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“Global Dissident”: Georgi Markov as a Cold War Playwright and Exile

Bulgarian writer Georgi Markov was undeniably one of the most controversial and internationally known Cold War dissidents and, after 1969, an expatriate-turned-exile.¹ Although some of his literary works were censored during the time of political stagnation and tightened ideological control, he left his country as a legal tourist and privileged member of the Bulgarian intellectual elite. Under the pressure exercised on him by conservative statesmen and policing critics, the writer ultimately sought refuge in the West. Markov’s radio programs aired successfully on BBC and Deutsche Welle, but it was the chapters of his memoir *Zadochni Reportazhi za Bulgaria* (*Correspondence on Bulgaria in Absentia*),² broadcasted on Radio Free Europe, which presented the most insightful and incriminatory account on Bulgarian dictatorial communism and attracted millions of listeners. This extensive political memoir ultimately led to the author’s assassination in London, widely known as the “Bulgarian umbrella murder”. Although Markov’s death and its long and complicated investigation have been extensively covered in journal articles, film documentaries, and spy histories,³ Markov’s literary work is less studied even in his own country,

¹ The main difference between “expatriates” and “exiles,” as pointed by John Neubauer, is that the former leave their countries without being “existentially endangered [and] in principle they can return any time they want to”. See John Neubauer, Borbála Zsuzsanna Török, eds., *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe. A Compendium* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 9–10.

² *Zadochni Reportazhi za Bulgaria* was first published in Bulgarian in Zurich, 1981. Selected chapters from the book were translated into English and published under the title *The Truth that Killed* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983). The English translation of the Bulgarian title and all other translations from Bulgarian in this article belong to the author.

³ According to Kristin Dimitrova, 136 articles about Markov and his murder were published in major English-language newspapers from 1978 to 2001, including *Washington Post*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Independent*, and *Toronto Star*. One particular article, published in 1993 in *New York Times*, was authored by the famous spy-fiction writer John Le Carré. See Kristin Dimitrova, “Sluchajat

especially in the light of the complex circumstances around the writer's political exile. His dissidence and subsequent emigration, as this article would argue, reveal not only the specific historical conditions and signature behavior of many defiant East European intellectuals, but also his intriguing personality, depth of artistic engagement, and particular life philosophy. To that end, this case study would attempt to macrohistoricize Markov's dissidence and political emigration behind the Iron Curtain by presenting a variety of documentary evidence, but also by seeking representations of Markov's internal and external exiles in some of his most important and controversial plays. These existentialist and allegorical works manifest a growing social and political skepticism that came from Markov's painful realization of the enforcement, interdependency and relativity of the *ally-enemy* and *victor-victim* binaries during the Cold War, as well as from his own experience in playing some of these conflicting roles. Finding different literary forms of expression to exercise his creative and personal freewill, Markov questioned the authority of political oppositions in general and deepened his perceptions of a world characterized by social entrapment, existential solitude, and critical choice-making. Either written in the totalitarian East or the egalitarian West, his dramatic works attest for the writer's "global dissidence" – a form of social engagement, which discursively reconciles the political realities on both sides of the Iron Curtain with the writer's philosophical beliefs and personal experiences.

Rising to the Top: Markov's Literary Career in the Early 1960s

Markov (1929–1978) rose to fame in his native country during the 1960s, winning national awards for his novels, short stories, plays, and movie scripts. Although he held a degree in chemical engineering and worked a couple of years in the technical field, his first short stories and essays were quickly picked by major literary journals and publishing houses, and by 1960 Markov had successfully transitioned to the career of a professional writer. At that time, invigorated by the post-Stalinist thaw, the Bulgarian literature experienced a high demand for new

Georgi Markov otvun, ili Kogato grum udari kak ehoto polepva," *Kultura*, 16 (2001), <http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/5381>. The case of the "umbrella murder" has also been covered or mentioned in many Cold War and Radio Free Europe histories, as well as in some film documentaries, including an episode from the PBS series *Secrets of the Dead* and the most recent *Silenced: Georgi Markov and the Umbrella Murder*, 2012, dir. and produced by Klaus Dixel. The most thorough investigation of the facts around Markov's life and assassination was made by Hristo Hristov and published in his 2006 award-winning book *Ubijte "Skitnik": Bulgarskata i britanskata politika po sluchaiia Georgi Markov (Kill the Wanderer: The Bulgarian and British State Politics on Georgi Markov's Case)*, (Sofia: Siela, 2006).

subjects, characters and a more contemporary style of expression.⁴ Encouraged by the success of his debut novel, the 1959 science-fiction *Ajax's Victors* (*Pobeditelite na Ajaks*), Markov wrote the novel *Men* (*Muzhe*, 1961), which won the Bulgarian Writers' Union award and secured the author's membership in this prestigious but highly political professional organization. Markov's recognition as a writer was not based on prescribed ideological content or artistic conformity: being a product of the Khrushchev's era, the writer belonged to the most progressive local intellectuals, who believed in the political change from within and the restoration of equality and freedom in the Bulgarian communist society.⁵ Although disillusioned about the promises of democratization in the late 1950s, these artists continued to push the boundaries of literature and art, hoping that some of their works may pass the harsh censorship of the totalitarian state. Markov's modern narratives were infused with intellectualism and irony, and, in the cases of his later novelettes *Portrait of My Double* (*Portret na moja dvoinik*, 1966) and *The Women of Warsaw* (*Zhenite na Varshava*, 1968), with more apolitical and personal undertones. Also at the end of the decade, Markov successfully expanded his literary endeavors into the genres of theatre and cinema. He wrote a total of ten plays, which continued the “poetic wave”⁶ in Bulgarian drama and creatively adapted the aesthetics of Existentialism and Theatre of the Absurd to his particular political environment. The young playwright spoke with honesty, sympathy and light humor about contemporary moral dilemmas and never succumbed to the ideologically enforced style of Socialist Realism, which created a stereotypical, “mummified”, and romantic view of the communist subject. Theatre would become Markov's “exilic” space, which dissected and counterbalanced the writer's restrictive conditions of social existence. His dramatic speaker would assume a dissident's voice due to a unique subjective perspective of a physical survivor, political outsider, and champion of higher ethical standards.

⁴ The Bulgarian Communist Party denounced the cult of personality at its historical April Plenum in 1956. At that forum, Todor Zhivkov was elected the new Secretary of Politburo. He later took the Prime Minister seat as well, thus strengthening his dictatorial power. By the late 1960s, Zhivkov had successfully reconstituted authoritarianism and the cult of personality in Bulgarian politics.

⁵ In his book *Seesaw: Cultural Life in Eastern Europe*, Yorick Blumenfeld explains the professional and civil aspirations of the Bulgarian “advanced” liberals: “The aim of these progressives is to create a link between Bulgarian writing and the West. They want to put themselves on the map. Being mostly in their twenties and early thirties, they want to infuse Bulgarian literature with their own vitality, with a genuine idealism”. See Jorick Blumenfeld, *Seesaw: Cultural Life in Eastern Europe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 183.

