

IRON CURTAIN OF MEMORIES: DEALING WITH SOVIET LIBERATION OF BULGARIA IN SEPTEMBER 1944

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Abstract: For Bulgaria September 9, 1944 was a turning point and the main objectives of this paper is to define this historical action (liberation or invasion) for the public memory, including the agreement or disagreement of the political environment and civil society with these two forms. First of all, in September 1944 Fatherland Front's Government saw the entry of the Soviet army not as liberation but as "armed support for the establishment of Soviet regime". During the early post-war years and before 1989, Communist regime in Sofia followed other Eastern European examples honored figures and events from national past, celebrated September 9, 1944 as anti-Fascist resistance, Soviet liberation, popular uprising, Socialist Revolution. All of them, were the ideological ingredients of the Bulgarian regime, presented as forerunners of a new, bright and prosperous "democratic" era.

After 1990, in an annual ritual, Bulgaria's political forces are deeply divided over the September 9, 1944 anniversary of the Soviet invasion of the country, with some seeing it is an occasion for celebration and others as a time for mourning.

The „liberation” of Bulgaria from part of Red Army is a really non-sense. More important, this „liberation” definitely altered the brittle democratic institutions of Bulgaria from most four decades, ideological and political, and transferred the country into a identically totalitarianism as in the USSR.

Ideological usage of history and memory in public discourse, including huge monuments and mausoleums, became part of Communist party mythology and legitimization. Most of these, built on so-called Realistic architecture, transferred its ideological significance on urban or regional legends, as chapters of recent histories. Russia and USSR became, together or separate, elements in national identity of historical memory of Bulgaria.

Keywords: Soviet Liberation on Bulgaria, monuments, memory, history, USSR, Todor Zhivkov, post-Communism

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Right on the morning of September 4, 2019 Bulgarian national news agency BTA submitted further comments on the documentary exhibition marking the 75-th anniversary of the liberation of Eastern Europe from Nazism organized by the Russian Embassy in Sofia. Bulgaria, like other countries from former Communist Europe, disputes its own history. On the anniversary of September 9, 1944, some of a particular persuasion the Soviet *invasion* as a *liberation*. Others, as the advent of four and half decades of repression. Between former Soviet Union memories of World War II and the neighboring ex-Communist European countries it placed, no until 1989-1990, an Iron Curtain of understanding, arguments, and explanations

BTA has prompted revealed the statement of Bulgarian Foreign Ministry which recalls that the Soviet troops entered Bulgarian territory after USSR declared war on Bulgaria on September 5, 1944, the same day when Bulgaria's newly appointed democrat government severed diplomatic relations with Germany and confirmed the country's neutrality towards USSR. "The long-term consequences for Bulgaria were the same as for the rest of the Eastern European countries which fell into the Soviet zone of influence: 45 years rule by a totalitarian regime based on the Bolshevik-Leninist version of the Communist ideology"¹ stated Foreign Ministry in Sofia quoted by BTA.

For the first time after 1990, an official document of the Bulgarian MFA directly challenges Russian's interpretation regarding the role of Stalin and of the Red Army as "liberators"². Ilian Vassilev wrote this is a marker of the end of transition from Soviet to European type of self-consciousness in Bulgaria, as the first formal challenge of the Bulgarian authorities to the monopoly of the Soviet narrative on the Soviet-Bulgarian history around and after September 9, 1944³. First and Second World Wars were not a popular topic for discussions among Bulgarians. In both, Bulgaria allied with Germany, in later case, Hitler's Nazi Germany, playing a losing hand.

1. The significance of September 9, 1944. Discussing the past with historians and political parties on Bulgaria

Debating in one of most influencing essay about the task of confronting unpleasant historical episodes, Mark Kramer noticed that as difficult as the process of historical reckoning may be for many Western countries, it has been

¹ *Sofia, Moscow Clash over Soviet Army's Role in Bulgaria during WWII*, BTA, 4.09.2019, in www.bta.bg/en/c/DF/id/2070603 (13.09.2019).

² Ilian Vassilev, *A historic press-release of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or why of Bulgaria became fed up with "Liberators"?*, "Bulgaria Analytica", 9.09.2019, in http://bulgariaanalytica.org/en/2019/09/09/a-historic-press-release-of-the-bulgarian-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-or-why-of-bulgaria-became-fed-up-with-liberators/?fbclid=IwARztEOoHuRV3hxN_HvOEWBA30hb9oIKNf-wGutRABGcP-vTgKCMNXK_4J2A (14.09.2019).

³ *Ibidem*.

even more arduous in former Communist countries, all of which were left on their own after the demise of Communism. In all of the former Communist countries, the task of coming to terms with the recent past was entirely up to the individual governments and societies⁴.

Liberation of Bulgaria by the Red Army or the start of Soviet occupation on September 1944? Did Bulgaria had a Fascist regime until the Communists took over the power?

