

Rituals of Transformation, Establishing Time Boundaries for the End of Socialism: The Case of Bulgaria

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How does one era end and another begin? How do people publicly express themselves in a crisis of transition? Improvised drama is one alternative. What follows are some recent personal observations in the form of an essay rather than a research article. The objective of this essay is to give a view of current sociopolitical transformations in Bulgaria. The passage through this period of transition is still incomplete at the time of this writing.

In Sofia as in most other European capitals, the time depth approaches or exceeds millenia of recorded history. A long history is attested to by the surrounding architecture. The tradition of formal nationhood in Bulgaria dates only from the latter part of the 19th century (1878). Its monarchy lasted about 20 years longer than the post World War II communist government. The architecture of the ritual and ceremonial core of Sofia sets the framework for this ethnographic essay.

When an existing governmental system is overthrown in a revolution and a new one established, there are annual holidays to mark the event and to legitimize the successor regime, as was the case with the coming into power of Bulgaria's socialist government. But what happens when the legitimacy of the ruling elite and their supporting ideology is undermined but the transformation in power relationships is incomplete? How do people manifest their rejection of beliefs no longer held, of a political system no longer valued? This essay also attempts to address this question.

In Sofia this past summer frustrations were acted out and ritual performances improvised, old belief systems previously marginalized were reaffirmed and hopes for the future expressed. The central squares in Sofia were the setting for these events. In some respects these events have an analog to the revolutionary dramas that were enacted during 1989-90 in Berlin, Prague and Budapest. The specific historical architectural backdrop against which these events unfolded provides not only temporal context, but the buildings themselves represent variously an outmoded and rejected ideological system as well as symbolize an underlying continuity of beliefs both secular and sacred. What I saw was a combination of rites of exorcism and, on a

different plane, of affirmation. In this setting architecture so laden with overt symbolism was a solace and a support, as well as an enemy which had to be destroyed or rendered meaningless. Anger, even hate was expressed with reference to buildings and monuments as well as with respect to individuals and ideologies.

These events were an unforgettable marker in my own life, even though they were obviously in another frame and with a different intensity of meaning for the citizen participants I had the privilege to observe--citizens taking political charge of their lives as they had not been able to do before. Unlike former East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary or Poland, there had been no history of revolt or open opposition to communist rule. As one who was an adolescent at the time of World War II, graduated from the University of Michigan in 1950 and studied at the Russian Institute at Columbia during the early 1950s, I was truly a product of the Cold War. Maturing in the environment of what appeared to be a stable confrontation of opposing blocs and seemingly diametrically opposed ideologies, I experienced a seemingly stable ideological universe where matters were not pleasant but where many behaviors were predictable.

The quick collapse of socialist regimes throughout Eastern Europe can only be partly attributed to the withdrawal of the Soviet Army as the dominant military force in this area. Most Western specialists on Eastern Europe did not anticipate the rapidity of the changes. Examining the events of this summer in Bulgaria, once considered the most orthodox and stable of the East European regimes, provides insight not only into the processes of change but also helps gain understanding of ways in which that former communist state functioned. It is now apparent that in Bulgaria, with its hard line approach to communist orthodoxy, the lack of revolts and experiments did not mean that the regime had in-depth support among its population. Witnessing the disintegration of what had seemed so solid, so secure, where people seemed so obedient carries with it a profound lesson about the limitations of the ability of states to permanently modify behavior even if they've had almost a half century and were willing to use a free hand in coercion. What seems so impressive is how little valued this system seemed to be--no civil wars here or even violent confrontations by organized groups to maintain communism, just variations felt by different groups in which pathways were appropriate to take to implement change.

The Setting

A stroll this past summer along the distinct yellow brick paving of Sofia's Ruski Boulevard had for me, elements of The Wizard of Oz about it, since it is on this street that the tomb of the founder of the Communist state, Georgi Dimitrov, is located. The drama focused on but a few city blocks, from the National Assembly Square through that of the 9th of September 1944, (the establishment of the postwar Bulgarian communist state) to the one named for Lenin. In this short space are embodied marked contradictions between historic relationships, enduring cultural ties and current assertions of national dignity, political independence and intellectual freedom. The architectural setting is detailed in a Baedeker fashion since the actors in last summer's drama used them as points of orientation.