⁶ Employing lyrical and allegorical language, the Bulgarian drama of the “poetic wave” focused on “light” subjects and humanistic ideas by revealing people's daily life, sentiments, and surmountable problems. Often, the young protagonists appear disconnected from the “revolutionary” generation of their parents and eager to fight for their humanistic ideals and personal happiness.

Markov's ascending writing career brought him a political immunity and economic prosperity. The communist state and its government showed incredible generosity to the intellectual elite and the most popular theatre artists invested in the socialist culture. Markov, for example, had a stable job as an editor of a state-owned publishing house, while simultaneously being granted immediate publications of his literary works. Together with other established representatives of the artistic intelligentsia and members of the Writers' Union, he also enjoyed many perks and privileges. Yorick Blumenfeld's impressions from a visit to Bulgaria in the 1960s affirm the double-standards in the communist society:

[Selected writers were] pacified by very considerable material benefits... The salaries of the members of the Union of Writers are said to be the highest of any professional group in Bulgaria. Of the close to three hundred full-time members, half have their own cars. The Union maintains a retreat in the mountains... and it keeps another villa on the Black Sea... Moreover, many of the authors travel abroad as often as their royalties permit and are privy to special contacts with the West.⁷

In his memoirs written in exile, Markov sums up the glorious beginning of his writer's career: "I passed from the world of the ordinary Bulgarian citizen deprived of his basic rights into the world of those who... had 'set up a state for themselves.'"⁸ Members of the "red aristocracy" easily acquired some of the most deficient goods: real estate, travel visas, non-repayable subsidies, long-term loans, and foreign currency, as well as the "patronage" and protection of high-rank officials. Georgi Markov was one of the few writers to be invited to the private gatherings of the country's political leader Todor Zhivkov, which often aimed to lure, flatter, and corrupt young and promising intellectuals. As a result, Markov was able to request one-on-one meetings with Zhivkov on a couple of occasions when his work was attacked and threatened by vigilant censors.

Throughout most of the 1960s, Markov's relationship with the party-state was precarious and risky, and it resulted in a constant balancing between his privileged position in the intellectual elite and the exercising of personal and creative freedoms. In a society of limitations and double standards, talented go-getters like Markov often attempted to "play" the system's cruel game. A fellow writer, Lyubomir Levchev poetically articulates Markov's ability to maintain his political correctness, at least until the end of the 1960s: "Jerry's⁹ thought danced on the edge of the acceptable and never fell off it. Ultimately, his works were considered exceptionally optimistic. This [professional] 'luck' could not but irritate the less lucky ones. They did not miss an opportunity to hurt him, attributing his success

⁷ Blumenfeld, *Seesaw*, 184.

⁸ Markov, *The Truth That Killed*, 182.

⁹ "Jerry" was Markov's nickname used by his closest friends.

to his clever and refined conformity”.¹⁰ In his dramatic works written between 1967 and 1969, Markov successfully used traditional content – the anti-fascist and revolutionary struggle – favored by the ruling style of Socialist Realism, but infused it with philosophical depth that expressed the author’s existential disconnection with his world. These works also testified for the author’s growing disenchantment with the communist elite and the ideological reductionism in Bulgarian literature.

Internal Exile and Bulgarian-Style Existentialism

Serious deviations from the course of political thaw and more liberal and humane socialism started to take place in Eastern Europe in the second half of the 1960s. The new hard-line policies were set by Moscow and gradually, sometimes painfully, imposed on the rest of the Warsaw Pact countries. The Bulgarian government stayed loyal to the “big Soviet brother” in condemning the writers-dissidents Andrei Siniavskii, Julii Daniel, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn between 1966 and 1967, as well as in the crashing of the Prague Spring in August 1968. A report of the Bulgarian State Security Committee from 1967 shows an increased anti-government activity and defection of young people as a result of the totalitarian oppression and growing economic deficit.¹¹ In 1966 the police apparatus expanded to include the Sixth Department of the State Security, established with the single purpose of surveying and keeping under control the intelligentsia. Since then, approvals and recommendations for any creative work often came directly from the colonels and generals, members of this new police institution. After 1968, an office of the Sixth Department exclusively monitored the programs of The Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Deutsche Welle, and BBC, among others, which, despite the attempts to have their radio waves jammed, were disseminating programs to the East European countries.

¹⁰ Qtd. in Hristov, *Ubijte “Skitnik”*, 75.

¹¹ In the 1960s, several political trials were organized against Bulgarian citizens accused of anti-communist propaganda or spying for Western governments. The most common punishment for political subversion was extended prison sentence, but death penalty was also exercised in a couple of highly publicized lawsuits in 1963 and 1968. Labor camps existed until 1962 under the names Labor Education Boarding (*trudovo-vuzpitatelno obshtezhitie*). The communist government sent to these camps thousands of non-conformists: outspoken intellectuals and young people, who were deemed “hooligans” for adhering to western culture. Hundreds of camp prisoners were killed in random acts of aggression displayed by the guards. After the closing of the labor camps, dissidents who could not be legally convicted were usually expelled from work and from all political and professional organizations. They were often relocated together with their families away from the big cities. See “Hronologia 1944–1989,” *Decommunization*, <http://www.decommunization.org/Communism/Bulgaria/1956–70.htm>.

Markov's successful career took a sharp turn in 1967, when his literary works started to be read more critically. The first blow came upon his play *Let's Go under the Rainbow* (*Da se provresh pod dugata*, 1966), a stage adaptation of the writer's novelette *Dr. Gospodov's Sanatorium*. The play was produced at two state theatres in the province before it had its Sofia premiere at the prominent People's Army Theatre in March 1967. After the thirteenth show at the Army Theatre the play was stopped, likely following a protest note from the Ministry of Culture. In an attempt to prevent the banning of the play, Markov asked for Todor Zhivkov's personal opinion of the text and, ultimately, his support. In a Machiavellian manner, the Party's First Secretary answered that he had found the play politically non-threatening but "very pessimistic and gloomy".¹² He added that he himself could not judge its aesthetic values since he was not an expert in literature, but would leave it to the specialists.

The action of the play takes place in an isolated tuberculosis sanatorium – the typical locked-up space in an existentialist drama – where seven terminally ill patients are forced to share their philosophical beliefs and make life-and-death decisions. The inmates display deep cynicism, despair, and a feral strife to survive for at least another day. The plot is set in 1944, during the time of the anti-fascist movement and rising political struggle of the then outlawed communist party. This historical context is suggested in the image of the wounded communist revolutionary – a young woman who is brought secretly into the facility for treatment. The end of the play, which Markov only wrote during the rehearsals and therefore avoided preliminary censorship, shows that each man in the sanatorium had secretly written a letter to the police to inform on the dangerous inmate. Purporting to expose the behavior of the decaying bourgeois class, the play alludes to Markov's contemporaries who, seized by fear and desire for personal gain, commit daily betrayals of the communist ideal as symbolized by the wounded revolutionary. Lower political authorities¹³ and theatre executives explained that the play was removed from the repertoire because it was inconsistent with the socialist-realist ideal of "truthfully" representing the party's revolutionary past and, therefore, failed to attract audiences. They particularly emphasized the fact that "although the wounded partisan is discussed throughout most of the play, she is shown on stage for only two minutes".¹⁴ In his report on the ideological education in the country, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party criticized the play for its "depressing atmosphere infused by biological and pathological detail,"

¹² Geori Markov, *Zadochni Reportazhi za Bulgaria* (Sofia: Profizdat, 1990): 345.

