

The Contradictory Images of Totalitarianism in Contemporary Bulgarian Historiographies

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On one occasion, therefore, the censor has to judge the tendency from the form, on another occasion, of the form from the tendency. If previously content had already disappeared as a criterion for censorship, now form also disappears. As long as the tendency is good, faults of form do not matter.

Karl Marx (1842), *Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction*

Abstract: The article proposes an explanation of the widespread memory anxieties related to the socialist past in post-1989 Bulgaria and the role of mainstream historiographical research. It focuses on publications and the public interventions of the independent Institute for the Studies of the Recent Past (ISRP), founded in 2005 to counter alleged tendencies of “tacit rehabilitation of the Communist regime”. My main argument is that the dominant frame of studying and teaching history of socialism, namely through the notion of totalitarianism, and its promotion by mainstream academic research projects such as those of the ISRP, contain unsurpassable contradictions and enhance existing anxieties about social memory and national identity.

Keywords: social memory, history of Bulgarian socialism, totalitarianism

Introduction

This article traces the contradictions of the post-1989 revisions of socialist history in Bulgaria and the related social memory anxieties. My main research question is: *what conditions the anxieties around the “truth about communism” and what is the role of historians in debates?* The article focuses on publications of the influential Sofia-based non-governmental Institute for the Studies of the Recent Past (ISRP), founded in 2005 in

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order to counter the alleged tendencies of “tacit rehabilitation of the communist regime” and to provide “consciousness of what is right and what is wrong”¹. My main argument is that the dominant frame of studying and teaching history of socialism, namely through the notion of totalitarianism, and its promotion by mainstream academic research projects such as those of the ISRP, contain unsurpassable contradictions and enhance existing anxieties about social memory and national identity.

With the support of ISRP, in 2018 the government issued new instructions on the history curriculum in 2018 (Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science, 2018). The new instructions were greeted as “revolutionary” by ISRP scholars, as well as journalists, media and pundits who support ISRP (Bedrov, 2018). But the newly written textbooks provoked a public scandal and accusations of “rehabilitating” communism in 2019. Eventually the government intervened and amended the new books. Similar public scandals are a constant feature of debates about socialist past in the last decades. According to anti-communist public intellectuals and memory activists, the truth about the totalitarian period is well known by the social scientists and historians in particular, but is hidden from society and specifically from the youth. Public opinion polls showing widespread socialist nostalgia are frequently quoted as a proof of a general “memory deficit”. Left-leaning academics and activists alike accuse their anti-communist opponents for supposedly manipulating the past, imposing censorship and even of totalitarian tendencies.

This article attempts to explain the (post)socialist memory anxieties in the following way: the first section briefly refers to two general factors that condition them – the crisis of national memory after the Cold War and the contradictions within the notion of totalitarianism that is most commonly used to refer to the socialist past. The last section offers a more detailed discussion of these contradictions in the notion of totalitarianism. The second section looks into recent public debates on teaching socialism in schools and the role historians close to the ISRP play in those debates. I argue that the notion of totalitarianism is seen as central to the proper teaching of “the truth about communism”. This truth is supposedly laid out in historiographical research and the most commonly cited research here is that of the ISRP. This is why in the third section I turn to the work of the ISRP. My goal here is to show that what erupts as memory wars in the public sphere can be traced to contradictions within the very research project that aims to overcome them. This, however, is not a fallacy of historians and academics. The ISRP represents some of the most important, long-lasting and systematic scientific projects to understand Bulgaria’s socialist past. My main argument here will be that the inconsistencies are an effect of the notion of totalitarianism that aims to guide a unified interpretation of the period. The fourth section revisits the historical shifts in the meaning of totalitarianism in order to demonstrate that its contradictions are not a product of its interpretative limitations, but are stemming from tensions in the history of the 20th century that have their effects today.

1. <https://minaloto.bg/>

I. The Social Conditions of Memory Anxieties

This article's goal is to propose an understanding of the conditions of the widespread anxieties related to the socialist past, and of the role of academic research in their production. These anxieties are conditioned by two main factors.

Firstly, the actually existing post-socialist liberal market society renders it impossible for anyone to impose a singular publicly valid image of the past. Here post-socialism is not limited to former socialist countries, as this process is coupled with a wider crisis of the ability of the state to impose efficient symbolic violence over social memory and national identity. This applies not only to anxieties related to socialism, but also to all traumatic moments in national histories, for example, the divisive politics of memory regarding the Spanish Civil War, French colonialism, or the links between the Founding Fathers and slavery in the US. An illustrative example of this shift is that states increasingly resort to juridical memory regulations. After the Cold War there was an explosion of the so-called memory laws (see Deyanova, 2009, pp. 118-128), prescribing official national memory over divisive events (civil wars, genocides, past political regimes, persecutions, etc.) and criminalizing alternative interpretations. In some cases memory laws do not criminalize the denial of events, but, on the contrary, prescribe oblivion, such as the so-called Nakba Law in Israel aiming to limit the annual commemoration of the mass displacement of Palestinians that accompanied the foundation of Israel in 1948.

