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## The Sovietization of Bulgarian Literature and the “Bulgarization” of Socialist Realism

### Abstract

The aim of the study is to show and analyse the phases and forms of enforcing/functioning of socialist realism as a dominant political and aesthetic doctrine and an institutionalised system in the literature of Bulgaria. Justification is provided for the use of concepts and historical-theoretical constructs, such as “socialist realism,” “domestication of socialist realism” etc., which make possible the emergence of a new history of literature from the times of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria.

The chronicles of Bulgarian socialist realism between 1948 and 1956 describe a few characteristics of the “method” in the context of the totalitarian People’s Republic, which are a direct repercussion of the practices of sovietisation applied with slight Bulgarian adaptations. *The domestication* of socialist realism – increasingly noticeable after 1956 – presents a limitation to the allowed freedoms of writing and publishing through authoritative discourses, accompanied by procedures which shorten the distance between the different positions in the literary field. The Bulgarian experience of socialist realist literary production brings into relief a specific model, that warrants the definition *home-made socialist realism*.

Keywords: Bulgarian Literature, People’s Republic of Bulgaria (PRB), socialist realism, sovietisation, “domestication of socialist realism”, Todor Zhivkov.

One of the trustworthy anecdotes from the times of communism claims that at one of the regular “friendly get-togethers” of the General Secretary of the communist party Todor Zhivkov with Bulgarian writers, the Secretary was approached by the lavishly decorated with state awards for literature living classic Mladen Issaev, who spontaneously, as an *old chum* asked Zhivkov to help him acquire an item generally missing from the market at the time – a colour television set. Zhivkov looked annoyed: “Why, Mladen! You must only turn to me for items no smaller than an apartment!”.

For one type of writer, indeed, until 1989 it was really easier to lay hands on a new flat than on a new TV set. However, this anecdote is indicative of the

relationship between the communist tyrant and the writers, already established by the 1980s, which appeared facile and with an innocent preference for humdrum, day-to-day topics, characterized by a quasi-friendly, homely closeness based on common interests and dependencies. This, however, holds true for the final years of the People's Republic.

Let us direct our scrutiny towards the beginning!

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The imposition of socialist realism in the literature of the People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB)<sup>1</sup> cannot be seen as the natural domination of a **purely aesthetic platform** or as a cultural **fad**. Neither should its development be seen in isolation from the systematic persecution and repression against writers and intellectuals of non-communist persuasion; from the introduction of a censorship (**known as Fatherland-Front**, the title assumed by the leading coalition of communists and agrarian party followers and later on – purely **communist**); from the nationalization of the facilities which re-produce art; from the fact of the close party and state control over the market of art products; from the network of institutions which guarantee the propagated **uniqueness and rightfulness of the method**; from placing the field of literature under incessant monitoring and control from a single writers' union – the Union of Bulgarian Writers (UBW).<sup>2</sup>

But **how Bulgarian** is the Bulgarian socialist realism? And how to define the boundaries of **sovietisation** of Bulgarian literature?

Power in Bulgaria after the coup of September 9<sup>th</sup> 1944 is exercised as much from the centre of the state – Sofia, as from **the outside** – from Moscow, the city which is not so much the capital of the USSR, the seat of Stalin's government and his communist party, but the residence of the leader of Bulgarian communists – Georgi Dimitrov. Until September 1945, the ex-centric state government unfolds through a complicated, multilayered method: the most significant signals for the authorities in Sofia come from **the outside and are relayed twice** – Dimitrov issues directives, which had previously been modelled as a general instruction or a concrete perspective by Stalin. Georgi Dimitrov's diary, in the part concerning the period from September 9<sup>th</sup> 1944 to November 1945 (the date of his return to Bulgaria) presents a *sui generis* map which helps us recognise the presence of an **external** centre.<sup>3</sup> Dimitrov is in Moscow but is in constant communication

<sup>1</sup> This text will not engage with the entire dynamics and diversity of the literature during the second half of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, but will focus instead on the general characteristics and specific features of the official political doctrine and nationalized and institutionalized system known as "socialist realism".