¹³ Typically, these were the party secretaries within the theatres and the members of the artistic management.

¹⁴ See Zunka Jankova, "Belezhki za piesite na Georgi Markov," *Piesite na Georgi Markov*, ed. Zinovia (Zunka) Yankova (Sofia: Litavra. 2001): 383–394, at 386.

which failed to educate the masses and raise a sense of patriotism.¹⁵ Director Asen Shopov believed that the real reason for banning the play was its incriminating finale, which implied that the contemporary society was comprised of conformists, cowards, and police informers.¹⁶ In his memoir, *Zadochni Reportazhi*, Markov suggests that the stopping of the production might have been for pettier and more self-serving reasons: since the show engaged the best members of the theatre cast, some casual propaganda plays were kept on hold and their authors, Markov's rivals, were eager to put his work under the ideological microscope and take it off the stage.

Seemingly a political allegory, *Let's Go under the Rainbow* actually reveals a lot of the author's personal feelings. Suffering tuberculosis in his youth and having spent some time in gloomy sanatoriums like the one depicted in his play, Markov instilled his work with a distinct skepticism in human nature as well as dark attitude to life. The haunting image of death, which had fuelled Markov's own desire to live fully and achieve fame, overlapped with the gathering political clouds in Bulgaria. Additionally, the successful playwright sensed the hostility and envy of his fellow writers, who were ready for any moral compromise in order to please the political regime and make a comfortable place for themselves in the totalitarian culture. A telling stage-note accompanying the text of another Markov's play written at the same time, *The Elevator (Asansiorut)*, marks the beginning of the writer's self-questioning and pending transformation: "Everyone walks on his path under the force of his own inertia until surprisingly he gets [stuck] in an 'elevator' which stops this journey. Maybe this is the sobering moment of one's awakening and deep self-examination. The journey does not end up here, it will continue, but now is the moment to ask how it should be continued".¹⁷ These lines hint at the writer's concerns of the amounting political and aesthetic constrains; they delineate the psychological space of his internal and existential drama, which involved his personal and professional life. Markov's dramatic works would become the "exilic shelter" of the disillusioned and distancing author. Written with Aesopian language, astute intellectualism, and dark pessimism, they would further address his existential-political entrapment in totalitarian Bulgaria. A deepening sense of alienation pervades Markov's next play, *Assassination in the Dead-End Street (Atentat v zatvorenata ulitza)*, which draws an image of the country as a hierarchically structured military camp set on a "dead-end street". The play's protagonists, Female Student and Male

¹⁵ Qtd. in Hristov, *Ubijte "Skitnik"*, 116.

¹⁶ Around the same time *Let's Go under the Rainbow* was censored, Markov's new novel, entitled *The Great Roof (Velikijat pokriv)* was also stopped from publication. The plot is an allegorical and critical take on an actual case of the roof collapse in a big industrial factory while under construction. The accident took human toll as a result of the managers' incompetence and lack of proper management, but the crime was never openly investigated.

¹⁷ Georgi Markov, "Asansiorut," *Piesite na Georgi Markov*, ed. Zinovia (Zunka) Yankova (Sofia: Litavra. 2001): 133–163, at 162.

Student members of the underground communist organization in 1939, are sent to assassinate a highly ranked General upon his return home from work, which they ultimately accomplish but with the price of their own lives. While waiting to execute their political order, the two young insurgents encounter the rest of the cast, which includes many of the General's admirers and slavish servants, as well as two Talking Heads who philosophize on the topic of dictatorship but are afraid to do anything to oppose it. The most interesting is the character of the Drunk, the only citizen who dares to protest against the General's decision to block the street: "To close my own street! And why? Because he is afraid!... I don't allow him to close my street! Some General! I am my own General!" (179). Parallels with totalitarian Bulgaria in this play are multitude and explicit, including the image of the people's General and his military clique or spineless public supporters. The conversations of the two young and idealistic students lead to profound conclusions about the interrelation of personal and social affairs and come to a sad realization that the assassination might be pointless, since another general would likely take the place of the executed one. In the play's epilog, two new assassins are waiting for another General on the same dead-end street, establishing the image of a historical recurrence, but also implying that every extreme political force would inevitably generate public resistance.

With *Assassination*, Markov was able to appeal to the censors by drawing from the history of the communist insurgency. Nevertheless, the circular composition of the play presents a much larger allegory and implies Markov's subjective views of a bleakly repetitive and oppressing social reality. The life-death dichotomy is expressed through the conflict of the two political forces during World War II, similar to the first examples of existentialist drama written in France. Reacting to the humanistic crisis following the German occupation and colonial disintegration, the literary movement of Existentialism "proposed that man was a lonely creature of anxiety and despair living in a meaningless world, and that he was merely existing until he made a decisive and critical choice about his own future course of action".¹⁸ Playwrights like Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Anouilh shared the belief that the "existential man should adopt some social or political cause in order to acquire ... dignity and purpose" in this absurd reality.¹⁹ Although such philosophical model could have easily accommodated the Marxist idea of class struggle,²⁰ in *Assassination* Markov clearly rejects the

¹⁸ J. L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 118.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 118.

²⁰ The academic Marxist criticism in Bulgaria often changed its positions about Existentialism, vacillating between its social dialectics and humanistic individualism. Manifesting his interest in this philosophical and literary trend, Markov will revisit the ambiguous place of Existentialism in communist culture. For instance, he wittily recounts how Bulgarian critics constantly changed their opinion on Jean-Paul Sartre's ideological positions. The labeling statements about them,

romantic and formulaic socialist-realist representation of the two communist insurgents, emphasizing instead their different ethical and personal motivations for joining the revolutionary struggle. The political dissent and personal credo Markov embraced early on – the socially engaged individualism manifested as an existentialist revolt – was the most impenetrable by leftist believers in collective progress. The writer refused to blindly advocate for the communist-party doctrine, placing instead his focus on the uneasy relationship between civil (political) community and the human being. Ultimately, Markov assumed the position of an outsider and “internal exile,” professing his individualist and humanistic opposition to any form of social oppression.

The public reaction to *Assassination on the Dead-End Street* was contradictory: on the one hand, it was the most produced Markov’s work in the early 1969, playing in four theatres around the country;²¹ on the other hand, it was subjected to utmost political scrutiny. The fact that *Assassination* was produced outside the capital city of Sofia might have been the reason for the censor’s initial oversight. The play’s intellectual appeal also played role in the success of this work. Similar to *Let’s Go under the Rainbow*, the attack on *Assassination on the Dead-End Street* did not come directly from the Politburo of the Communist Party or the State Security, but appeared in the form of an editorial published in the communist newspaper *Rabotnichesko Delo*, which claimed that the play was “foreign” to Bulgarian audiences.²² Despite the official criticism, in the spring of 1969 *Assassination* won the National Drama Award. The performances in all four theatres were stopped only later that year, after two more of Markov’s plays were put on hold before their opening nights, leading to the writer’s decision to leave Bulgaria.