Anne Applebaum extensively explained that even nowadays is not easy to evaluate the chronology of the whole Eastern Europe in the last five months of World War II because not everybody has the same memories about the events in that bloody period. In line with Soviet and national-communist standard narratives, Eastern Europe was liberated from Nazi Germany and the Fascist yoke by the glorious Red Army, in a succession of a triumphs, at the end of which the Fascists were destroyed.⁵

For Bulgaria September 9, 1944 was a turning point and the main objectives of this paper is to define this historical action (liberation or invasion) for the public memory, including the agreement or disagreement of the political environment and civil society with these two forms.. First of all, in September 1944 Fatherland Front's Government saw the entry of the Soviet army not as liberation but as "armed support for the establishment of Soviet regime"⁶. During the early post-war years and before 1989, Communist regime in Sofia followed other Eastern European examples honored figures and events from national past, celebrated September 9, 1944 as anti-Fascist resistance, Soviet liberation, popular uprising, Socialist Revolution. All of them, were the ideological ingredients of the Bulgarian regime, presented as forerunners of a new, bright and prosperous "democratic" era.

On the other side of the Danube, Romanian Communist regime faced the same challenges, really linked with inner ideological forces and bilateral relations with Moscow. About August 23, 1944, Romanian Communists agreed as *coup d'état*, Soviet liberation, national insurrection and, last but not least, Nicolae Ceausescu's Socialist Revolution, anti-Fascist and anti-Imperialist⁷.

⁴ Mark Kramer, *Public Memory and Historical Traumas: Poland and the Experience of World War II*, in Florin Anghel, Cristian Andrei Leonte, Andreea Pavel coordinators, "The Image of the Other. Memory and Representation of the Neighbourhood and the World", Editura Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2018, p.35.

⁵ Anne Applebaum, *Cortina de fier. Represiunea sovietică în Europa de Este, 1945-1956*, Editura Litera, București, 2015, p.69.

⁶ Marietta Stankova, *Georgi Dimitrov: A Biography*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2010, p. 180.

⁷ Florin Anghel, *Une évolution de la mystification des événements du 23 Août 1944 dans le discours officiel communiste, 1945-1989*, « Revue Roumaine d'Histoire », 3-4, 1994, p. 331-343. In Bulgaria, for the reinterpretation on Second World War : Petya Dimitrova, Nikolay Poppetrov, *Past Continous : The Second World War and the Changes of the*

Instead, for example Lithuania, it tends to focus exclusively on the victims of the Soviet occupations in 1940-1941 and after 1944. But, as historian Timothy Snyder argues, as horrible as the Soviet occupation was, the largest group of genocide victims in Lithuania were the Jews murdered by the Germans with the help of the local population (some 72,000 Jews from Vilnius and elsewhere were murdered at Ponary in 1941)⁸. Neighboring Estonia, in Tallinn, had also a “history’s conflicting approaches” when it decided to demolished the so-called Bronze Soviet Soldier, in 2007, a strong symbol of Estonian national memory which was in deep conflict with controlling institutional mechanisms from Soviet period until nowadays Russian “unforeseeable” powers⁹.

Iskra Baeva and Petya Kabakchieva concluded memorialistic literature, whether it presented socialism in a negative light or tried to balance between failures and achievements, affected relatively little public feeling and the reason for this and that reading had dropped in the transition years after 1990¹⁰. Both admitted that the main factor forming young Bulgarians’ idea of socialism is the educational system but the impact of school is not to be magnified, since textbook interpretations rarely reach young Bulgarians¹¹. Baeva noticed in one of her books (2006) that Communism, strictly as a ideological regime, did not even exist in Bulgaria: contrary, there were a lot of challenged political regimes from 1939 until the beginning of 2000’s¹².

Evelina Kelbecheva on her turn noticed the Communist regime studies after 1990 were in nothing but all well-organized ignorance and that perfidious academic “normalization of communism”, which actually produces a long-lasting and scientifically legitimized falsification of history¹³.

Narratives About It (the Bulgarian Example), « Bulgarian Historical Review/Revue bulgare d’Histoire », nr. 3-4, 2018, p. 121-158.

⁸ Timothy Snyder, *Lithuania neglects the memory of its murdered Jews*, “The Guardian”, 29.07.2011, in <https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jul/29/Lithuania-murdered-jews-wartime-crimes> (7.12.2019).

⁹ James Kirchick, *Sfârșitul Europei. Dictatori, demagogi și noul ev întunecat*, Editura Politom, Iași, 2018, p. 26; 37; 66.

¹⁰ Iskra Baeva, Petya Kabakchieva, *How is Communism Remembered in Bulgaria? Research, Literature, Projects*, in Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, Stefan Troebst editors, “Remembering Communism. Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe”, Central European University Press, Budapest, New York, 2014, p. 74.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p.76.

¹² Citation in Adam Burakowski, *Bulgaria: în căutarea unui sfârșit al comunismului*, în Adam Burakowski, Aleksander Gubrynowicz, Paweł Ukielski, 1989. *Toamna națiunilor*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2013, p. 400. Ivaylo Znepolski, Mihail Gruev, Momtchil Metodiev, Martin Ivanov, Daniel Vatchkov, Ivan Elenkov, Plamen Doynov, *Bulgaria under Communism*, Routledge, New York, 2019.