<sup>2</sup> Faced with the question how to refer to the phenomenon "socialist realism" – as a method, doctrine, an art ideology, an administrative lever, a system or something else – we chose to define it as a "doctrine" (a political complex of principles and rules, thematic nuclei and recipes for plot and characters) and a "system" (nationalized institutional basis, deprived of autonomy political field, a censure apparatus and a rigid literary protocol).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Georgi Dimitrov, Г. Димитров, *Дневник. 9 март 1933 – 6 февруари 1949*, София 1997. The records between 9.09.1944 and 4.11.1945 can be seen, as follows: p. 436–510, and until the end: p. 436–652.

with Sofia – not so much as generator, but as **transmitter** of ideas and messages. This specific **in-between-ness** – between inside and **outside**, between the Soviet and the Bulgarian authorities, clarifies the puppeteering, split behavior of Georgi Dimitrov.

In his book *The Bulgarian Communism* Ivaylo Znepolski acknowledges the indisputable authority of Dimitrov against the backdrop of the “provincial Bulgarian scene”, but he also points to a behind-the-scenes “second, hidden nervous face – the face behind the potential victim of the close circle around Stalin”.<sup>4</sup> For the Bulgarian public, Dimitrov’s directives remain hidden (secret letters, unofficial conversations, encoded messages etc.), but whenever they come to the surface, they are accepted as signals from a higher authority – a charismatic person whose words turn into an action plan, particularly for the mushrooming Fatherland-Front and the communist community in Bulgaria.

The ex-centric position of the socialist realism in Bulgaria appears to re-trace the trajectory of influences followed by the authorities – with the difference that its doctrine has already had some **experience** before 1944, albeit under a different title – **new artistic realism**.

The external centre continues to transmit directives even after Georgi Dimitrov’s return to Bulgaria in 1945, in accordance with the hierarchy within the imagined world communist community whose top and centre is the Kremlin, personified in the image of the “leader of the whole progressive mankind”. Georgi Dimitrov’s return to Bulgaria does not cancel this duplicity; in a sense it even enhances it – it adds a new tension: Dimitrov sometimes tests how far he can go in his efforts to emancipate himself from Stalin and is often forced to suffer reproaches and harsh criticism, which he invariably obeys.<sup>5</sup> Until the end of his life he remains “a man between two countries and two allegiances which he hopelessly tries to reconcile”.<sup>6</sup> This scenario of split loyalties recurs with all the subsequent general secretaries of the Bulgarian Communist Party and Prime Ministers of the People’s Republic – Vassil Kolarov, Valko Chervenkov and Todor Zhivkov.

The ex-centrism of the source of power guaranteed by the colonial cultural model in the PRB is retained even after Stalin’s death in 1953, although its effect on literature is less visible. At times of leadership crises in the USSR (1953/1958 and 1964/1968) the ex-centrism seems to disappear in the shadow of the outgoing and the newly elected, yet unestablished Soviet leader (Khrushchev or Brezhnev), only to return with the gradual strengthening of his image and power. In the literature of the PRB the **colonial** reflex and the **mirrored** language are visible during the entire period – from the Bulgarian odes and mourning texts for Stalin<sup>7</sup>, through Todor Zhivkov’s speech of April 15<sup>th</sup> 1963 “Communist ideas – the su-

<sup>4</sup> I. Znepolski, И. Знеполски, *Българският комунизъм. Социокултурни черти и властова траектория*, София 2008, p. 126.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., for instance, the case with Georgi Dimitrov’s speech in Rumania, when he puts forward the idea for a federation among all the countries in Eastern Europe and a cross-border union, which is condescendingly and even rudely reproached by Stalin – in Dimitrov: Г. Димитров, op. cit., p. 595–598.

