INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Bulgaria (the third of five parts)

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Dear Peter,

This newsletter gives you a tour of the Museum of Bulgarian History from Thracian treasures through the era of their national revival and up to the years before World War Two when Bulgaria had a multi-party system. You also hear some of the views of an editor and assistant at Bulgaria's main opposition (i.e., anti-Communist) newspaper, Demokracia, and of one of the principal representatives of the main opposition movement, the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS).

Museum of Bulgarian History

The Museum of Bulgarian History provides a welcome refuge from the sultry Sofian heat and diesel fumes, because it has very few windows and is very sparsely lit. Its brass, granite, black marble, and columns recall the court house that it had been in the interwar period. There was no orientation plan of the museum, but the old man who takes the tickets at the door is well informed and ready to help. There were few visitors on the ground floor, and even fewer made it to the second floor. The third floor was closed. The museum guards', mostly young women with bored expressions and civilian clothes, were sitting around at various spots throughout the museum and chatting with small groups of friends who seem to have come expressly to visit them.

The ground floor exhibition is The New Thracian Treasures from Rogozen, Bulgaria. This is a relatively new exhibit of gold, silver, glass, and ceramic work that had been discovered by a tractor driver (that great hero of the socialist revolution -- although in this case probably not fictitious) named Ivan Dimitrov Savov. This exhibit even has (real) English explanations at several points.

The museum is, as one might expect from a country where Eastern Orthodox was the predominant religion, full of lovely icons. It's also full of reproductions of maps by disoriented

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cartographers of olde. The era of the "Turkish Yoke," from the sixteenth century till 1878, is represented by the symbols of Turkish oppression -- armor, sabers, and tax books -- and of the Turkish contribution -- coffee services. The "Battle for National Independence" (i.e, the uprising against the Turks) understandably is extensively exhibited and there is a 1.5-meter-tall bell that is a symbol of Bulgarian faith in the freedom mission from Russia.

There is also an interesting certificate to Victor Hugo, which named him an honorary member of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Committee in Bucharest, Rumania, because he had sent a letter supporting the aims of the Bulgarian revolutionaries against the Turks. An example of the Bulgarians' appreciation for the American contribution to this struggle is a letter dated 17 November 1876 to Eugene Schuyler, Consul General of the United States in Constantinople; it was signed by Gerasi, the episcope, on behalf of the Bulgarians of Philippolis (now Plovdiv), which had been one of the main centers of the April Uprising. The main part of the text is as follows:

> No nation had ever contracted such a debt of gratitude towards disinterested defenders of truth as we have done towards you and the noble land of your fellow workers. [...] it was only when the weight of your name was added to the reports of our misfortunes which reached England that that explosion of feeling broke out which saved a nation and marked an epoch.

Also exhibited here were copies of newspapers that had reported on the April Uprising: the Swiss Berner, the Gazette de Lausanne, Der Bund from Bern, as well as the Czech newspapers Çeskÿ pokrok [Czech Progress] and Narodní listy [National Gazette].

The second floor had another large display, Education in Bulgaria, as part of the larger exhibit of the National Revival. It showed a very crudely drawn globe that was used in geography in Bulgarian grammar schools and the first book printed in modern Bulgarian, which didn't appear until 1806. It is a collection of sermons Kyriakodromion sirech nedelnik [A Collection of Sermons for the Entire Week] by Sofroni Vranchanski. Bulgarian literature did not become secular until the mid nineteenth century. Dr. Petr Beron (1800-1871), a national revivalist and the first pedagogue to teach in Bulgarian, was instrumental in the development of Bulgarian schools from religious to secular. He spent a long time working abroad in Paris, London, Austria, Romania, as well as several visits to Prague. He had been in correspondence with the Czech scientist and educator J.E Purkynê (the latter was also a friend of Goethe), and had experience with Greek and German schools. He authored their first spelling-book, which was published in 1824. A whole room was dedicated to an exhibition of life and work of one of their main national revivalist authors, Ivan Vasov, who was also Minister of Education and a diplomat.