The Road to Emigration

It appears that the cases of *Let’s Go under the Rainbow* and *Assassination on the Dead-End Street* were isolated, and the criticism of the two plays was “friendly,” “formal,” and constructive, hardly capable of destroying the playwright’s artistic credibility and political immunity. After all, it was the Politburo of the Communist Party itself, which in 1968 commissioned Markov to write a play – part of an epic trilogy – in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the socialist revolution in Bulgaria. Markov was granted an exclusive access to secret pre-revolutionary archives containing the recorded police interrogations of communist prisoners

written in textbooks and encyclopedias, swayed from progressive dialectics to “reactionist existentialism” and anti-materialism, and from peace activism to subjectivism and pessimism (*Zadochni Reportazhi*, 357).

²¹ In the spring of 1969, the play won the National Drama award.

²² Qtd. in Hristov, *Ubijte “Skitnik”*, 129.

during the war period (1942–1944). Since the dramaturgical work and rehearsals of the play, entitled *Communists*, attracted many suspicious and critical eyes, Georgi Markov and director Asen Shopov decided to meet with Todor Zhivkov early in the process and receive his blessings for this critical venture. The Party leader, a former political prisoner himself, expressed his personal belief that the characters of the communists should not be romanticized for the sake of a “cheap dramatic effect.”²³ Determined to write a documentary piece, Markov researched deeply in the archives. He later recounted the shock of his discoveries: “[My] first and most immediate impression was of the immense difference between the content of these documents and the picture offered to us by the official literature of memoirs as a whole... A reality which is eloquent and powerful in itself is replaced by painfully sentimental and unsophisticated bombast.”²⁴ In Markov’s play, as in the police documents of the interrogations, the moral dignity of the arrested communists emerges not from some stereotypical gestures and phraseology, but from their genuine idealism, philosophical doubts, simple requests, personal regrets, and confusion as well as fear in the face of death. Some of these young people, who were later turned into revolutionary symbols and political “monuments” by the communist propaganda, shared their human and existential reasons for joining the Communist Party, for instance, because of loneliness, compassion, or sense of personal fulfillment. In the play, their ideals of liberty and equality resonate tragically with the words of their interrogator, Chief of Police, who says: “As for ‘freedom,’ this is the second most meaningless word in the dictionary. Nobody is ever free... There will always be police. It serves those who pay it to protect their interests...”²⁵ These prophetic words reach beyond the simple analogy with the police-run Bulgaria, and display deep skepticism about social dialectics as well as the idea of man’s inherent strife for power and domination no matter what ideology he chooses. In the process of writing *Communists*, Markov also recognized the inevitable manipulation of every major historical event and the exploitation, and even corruption, of the revolutionary ideals as written in the history of the winners. The subtexts in his play excel the political expediency to express the writer’s fundamental disbelief in collective ideology, which obliterates the impact of class struggle in society and estranges intellectuals and thinkers from partisan’s politics. Poet Lyubomir Levchev’s observations that Markov’s “work in the [police] archives had contributed to his personal change,” implies a deeper transformation than the playwright’s growing intolerance towards the communist establishment.²⁶ Markov later revealed his

²³ See Eli Yankova, “Kak be sprjana edna ‘cheshka’ piesa na Georgi Markov,” *Democratzia*, (1 July 1993): 10.

²⁴ Markov, *The Truth that Killed*, 139.

²⁵ Georgi Markov, “Komunisti,” *Piesite na Georgi Markov*, ed. Zinovia (Zunka) Yankova (Sofia: Litavra. 2001): 259–303, at 285, 299.

²⁶ Qtd. in Hristov, *Ubijte “Skitnik”*, 123.

alienated state of social existence in totalitarian Bulgaria, where literature and culture were obliged to echo the myth of a continuous revolutionary struggle and the urgency of choosing a position in the ideological conflict between communism and capitalism. “I had never been able (despite my attempts) to identify with *them*,” he writes, “I had always felt with compelling clarity what was *mine* and what was *theirs*”.²⁷

The most significant critique of *Communists* came from the new minister of Internal Affairs, Angel Solakov, previously serving as head of the State Security. In a formal letter to the writer, General Solakov questions his choice of “epic” style that includes narration and a montage of episodes, and points at the unflattering representation of the young communists compared to the more convincing figure of the Chief of Police. At the end of his letter, Solakov suggests serious revisions of the text that aim to reconstitute the stereotypical political antipodes and make the overall tone of the play more optimistic and inspiring.²⁸ Even before Solakov’s letter was written, Georgi Markov must have felt that his pursuit of historical truth strongly contradicted the ideological norm and melodramatic stance prescribed by the style of Socialist Realism. The playwright encrypted his disillusionment about artist’s freedom of expression in the play’s opening scene, which features the Fifth Communist’s inner monolog while he is being chased by the police:

FIFTH COMMUNIST: A crowd is gathering in front of the National Theatre! Intelligentsia! Honorable people! Probably they will watch a tragedy onstage or some kind of a court drama! The poet’s imagination had to make these people feel something that is missing in their lives. For a moment, they need to experience something sublime and feel deep emotions... Am I not an actor? An actor who plays his role well and by taking a step towards death awes the excited audiences! (260)

Despite his awareness of the stylistic simplification and political correctness expected from him, in *Communists* Markov boldly exercised and cleverly defended his creative and existential principles. In this play, he once again chose to underline the ethical dilemmas instead of the ideological propaganda of the class struggle which the Bulgarian party-state had set as a discursive imperative during the Cold War. The duality of Markov’s life as a citizen and artist in Bulgaria was a bitter act of balancing individual moral qualities and the social norms, which infused the dramatic conflict in his plays. Antoaneta Vojnikova, a close friend of the writer, articulates the personal and existentialist state of such duplicate existence: “Jerry flirted with various social groups, including the political authorities. It was the latter that started the flirt and Jerry accepted it. His point was: ‘They will court me, I will be around them using all they could

²⁷ Markov, *The Truth that Killed*, 265.

²⁸ See Lyuben Markov, ed., *121 Dokumenta za i ot Georgi Markov: Az Bjah Toi* (Sofia: Kameya and 2 1/5, 1999): 18–19.

afford to reach my goals.' ...Ultimately, this flirt was something he could not continue to bear. For him this was an excruciating burden".²⁹ The exacerbating circumstances around the play *Communists* and another new play Markov wrote the same year, the satire *I Was Him* (*Az bjah toi*), proved that his literary works had ceased to be a safe exilic "haven" for the defiant intellectual.

