Неделчев, 1998). Inna Peleva also writes about the 'empty space of non-events' in the 1990s (Пелева, 1998). Starting from the distinction between symbolic and legal belonging and from the mutual reversibility between 'real' and 'symbolic capital', Alexander Kyosev considers what happened to be a 'postmodern event' (Кьосев, 2005, p. 259). He gave up media-staged theses and antitheses, provisionally offering four motivations for the theft, called 'figures'. The author finds the identification of the theft from Zograf Monastery with the figure of 'sacred theft' in the national narrative of the novel *Under the Yoke* by Ivan Vazov just as unconvincing as excusing crimes by giving them national importance. Without exception, analysts of this case in the 1990s insisted that what happened to *Slav-Bulgarian History* was a display of inauthentic nationalism:

> We are talking about yet another simulacrum – the structures sliding out of the shadows just need symbolic capital urgently and are ready to appropriate it from whatever 'green purses', whatever museums, whatever monasteries and sacred texts, wherever it is hidden, regardless of whether they steal it and return it to the museum. What is needed now is legitimisation – at any cost, quickly, immediately. The only solid symbolic resource appeared to be the nationalist one. In this sense, the secret services, the criminal power groups, the credit bankers and millionaires, the treasure hunters and donors, and the people with dubious collections are *nationalists by default* – there is simply nothing else that could provide them with a legitimate, authoritative public voice at the moment in their eyes, and this is the greatest wealth for the moment. (Кьосев, 2005, p. 263; italic is mine, SD.)

Simulacrum is a public stylisation of an established setting with populist stylistic deviations typical of democracy.

The second very important thematic link in the articles devoted to the scandal is associated with the lack of catharsis in society after the case was resolved. The moral case attributed through populist discourse proves insufficient to yield any general mental change regarding the significance of *Slav-Bulgarian History* for the nation. Here is how Inna Peleva recounts and interprets what happened:

> After all, the will for confrontation (the core of the mental and sensual stereotypes of the National Revival, spreading around the bit of matter torn off the body of the epoch) eventually sent quite a lot of people to line up in front of the Museum. *They had not read and would not read that old book*, but they wanted to articulate the suffering someone had caused them, to manifest an image of pain and anguish, to blame others – rulers and foreigners – through it. (Пелева, 1998; italic is mine, SD.)

According to Peleva, normalisation occurred 'without catharsis'. However, its occurrence also seemed almost impossible, insofar as the populists' genre decision was *a legend* but came out as a *performance* rather than a classic tragedy with a half-guilty and half-innocent protagonist. Although what happened was supposed to shake the community in terms of national self-esteem, it did not actually happen: 'It appeared as a symptom of us placing enlightenment in the museum, *of choosing silent contemplation over reading* and dissemination, sacred material values over communicative and intellectual ones' (Кьосев, 2005, p. 259; italic is mine, SD.). This means a regression to a 'magical' symbolic resource of a collective superstition that undermines the values of the Enlightenment.

A common bleak finding in metatexts in cultural periodicals is that society chose to co-participate in the national-identity narrative through worship, i.e., through fetishisation of *History*, rather than through its reminder-reading-reconsideration.

Literary studies in the 1990s: a deconstructionist approach to *Slav-Bulgarian History*

However, *Slav-Bulgarian History* was re-read in a very small elitist circle of philologists. It is not very clear whether the scandal was the trigger; rather, it was the background event of an already started revision of Paisius of Hilendar's contribution to the Bulgarian National Revival that gained momentum

with the promotion of poststructuralism and deconstructionism in Bulgaria. At the beginning of our study, we drew attention to the relational approach in some 1990s interpretations of Paisius's text and context, which later drew other similar readings. The first in the 1990s were Vladimir Trendafilov with his article "Paisius – not a Constructor, but a Construct of the [Bulgarian] Revival" (Трендафилов, 1996) and Inna Peleva with her study "Paisius – the Beginning and the End of Story-telling" (Пелева, 1999, pp. 7–35). They, independently of each other, problematised the role of Paisius of Hilendar in building the nation, taking away the national identity narrative from its natural and organic core, and interpreting it as constructed by national ideologists. The fact that proponents of the natural-nationalist thesis of the nation's formation emerged quickly is indicative enough, but how did the deconstructionist approach expand the cultural biography of *Slav-Bulgarian History*, and what are the morals of this interpretation for the nation in general?

To begin with, deconstruction is useful when there is an enduring consensus of knowledge. It creates the prerequisites for a pluralistic approach to the subject. Construction is always a decision procedure: it prioritises something over something else. The nation has been a thematic driving force of ideologists since the liberation from Ottoman rule (1878) because it appears as a field in which forms and symbols of fateful connectedness can be created. Secondly, deconstruction is above all an analysis, not a disassembling or destruction of socially constructed knowledge. It is a 'thinking about origins' that prioritises the needs of memory at the expense of the needs of history. Specifically, the relativist approaches to the Slav-Bulgarian History of the 1990s are not at all intended to dethrone Paisius from his position as the author of Bulgarian historical consciousness but to ask whether Paisius actually created the Bulgarian National Revival and mobilised other analytical tools beyond personality? In other words, these readings of *Slav-Bulgarian History* in the 1990s problematised the only enduring historically stable legitimate entrance to it: nationalism.