¹³ Evelina Kelbecheva, “*And they will enter a church to make a sign of the cross, so that they remain in power...*”, In <http://sofiaplatform.org/and-they-will-enter-a-church-to-make-the-sign-of-the-cross-so-that-they-remain-in-power/> (22.11.2019). See also for first decade

A main level of analysis on the case is the fact that there is much uncertainty regarding the moment when the end of Communism in Bulgaria really happened. Adam Burakowski, an Polish historian on the falls of European Communist regimes, noticed unlike Germans with their November 9, 1989, Czechs (October 7, 1989) or Romanians (December 22, 1989), in Bulgaria such “convenience” it lacked¹⁴ in a chronology: is it November 10, 1989, the day of a *coup* against Todor Zhivkov or, maybe, November 15, 1990 when People’s Republic of Bulgaria has turned into simple democratic Republic of Bulgaria? Iskra Baeva says for the first time in post-Communist era pluralist and free parliamentary elections in Bulgaria (June 10 and 17, 1990) induced now-Socialist, former Communist Party, as absolute winners¹⁵.

Same Iskra Baeva accorded explanations about Russophilia¹⁶ are linked with Bulgarian resistance movement (1941-1944) which was a unique phenomenon taking into consideration the fact that Bulgaria belonged to the Axis, and in addition sought to achieve the national ideal of unification of all territories inhabited by Bulgarians. Baeva wrote the defense of Bulgarians interests by the Russians also played a certain role during the Paris Peace Conference of 1946. Bulgaria avoided a repeat of the punitive peace terms of the Treaty of Neuilly of 1919, and a third national disaster, indeed, far from suffering further territorial losses, and also retained Southern Dobruja.

At once it is important to remember that the specific date chosen for the Day of Homage and Gratitude for anti-Communism in Bulgaria-February 1- marks the 1945 death sentences of 147 members of the Bulgarian World War II governments: the three Regents (including Prince Kiril, brother of Tsar Boris III) during the time boy Tsar Simeon II (1943-1946), 22 former cabinet ministers, 8 Royal advisers, 67 members of Parliament and 47 generals and senior officers, including the commanders of all armed forces. But, these victims of Communism include major military and political figures who worked closely with Nazi Germany, such as Bogdan Filov, Prime Minister in 1940-1943, Petar Gabrovski, Minister of Interior under Filov and in 1943 briefly Prime Minister or General Nikola Zhekov¹⁷.

after Communism: Thomas A. Meininger, *A Troubled Transition: Bulgarian Historiography, 1989-1996*, “Contemporary European History”, vol.5, nr.1, 1996, p. 103-118.

¹⁴ Adam Burakowski, *op.cit.*, p.400.

¹⁵ Iskra Baeva, *Bulgaria- o democrație de fațadă, în stil autoritar*, „Timpul”, Iași, 29.10.2019, in www.revistatimpul.ro-view-article/4207 (12.12.2019).

¹⁶ Iskra Baeva, *The day before the crash- Bulgarian-Soviet relations in the nineteen eighties*, in “Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej”, vol. 47, 2012.

¹⁷ Kristen Ghodsee, *Tale of “Two Totalitarianisms”: The Crisis of Capitalism and the Historical Memory of Communism*, “History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History”, vol.4, nr.2, 2014, p.131-132.

Maria Todorova herself argued in 2009 that in the legal sphere the memory of communism is still present, but is fading irreversibly. For the majority- wrote Todorova-the regime was restrictive of political and economic freedoms, but provided security and the plummeting living standards in the 1990s and after contributed to this perception, transforming in in a special “post-communist nostalgia”¹⁸. Todorova added post-communist nostalgia is not only the longing for security, stability and prosperity but also the feeling of loss for a specific form of sociability¹⁹. On same line it subscribed also Ivaylo Ditchev, a decade after Maria Todorova editorial. Ditchev wrote thirty years after Todor Zhivkov was ousted, Bulgaria is debating the need for a museum on communism, hesitated and never created a serious memorial institution that dealt with the communist period. That’s because it was always too early for some, while for others, it was too late²⁰. “You can say that the period of socialism is downplayed in the history textbooks”, said Vesselin Metodiev, who served as education minister in the country’s first anti-Communist government (in 1990) in a declaration on 2004. “Bulgarian historiography was an ideological discipline. Non-Marxist historians have only recently able to begin studying the historical record”²¹.