It was a Czech, Dr. Konstantin Jireçek (1854-1917), who wrote the History of Bulgaria (1876). Jireçek was a lecturer in history at Charles University in Prague but went to work as a secretary in the Bulgarian Ministry of Education in 1879; from 1881-82 he was the Minister of Education. He then returned to teach at Charles University and later ran a Slavonic institute in Vienna. Although his history of Bulgaria was published in Bulgarian, the printing and publishing was done in Odessa,

Russia. At that time many Bulgarian books were being published there, as well as in Romania and Hungary. The book was immediately translated into several other languages.

Most interesting, because it was a sign of at least some attempt to reexamine the past, was the "Exhibition of Political Parties through the Decades in Bulgaria, 1878 - 1944". A small but nevertheless informative exhibit, it contained campaign leaflets, newspapers, as well as photographs and personal affects of leaders of many of the 17 parties and their trade unions. (Many of the party leaders had posed for these photo portraits in military uniforms or tuxedos and sported at least two medals -- a tradition in this part of the world, which Rumania was perhaps one of the last to carry on so late into this century). These political parties lasted from the late 1880s until all were banned or suppressed from 1934 through World War Two; they didn't appear again until liberation in 1944 and were soon suppressed and banned again when the Communists were fully in power.

In comparison to the monotonous tone of the history of the BCP, which Bulgarians had been force fed for decades, this exhibition showed a history full of various actors including the Progressive Liberal Dragan Cankov, 1828-1911; the Conservative National Party; the political journalist Grigor Vasilev who from 1938 to 1939 was leader of the democratic opposition; the National-Liberal Party under the leadership of Stefan Stambolov (1853-95); their newspaper was Svoboda [Freedom]; the Bulgarian Agronomist-National Party, whose leader was Alexander Stambolijski (1875-1923); the Liberal Party under the leadership of Vasil Radoslavov (1859-1929), whose paper, from 1888, was the bi-weekly Narodni prava [National Rights]; the Democratic party; the Radical Democratic Party under the leadership of Najchov Canov (1857-1923), and their paper the Democrat; and the Radical Party, their leader Todor Vlajkov, and their newspaper, the Radical-Liberal. A chart demonstrated the confusing array of metamorphoses that the parties went through. The Communist Party, in particular, had several names as it went through several transformations, some factions existing simultaneously.

Also displayed is the first Bulgarian Constitution, bound in red leather that has its title and date it became law, April 16, 1879, inscribed in goldleaf. Since those days of constitutional monarchy, the Bulgarians have had a few other constitutions.

The exhibition didn't seem to be biased toward or against any one party, and there was none of the vindictive against the other parties, which the Communists were formerly so keen on heaping on others (no use even of the term "monarcho-fascist"). The Bulgarian Communist Party, nevertheless, had a slightly larger display in a cabinet all to itself. The Party was founded in 1857 as the Social Democratic Party and became the Communist Party in 1919. From 1856-1924, it was led by Dimitr Blagoev (1891-1924). George Dimitrov (1882-1949) succeeded Blagoev and led the Party until his death. A photo of the young Dimitrov lay beside his modest notebook of French vocabulary that he was learning in prison in 1918, together presented a contrast to his 41 years of glorious entombment in the Dimitrov Mausoleum. This display case was dominated by a small Communist flag of rough fabric, faded from crimson to pink, with its hammer and sickle crudely sewn on. There was a document with Dimitrov's words from Berlin, 1935, where he called out "We must unite and make a

common front against the fascists!" In retrospect, it seems that circumstances of 1935 demanded joint action from parties of divergent credos, but the times also provided the Communists with a perfect opportunity to gain legitimacy. Circumstances have since changed and the Communists seemed to have done everything possible to lose that legitimacy.

There were also political postcards with caricatures and an enlarged reproduction of a newspaper cartoon "Bulgarian Parrot" by S.S. Solchinski from 1919. It reminded me of the work of the British cartoonist Cruickshank and depicted the deputies in the 1919 Bulgarian Parliament as bickering animals. The Communist worker, in peasant garb, is in the foreground to the left, building a wall, which so far is up to his waist while he calmly waits for his moment.

The most gruesome and, therefore, most striking display was a ten-inch glass apothecary jar containing cotton stuffed on top of some grayish material and adorned with a faded tricolor ribbon of red, gray, and pink. It was the heart of the Radical Democrat leader, Canov, and had been donated to the museum.