It remains to answer the question of whether making the State Security archives public or highlighting the secret collaborators who carried out Operation Marathon gives us a new perspective on collective memory. We have to bear in mind that these announcements under the circumstances date from the eve of another anniversary of *Slav-Bulgarian History*, i.e., the 250th anniversary of its writing, which also means an expected mobilisation of the media. We have information that President Peter Stoyanov was sure he did the right

thing (Стоянов, 2008). TV interviews with those involved and the perpetrators are available on the internet and give the general impression that there is no new line of motivation for the theft: a delegated job with patriotic motives had been done. The ideologist of the illegal seizure of treasures, Alexander Fol, the one closest to Lyudmila Zhivkova, is deceased and cannot be held responsible. There is no change either in the populist behaviour of Bozhidar Dimitrov, who is currently the director of the National Historical Museum for the second time after he was fired in 2012 over the *Slav-Bulgarian History* scandal. It is public knowledge that Dimitrov owes his reappointment to the same position years later to President Parvanov (cf. Дечев, 2018). Dimitrov even noted the stabilisation of Zograf Monastery: 'Now thirty-two Bulgarian guys are driving Toyotas there' (Христов, 2012, p. 249). When asked on a TV show whether he would have personally stolen *Slav-Bulgarian History* if he had been tasked with that, he replied: 'with great enthusiasm'.[19]

What the partial opening of the archives has resulted in so far is work in the field of investigative journalism, research in the genres of the documentary history of the recent past, and micro-histories of ruined lives. Gradually, descriptions of the institution of State Security, which, for understandable reasons, Bulgarian society knows only as a repressive mechanism but not as a structure, are also being created. All knowledge of these matters is important, not least for the sustenance of democracy.

Conclusion

We began this account with Joseph Brodsky's open address to Vaclav Havel, in which we found an anthropological perspective in the approach to communism in contrast to the historical perspective on the Czech president's post-Communist nightmare speech. In conclusion, we will only highlight here the main points of Havel's historical thinking concerning phenomena such as nationalism and patriotism, relevant in the 1990s in the Eastern Bloc countries. Throughout communism, Havel says, history stagnated due to the regime's very tenacious internal tendency to make everything equal. He

[19] See the Nova TV programme 'Four versions: why the State Security stole Slavic-Bulgarian History from Zograf Monastery': Публицистиката на NOVA (2016).

sees the reason for triggering the old-fashioned patriotism of the post-Communist era in the attempt to demonstrate difference, and one of the channels to do so is pride in one's homeland. We call Havel's perspective historical because it offers not only an attitude to the past and the present but also a way out of the crisis of stagnation. In this speech, the Czech president demonstrates the abandonment of the 'national perception of the world' and the realisation of personal responsibility, as in 'today's world everything affects everyone' (Havel, 1993). The Chosen People, he reminds us, have been chosen to shoulder a burden intended for all of us. The main lesson of this sacrifice is to keep us all alert to our indifference when we lightly find out that the unfolding events do not concern us. Awareness of the personal input into the deconstruction would provide a new understanding of destiny beyond the limits of the national.

If poets and scholars seem to be more obsessed with memory, history is a problematic construct for politicians. President Peter Stoyanov also insisted on The 'battle for history' (Христов, 2012, p. 261), referring to the full declassification of the State Security archives. Only against this background can national destiny mean unity between the battle for history and the battle for the future.

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Służby Bezpieczeństwa, *Słowianobułgarska historia* i demokracja lat 90. XX wieku. Nacjonalizm i narodowy populizm

Artykuł stanowi studium przypadku poświęcone nielegalnemu przejęciu z klasztoru Zograf na Świętej Górze Athos rękopisu *Słowianobułgarskiej historii* (1762) św. Paisjusza z Hilendaru, a więc kamienia węgielnego bułgarskiej tożsamości narodowej. Przejęcie to zostało zaplanowane i zrealizowane w okresie reżimu komunistycznego przez bułgarskie Służby Bezpieczeństwa. Artykuł podejmuje również kwestie implikacji społecznych, wywołanych skandalem związanym z ujawnieniem tej sprawy w latach 90. XX wieku. Przedmiotem analizy jest dyskurs populistyczny byłych agentów Służby Bezpieczeństwa, którzy po upadku reżimu zajmowali ważne stanowiska publiczne, a przejęcie rękopisu uzasadniali jako akt patriotyczny. W centrum uwagi znajdują się twierdzenia nacjonalistycznego historyka Bożydara Dimitrova, a także fetyszyzacja narracji o św. Paisjusza z Hilendaru w Narodowym Muzeum Historycznym w Sofii, która w krytycznym momencie bułgarskiej demokracji nie zdołała wykazać swojej wartości komunikacyjnej.

Słowa kluczowe: „Słowianobułgarska historia"; nacjonalizm; komunizm; Bułgaria; Służby Bezpieczeństwa; Bożydar Dimitrow; patriotyzm; populizm

State Security, *Slav-Bulgarian History* and democracy in the 1990s: Nationalism and national populism

This case study is dedicated to the social implications provoked by the scandal surrounding the disclosure of Father Paisius of Hilendar's illegal seizure of *Slav-Bulgarian History* (1762) – a milestone in the Bulgarian national identity – from Zograf Monastery on the Holy Mount of Athos in the 1990s, planned and realised by the State Security during the communist regime in Bulgaria. The object of the analysis is the populist discourse of former State Security agents, who held important public positions after the regime's collapse and justified the seizure as a patriotic act. The focus of attention is the assertation of the nationalist historian Bozhidar Dimitrov. The second focus of the paper is the fetishisation of the story of Father Paisius at the National Historical Museum, which failed to prove its communicative value at a critical point in Bulgaria's democracy.

Keywords: "Slav-Bulgarian History"; nationalism; communism; Bulgaria; secret services; Bozhidar Dimitrov; patriotism; populism

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