Communists was scheduled to open on September 19, 1969 at Theatre Tear and Laughter with a rehearsal period completed before the theatres' summer break. In the late spring, after the preview performance of the play, the government's watchdogs turned the stage lights off and demanded serious revisions of the text. A few weeks later, on June 15th, another one of Markov's plays, the satire *I Was Him*, was also stopped after its matinee-preview at the Theatre of Satire. The genre of the play is quite different from Markov's other works and it could be related to the Theatre of the (socialist) Absurd, which was already noticeable in the works of Vaclav Havel and Ivan Klima in Czechoslovakia, and Slavomir Mrozek and Tadeusz Rozewicz in Poland.³⁰ The protagonist in *I Was Him*, Ivan Petrov, appears in many ways to be the author's double. He is an engineer in a socialist machine factory, who has been mistaken for the nephew of a big minister and quickly promoted by the plant managers in hope that the "uncle's" political back will cover up their incompetence and corruption. From a productive and conscientious worker, Petrov becomes a useless and inept supervisor and later a vice president of the factory. Sucked in the vicious circle of the top technocrats, he is being constantly reminded that his work is a noble service to the country and forced to accept the game of favoritism and deceit. In his satirical comedy, Markov draws a grotesque yet truthful picture of the fierce climbing on the political ladder and exposes the deeply embedded insecurity, slavishness, and pervasive greed of people from all professional ranks – from the chairmen to the support staff – each of them blindly mimicking and repeating "Him," the higher authority on the totalitarian pyramid.

As Markov recalls in his essays written in exile, he and the production cast of *I Was Him* had no big hopes that the unflattering image of the social reality presented in the play will pass the censorship. When at the end of the preview performance a State Security officer asked the author what kind of "Czech play" he had written, Markov replied that he had written a Bulgarian play and demonstratively left the building of the theatre, refusing to attend the post-production meeting, at which *I Was Him* was deemed unsuitable for general audiences. That same day Markov left for Italy to visit his brother, who had emigrated there in 1963. The writer already had a foreign visa, something that not many Bulgarian citizens, especially

²⁹ Qtd. in Hristov, *Ubijte "Skitnik"*, 76.

³⁰ These Eastern European modernists were not immediately made known in Bulgaria, where Theatre of the Absurd was only officially accepted as an escape valve to social discontent almost ten years later, in the late 1970s, with the works of Stanislav Stratiev.

with family members residing behind the Iron Curtain, were able to easily obtain. Ironically, Markov's visa had been guaranteed by the Interior Minister Angel Solakov, the same omnipresent “chief of police” who also kept an eye on the intelligentsia and wrote the formal critique of *Communists*. The highest political authorities, including members of the State Security who had cooperated with Markov on some of his previous works,³¹ must have trusted his loyalty to the country. According to the writer, on the day of the preview performance of *I Was Him*, one of these well-established friends suggested that the writer use his passport and leave the country for a few months until the clouds over his plays dispersed. Despite the danger hanging over his last two plays, Markov was nevertheless given the chance to revise his works before the shows could open to the public.

Between Two Worlds

Markov did not return to Bulgaria that fall, and when the new theatre season began, rumors started to spread about his possible defection. These rumors were coming from some of the writer's colleagues, who did not hesitate to quickly brand him as an “emigrant” and “non-returner”. His plays *The Elevator* and *Assassination* were quietly taken off the repertoire lists and the last two works, *Communists* and *I Was Him* were awaiting similar fate. The writer was also fired from his editor's position for disciplinary reasons. In Italy Markov continued to work on some projects already commissioned by the Bulgarian National Television. The news about the malicious attacks quickly reached him abroad. According to his correspondence with close friends and family, until that point Markov had not seriously considered emigration, but requested an extension of his visa to legally continue his creative and personal retreat in Italy for another six months. In a letter to a trusted friend, writer Stephan Tsanev, Markov opens about his personal motives for remaining out of the country: “[I] found it to be most logical to be away from Sofia in a moment of my life when I have to make a final decision whether I should continue to write or stop forever (I am talking about [the current literary] market and offers); a moment when one must certainly remain alone and face himself in the mirror”.³² When the insinuations about his defection increased, he temporarily entertained the idea to return home and live in self-exile somewhere in the province or go back to the engineering profession.³³ Similar

³¹ At that time Markov was researching and co-writing a script for a TV film about the history of the Bulgarian secret police since 1945. The TV series, *Na Vseki Kilometar (At Every Mile)*, became widely popular and contributed greatly to the advancement of Bulgarian detective and spy genre. Since at the time the series aired on the Bulgarian television Markov was already living abroad, his name was scratched off the credits.

³² Qtd. in Hristov, *Ubijte “Skitnik”*, 148.

³³ *Ibidem*, 144.

to the protagonist of his last play, *I Was Him*, Markov was able to recognize the compromises he had made while living the high-class life of a prominent writer. Defending himself against the vilifications of his work and blunt accusations of being a national traitor, he wrote an explanatory letter to the Interior Minister, saying: "It seems that someone at home has the persistent desire and the strong interest that I never return".³⁴ Markov also suggests a different explanation of these public attitudes: "As you personally know, there are antagonistic tendencies among various writers' cliques at home and my only guilt is that I don't belong to any of them" (36). In the same letter, Markov complains that the conditions for his literary work have been unbearable in the past year, and blames the literary nomenclature and petty interests for this. Maybe he was wrong to differentiate between "small" and "big" politics, and thought his real enemies to be the "small dictators": institutional leaders and incompetent careerists who envied his success and tried to gain political credit by being the Party's watchdogs. The situation in Bulgaria, nevertheless, appeared irreversible and Markov felt more and more trapped in his temporary exile.

While Bulgaria was closing its doors on the defiant writer, any prospects for him to continue his literary career in the new cultural environment looked slim. Markov's cultural and language differences appeared to be insurmountable obstacles for his quick integration in the western culture. Years after leaving Bulgaria, Markov wrote in a letter to another writer-dissident, exiled in the United States:

I hope you share my disillusionment for ever being understood by our western readers. Their perception [of the East] is, at best, childish and naïve, and, at worse, cynical... The West accepted enthusiastically the picture of the East which Solzhenitsyn painted, because it is emotional and simple like a "horror movie" whereas the reality [there] is far more complex and not that exotic.³⁵

At the beginning of 1970, his most difficult time of transition and choices about the future, Markov weighed on his professional opportunities in the West: "In Italy, in particular, it is not important what you have written but who you are. I could be easily promoted as a writer through a political scandal like the one with Kuznetsov³⁶ (it was even offered to me), but this is repulsive to me and I definitely do not want to take this road".³⁷ Later that year, Markov moved to London, where he had a slim chance for a breakthrough with the filming of his most interesting

³⁴ Lyben Markov, *121 Dokumenta*, 35.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 252-3.

³⁶ Markov very likely refers to Soviet writer Anatoly Kuznetsov, who defected to the United Kingdom in 1969 and managed to publish his political novel *Babi Yar* about Stalin's murders of thousands Soviet Jews in 1941. Kuznetsov cooperated with Radio Liberty while living in exile.

³⁷ Lyuben Markov, *121 Dokumenta*, 45.

novelette, *The Women of Warsaw*.³⁸ Unfortunately, this project failed due to the lack of funding.