Trying to Improve the Circulation

I saw the reborn opposition and a reborn opposition newspaper, when we went to visit the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS in Bulgarian) headquarters, a drab, six-story building on S. Rakowski Street. Unfortunately, at first there was no one there from the SDS who felt himself adequately qualified to answer questions, so it was suggested I come back the next day and talk with "the boss". In the meantime, I decided to use the opportunity to talk with the editorial board of Demokracia, the organization's newspaper (actually just one of their newspapers; the other one being the cultural paper, Vek 21 [Century 21]). I first spoke to Boris Spiridonov, who is one of four people who run the International Department of Demokracia.

The first issue of Demokracia came out on 12 February 1990. It has used the large European format since that first issue, which sold roughly 70,000 copies. At the time of the June elections, Demokracia had a circulation of 400,000. This had dropped off to 300,000 and is published six days a week (at the time of this interview in August). The official newspaper of the Bulgarian Socialist (formerly called Communist) Party is Duma [Word] and has more than double the circulation of Demokracia.

The young secretary, Rosica Nikolov, who had first talked to us when we stepped in the office began to add more and more to Mr. Spiridonov's answers, until finally she got up from behind her desk and sat down on a chair directly in front of us. The idea for Demokracia began to gel, she said, in mid-January of this year, when about ten journalists held a meeting, which she also attended. Demokracia hired its journalists on the basis of a competition in which applicants were asked to write three articles on themes of their choice. Rosica is not a journalist but a student of French philology who was unemployed and offered to help the journalists of Demokracia with translations from French. Soon she was also looking after financial matters and doing the paper's secretarial work. Once the chaotic days of February were over, she began to do more work in Demokracia's International Department. On 1 May, she became an official employee there. Boris Spiridonov, before the power-shifts that

started in November 1989, was an editor for Narodna kultura [National Culture], published by the Ministry of Culture.

One of the main problems Demokracia faced and faces is circulation. This is obviously an important element in the life of any newspaper, but for opposition papers (provided they're even allowed to exist) in countries with authoritarian and totalitarian regimes this is especially true. In February of this year, Demokracia was experiencing problems with circulation: the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture stipulated that Demokracia should be limited to a circulation of 75,000, five days a week, and that each issue should only be four pages. The Communist daily, Rabotnichesko delo [Worker's Affairs], at that time had a circulation of 800,000. With the help of public street demonstrations, Demokracia managed to get the government-imposed ceiling of its circulation raised to 100,000, an amount that was sufficient only for Sofia and unable to reach the other major cities, let alone the countryside.

Government control of the delivery of supplies, especially of newsprint, is an effective form of censorship or control against an undesirable newspaper. Demokracia, which works with linotype, has problems all the time with printing equipment. The government claimed that there was a shortage of paper, but the Communist paper always had enough. And it wasn't that Demokracia wasn't popular; Rosica explained that people would stand from 5:00 a.m. in a line of 60 people just to get a copy. Sometimes this event itself became Demokracia's headline. They were not allowed to have subscribers until March or April. Another obstacle was the local Communist leaders in the towns and villages who ordered the postal subscription service, which has a monopoly (as in Czechoslovakia even today) on handling all requests for subscriptions, not to accept any orders for Demokracia. Besides, people in the villages were (and are) afraid to be seen reading this paper. In addition to all this, Demokracia had no telex and no foreign correspondents (the Communist paper, by comparison, had 15 foreign correspondents). Their wages are from private sources, whereas the Communists (I'm assuming Mr. Spiridonov was referring to those who are presently called Socialists) are paid from state sources.

I asked about financial aid and gifts from abroad. In the preelection period SDS and Demokracia received many gifts from abroad, especially from Bulgarian emigres, most of whom are living in the USA, Munich and above all in Stockholm (which is also a strong center of Czech emigre support, e.g., the Charter 77 Foundation was situated there), which, said Rosica, is the strongest and most active center of Bulgarian opposition to the Communists. At present, they are not allowed to receive money, but they do receive equipment. One Bulgarian from Kuwait donated a FAX machine (Demokracia currently have two, and the others are in SDS). One Bulgarian family in Austria drove to Sofia bringing a loudspeaker system for the demonstrations and, after seeing the terrible technical conditions, left their equipment and the minibus with Demokracia. British newspaper magnate Robert Maxwell donated paper that was to be divided equally among the main political parties. This was taken as an indication that he wanted to be in everybody's good books. The people at Demokracia told me that Maxwell does not support the opposition and that he wants to buy old palaces and residences of the Communists. "He doesn't offer support; he just wants to take the profits for himself."