A Czar and Churches

The equestrian statue of Czar Alexander II, the "Czar Liberator," whose armies helped end Turkish rule in 1878, marks one end of the scene. He is mounted up between the National Assembly and the recently built but slowly decaying Grand Hotel Sofia. This circular square leads into, a part of Ruski Boulevard lined with low 19th and early 20th century buildings reminiscent of older streets in Leningrad. There is the Army Officers Club and a small Russian Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas built prior to World War I at the request of the Russian Ambassador who did not wish to worship in the "schismatic" Bulgarian church. Set in its own adjoining cobbled square is the massive Alexander Nevsky Cathedral of the Bulgarian Orthodox Patriarchate (begun in 1882). Nevsky was the patron saint of the Czar Liberator. Also in this square is the church of St Sophia, originally begun in the 6th century on the site of older churches, and nearby under a willow is the grave of Ivan Vazov a premier founder of modern Bulgarian literature. In 1960, at the height of communist power, Nevsky's dome was regilded with some 18 pounds of gold leaf. In a park between the Patriarchate and the Boulevard is a sculpture group of heroes of the Workers' Liberation Struggle. Their bronze faces writhe in agony like saintly martyrs consecrating a new faith. Back on Ruski Boulevard glass cases fronting on the street display photos of newly elected representatives to the multiparty National Assembly with their individual identities color-keyed to party affiliations.

Altering Values

A small park, formerly manicured and an in-town respite area, is today the site of a busy flea market. During the initial days of sanctioned freedom it became an open-air art gallery and has expanded to include tourist art, old and new clothing, crafts, books, tapes, antiques, fast food and to one side, gambling. There appeared to be few visible controls. People crowd each other for space in the limited square block area. Amidst the crowd I noticed a familiar bronze statue of two fawns. In 1975 I was resident with my family in Sofia under an exchange agreement between the Bulgarian Academy and the National Academy of Sciences. Our then five year old daughter on first seeing the statues had scampered over to pat them. She had been gruffly yanked back by a woman who chided, "What kind of citizens are you? Where is your respect for the People's property?" Today buyers, sellers, spectators and loungers trample every available space. "This is our little Montmartre," a vendor proudly remarked. The woman who chastised us back then seemed to embody former concepts of authority and discipline inherent in a "Peoples' State."

Turning of regulated public space into an area devoted to individual private gain is emblematic of other transformations. In this society basic changes have occurred in the period of less than a generation since we last spent a considerable time in Sofia. During our 1975 stay our older daughters attended a Bulgarian English language high school (there were also similar schools which emphasized Russian and French). At that time all high school students had to wear precisely delineated uniforms. After our arrival we stayed for several months at the then new Grand Hotel until the Academy found housing. One day our daughters returned from school to our hotel. But the usual doorman wasn't on duty and they were refused entry since Bulgarians, especially young people in school uniforms, were not ordinarily allowed into a hotel reserved for foreigners. Today those required uniforms with their rigid dress codes are an historic memory. These minor changes are like a few leaves in the wind but last summer's demonstrations were preceded by many changes in expected behavior.

Abhored Monuments of the Recent Past --Communist State Architecture

Following Ruski Boulevard beyond the Officers Club and the small Russian church leads one to the 9th of September Square. Here is a small replica of Red Square in the sense that it is planned public space designed for parades, reviews and mass gatherings. The former Royal Palace, painted a soft green, houses combined Art and Ethnographic Museums. Its relatively modest size is in keeping with the scale of the other buildings on the avenue. Directly opposite this graceful structure is the stern, grey granite Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov. For decades his remains were watched over by honor guards in formal dress uniforms from the era of the prewar kingdom. in their feathered headresses they changed guard by goose-stepping smartly to the military barracks on an adjacent street. An official description depicts the erection of the masoleum following the death of Dimitrov in Moscow in July, 1949.

"The Mausoleum was built in 6 days and 6 nights ... On either side of the door to the crypt (never used by the public) are figures of the great party militants --D. Blagoev, G. Kirkov, G. Dimitrov and V. Kolarov. (His) body was embalmed like those of Lenin and Stalin by the Soviet expert professor B.I. Zbarskij." While the Soviet model may have been important, what was the hurry to build such a structure in so prominent a place and have it immediately surrounded by the ritual of uniformed guards? Clearly the masoleum was to be a focus for national rituals, an appropriate place for the new political elite to oversee manifestations of public support. Thus part of the reason for the hurry was obvious, to attempt to establish immediately an honored relic to buttress the tradition of the new secular state. Dimitrov was to be enshrined as a culture hero, the first secular king. But he was one without a defined heritage of legitimacy, without prescribed rules of succession.