<sup>6</sup> I. Znepolski, И. Знеполски, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., for instance: В. Vozhilov, Б. Божилков, *Венец пред саркофага на Сталин*, София 1953.

perior principle in our literature and art”<sup>8</sup>, which literally mimics the devastating speech of Khrushchev “High ideals and art craftsmanship – the superior strength of the Soviet art and literature” of March 8<sup>th</sup> 1963<sup>9</sup>, to the funeral speeches and mournful poems by Bulgarian poets about the death of Brezhnev in the autumn of 1982.<sup>10</sup> **Sovietisation** permeates all literary channels, importing from the USSR model texts, ready-made theses, organizational models, behavioural patterns, names, formulas, end and last-instance “truths” from unquestionable authorities. The **sovietisation** even has its **personal-biographic profile** – graduates of the Stalinistic schools from the 1930s, along with Georgi Dimitrov, are also his direct successors at the political top in Bulgaria Vassil Kolarov and Valko Chervenkov, as well as the allegedly competent specialist in the problems of socialist realism, the long serving Chairman of the Bulgarian Academy of Science – Todor Pavlov. The longest serving Chairmen of the Union of Bulgarian Writers also have solid Soviet background: Hristo Radevski (1949–1958) was Cultural attaché at the Bulgarian Embassy in Moscow in the mid – 40s and Georgi Dzhagarov (1966–1972) studied at the Institute for Literature “Maxim Gorky”.

Having emerged on the literary-ideological basis of the *left avant-garde* (personified in the figures of Geo Milev, Lamar, Nikolai Marangozov etc.), **left classics** (shakily recognisable in Dimitar Polyakov, Hristo Smirnovski, Nikola Vaptsarov etc.) and *proletarian literature of the 30s* (with its classicist elements in the works of Hristo Radevski, Mladen Issaev etc.), Bulgarian literary socialist realism is born as a colonial art, directly influenced by the metropoly (the USSR and Soviet literature). As a whole, the principle of party-faithfulness remains ambiguously manifested, because the Party is Bulgarian – Bulgarian Workers’ Party (communists), Bulgarian Communist Party – and Soviet – All Soviet Communist party (bolsheviks), the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, while the leader is “father of the peoples” (Stalin), as well as “our own leader and teacher” (Dimitrov). Later on the pairs are as follows: Stalin–Chervenkov, Khrushchev–Zhivkov, Brezhnev–Zhivkov.

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<sup>8</sup> This speech by Zhivkov is published in: Т. Живков, *Комунистическата идейност – висш принцип на нашата литература и изкуство* [in:] idem, Тодор. *Изкуството, науката и културата в служба на народа*, т. 2., София 1965, р. 193–262.

<sup>9</sup> N. Khrushchev, Н. Хрущев, *Высокая идейность и художественное мастерство – великая сила советской литературы и искусства: Речь на встрече руководителей партии и правительства 8 марта 1963 года*, Москва 1963.

<sup>10</sup> After the death of Leonid Brezhnev a few Bulgarian poets, among whom are Alexander Gerov, Elisaveta Bagriana, Marko Nedyalkov, Mladen Issaev, Salis Tadzher publish poems “in memoriam”: “Literature Front” weekly „Литературен фронт”, no. 46, 18.11.1982.

**The first characteristic** is seen in the system of socialist realism: the only writers' organisation permitted in Bulgaria – the Union of Bulgarian Writers is not only directly subordinated to the Bulgarian Communist party, but also numerous specific cases there are resolved personally by Valko Chervenkov, who until his conversion to a leader in 1950 is in charge (both as a member of Politburo, and as chairman of the Committee for Science, Art and Culture) of liaising with writers. The dictatorial power discourse gives both general and specific guidance in managing the system. However, the major contradictions of the literary field, totally deprived of autonomy, are concentrated in the Union of Writers itself. That is the reason why since the end of 1948 there is a constant need of reminders of the **concept of unity and solidarity** in the Bulgarian Union of Writers. Placing this concept on a pedestal aims to contain and control group in-fighting in the Union and to guarantee its direct submission to the Central Committee and of the communist leader himself.