I was curious to learn what they use for guidance or if they have any models (for the newspaper, I meant, but didn't pose the question clearly enough) that they are following. "The capitalist way, the West European way. I don't know. The main task is to create a market-oriented economy, because right now everything is a monopoly of the state." Although this was not the answer I was looking for, it is interesting because it is rather typical for many East Europeans. Many have a vague notion of what they want, i.e., to be like the West, and a slightly clearer notion of what they don't want, namely Communism, of which they've had more than their fill. It is also interesting to note that the people I spoke with always used the terms Communists and Communism even though officially there is no longer a Communist Party; consequently they never used the term Socialist. So how free of the Communists was Bulgaria in August 1990? What about, for example, the secret police? Were they still worried about them? "I don't know about right now," said Boris, "but a month or two ago [June or July], we were sure our phones were being bugged."

What do readers generally think of Demokracia? Rosica said that Bulgarians don't regard it as the best quality newspaper. What does she think about that? "I know we don't have any professionals, and I know why they don't consider us very good. Nevertheless, people like to read it, because they see ideas or criticism that they don't see elsewhere." (This is the same response as I had from my friend Lucie Mertova, when I commented on the occasionally mediocre quality of the Czech Lidove noviny). "We're accused of only criticizing and pointing out bad things, but not proposing anything." Did they agree? I asked. "Yes," said Rosica, "this is a reaction of people who in the past were only quiet. It's very hard to suggest something progressive or constructive under the circumstance we're living in." Boris added, " The whole state is in a kind of chaos, because of the results of bad economic planning. Bulgaria is a failed state. It shows in people who are unable to work properly and be creative. It's hard for all Bulgarians to make a decision, if for 45 years they only took orders. There is almost no change in the economy. The old rules still apply. And, there's no press law."

What is the main message that Demokracia would like to put across? Boris spoke up. "The truth about the society we're living in and the history of this society. The Communists say the pages of history should be closed. We say, before closing the book, we should read it through."

Would they say that the Communist (or rather Socialist) newspaper has become more honest under the pressure of some competition from other papers? "No," said Boris, pointing out that the Bulgarian Communist Party "doesn't care about any laws that effect themselves." "They want to keep the status quo," in that they don't care about competition. "They only want to legalize the property they have or sell it to foreign firms."

I asked Boris about his former employer, Narodna kultura [National Culture], where he was an editor from 1984-89. At this point in the conversation, he became more reflective and his answers were less automatic. In the days when he was working there, "the newspaper was anti-Zhivkov in a subtle way." There were criticisms about the state and about cultural matters, but not of the BCP. Did he think this was the result of Gorbachev's ascent to the Presidency in the USSR? Boris said that after Gorbachev came on the scene, Narodna kultura ran many Bulgarian

translations of articles from the Soviet press. The changes -- perestroika and glasnost -- that took place in the mid-1980s, said Boris, "were designed to happen in a Soviet, i.e., Gorbachev way."

Was there any underground culture or organized opposition in Bulgaria at that time? Boris mentioned a group of about 100 intellectuals, Communist and non-Communist, who formed the "Club for Glasnost and Democracy". Some of its members were expelled from the BCP. There was, in addition, the group "Eco-Glasnost", which also was a mix of political beliefs, and the "Committee for Human Rights," all of whose 15 members had once been arrested. "After 10 November 1989," said Boris, "it became clear who was who." Some of these people then made it into the highest ranks of the BCP and others, like the then just recently elected president, Zhelvo Zhelev, joined the SDS, and Petko Simjonov became the leader of the SDS election campaign.

When I asked about Demokracia's cultural writing, Boris again answered but without much pride. "It's very weak. It's very politicized." Cultural affairs are handled mostly by Vek 21, which Boris says is the best in the country. (I couldn't help but imagine the staff dressed as the real estate agents in the American TV ads). Its editorial board is also located in the SDS headquarters, but unfortunately the editors were at a meeting, so we were able to leave only with a pile of back issues.