Todor Zhivkov himself, in one of its official biography, committed by Institute of History of Bulgarian Communist Party at the beginning of 1980’s, did not mentioned Red Army presence in Bulgaria immediately after *coup d’état* of September 9, 1944. Zhivkov, who leaded Bulgaria from 1954 until November 10, 1989, have no remembering about presence of USSR and Red Army in Bulgaria.²² It only presents the “historical” morning discourse of the new Prime Minister Kimon Georgiev, at 6.25 a.m. at Radio Sofia about the Government of Fatherland Front (with 5 Communist ministers, 4 from the Agrarian Union, 4 from “Zveno”, 2 Social-Democrats and 2 Independents). Zhivkov constantly mentioned “revolutionaries’ groups and detachments”, from Bulgarians, which founded and arrested former ministers from the 1941-1944 governments, members of *Sobranie* allied with the vote in favor of Bulgaria’s entrance into Axis (in 1941), high officials in administration and

¹⁸ Maria Todorova, *Daring to remember Bulgaria pre-1989*, “The Guardian”, 9.11.2019, in <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/nov/09/1989-communism-bulgaria> (14.10.2019).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Ivaylo Ditchev, *My Europe: The impossible museum of communism*, “Deutsche Welle”, 11.11.2019, in <https://www.dw.com/en/my-europe-the-impossible-museum-of-communism/a-51203126> (17.11.2019).

²¹ Nicholas Wood, *Youths know little of Communist era: Bulgaria struggles to remember its past*, “The New York Times”, 10.11.2004, in <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/10/news/youths-know-little-of-communist-era-bulgaria-struggles-to-remember-its.html> (17.03.2020).

²² *Todor Jivkov. Essai biographique*, Sofia Presse, Sofia, 1981, p. 118-124.

police. All of them were deposed in the building of former “Slavianska beseda” hotel, on Rakovski street, to be charged on People’s Court²³. Only on September 15, 1944 Soviet troops entering Sofia²⁴.

Not only Zhivkov but a lot of ideologists after September 1944 have stressed the “double liberation” of Bulgaria from the part of Russians: in 1877-1878 and in 1944. The motive of the “double liberators” appeared in public discourse immediately after the Fatherland Front took over power. It was centered around the idea of the “Slav unity”, “eternal friendship” between Russians and Bulgarians as a foundation of the “Bulgarian-Soviet friendship” which was pointed out as essential for Bulgarians as “sun and air” for every living creature. Vasil Kolarov gave a speech in 1948 and defined the “liberation” as a “typical people’s revolution”²⁵.

Historian Mikhail Gruev assured Red Army occupation officially lasted three years, from September 1944 to December 1947 and insisted that right in this period the maintaining of the Soviets cost Bulgaria about 133 billion leva, as it was the responsibility of the Bulgarian state under the peace agreement²⁶. But, insisted Gruev, if the Red Army had not entered it, Bulgaria’s situation would have been very similar to that of Greece. Probably it would have been subjected to a stronger British influence in the post war years, when the focus of the Truman Doctrine was to prevent the expansion of Communism in Europe²⁷.

Lucezar Stoyanov recently explained in an interview about 75 years from “liberation” of September 9, 1944 the changes of perceptions from the early 1944 until the latest days of Todor Zhivkov’s regime. In a broadcasting declaration at Radio Sofia, on September 9, 1944 Fatherland Front’s government insisted of the *coup* against the Fascist enemies and Germany. Communist “Rabotnichesko delo” has used after a short period “anti-Fascist national uprising”, a fight against German occupation and a Monarch-Fascist regime. Georgi Dimitrov completed with “decisive and liberating role of Red Army”. Only ideologist Vasil Kolarov introduced “liberation” terminology: Russian twice liberation of Bulgaria, once in 1877-1878 and after in 1944. Later,

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 122-123.

²⁴ Marietta Stankova, *Bulgaria in British Foreign Policy, 1943-1949*, Anthem Press, London, New York, 2014, p. 65.

²⁵ Anastasya Pashova, Kristina Popova, Mariyana Piskova, Milena Angelova, Nurie Muratova, Petar Vodenicharov, “*Battles in the Past*” or “*Battles for the Past*”: *Bulgarian National Models of Memory and Memory Policy*, “Balkanistic Forum”, vol.1, 2013, p. 41-42.

²⁶ Polina Spartyanova, *If the Red Army had not occupied Bulgaria, the country would have shared the fate of Greece after World War II*, “GR Reporter”, 12.09.2014, in http://www.greporter.info/en/if_red_army_had_not_occupied_bulgaria_country_would_have_shared_fate_greece_aft/11689 (15.09.2019).

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

1971 People's Republic Constitution of Todor Zhivkov insisted that September 9, 1944 was an internal effort of so-called Socialist Revolution together with USSR and Red Army in efforts to liberate the country²⁸.

In an annual ritual, Bulgaria's political forces are deeply divided over the September 9, 1944 anniversary of the Soviet invasion of the country, with some seeing it as an occasion for celebration and others as a time for mourning.