Until this past summer Dimitrov's remains continued to be viewed by the curious and perhaps occasionally reverent. The public entered through a back door. To this observer's untrained eyes, in the subdued light of the guarded crypt the body appeared as from a wax museum. This attempt at embalmed immortality lasted only 41 years, considerably less than a normal life expectancy, until July 1990. His remains were secretly removed at night and given a formal burial by the still-ruling Communist (renamed Socialist) Party government. Prior to his removal the opposition had draped caricatures of Dimitrov as Sphinx over the railings around the entrance. The furtive removal of the remains at night and under the pressure of demonstrations

was a significant acknowledgement of the loss of the ruling government's loss of legitimacy. After the removal, by day a large hastily covered up hole was easily visible at the back of the mausoleum.

Dimitrov's tomb was of a different order of people's property than the bronze fawns our daughter had tried to pet in the park, but this item of peoples' property survived. Overnight the formerly sacred and restricted territory of the mausoleum and its surroundings was secularized, one less forbidden spot for the public. The guards disappeared. Casual passersby sat on the rails before the bronze doors in front of which soldiers had stood at attention. Local and foreign photographers mounted the mausoleum where officials had once stood to gain a vantage point. Children played near the once forbidden entrance. Desanctifying graffiti appeared on the walls. (I had never thought of graffiti before as temporally bonding an era and, in effect, a way of life.) It seemed to me last summer that Ruski Boulevard became a kind of time line linking, as it did, a sitting parliament with hoped for plans for the future, with the 9th of September Square (name not yet changed) and the former Royal Palace and former mausoleum, which together formed two definitive points in linear historic time, two expired political epochs. Communist theory did define a sequence of past historical epochs meshed into a forward looking ideology with a promised new epoch of secular fulfillment. But how to put this ideology, with its promised future of illusion, in the past? Just as individual deaths require a ritual of closure, so too, do the termination of epochs have dramatic rituals of passage. These rituals are not regularized. From this point of view the outcome of wars, with their rituals of victory or surrender, seem to have more formalized rites of passage than essentially peaceful transitions from one governmental system to another. But such transitions do require a process of purging, of cleansing of the past which appears not to have been willingly accepted by many if not most. These improvised rituals of transition were acted out in the square in front of Dimitrov's former tomb in a place from which the power of the now-expiring state was projected.

Anchoring a corner of the Square across from the Royal Palace and manifesting overwhelming power is the proportionately immense stone Party headquarters. From its roof glowed a large red star illuminated every night. Mounted on a tall pole above the high roof, it was the tallest structure in the area. Its height and symbolism might have once served as a beacon, like some secular church spire. Most recently it had been looked upon by many as an affront, a provocation. The building presents itself in its heavy-set Stalinist style as a fortress of

monolithic communism dwarfing the surrounding structures, not unlike an imperial castle in a feudal society. During last summer this Socialist Party headquarters was the focus of hostile demonstrations. By September demonstrators had set it on fire. Reportedly, after the fire, some party functionaries conducted tours of previously inaccessible parts of Party headquarters. The building had only been completed in 1955 and in concept and appearance had appeared built to endure for centuries. Its period of preeminence was even less than that of Dimitrov's tomb.

Rituals of Political Transformation--The Past in the Future

Across from Dimitrov's tomb at the other side of the square is the National Bank, constructed just before World War II. It represents a kind of neutral ground. A feature of the building is a flight of wide steps leading up to the main entrance. These have recently served as tiers of seats for silent vigils as well as demonstrations.

The evening of the day we arrived in Sofia marked the opening of the new session of the National Assembly. Toward dusk, the usual time for strolling in this historic heart of the city, the Square became filled with what appeared to be a spontaneous gathering. There were people of all ages. As they entered the area most formed themselves into seated rows on the bank steps. Each person held a candle. When the steps were completely filled, new rows formed as people sat down directly on the bricks. Dusk grew into darkness. On signals from organizers, the candles were lit, and the large, orderly crowd streamed down Ruski Boulevard in the direction of the National Assembly chanting "CDC, CDC", the Bulgarian initials for the Union of Democratic Forces, the opposition coalition group. Impressive as this demonstration seemed from a distance, one had to march with the crowd to fully sense the power of this peaceful and orderly crowd. While it is hard not to believe that the organizers were not influenced by similar processions some months earlier in Czechoslovakia the profound commitment of the demonstrators was evident. In fact a recent book on Eastern Europe bears the title, *Lighting the Night*³ with the symbolism of bringing light to darkness readily apparent.