Again, Boris emphasized that newsprint was their main problem (I forgot to point out that I didn't see what this had to do with weak or strong writing), and this is not because of the competition for newsprint from the hundreds of other newspapers that have been born over the past few months. "Except for about 50, the other papers will die by the end of the year," predicts Boris. The main problem is that the Soviet Union is the main supplier of newsprint and they're cutting supplies by 30 percent, as well as demanding hard currency only as of January 1991. And, according to Boris, recycling is out of the question as a solution to the newsprint problem.

Why was there no cultural underground like there was in Czechoslovakia, which could have bloomed after the Communists lost their total hold on power? After 10 November, the expected samizdat or unpublished works that were, as the expression goes, "written for the drawer" never appeared. "It turned out that the desk drawers were empty," said Boris.

SDS

On the following day we met with one of the leaders of the SDS, Philip Dimitrov. He spoke to me in very good English because he was "in love with the language" and had gone to an English language school in Sofia. Dimitrov is a lawyer by training, and it shows in his approach to the SDS and Bulgarian politics. He had been working in the Lawyers Union, which was planned as a professional organization, although not quite like a regular trade union. During the elections, Dimitrov ran for parliament in north-east Bulgaria but without success.

So as not to overburden an already heavily laden report, I'll skip the overview and outline of the SDS and its constituent parts, which Dimitrov gave me, and I'll also omit our short discussion about the Turkish problem of a few years

back. I consider most interesting his answers to my question regarding the differences in the Czechoslovak and Bulgarian versions of opposition to Communist rule.

"First of all," he said, "there seem to have been much bigger groups of people in Czechoslovakia who were ready to act in shorter periods of time, for example, the number of people in street demonstrations. Although," he added cautiously, "if we look at the percentages [of the population], maybe the differences are not as great as they seem at some moments." Another difference is connected with the Communist Party members themselves. "The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia plays the game, I'd say, more fairly. The Bulgarian Communist Party seemed to be the most impudent of all. Here, the Communist Party became Socialists but still kept all the Communist symbols and pretend nothing has happened.

"What happened in Czechoslovakia is impressive. [...] We, however, started from a different position. I don't know whether it was right or not, but we started from Parliament, whereas they started from the President. From the point of view of constitutional law, we're more constitutional than the Czechoslovaks were." I don't really agree with Dimitrov on this point, but constitutional law is not my field and I don't have nearly enough of the facts from either country. Nevertheless, I have noticed how the Czechoslovak politicians have almost always had an obsession with the legal or at least bureaucratic aspects of the rules and regulations of government, and that this seems especially true for Civic Forum and Vaclav Havel.

On the question of the lack of Bulgarian oppositional underground before November and June, Dimitrov mentioned that there had been various clubs and ecologists' gatherings, which had been going on for two or three years. "They were scattered, however, and not in touch with each other." As for why there was so little Bulgarian samizdat (i.e., it really didn't appear until the spring of 1989), Dimitrov said that it was hard to answer. He pointed to the lack of communication, which greatly reduces the effectiveness of dissident groups and to what he said (in contrast to Edi Schwarz at the Jewish Cultural Center) was the greater harshness of the Bulgarian regime towards groups that excluded Communism. For samizdat you need about 5,000 people, Dimitrov felt, and there weren't so many dissidents in Bulgaria. Like those other Bulgarians whom I asked, Dimitrov was unable to give a really satisfactory answer to this question. Very few Bulgarians, it seems to me, had actually considered the issue at all. It's hard to believe it's because Bulgaria was more cut off from the non-Communist world than was Czechoslovakia. This is true geographically -- and maybe that is crucial -- but Radio Free Europe, which was instrumental in disseminating dissident Czechoslovak ideas and essays over the airwaves, also broadcasts in Bulgarian to Bulgaria, as does Voice of America, the BBC, and the West German Deutschewelle (which, one old Bulgarian told me, has the best Bulgarian news broadcasts of all). Perhaps it was the lack of attention Bulgarian dissidents (or potential dissidents) and Bulgaria in general received from Western writers, journalists, academics, and cultural tourists.

Yours, Dirk

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