Petar Stoyanov, who was Bulgaria's President from 1997 to 2002, said that September 9, 1944 was a terrible day because it dramatically splits the Bulgarian nation; was a tragic date because it launched the bloody excesses of the criminal communist regime²⁹. A former conservative politician, from GERB of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, added that September 9 was a day to commemorate the memory of those who had been killed in the 1944 coup. "There is a tendency to return to the principles of an ideology that denies and aims to destroy traditional national values and lay the foundation of new religious without national identity", Toma Bikov said³⁰. In his turn, Mihail Mikov, a former speaker of Parliament and former Interior Ministry from part of Socialist Party, said that September 9 was a turning point in the development of Bulgaria and had defined for decades the fate of the country³¹. "September 9 symbolize the contribution of Bulgarian resistance against Fascism" Yanaki Stoilov, a high Socialist Party politician, said in a declaration read in the Parliament; this date ensured the reorientation of Bulgaria, an ally of Nazi Germany, into a country that fought on the side of Allied Nations" he also added.³² Also, in Sofia, Levski football club-one of the capital city's two major teams and rival to CSKA, the "red" team with its antecedents in the Communist-era army team-issued a September 9 declaration entitled "we will not forget, we will not forgive"³³.

²⁸ Мила Гешакова, *Доц. Д-р Лъчезар Стоянов: 9.9.1944 г ъе пребрат, но го героизираха до народно въстание*, "24 часа", Sofia, 27.09.2019, in <https://www.24chasa.bg/mnenia/article/7676343> (27.09.2019).

²⁹ Clive Leviev-Sawyer, *Marking Soviet invasion on September 9 highlights red lines of division in Bulgaria*, in "The Sofia Globe", Sofia, 9.09.2014, in <https://sofiaglobe.com/2014/09/09/marking-soviet-invasion-on-september-9-highlights-red-lines-of-division-in-bulgaria/> (12.09.2019).

³⁰ Clive Leviev-Sawyer, *Bulgarian politicians again divided over anniversary of September 1944 Soviet invasion*, in "The Sofia Globe", Sofia, 8.09.2017, in <https://sofiaglobe.com/2017/09/08/bulgarian-politicians-again-divided-over-anniversary-of-september-1944-soviet-invasion/> (14.09.2019).

³¹ Clive Leviev-Sawyer, *Marking Soviet invasion*.

³² Idem, *Bulgarian politicians again divided*.

³³ Idem, *Marking Soviet invasion*.

2. Some political history about September 1944: Soviet liberation or Soviet occupation?

Leonid Gibianskii clearly noticed the success of the Communist led September 9, 1944 *coup* in Bulgaria and the subsequent domination of the country by the Communist party would not have occurred without Soviet help and encouragement³⁴.

On August 26, 1944 under threat of the advance of the Red Army in Romania, after the *coup d'état* in Bucharest, on August 23, 1944 led by King Mihai I under Prime Minister Marshal Ion Antonescu and his pro-Axis alliance with Nazi Germany, the government of Ivan Bagrianov made a proclamation of neutrality of Bulgaria. On the same day the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Workers' Party (communist) issued instructions for taking up arms and seizing power. On September 2, 1944 a government was formed with Konstantin Muraviev as Prime Minister which continued the peace negotiations with all sides and stated its will for democratic reforms.

Marietta Stankova agreed it seems plausible that only at the end of August 1944 did Stalin make plans for military advance in Bulgaria. It was evident that Bulgaria was not going to resist to the Red Army so that Soviet occupation and the ensuing political influence over the country would be achieved without any material or human losses. The new Bulgarian government of Konstantin Muraviev, also noticed Stankova, was formed to solve a single issue, that of getting Bulgaria out of the war³⁵. Again Anne Applebaum confirmed Soviet Army occupation on Eastern Europe, in 1944-1945, was not scheduled and was not part of a long-term ideological and political thinking in 1944³⁶.

On September 5, 1944 Georgi Dimitrov was suddenly informed by Molotov of an imminent Soviet declaration of war on Bulgaria. Stankova confirmed in her Dimitrov's biography that he had not participated in this pivotal decision³⁷. The Soviet Government declared war on Bulgaria on September 5, 1944 at 6.00 p.m. Moscow time. It seems that the Bulgarian Government learned of the Soviet declaration of war from the radio and had to determine its authenticity *via* Ankara.

The delayed Soviet entry in Bulgaria on September 8, 1944 could not have been caused by fear of the last retreating German militaries even if any kind of interference by the Soviet Union in the domestic affairs of Bulgaria was presented as based on criterion of national interest. On the night before

³⁴ Leonid Gibianskii, Norman M. Naimark, *The Soviet Union and the Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1954. A Documentary Collection*, The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, Washington D.C., 2004, p.9.

³⁵ Marietta Stankova, *Bulgaria in British Foreign Policy*, p. 64.

³⁶ Anne Applebaum, *Cortina de fier*, p. 88.

³⁷ Marietta Stankova, *Georgi Dimitrov: A Biography*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2010, p. 179.

September 9, 1944, when the Soviet invasion had begun, the officers from the political group *Zveno* seized crucial facilities in Sofia: the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Interior, the Central Post Office, the Telegraph Office, the radio. The Fatherland's Front plan went smoothly, and key government, military and communications positions in Sofia fell into the hands of the plotters, with minimal effort and without bloodshed. It was a proclamation on Radio Sofia at 6 o'clock in the morning of September 9 by the new *Zveno* Prime Minister, Kimon Georgiev, that first informed Georgi Dimitrov of the safe establishment and the new composition of the new government³⁸.