Confronting The Past

But such aesthetically pleasing and hopeful performances do not directly confront the past nor obviate the need for rituals of expiation and cleansing, in a sense, a public cathartic. One day a mechanical scapegoat appeared in front of the now empty masoleum. it was a cream-colored, battered, more than thirty year old, Soviet auto with flat tires. Upon this iron scapegoat were heaped the expurgated contents of homes and offices, the ideological detritus of the collective past accumulated over almost five decades. Here were personal documents in the form of party membership cards and awards, books of speeches and the collected works of party leaders.

Included were not only the material remains of Bulgarian communism but those from the larger pantheon of founding fathers -- Stalin, of course, but also Lenin, Marx and Engels. These materials were not simply thrown on a pile of discards but artistically linked to the ordinary detritus of industrial civilization such as old auto parts, shoes, broken pieces of furniture, discarded vacuum cleaner parts. Surmounting the pile were portraits in broken glass frames of recent luminaries such as the long-term former premier Zhivkov, Dimitrov, as well as the Soviets' presently or formerly embalmed "immortals." overlying each broken portrait was a well-worn toilet seat. During the time the car remained in the square each day brought forth a new arrangement. Once the car was topped with a dead conifer festooned with discarded red communist party ribbons, a mockery of the state holiday with the New Year's tree. One day I brought my camera and took a photo of a boy adding his newly discarded red Pioneer scarf while the adults applauded. While I focused on what seemed to be an appropriate angle to catch the full visual impact of the toilet seat framed portraits, a young man ran up behind me shouting, "Why do you want to preserve this? I want to spit on it!"

Occasionally someone would bend down to examine an item from the pile but no one ever seemed to take anything away. I thought it might be of historical interest to collect a few items for an American archive but it seemed to me that this would be interfering with the way people wished to dispose of ideological reminders of a now despised past. It was necessary to respect the ways in which others bury their dead, even if the remains were not purifying corpses and whitening bones but printed matter and photos. This was not a form of Hitlerian book-

burning, a futile attempt to ban vital ideas by incinerating them but rather this appeared to be a careful, measured, even if occasionally emotional, effort to discard a noxious burden.

Hitlers' troopers attempted to dispose of works that they deemed dangerous or decadent, and in so doing acknowledged their power. None of these materials seemed to be valued, even by the Socialists. Had they ever been more than passing writs or justifications of temporal authority? The Bulgarian communists embalmed their leader and established official school and holiday rituals, but these seem to have lacked a larger context of legitimacy, of rationalizing myth. In the Square the emphasis seemed to be on achieving a break with the past by contemplating it and subjecting it to ridicule, then allowing it to pass away. It did not seem that people were confronting the antichrist or the devil incarnate but rather I seemed to sense a collective mourning for lost years and destroyed hopes for a better life, a better society. This grieving was not for a political system which claimed superiority, lied, promised much and delivered relatively little in valued results beyond a secured mediocrity. As the summer weeks wore on, a self-appointed caretaker swept up and rearranged the growing heap of discards. The increasing space was carefully marked off and contained within an ever widening funereal black cloth border contrasting with the light brick pavement.

Throughout the time of this public display there were always lots of police with their vehicles parked on the streets leading to the square. People were always ready for conversation, especially denunciations of recent Communist history. They eagerly sought a chance to engage and even bait a still believing socialist. These conversations seemed to be oral performances which paralleled the function of the pile of discards. People felt a need to gather about and denounce the past and so doing, to confront it by variously expressing rage, disgust and disappointment even, in a way, lamenting for time misspent. In response to my query it was continually repeated that the police would not interfere and that army tanks would not come "like in Tiananmen Square." The only time I saw such activity was when a seemingly distraught supporter of the Socialist Party ran from the square yelling for the police, claiming he had been threatened by a young man from the opposition. When the police grabbed the young man and began to shove him around, a crowd immediately gathered around them and the police released their captive.

This public ritual of rejection needs to be placed in perspective. The rejection of Communist ideology and its accompanying monolithic state is a selective process concerned

with the immediate past and is very distinct from ideas about national identity and core components of the culture such as religion. Thus Lenin framed in a toilet seat is quite distinct from the historical tradition of the Czar Liberator and aspects of Russian culture in general. Thus while these rituals of rejection were taking place in the Square, Soviet bookstores on Ruski Boulevard and elsewhere continued to do a brisk business with non-ideological items such as literary classics, well-produced art books and technological manuals in high demand. It was the monolithic ideology of Communism that was being rejected and not the state's relatively generous social benefits.