Between June 1969 and the spring of 1970, Georgi Markov lived in-between the East and the West, holding a legal Bulgarian passport and disengaging from any anti-Bulgarian activities or political commentaries. Similar to those who manage to “leave legally and do not burn the bridges behind,” Markov could not be considered a typical exile, for he did not face an imminent danger at home, despite the “routine” censorship of his works.³⁹ Some institutional actions and stronger reprimands from higher officials later on indicated the emergence of such a threat, as well as the danger of possible retaliation upon his return.⁴⁰ From 1970 to the end of 1971 Markov resided in the United Kingdom on an extended visa as a legal foreigner. The request for the last possible extension of his international passport was exceptionally difficult and traumatic. Markov puts it in existential terms, calling the passport a “pitiful thing... [that] can shake your life almost as death does”.⁴¹ His contacts in the Bulgarian state police, fearful about their own responsibilities for letting the prominent writer get out of the country, deliberately delayed the renewal of his foreign passport in order to put pressure on him to return. In his summary of the relationships between the state and dissidents, John Neubauer states that totalitarian governments usually preferred to keep their critics at home, “for at home they could be silenced, locked up in jails and forced labor camps, or simply murdered; abroad they could rally politicians and public opinion against the dictatorial regime”.⁴² In the years following Markov’s settling in London, the writer would justify the fears of the Bulgarian government and set up a new stage for his enduring battle with the political enemy.

The Choices of a Political Exile

In the fall of 1970, Georgi Markov sought political asylum at the British Ministry of Interior and was granted one on the conditions that he continued his writing career in the new country.⁴³ By the summer of 1971, he began to work

³⁸ Markov’s 1968 novella *Zhenite na Varshava* (*The Women of Warsaw*) was highly praised at home and abroad, and was considered for a movie script by Bulgarian-born film producer Petar Uvaliev (aka Pierre Rouve). Uvaliev, a successful producer, writer, and director living in London, co-produced with Carlo Ponti Michelangelo Antonioni’s classic *Blow-Up*, 1966; see Hristov, *Ubijte “Skitnik”*, 153–4.

³⁹ Neubauer, *The Exile and Return*, 9.

⁴⁰ Markov worried that, because of his dissident reputation and extended stay in Italy, he would never be allowed to travel abroad in the near future.

⁴¹ Qtd. in Hristov, *Ubijte “Skitnik”*, 155.

⁴² Neubauer, *The Exile and Return*, 7.

⁴³ Qtd. Hristov, *Ubijte “Skitnik”*, 163.

initially part time and soon permanently at the Bulgarian section of Radio BBC (International Services), writing commentaries on various cultural and artistic events. The same year he also began to send to the Bulgarian office of radio Deutsche Welle journalistic articles, which the Bulgarian State Security deemed to be of anti-governmental and hostile nature.⁴⁴ Markov's appearances on Deutsche Welle and BBC gave a sufficient reason to the authorities to carry a full-fledged public campaign against the author. In 1972, this campaign culminated in a political trial, which aimed to prove that the writer had disseminated anti-communist and slanderous opinions about his country in support of the western propaganda. In the presented court evidence, the state prosecutors mentioned as particularly offensive his radio essays "Celebrations, Parades and Manifestations," "*Waiting for Godot*, a Play about Humanity and Our Time," and "The Fictions of Marxism and Reality of Man," among others.⁴⁵ Additional to the evidence of his radio programs, some of Markov's "friends" and critics testified about his personal and professional behavior in Bulgaria. Most of the testimonies included narrowly scrutinized and overly ideologized opinions about his literary work.⁴⁶ The court trial against Markov began in December 1972, was held behind closed doors, and came with a verdict in only two weeks. The writer was sentenced in absentia to six years and six months of imprisonment. In personal correspondence following this sentence, Markov defended his choice to live and speak out freely in the West, and fired back at the malicious accusation that he has sold his talent and consciousness for money: "It is a well-known fact that nobody here pays [writers] as much as the Bulgarian government does... It takes a great courage and strong determination for someone to leave the life of luxury in Bulgaria and accept the risk, together with the ensuing pains [of living in exile]..."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Since 1960, radio Deutsche Welle began to reach audiences outside West Germany as an independent media outlet. In 1961, the radio opened its Eastern department, and as a part of it, the Bulgarian section began its work in August 1963. Different from the less confrontational and diplomatic BBC, the German radio allowed and encouraged more subjective and judgmental political opinions on air. Although not directly critiquing state politics but rather dissecting cultural and social anomalies in Bulgaria, Markov's programs for Deutsche Welle were perceived by the Bulgarian authorities as openly hostile and anti-governmental.

⁴⁵ See Lyuben Markov, *121 Dokumenta*, 105. A total of seventeen programs delivered by Markov on Deutsche Welle between December 1971 and June 1972 were presented to the jury. Other topics of Markov's early radio programs include the declining birthrate in Bulgaria ("Is Bulgarian People on the Brink of Extinction?"), police informing ("Government that Encourages Informing") and the totalitarian and conservative nature of the Bulgarian culture, education and the arts ("The Put-Down Balloon or the Bulgarian Cinema in the Recent Years," "Tradition, Innovation, and Modernism," and "The Problems of the Bulgarian Culture").

⁴⁶ Markov's works were taken off the stage and the shelves as the communist media openly attacked the image of the famous writer, calling him a "police-dog, informer, spy, non-returner, national traitor, radio-saboteur... egocentric, bohemian, and adventurer"; see Petar Petrov, "Piesite na Georgi Markov – protjazhno vuzbuzhdane na nastojashteto". *Demokratsia* (9 February 2002):13.

⁴⁷ Lyuben Markov, *121 Dokumenta*, 132.

Although Deutsche Welle and BBC did not give hefty compensations to their foreign contributors, these Cold War radios presented one of the only employment opportunities for East European writers at that period. Markov managed to continue to air programs on Deutsche Welle and in 1975 started to contribute to Radio Free Europe (RFE) as well, despite the fact that BBC considered any collaboration with a competing media to be a conflict of interest. With its headquarters in Munich, Germany, RFE was one of the most powerful propaganda radios during the Cold War. It was a product of the American Committee for Free Europe and had as its main objectives to “[c]reate an institution in which the émigrés from the satellite nations [of Soviet Russia] could find employment” and “utilize the political figures of such emigrations as rallying points and as symbols of unified opposition to communism...”⁴⁸ Georgi Markov’s programs for RFE presented the most incriminating criticism on totalitarian Bulgaria from contemporary and insider’s point of view. To circumvent the BBC policies, the writer started to offer RFE material written in the memoir genre and showcasing more of his literary talent – the chapters of his *Zadochni Reportazhi za Bulgaria* (*Correspondence on Bulgaria in Absentia*), which were written in engaging narrative and dialog. Markov’s simultaneous work in the international programming of all three radios was unprecedented, and it spoke clearly about his indisputable reputation abroad. It was Radio Free Europe that gave opportunity for the most honest and direct opinion on communism, which the author wished to share with the only understanding audience he ever had – the Bulgarian one. In *Zadochni Reportazhi*, the memories of Markov’s own life – sometime nostalgic and self-critical – intertwined with his astute observations of the mechanisms that controlled the communist culture, industry, party, intelligentsia, underground movement, police, history, and society in general. The most fascinating yet dangerous subject he could not help introducing was his meetings with Bulgaria’s totalitarian leader, Todor Zhivkov. He gave a profoundly truthful depiction of the sly, manipulative, uneducated, and revengeful man, who managed with internal and external support to govern the country for thirty-three years.