Contrary to fears on the right or even inflated expectations on the left of the political spectrum, Georgi Dimitrov was eager that the new regime should appear as moderate and non-revolutionary as possible. One of his first communications, on September 9, 1944, already warned against the establishment of Bolshevik-style councils in Varna. A week later Dimitrov practically forbade the use of the term "anti-fascist revolution", as to reminiscent of the ideas of class war³⁹. On September 22, 1944 already Dimitrov sent Stalin additional information about the situation in Bulgaria: he ventured to raise some positive points, such as the lack of a fixed exchange rate for the rouble (which fed the black market), and the resumption of fishing on the Black Sea coast. But Dimitrov drew attention to the occupying forces' arbitrary confiscation of cattle, foodstuffs and vehicles, and worse, the drunken behavior of soldiers who were pillaging and raping⁴⁰.

All of them have been summarized by American Representative in Sofia, Maynard Barnes, in a telegram of December 1, 1944 to his Secretary of State in Washington: "*it must be said in all honesty that all Bulgaria is in a hell of a state*"⁴¹.

Just in the moment when Soviet troops had begun the occupation of Bulgaria, it carried from some days a clearly political transition in Sofia, also a geopolitical transfer from the Axis and Nazi Germany's alliance to neutrality and searching peace with the Allies. A new government directed by Bagrianov controlled from part of political opposition had just taken over the power and had announced publicly the starting internal and foreign affairs schedules. Bulgaria had just begun to renounce to the Nazi Germany's alliance, especially after Romania took the same, on August 23, 1944 and the presence in the Balkans of the Reich's armies simply became a problem and a burden also.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p.180.

³⁹ Marietta Stankova, *Georgi Dimitrov*, p. 180.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p.182.

⁴¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers*, vol.III. The British Commonwealth and Europe, 1944, doc. 435, Telegram 871.01/12-144 from American Representative in Sofia, Maynard Barnes, to the Secretary of State, December 1, 1944 in <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v03/d435> (25.09.2019).

Dealing with history as political memory became a currently skill for nowadays Russian leaderships, including Kremlin deciders. President Vladimir Putin claimed at the end of 2019 after reading the wartime diaries of a Polish ambassador in Germany, Józef Lipski, he was disturbed by an exchange between Polish officials and Hitler, wherein Hitler described a solution to the „jewish question”: deporting Jewish people to Madagascar and other colonies, Putin claimed. „A bastard, an anti-Semitic pig, you cannot put it in any other way”, Putin said of Lipski⁴².

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3. Memory War as Memory Political Places: Soviet Monuments of Liberation or Well-Organized Ignorance of Occupation and Communism?

One of first cities to experience “liberation” during the Red Army’s invasion of Bulgaria was Varna. The bustling port city was renamed Stalin from 1949 to 1956⁴³ (as in Romania the old and mountain city of Braşov) and rising up from 1978 from the city’s northern most point Turna Hill is an indelible reminder of USSR coming to the aid of its Bulgarian brethren: the Soviet-Bulgarian Friendship Monument. Just recently in the 2000’s the city of Varna solemnly removed the status of Stalin as honorary citizen.

The monument dedicated to the Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship in Varna is 48 m wide, 23 m tall concrete structure. Its construction began in 1974 and it was inaugurated on November 13, 1978 after architect Kamen Goranov and a team of local sculptors won a national contest to build a commemorative monument. The original bronze inscription above the entrance once read “Friendship for centuries throughout centuries”. On its left wing, it depicted three Bulgarian women offering salt, bread, and Bulgaria’s national flower, the rose. On its right wing, four Soviet soldiers all facing towards Moscow. Inside

⁴² Blake Dodge, *Vladimir Putin accuses Poland of anti-semitism, colluding with Hitler*, “Newsweek”, 26.12.2019, in <https://www.newsweek.com/vladimir-putin-accuses-poland-antisemitism-colluding-hitler-1479208> (27.12.2019). See: Waclaw Radziwinowicz, *Putin szczuje na Polskę. Według prezydenta Rosji miała ona aprobować zagładę Żydów*, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, Warszawa, 23.12.2019, in <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,25541699,putin-szczuje-na-polskie-wedlug-prezydenta-rosji-miala-ona-aprobowac.html?disableRedirects=true> (27.12.2019).

⁴³ Adam Maisel, Will Duval, *Ghosts of Soviet Past: Do Bulgaria’s Historical Russian Ties Spell Trouble For NATO On the Black Sea Coast?*, “Modern War Institute at West Point”, 27.04.2017, in <https://mwi.usma.edu/ghosts-soviet-past-bulgarias-historical-russian-ties-spell-trouble-nato-black-sea-coast/> (14.09.2019).

the monument itself once consisted of numerous passages and chambers which originally served memorial and museum purpose.

All of this constructions, despite a *lieux de mémoire* of Russian and Soviet friendships, are now in ruin and devastated.