Moreover, even among the communist writers who dominate the scene at the UBW, demarcation lines begin to be visible which problematise the entire literary policy of the Bulgarian Communist Party. Some of the divisions are inherited from the conflicts in the left literary sector during and before 1944 (the discussion of art as a social corrective on the pages of KORMILO weekly, the confrontations with the "renegates" who changed allegiances and migrated to the circle "Zlatorog" during the 20s and 30s, the friendly and collegial re-groupings throughout the 40s). In effect, however, what is happening is a transfer of arguments from the past to the actual battle for influence over the totalitarian literary system. Up until 1956 Chervenkov is needed to arbitrate in the struggles among different writers' groups in the UBW, where he invariably supports the Union Governors embodied by its chief secretary Hristo Radevski.

The second peculiarity of the imposition of socialist realism after 1948 is observed in the special regime of functioning of the literary field, in which literary criticism is favoured as the political language interpreting the imperative discourse of the leader of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. In this rendition literary criticism sets the standards for being socialist realistic and evaluates whether and how far the text fulfills the requirements. At the very beginning of the 50s the 'theoretical' aspects of socialist realism in Bulgaria are integrated in the practice of reviewing literary text as a constant trial and improvement of the standards in the process of literary production. As paragons, mainly Soviet "theoretical samples are employed", so that the respective review (report) can be sent to the public party meeting<sup>11</sup>, where the main task of the critics authorised with the dominant discourse is to assess the actual production of the Bulgarian socialist realists.

**The third characteristic** of the initial years of the domination of socialist realism is that almost all members of the UBW, irrespective of their party membership and social status are involved in the forums for the **"reforming of the**

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<sup>11</sup> Cf, for instance, the often quoted soviet article A. Mesnikov: A. Mesnikov, *За основните черти на социалистическия реализъм – Септември*, кн. 4, 1952.

**character**” – meetings of groups for Marxist and Leninist education; participation in the system for in-service ideological training; involvement with sessions of “collective approaches” in the process of writing; trips to the Soviet Union (individually or in delegations of writers). Thus socialist realism is implemented as a specific endeavour for a profound personal make-over – in thinking (adoption of Marx-Leninist world views) and in behaviour (as the use of specific literary methods).

What is at stake here is a complex impact from a range of factors – from the general political and economic environment to all “methods”, such as “getting to know life”, “attaching writers to industrial enterprises”, “visits to collective agrarian farms during the reaping season”, “visits to border areas”, “readers’ conferences at shopfloors and agrarian farms so as to hear the opinions of readers from the protagonists of our literature”<sup>12</sup> etc.

This alters the entire bibliographic picture in Bulgaria. State Publishing houses serve this process – they approve for publication books written entirely in the new thematic areas. State orders in the area of literary work, the stringent censorship control of the books offered for publication and the forms of intensive “Marxist-Leninist” modelling of the writers’ identities determine for a long time to come the absolute domination of socialist realism in its *classic* soviet version.

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Despite its colonial genealogy, **Bulgarian socialist realism** – even in the context of the early People’s Republic (until 1956) – manages to develop a few specific features which we shall briefly outline here:

After the coup of September 9<sup>th</sup> the writers’ community is not immediately plunged in socialist realism but passes through a ‘buffer’ period of **Fatherland-Ffront literature** between September 1944 and December 1948. During this period there is a relative and rather problematic rivalry between certain types of writing, among which we can discern frankly **oppositional** styles of writing and behaviour. At least verbally, declarations are made that socialist realism develops *in competition* with other styles and methods. Even in the years of the fiercest terror and the most dogmatic imposition of socialist realism, the literary field *recalls* this as a time of **compromise with the Fatherland-Fornit**.