City of Truth

Next to the bank building is the Archeological Museum housed in the former Bujuk Dzamija, or Great Mosque, built in the 15th century. Across the street is the low church of St. George containing frescoes from the 12th century. This is within another part of the massive Stalinist building complex off the Square. This part of the massive Stalinist architectural complex houses the revamped Sofia Sheraton, formerly the Balkan Hotel. At the head of the complex was a massive statue of Lenin, then still standing. In this setting a group of tents were pegged out in the grouting between the yellow paving blocks. Overhead banners proclaimed, "Communist-Free Zone," "City of Truth." In the heat of summer it was like a political fair. Representatives of dissident groups, with students and intellectuals predominating, sat on camp strolls, or relaxed in their sleeping bags and lounged about in jeans and T-shirts. Some conversed with visitors, lovers embraced and others did housekeeping, fixing coffee, sweeping up and collecting trash. Outside most tents were identifying banners and tables for distributing flyers, selling alternative newspapers and signing petitions. Daily, satiric political cartoons were pinned to tent flaps. Mass-produced plaster-of-Paris busts of Dimitrov were lobotomized and used as ashtrays or, surrealistically, as vases for fresh flowers.

Prominent was a "popemobile," a tented van manned by an Orthodox priest. Daily he conducted mass from the tailgate, complete with a swinging censer wafting incense over an attentive crowd. Young men and women in street dress stepped forward to be baptized publicly. Much in evidence were numerous tents of the Green Party whose initial demonstrations on ecological matters had first seriously challenged the Communist government. A student strike in

June had also helped raise consciousness and mobilize intellectuals and professionals. inhabitants of the "city of truth" included historians, librarians, geologists, chemists, mathematicians, language and literature specialists, writers and those representing political parties in the Union of Democratic Forces (CDF). Signs listed their University of Sofia or Bulgarian Academy of Science affiliations. Present as well were representatives of the monarchist party, with color pictures of the royal family. A maverick booth had a petition, with many foreign signatures, for Bulgaria to become the 51st state of the United States.

Political theater took the form of three men who paraded through the tent city wearing oversize paper mache, caricature masks of Zhivkov, the more recently-resigned Socialist Premier Mladenov and the then Socialist incumbent Lukanov. The cleverly executed masks were immediately recognizable as the wearers clowning their way through the encampment. A visiting Frenchman asked if these masks were for a summer holiday rite.

Soviet and Other Parallels

A recent issue of Soviet Anthropology and Archeology, *A Region in Turmoil, Armenia*; (Fall 1990) presents previously unpublished papers by the Armenian scholar, A. Abran-lian. In his "Archaic Ritual and Theater, From the Ceremonial Glade to Theater Square," he discusses the recent popular mass demonstrations in Erevan. These events are unlike the happenings in Sofia in that they take place against a background of conflict. Violence is involved in the Armenian rejection of communism and assertion of national identity in the face of the army of the Soviet state. He describes confrontation with Soviet troops. But the author, a specialist in ritual behavior, stresses the impact of staged drama in a place appropriately called Theater Square. In one fascinating scene he depicts how protesters faced Soviet tanks by making a symbolic barrier of the works of Lenin which the troops would have to crush before reaching the demonstrators (P.58). He also describes how the protesters defended the square by forming a single line joining hands. The tents in the square which housed the hunger strikers are likened to "booths in a fair." These, of course, are not rituals of closure but of resistance which is perhaps the fundamental difference to the Sofia street scene.

The Bulgarian events seem sedate by comparison, especially as concerns the staged Armenian funerals of martyrs. For Armenia the more precise analogs are to Tbilisi and, more

recently, the violence in the cities of the Baltic states. Sofia relates perhaps most closely to East Berlin, Budapest and especially to events in Prague's Wenceslas Square. But violence was not absent from Bulgarian communism, and among the pamphlets for sale at a stand in front of the mausoleum was one detailing past deaths in state detention camps.

It doesn't seem appropriate to graft a conclusion onto this essay since the political process is still evolving in Bulgaria and the basic economic reforms and constitutional changes are mostly still to be made. Despite Bulgaria's close historic ties with Imperial Russia and with the Soviet Union the model of eventual transformation will most likely be closer to that of other East European states than to the travails of its giant neighbor.

Notes

1. This article is based on observations made during the summer of 1990 when I was in Sofia as a guest of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. This assistance is appreciatively acknowledged, as is that of the Research Council of the University of Massachusetts. Parts of the publication appeared in an earlier version in Universities Field Staff International, Field Staff Reports 1990-91/ No. 12.
2. Nagler's Encyclopedic Guide, Bulgaria. Geneva, 1969, p. 79.
3. William Echikson, William Morrow, 1990