Not only in Bulgaria, but all of the other Eastern European countries expelled Soviet monuments from public spaces in searching to improve exclusion of “liberators” from collective memories. There are a lot of emotional not punitive impulses where local authorities or governments has decided to get out historical rubbish from collective memories and from public spaces. Ian Buruma explained, in an essay from 2005, “monument sometime work best when they are abstract” and “one reason why most people still know about Auschwitz or Buchenwald, but not about Magadan or Kolyma, is that so physical evidence of the latter survives. Where the pitiful remnants of past brutalities decay, there is no need to reconstruct them”⁴⁴. For all *lieux des mémoires* in Eastern Europe about “Soviet liberation” public memory recording Red Army as ideological but occupation forces and figures: it exist just few and not important examples in former Communist countries, also in former USSR until 1991 (Baltic states, Georgia or Ukraine) when the memorials or modest monuments remained in central parts of capitals or major places and cities.

In other case, only the symbolic national day is already debating by politics, between mythological Independence and Soviet “liberation”. Belarusian example is edifying for almost three decades after USSR collapse in 1991. The annual anniversary of the proclamation of Belarusian People’s Republic, which is celebrated on March 25 and called the Day of Freedom, is, for the Belarusian opposition, the main occasion to publicly demonstrate views which are different to the government’s official narrative. Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime has previously completely ignored this celebration, even more so that the country’s official Independence Day, the anniversary of the liberation of Minsk from Germany by the Red Army in 1944, falls on July 3⁴⁵.

But there were also political and security policies interests for preservation and lighting Soviet monuments and their memory in most parts of former USSR, looking interests of Kremlin for all these former “soviet republics” or just Eastern Communist countries. Estonian Internal Security

⁴⁴ Ian Buruma, *Tainted ground*, “The Guardian”, 15.10.2005, in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/15/germany.comment> (23.11.2019). Such *lieux des mémoires* was as different as those remembering First World War, for example. In Romania, dedicated these: Ionaș Popescu, *Monumentele eroilor din județul Tulcea*, Tulcea, 2013 and Sînziana Cuciuc Romanescu, *Simbolistica militară în arta românească interbelică*, Editura Muzicală, București, 2015.

⁴⁵ Kamil Klysiński, *The celebration of the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian People’s Republic*, “Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich”, Warszawa, 28.03. 2018, in <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-03-28/celebration-100th-anniversary-proclamation-belarusian-peoples> (23.11.2019).

Service Annual Review for 2017 determined “Kremlin makes funding activities and events related to memorials a priority” and “Russian agencies must identify, preserve and popularize cultural and historical monuments related to Russia’s historical past abroad”⁴⁶ for Moscow working to strengthen its control in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. In this regard, it is for Estonian part to adopt necessary measures for exclusion of Red Army monuments out of public, such was the operation to move Soviet memorial of the Maarjamäe, built between 1960 and 1975 and commemorates the so-called Ice Cruise of the Baltic Fleet, the evacuation of Russian warships from Tallinn to Helsinki in February 1918⁴⁷. In on turn, Agata Pyzik noted people who deface and destroy statues across the former USSR are confusing the past with the present⁴⁸.

Vasil Kolarov gave a speech named “The liberation of Bulgaria from the Turkish yoke” published in 10,000 copies on the occasion of the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Bulgaria in 1948. Speaking about “the limitless gratitude to the courageous Red Army, which by a thunder like invasion on the Balkans drove away the German hordes from the Bulgarian land and gave the Bulgarian people the full possibility, to rise up against the fascist executions, to take its destiny in strong hands”⁴⁹.

This myth about “double liberations” found expression in monumental art, museum policy, legislation and celebrations. As in Varna, Soviet Army monuments in Bulgaria allows to see as a major landmark of cities, which means the Soviet statues are becoming part of the local environment. First of all, Communist regime in Bulgaria expressed gratitude towards the Soviet Union for the central role she had played in Bulgaria’s national survival, by erecting central, impressive monuments dedicated to the Red Army. Communist mouthpiece “Rabotnichesko delo” stressed on the editorial of October 3, 1947 “no Bulgarian heart could exist that does not join initiatives for the immortalization of the Bulgarian people’s recognition towards the Soviet Army”⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ ISS: *Russia exploiting war memorials to stir up conflicts abroad*, Eesti Rahvusringhääling, Tallinn, 12.04.2018, in <https://news.err.ee/746397/iss-russia-exploiting-war-memorials-to-stir-up-conflicts-abroad> (20.09.2019).

⁴⁷ *Tallinn wants to determine Soviet monument’s historic value*, Eesti Rahvusringhääling, Tallinn, 28.03.2018, in <https://news.err.ee/692520/tallinn-wants-to-determine-soviet-monument-s-historic-value> (20.09.2019).

⁴⁸ Agata Pyzik, *Why Soviet monuments should be protected*, “The Guardian”, 29.09.2014, in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/soviet-ussr-monuments-should-be-protected> (22.11.2019).