The existence of a unitary and monolithic Writers’ Union, directly subordinated to the Communist party (a *sui generis* “Ministry of Literature”), is a strategic part of the implementation of socialist realism as a total artistic and political ideology. However, the guarantee of the **exclusive status** of the Union of Writers in Bulgaria is not preceded by a decreed liquidation of writers’ organisations which used to exist until 1944, as it happened in the Soviet Union. In the literary field in Bulgaria a single Writers Union remains in existence, and it is presented as an immediate successor to the one established in 1913. The Communist party, in effect, takes hold of the existing organisation, while injecting a huge number of new members and purging writers accused of “fascist activities” and “pan-Bulgarian chauvinism”. The Union of Bulgarian Writers turns into a central cell of the institutional power network of socialist realism – the foundation of a doctrine which exploits its historical resources from the period until September 9<sup>th</sup> 1944.

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<sup>12</sup> ЦДА, ф. 357, оп. 1, а.е. 32, л. 9–11.

Towards the mid 1950s the writers who have gained admission to the Writers' Union, or have at least acquired certain publicity are no more destroyed or ostracised from the writers' community. The members of the Union, by virtue of their membership, are already part of a complex, yet limited interplay between power and style. Usually the "free choice" of a manner of writing and behaviour is connected with a tacit agreement between the author of the work and the subject of the authority which controls the literary field.

This tendency of **mutual taming** between the authorities and literature and towards a more discernible **domestication** of the Bulgarian socialist realism becomes particularly salient around the years of the greatest crises of communism – **the first crisis** of 1956, **the second crisis** – 1968 and **the crisis of its end and dissolution** – 1989. It is these moments of crisis that cause the greatest tension in the communication channels between the party, the state authorities and the writers' community, calling into question the homogeneity of the literary field and spurring the figures positioned in its field to commit actions which may lead towards its autonomy.

In Bulgaria all these processes unfold in it **the domesticated** format of the Bulgarian socialist realism – among the **big family** of the Bulgarian writers, some of whom have been in close contact with the respective communist leaders throughout the years. And if this proximity is more sporadic until the demise of Georgi Dimitrov (July 1949) and Vassil Kolarov (January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1950), in the years of socialist realism **in action** – during the rule of Valko Chervenkov and Todor Zhivkov the actual leader is part and parcel of the writers' community and plays a specific role. He is not only **a guiding light, teacher and arbitrator** of the writers, but also **an advisor** and **father**, an immediate participant and moderator in the actions on the literary field – **a head of the family**.

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In his seminal monograph *Socialist Realism. Theory. Development. Decay* (originally published in 1977) Edvard Mozheiko pays special attention to "two versions of socialist realism" between 1950 and 1956 – "Bulgarian" ("more rigid and dogmatic", "a precise copy of the Soviet concept of social realism") and "Polish" ("less stringent and more liberal", "an attempt at preserving the possible degree of independence, under the circumstances").<sup>13</sup> Both versions undergo a peculiar continuation in 1957, when in a loud discussion between Todor Pavlov and a few Bulgarian followers of his, on the one hand and some Tshechoslovak theorists and literature adepts, on the other, a more clear-cut presentation of the difference between the Bulgarian and the Central European understanding of socialist realism is made. The former insists that socialist realism is a "method" needed as a "specific means of applying pressure on writers and a way to successfully control their work", while the latter allows for "a style diversity and multiplicity".<sup>14</sup>

Precisely around the times of crisis for the entire communist system 1956/1957 a series of problematisations of socialist realism occur in Bulgaria. It is true that

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<sup>13</sup> E. Mozheiko, E. Можейко, *Социалистическият реализъм. Теория. Развитие. Упадък*, прев. К. Риков, София 2009, p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252–253.

in the end the forces behind the status quo take the upper hand over the reformers. However, the discussions about socialist realism of 1956/1957 are engraved in the actual memory of the writers' community and spur the ensuing changes both in artistic practice and in the reformulation of part of the principles of the doctrine.

The processes of partial reinstatement of Stalinism after the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising and (at least ostensibly) of complete rehabilitation of socialist realism in Bulgaria can appear as a failure of the reform effort; nevertheless, particularly from the perspective of the 60s, they turn into a historical and literary resource for gradual change.