Between 1975 and 1978, for 32 weeks, Markov aired 137 programs on RFE, expanding with 60% the pool of radio listeners. A survey of the transmissions and audiences of the radio in Bulgaria shows an increase of listeners from 20% to 30% of the adult population, despite the government’s active measures to jam the programs.⁴⁹ The Bulgarian police anxiously monitored and recorded

⁴⁸ Richard H. Cummings, *Cold War Radio: The Dangerous History of American Broadcasting in Europe, 1950–1989* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland and Company, 2009), 9.

⁴⁹ Lechoslaw Gawlikowski and Yvette Neisser Moreno, “Appendix C: Weekly Listening Rates for Major Western Broadcasters to Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and the USSR During the Cold War,” in *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern*

Markov's radio appearances, calling him the "heavy artillery" of the enemy's radio propaganda.⁵⁰ After Markov aired his chapters on Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian government quickly advanced a plan for the dissident's neutralization. The sophisticated assassination plot aimed to make his death appear natural and difficult to be identified as a result of an assault. With the technical help of KGB, the Bulgarian Secret Services devised a tool, probably an umbrella, equipped with a mechanism to shoot a miniature pellet carrying the deadly ricin poison into Markov's body. The writer was struck with the capsule at Waterloo Bridge on September 7, 1978 and died from the poisoning four days later. Markov had been warned many times about various plans of the Bulgarian government to eliminate or abduct him, but several months before the murder the warnings alarmingly increased. Although occasionally the writer was granted personal security, like during a business trip he made to Munich,⁵¹ BBC and the British authorities in general were not specifically concerned about his safety, despite the fact that they had received formal complaints from the Bulgarian government about Markov's unacceptable broadcasts.⁵² A witness of Markov's dissidence during the 1960s and the 1970s, Bulgarian writer Stephan Tsanev declares: "It must be known that at least one million Bulgarians have heard him [on RFE]. Wherever you go, everyone was listening to Georgi Markov! No one has ever accomplished a bigger act of heroism in the intellectual world. No one has ever had a larger impact on his nation than Georgi Markov."⁵³ The power of Markov's journalism originated in his first-hand knowledge of contemporary Bulgarian affairs but also in his honest, intelligent, and insightful presentation of the facts.

"Global Dissidence"

In BBC Markov often felt pressured by internal policies of political correctness and bureaucratic restrictions. The "censorship" resulting from the particular international relations between the United Kingdom and Bulgaria gave him a sense of discouragement about the British interest in supporting the fight

Europe, eds. A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2010): 142–144, at 144.

⁵⁰ Qtd. in Hristov, *Ubijte "Skitnik"*, 123.

⁵¹ The Radio Free Europe Security Office received the first warnings that Markov would be killed in January 1978. See Cummings, *Cold War Radio*, 65.

⁵² The official note was sent to the ambassador of the United Kingdom in Bulgaria, directly accusing the British authorities for allowing Markov's critical commentaries on the Bulgarian-Soviet relations, Bulgaria's people, and personally some political leaders. Understanding that the Bulgarian diplomatic note mostly concerned programs Markov aired at other radios, BBC might have begun to put more pressure on him to terminate his contribution to Deutsche Welle and RFE. See Hristov, *Ubijte "Skitnik"*, 384–7.

⁵³ Qtd. in Hristov, *Ubijte "Skitnik"*, 372.

for freedom in Eastern Europe.⁵⁴ In the summer of 1978, Markov expressed a desire to leave BBC and get more involved with RFE, while having the extra time to write his literary work. As he confided to a friend, he felt that in BBC he is administratively restricted to work as a regular translator and commentator on cultural events.⁵⁵ Although RFE was more tolerant to open political criticism and even direct references to Bulgarian officials, it also tried to walk the fine line of international diplomacy. Allegedly, Markov offered the radio a series of programs about the lives of Bulgarian emigrants, each story underlining the larger philosophical conflict between freedom and enslavement, but RFE rejected the idea fearing that the communist media will accuse them of being an “emigrants’ radio”.⁵⁶ Consequently, Georgi Markov and other exiled intellectuals felt that they “were victims of the hypocrisy, private interests, and inconsistent efforts of the West in the war on communism”.⁵⁷ Markov went even further in his observation about the West as to say that job security, political complacency, and personal wellbeing, no matter on what level, are the standards of most people’s lives in western democracies.⁵⁸

In 1974, Markov experienced a stroke of luck in having his play *Let’s Go under the Rainbow* staged at The Little Theatre in London, while his new play, *The Archangel Michael*, was shown at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Completed in exile, *The Archangel Michael* had a non-professional production at Drummond School and became one of the three plays to win the “Fringe Firsts” award at the international Edinburgh Theatre Festival in the summer of 1974.⁵⁹ Written in the canon of Existentialism and in a more abstract and philosophical language than any other of Markov’s previous works, *The Archangel Michael* features the life-and-death relation and the fierce debate of two symbolic characters: the Doctor, representing the intellectual and humanistic identity of man, and the Policeman, exemplifying the tools of political power and social oppression. Suspecting that the Doctor is on his way to help wounded guerilla fighters hiding in the Red Forest, the Policeman arrests him and starts escorting him to the nearest village. During a random gunfire with the fighters, the Policeman is wounded but receives timely help from the medic. Despite the bond created

⁵⁴ See *Ibidem*, 320. Apparently, Eastern European countries feared the possibility of an organized emigration with a powerful international forum of expression, because such a political organization could lead to a more successful insurgency and the toppling of the communist regime.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 397.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 321.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 393.

⁵⁹ The idea crystallized while Markov was still in Bulgaria, but he wrote the play abroad. In a letter to Zunka Yankova, Markov mentions two new plays which he writes “for himself,” one of which was tentatively entitled *Doctor and Policeman*; see Lyuben Markov, *121 Dokumenta*, 23.

between them, when they approach the village and the Doctor attempts to flee, the Policeman shoots and kills him.

In his last play, Georgi Markov instinctively advances his existential grasp on the austere political reality during the Cold War, continuing some philosophical themes of his 1960s plays. For instance, he underlines the image of social entrapment and interdependency without imposing it as typical for the totalitarian system. Written in a new political context, the play acquires larger implications, referencing social and ethical dichotomies also existent in western democracies. The names of the two characters reveal an irrevocable duality: the Doctor's first name is Michael and the Policeman's is Archangel (or Angel).⁶⁰ Their dialog exposes the ontological nature of mankind and society as symbolized in the metaphor of "the white angel with black wings," Archangel Michael:

POLICEMAN: [. . .] Archangel takes a soul, whereas Michael saves a soul! I take, you save, I take, you save, until finally...