⁴⁹ Anastasya Pashova, Kristina Popova, Mariyana Piskova, Milena Angelova, Nurie Muratova, Petar Vodenicharov, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁵⁰ Yannis Sygkelos, *Nationalism from the Left. The Bulgarian Communist Party during the Second World War and the Early Post-War Years*, Brill, Leiden, 2011, p. 135.

Professor Ivaylo Ditchchev said Bulgaria has a problem with historical memory because it is very difficult to reach a consensus on such sensitive topics as the country's Communist past. But, argued Ditchchev, "monuments are not what they were in 19th century"⁵¹ when their symbolism was taken more seriously. These because from the morning of June 18, 2011, and successively years after, the citizens of Sofia woke to discover that during the night the soldiers on the monument to the Soviet Army, erected straight in center of Sofia in 1954, had been repainted in the colors and capes of Batman, Superman, Santa Claus and other characters.

Boiko Penchev, an academic and columnist, wrote in "Dnevnik" from Sofia on July 8, 2011 painting a Soviet soldier as Batman is a sacrilege. "It's an undermining of historical memory when history is rewritten in a non-organized way, without the sanction of the party and state. The monuments are there constantly to remind us of who has the power to impose an "official" memory of the past"⁵² concluded quoting source. And, it cheered the author a stunt aimed squarely at a national "mentality that leaves Bulgaria a country that resists change. The anonymous painters did not just paint over the grey figures of the monument. They painted over the grey face of power itself"⁵³.

In 2014 the statue of Soviet liberators in Sofia was painted overnight on August 17th⁵⁴. Also, in the early hours of September 9, 2018 the same Soviet Army monument was again daubed with white paint⁵⁵, surely to commemorate the Red Army invasion and instauration of Communism regime in 1944. Not also in Sofia, but in Silistra, just accross on the Danube, the monument of Soviet Army was daubed with red paint to depict the soldiers as having bloody hands on the eve of 74th anniversary of invasion on September 1944. The municipality of Silistra- who gained the monument right in center of city- issued a reminder

⁵¹ Mariya Cheresheva, *Painting Monuments Stays in Vogue in Bulgaria*, "Balkan Insight", 8.05.2017, in <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/05/08/painting-monuments-stays-in-vogue-in-bulgaria-05-07-2017/> (20.11.2019).

⁵² "Dnevnik", Sofia, 8.07.2011, translated into *The superheroes of Soviet Sofia*, in "VoxEurop", 9.07.2011, in <https://voxeurop.eu/en/content/article/765421-superheroes-soviet-sofia> (20.11.2019).

⁵³ Toby Manhire, "*Bansky of Bulgaria*" paints the Red Army pop, "New Zealand Listener", 12.07.2011, in <https://www.noted.co.nz/archive/archive-listener-nz-2011/bansky-of-bulgaria-paints-the-red-army-pop> (23.11.2019).

⁵⁴ Polly Mosendz, *Russia Kindly Asks Bulgarians to Stop Painting Over Their Soviet Monuments*, "The Atlantic", 20.08.2014, in <https://theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/russia-kindly-asks-bulgarians-to-stop-painting-over-their-soviet-monument/378844/> (22.11.2019).

⁵⁵ *Soviet Army monument in Sofia daubed on 74th anniversary of invasion of Bulgaria*, "The Sofia Globe", 9.09.2018, in <https://sofiaglobe.com/2018/09/09/soviet-army-monument-in-sofia-daubed-on-74th-anniversary-of-invasion-of-bulgaria/> (13.09.2019).

that the law forbade damaging memorials and offenders were subject to penalties⁵⁶.

“Liberation” of Bulgaria in September 1944 by the Soviet Army, as heritage on national history was a construction of political memory. Communist regime has legitimated its foundation almost as exclusively on 1944, September 9, usual as a *coup d'état* in a domestic political chronology. Ideological usage of history and memory in public discourse, including huge monuments and mausoleums, became part of Communist party mythology and legitimization. Most of these, built on so-called Realistic architecture, transferred its ideological significance on urban or regional legends, as chapters of recent histories. Russia and USSR became, together or separate, elements in national identity of historical memory of Bulgaria.

After 1990 political and social confusions, including nostalgia for Todor Zhivkov dictatorship, had not succeed in refreshing historical memory and disposing it in a normality. Not even political or scientific debates but maintain of 1944 “Liberation” on the center of local identities in such great urban places like Sofia, Varna, Burgas, Plovdiv were relevant. Abusing these signs of totalitarian memory, instruments of Communist propaganda, in fact abandoned and poorly maintained from part of communities and local authorities were received different and opposing reactions from part of political but also public opinion. A solution on this historical and national identity memory war- a regulation of “Liberation” on Bulgaria in 1944 by USSR- will be conclude also to deposing or not the lot of these specific monuments and mausoleums.

⁵⁶ *Monument to Soviet Army in Bulgaria's Silistra daubed to depict “bloody” hands*, “The Sofia Globe”, 2.03.2018, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2018/03/02/monument-to-soviet-army-in-bulgaria-silistra-daubed-to-depict-bloody-hands/> (13.09.2019).