The mid 1960s see the beginning of the intensive **domestication** of socialist realism. Once again, just like in 1945/1946 or 1948/1949 the Bulgarian party leaders demonstrate readiness to forget and forgive **en masse** "the errors of the past", new measures are introduced to discipline the writers community but this time the censorship apparatus is reinstated, the forms of repression are "milder" and most significantly – in return for the continuing domination of the principle of party allegiance, artistic practices start gradually – albeit slowly – to be liberated from the normative critical supervision over some aspects of the doctrine: to lift the need to trace whether literary works project the 'typical'; to set aside the idea of "educating the working classes", to allow overstepping the limits of permissible criticism.

During the following years the authorities allow amendments to be made to socialist realism through specific practices, but the author is required at least to declare acceptance of the term. This means refraining from attacks against the formula "socialist realism" and recognising the "guiding role of the Party" in literature, in return for which part of the styles may be allowed to test the theoretic integrity of the "method".

A special zone is opened for free criticism, either limited in time (the period of **the cult to personality**), or informed by specific socio-political factors (the bureaucracy of the middle management, socialist consumerism etc.) which engulfs the negative critical energies of artistic practice. For instance, satire draws its objects of criticism only from the epoch until 1956 and in the pyramid of power – to the rank of deputy minister. Sporadically permitted, at other times – forbidden, criticism against the **cult of personality** gains strength solely from essays written and published in 1956/1957. At that time, the boundaries of permissible criticism are drawn and they include – philistinism, law-breaking, bureaucracy etc. This is the zone for permissible criticism of society, constantly reformulated and defined until 1989. The doctrine of socialist realism in Bulgaria is subject to corrections from the inside – maybe at a slower pace compared to other literatures of satellite status to the USSR, but sharing the same thematic and stylistic trends.

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**The domestication** of socialist realism – increasingly noticeable after 1956 – presents a limitation to the allowed freedoms of writing and publishing through authoritative discourses, accompanied by procedures which shorten the distance



between the different positions in the literary field. The result is a canny **capsulation** of eventual discord within the writers' guild, a defusion of the possible alternatives through a series of compromising steps. The status of political intimacy and public proximity between the authorities and literature is relentlessly upheld. This leads in turn to a corrupt language behaviour on the part of the authors. One of the tokens indicating this tendency is the blurred boundary between **writing** and **publishing** in the mind of writers. You only write what you can expect to be published. This is the limit of internalisation of the political in the literary practice through the years in Bulgaria. The almost complete lack of unpublished manuscripts after 1989 confirms such a pragmatic logic.

In 1966 Todor Zhivkov comes up with a relatively convenient ideological formula which defines the boundaries of permissible criticism in Bulgaria. In another speech at a meeting of the Writers Union he launches the idea about the "two types of truth": "The Great Truth" that "in our country a new society is being built, with new propellers; that each day reaffirms the achievements of our socialist society, strengthens and upgrades the socialist order; that we are moving forward to communism" [...] and "The Small Truth" that "in our country there is also egotism, apathy, theft, arrogance, career-hunting, bureaucracy [...] low morals [...] unfair favouritism [...] – the small truth of the negative aspects of life..."<sup>15</sup> As the major reason for the existence of "the small truth" is identified an occurrence which becomes increasingly visible since the 60s: socialist consumerism. It is consumerism's manifestations of the "small" or "second" truth that, according to Zhivkov, "we need to fight", to criticise, "without forgetting the main thing: what happens in our life should be seen in its revolutionary line of development and not from the position of petty-bourgeois radicalism and liberalism".<sup>16</sup>

Zhivkov tries to revise the doctrine of socialist realism by limiting the zone of criticism and calling upon "each author" to assist as much as he can in "doing away with the second truth" through "an active engagement with reality". At the same time he preserves the pivotal socialist realist idea about the "revolutionary development" of reality, which he summarises as a particular meta-reality ("the great truth") untouchable by critical gestures and reflexes. In the following years this formula is tried numerous times in art works through a true symbolic battle, as the boundary between the two types of truth begins to shift and the zone of "the small truth" increases and takes up an ever larger ground in socialist literature and culture.