DOCTOR: Finally?

POLICEMAN: Archangel will take Michael's soul too.

DOCTOR: Or Michael will save Archangel's...

POLICEMAN (*Laughing*): Do you really think that you can save my soul?

DOCTOR: I am obliged to try!⁶¹

In the last years of his life and as a result of his dramatic personal transformations, Markov seems to have reconciled with the inevitability of social evil and strengthen his belief in the human obligation to offset this evil as much as possible. In his radio essay "System and People," aired on Deutsche Welle, he voices his moralistic stand on the stark political realities he witnessed at the peak of the Cold War, also underlining the thesis of his play: "In every social group, as in each human being, virtues and vices coexist in a life-essential equilibrium. When a political system destabilizes this equilibrium by pulling it into one or another direction, i.e., either towards the angel or the devil, it puts an end to this balance that equals death."⁶² In *The Archangel Michael*, Markov also underlines the man's existential dilemma: he is free to choose to be either "intellectual" or "policeman," healer or murderer, professional or public servant, creator or parasite, angel or devil. The most convincing argument in favor of these personal choices is made by the Policeman, who, accused by the Doctor of lacking the freedom to make conscious decisions on his own, replies: "I only serve myself. The one I serve is only a pretext! Nothing more... See, if I did not serve myself, I wouldn't have stopped you at all, wouldn't have chased you when you tried

⁶⁰ The two names are traditional in the Bulgarian language and cultural practice.

⁶¹ Georgi Markov, "Arakhangel Mikhail," trans. from English by Kamen Kostov, in *Piesite na Georgi Markov*, ed. Zinovia (Zunka) Yankova (Sofia: Litavra. 2001): 345–383, at 361.

⁶² Lyuben Markov, *121 Dokumenta*, 274.

to escape, would not have let you escape... I arrested you and not the one who gave me the uniform” (371). Having seen many of his fellow writers in Bulgaria surrender their “doctor’s” talents and turn into “policemen”⁶³ in order to satisfy their personal or professional ambitions, and having balanced with difficulties his Angel’s and Michael’s identities as a “court” writer in the Bulgarian totalitarian milieu, in his play Markov suggests the key to man’s ultimate freedom and integrity: the constant and painful self-questioning that keeps human consciousness and ethical judgment sensitive to all historical changes, all the time.

The most important choice Markov made while living in exile – to return to his memories, recount his Bulgarian experiences, and expose the totalitarian system which harbored the most dangerous imbalance of good and evil – was as much a result of the writer’s *existential* circumstances of becoming a social rebel and political dissident, as an example of his *existentialist* wisdom to act according to his personal and professional “obligations”. Such a deeper perception of and selfless engagement with life implies, nevertheless, some intellectual cynicism and fatalism, which in *The Archangel Michael* is noticeable in the Doctor’s risky and futile attempt to escape his capturer if only for the sake of exercising his freedom to carry out the “wonderful journey to the only ideal – death.”⁶⁴ Markov followed in the steps of his character by selflessly continuing his programs on Radio Free Europe and, despite the direct threats on his life, lived openly and unafraid.⁶⁵ With his categorical and intelligently argued statements in his “western” play, he professes Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical credo, “Thus, totally free... profoundly responsible for the war as if I had myself declared it... engaging myself in it wholly and *stamping it with my seal*... I carry the weight of the world by myself alone...” (sic)⁶⁶ Either in totalitarian Bulgaria or the egalitarian West, Markov’s dramatic speaker assumes the voice of a “global dissident” by embracing the challenge of political struggle not as a particular allegiance to one or another “camp”, but a personal warfare carried out with the dignity and astuteness of an intellectual, the nostalgic sentiment of an emigrant, and the honesty of a human being.

⁶³ Markov’s open letter to Lyubomir Levchev, a gifted poet who lent his political service to the communist party and headed the Bulgarian Writers’ Union, provides a profound testimony of the personal compromises many Bulgarian intellectuals did during communism. See Lyuben Markov, *121 Dokumenta*, 166–172.

⁶⁴ The quote is from Georgi Markov’s radio essay “The Ideals”, aired on Deutsche Welle; see Lyuben Markov, *121 Dokumenta*, 257.

⁶⁵ Before Markov’s assassination on Waterloo Bridge, Bulgarian Secret Services allegedly made other attempts to kill him, but they were thwarted by the writer-dissident because he was warned and acted with caution. Markov apparently was informed about the last assassination plan that would utilize a special poison, but he decided to ignore it, thinking that the warnings might have aimed only to scare and intimidate him. See Hristov, *Ubijte “Skitnik”*, 403, 390–393.

⁶⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, “From *Being and Nothingness*,” *Reality, Man, and Existence: Essential Works of Existentialism*, ed. H. J. Blackham (New York, Toronto, London: Bantam Books): 309–347, at 311.

Sensitive to the injustices and flaws on both sides of the Iron Curtain, Georgi Markov became a socially engaged exile who, contrary to the culturally alienated cosmopolitan intellectuals, did not indulge in his “transcendental homelessness,”⁶⁷ exercising instead a rather “global dissidence.” Either as a persecuted playwright in Bulgaria or a prominent journalist in the foreign media during the Cold War, Markov manifested political views that were inseparable from his personal experience and core moral values. It is exactly this holistic manifestation of his political-individual identity that allowed his plays as well as his journalism to be read as subversive but also highly philosophical and poetic literature. The writer-activist constructed narratives in which the polyphony of the voices included the “critic” and “confessor” in one. This notable duality, which guaranteed the author’s utmost freedom and honesty of expression, was the main reason for Markov’s profound impact on the modern literature and totalitarian opposition in Bulgaria during the 1960s and the 1970s.

Vessela S. Warner

“Global Dissident”: Georgi Markov as a Cold War Playwright and Exile

Summary

Georgi Markov (1929–1978) was a prominent Bulgarian writer and, after 1968, a dissident and political exile, who ultimately broadcasted some of the most insightful and incriminatory depictions of totalitarian communism on Radio Free Europe and radio Deutsche Welle. His compelling presence in the emigration media became the reason for his political assassination in London, widely known as the “Bulgarian umbrella murder.” This article examines Markov’s thrilling journey from being a part of the Bulgarian top intelligentsia in the 1960s to becoming the “heavy artillery” in the East European emigration behind the Iron Curtain. The case study presents, through a variety of documentary evidence as well as analyses of his most important plays, the writer’s internal and external exiles. Markov’s allegorical drama manifests his social skepticism as well as painful realization of the relativity of ideological propaganda and enforcement of political oppositions during the Cold War. Drawing on his personal experience in the totalitarian East as well as the egalitarian West, the playwright exhibits the moral engagement, integrity, and freewill of an existentialist and “global dissident” in the exilic space of his late dramatic works.

⁶⁷ A term coined by György Lukács in 1916, which generally defines “many modern European writers and intellectuals, who became alienated from their native cultures, and frequently departed from it all but voluntarily,” either by seeking new “ideological commitment or its opposite, namely a desire to free oneself from it.” Neubauer, *The Exile and Return*, 7.