It is not by chance that yearly meetings between Zhivkov and a wider circle of members of the Union of Bulgarian Writers begin to take place as late as 1966, held in the heat of summer, in August, in the writers' sea-side residence near Varna. At these meetings the leader shares in confidence "secrets" about the internal and international situation, hears the writers' "problems", promises assistance in a wide range of spheres – from building a block of flats for writers to personal requests for job positions, acquiring a flat or a car. These meetings are held in an

<sup>15</sup> T. Zhivkov, Т. Живков, *За работата на Деветия конгрес на Българската комунистическа партия* [in:] Т. Живков, *За литературата*, София 1981, p. 240–242.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

atmosphere of increasingly **intimate camaradery**. Put in a different way, this means that, in effect, Zhivkov and the writers solve many of their political and household problems – guided by, and from the perspective of, “the little truth”.

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Throughout the 70s and 80s of the XX century literary criticism is inclined to absorb all writing styles which do not openly challenge the dominant position of socialist realism by extending the stylistic registers of the “unitary method” and involving them in the traditional politically correct thematic domains (for instance, the so-called historic or patriotic topics), through including the authors in the established hierarchies (via membership in professional unions, in the Communist party or simply by “giving them a job”). During the 70s and the early 80s the theory of socialist realism tries to catch up with the changes of the 60s and to project itself onto the new writing practices. As Ivan Radev notices, “the tactics of those in power” begins to depend not so much on banishing “those books which are ideologically unacceptable but have become a fact”, but on the reverse – “some of them are wisely given the blessings of an authoritative trusted persona and thus become ‘ours’”.<sup>17</sup>

In this new strategy there is one other motive. Reducing the term to a rhetorical sign, to an empty catchword is dictated by the desire to interpret and approve the socialist-realist avant-garde or modernist style of writers close to the power block. The doctrine is so deprived of principles that it is enough for an author to be a member of the Communist Party or at least approved for some reason by the authorities, for this author to retain the freedom of his thematic and stylistic space and to turn his back on the round-table debates on the “method”. Thus socialist realist literary critics begin to recognise as “socialist writers” authors who had previously been labelled “unreliable” or even “hostile” to the established brand of art. The ideology is forced to recycle and re-label the stylistic and image structures of the avant-garde and modernism, so as to ingrain them in the doctrine of socialist realism.

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The Bulgarian experience of socialist realist literary production brings into relief a specific model, that warrants the definition **home-made socialist realism**. By a special analogy, it approximates what Gerald Creed calls “domesticated revolution”<sup>18</sup> in his study of the peculiarities of Bulgarian agriculture. However, we have in mind here literature – considered one of the most significant activities

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<sup>17</sup> I. Radev, И. Радев, *Няколко обяснителни думи* [in:] *Литературните погроми. Поръчкови „убийства“ в новата ни литература*, Велико Търново 2001, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> G. Creed, *Domesticating Revolution: From Socialist Reform to Ambivalent Transition in a Bulgarian Village*, Sofia 2005.

in the sphere of propaganda, i.e. a key element in the infrastructure of generating social reality in Bulgaria, which is also under the close scrutiny of the state.

What is even more important is that for Bulgarian socialist realism the gigantic effort of Bulgarian literature **to reflect reality in its revolutionary development** lacks scope. Bulgarian socialist realism remains limited to the Bulgarian-language milieu – untranslatable, meant for “internal use only” **at home**. For an **audience of the next of kin**, where the author is ambiguously presented. Even the secured translations of a number of Bulgarian works in communist countries stress the inevitably limited audience of **Bulgarian Literature**, which can hardly count on echoes outside its own language limits.

We also have in mind a different type of language – a space of complex understanding and misunderstanding. Even the **Aesopian language** in this case is a typical **domesticated** product – presented as a critique masked in allegories and fables, addressed to the audience of adepts who are **People Like Us**, i.e. they know our dramas and problems and interpret them through **our** vocabulary.

The socialist realism in Bulgaria is **domesticated** inasmuch as it happens in the limited space of a **household** where there is a division of labour. The leader not only interferes directly in literary life, but more than once tackles issues of a particularly domestic nature – both of individual writers and of their union. He encourages, recommends, criticises, points out and forgives errors. The chairmen and members of the governing bodies of the Union of Bulgarian Writers are often close (family) friends with the leader of the Communist Party and with members of his family; they attend parties on a regular basis (at the time of Chervenkov) or hunting parties (with Zhivkov).

Despite its gradual minimisation of use, the term “socialist realism”, **the principle of party allegiance** (in the reductionist form of “leadership principle”) after being discredited in the era of the “cult of the personality” during the 1950s, suddenly sees a belated renaissance in the 1980s of the XX century. At that time there is a new over-personalisation of the image of the communist leader in certain artistic practices. In 1981 the premature demise of Lyudmila Zhivkova generates a real posthumous cult, while the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her Father, Todor Zhivkov, unleashes waves of personal devotion embodied in poems or pictures, epitomised in the first collection “April Hearts” (1981), followed through the years by similar collections under the same title. Many Bulgarian poets combine the mourning of the Daughter with “gratitude for the inspiration” to the Father.<sup>19</sup> Merged in a special double-edged unity, the two images – of the Father and the Daughter – reconstruct the phenomenon of the **political family** just like in the actual socio-cultural field and in the system of images of socialist realism.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Characteristic mourning lyric texts for Lyudmila Zhivkova are written by Lyubomir Levchev, Ussin Kerim, Atanas Dushkov etc., and for Todor Zhivkov – Alexander Gerov, Lyubomir Levchev, Lilyana Stefanova, Lachezar Elenkov, Nino Nikolov etc., cf. April Hearts, Varna 1981, cf. also the essay by Lyubomir Levchev, *Thank you for the Inspiration*, “Literature Front”, 3.09.1981, no. 36.

<sup>20</sup> On the issue of the political family cf. Nikola Georgiev, H. Георгиев, *Нова книга за българския народ*, София 1991, p. 7–49, as well as P. Dojnov: П. Дойнов, *Увод в политическото семейство* [in:] *Социалистическият реализъм: нови изследвания*, съст. П. Дойнов, София 2008, p. 295–306.

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Once having accepted socialist realism through his works and/or admission to the Writers' Union, any writer in Bulgaria finds it hard to win back his organisational and aesthetic freedom unless he resorts to a radical gesture, such as the terminal act of emigration by Georgi Markov at the end of the 60s, which eventually ended in his murder in London in 1978. The cases of permanent – forced or voluntary – marginalisation are numerous but most of them involve people who remain outside the membership of the Union of Bulgarian Writers.

A forced withdrawal from publicity for various periods of time is imposed on poets such as Konstantin Pavlov, Nikolay Kanchev, Stefan Gechev and other authors, but it is the long play of **mutual taming** between their writing and the system of socialist realism that changes them (to a lesser degree) and the system (to a greater degree).

For most of the writers in Bulgaria, however, the choice of text and language behaviour does not need to be so crucial. They inhabit both the public sphere and the system of literary-publishing – they write and publish, they are forced to exist in a literary market entirely sustained and controlled by the state, at the price of a constant hide-and-seek with the censorship, of episodic compromise and mutual concessions.

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Do not let us forget also, that the better part of what is published and studied at school as literary heritage, despite its symbolic expropriation by the communist ideology, cannot be ear-marked as socialist realism. This “opening” to foreign experience and to one’s own past cannot be entirely controlled. In such an environment, **modern** Bulgarian styles begin to assume alternativeness within the limits of what is allowed by the official institutions.

The term “socialist realism” gradually begins to give way, maybe due to its own “light weight” or emptiness; it diminishes and vanishes in its parodic contraction – **soc-realism**. That is how it lays bare its own “engineered” origins, designed in Stalinist laboratories, and its quality to change, to become “smaller” and less “formal”, shared more and more **in haste and by the by**. A term destined to dwindle.

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