Although memory laws have different political motivations (left, right, conservative, liberal or nationalist), what they share, paradoxically, is the common attempt to overcome the rise of diverging identities (ideological, ethnic, religious or others). They are all provoked by the states' inability to contain their symbolic monopoly over national memory. The Bulgarian sociologist Liliana Deyanova shows that after 1989 the public sphere in Bulgaria was characterized by what she calls "a civil war over memory" (Deyanova, 2009, p. 72). The activists on each side try to codify, if they manage to find partners in the political field, their version of historical events and to negate the memory of others. In that sense, Deyanova shows that negationism is a broader phenomenon, a negation of the identity of one's "enemies". Key in Deyanova's analysis is that *the sites of memory are not defined by reaching a consensus, but by dissensus* – their deeply conflictual interpretations. This is why she reformulated Pierre Nora's famous concept, which he coined to understand the nation as the subject of consensual memorization (see Nora, 1997), to claim that *the common sites of memory are not sites of common memory*. In Bulgarian debates this aphorism is now sometimes falsely attributed to Nora himself. According to Deyanova, "the old world of meaning" could hardly "orient practical action" in the new "postnational, liquid modernity", but, at the same time, the "new neoliberal institutional rules [are unable to constitute] a world, which is not only instrumentally efficient, but is also collectively shared and a meaningful lifeworld" (Deyanova, 2009, p. 332).

The aforementioned (first) factor can be considered as the *genus proximus* of the conditions of memory anxieties, because it is not limited to the memory of socialism. Similar symbolic battles in Bulgaria are fought over the Ottoman past and over Bulgaria's active role in the Holocaust during WWII. They are sometimes extended to the international arena, for example, when in 2020 Bulgaria blocked North Macedonia's accession negotiations with the EU over memory and identity claims. This begs the question what is the *differentia specifica* of the divisive politics of memory regarding the socialist past and it leads me to the second factor.

The second factor, which is peculiar to the revisions of the socialist past, is that the very notion of totalitarianism, that dominant attempts to conceptualize the period rely on, presupposes an unsurpassable contradiction. It is not the notion itself, of course, but the contradictory historical trajectory it embodies, that renders it incapable to produce a unified understanding of its object. My main argument here, based on a brief review of the main historical theoretical conceptualizations of totalitarianism which I will discuss in the last section of the article, is that the notion contains two mutually exclusive critiques. The first is posed against formal rationality, capitalism, modernity and industrialism. Here totalitarianism is an integral, but unintended element of modernity. The other critique can be traced back to fears of unbridled mass democracy, revolutionary transformations and the subversive (and destructive) dangers for the established order it contains. Here totalitarianism is radically external to Western modernity – foreign, Oriental, abnormal, pathological. It becomes clear that the notion of totalitarianism cannot be reduced to a Cold War weapon, one has to acknowledge its relative autonomy and the fact that it partly conditions the impossibility to formulate a unified imaginary about the socialist past. In other words, the notion of totalitarianism is at the same time the condition of possibility and of impossibility of a dominant imaginary that is supposed to serve as a moral guide for *the future* by producing “truths” about *the past*. The last section of the article elaborates on that question. I will now turn to these two factors and how they play out in the public debate in Bulgaria regarding teaching the history of socialism in high schools.

II. Teaching Totalitarianism

In 2019 the nongovernmental foundation Truth and Memory protested against school books’ representation of part of the History and Civilization curriculum in Bulgaria. The new textbooks were written in order to conform to the aforementioned new 2018 governmental instruction. The NGO sent an open letter (Hristov, Kelbecheva, 2019), signed by Hristo Hristov, a journalist and head of the foundation, and the historian Evelina Kelbecheva, both associates of the ISRP. The letter claimed that school books present “history only”, but “not civilization”. According to them, the newest governmental instructions were “formally included”, but not in spirit, making the texts manipulative. Both Kelbecheva and Hristov welcomed the 2018 instructions, but they thought that the actual textbooks, despite calling the socialist period totalitarian, were not anti-communist enough: “there is not enough focus on the most important features of the totalitarian communist regime – political terror, the repressive system, the total Sovietization of the country and Kremlin’s dictate over virtually all spheres of life”. According to Momchil Metodiev, a Bulgarian historian of socialism and a member of the ISRP, “facts ought to come first, but when it comes to totalitarian regimes a certain moral judgement is a must”. The ISRP published a position (ISRP, 2019) against “objective” and factual representation of socialism that does not put forward the values of the current liberal-democratic regime first, and claimed this may lead to “negationism”. Their statement also criticised the textbooks for “formal adhering” to the requirements, while “internally eroding them”. This leads, according to them, to a “contradiction between the theoretical definition of communism as totalitarianism and its partial rehabilitation”.

Eventually the government forced the publishers to amend the school books and to include quotations from the *Law on Declaring the Criminal Nature of the Communist*

Regime in Bulgaria, adopted in 2000¹, as well as more negative qualifications (more victims, more crimes, more resistance, etc.). Even though the government responded to the protests, it did not reform the process of selection of school books. In the first open letter the government was asked to stop “the current malpractice of representing identical facts and events in different ways in different textbooks by implementing new selection criteria and stricter control over content”. According to the ISRP, “paradoxically, the current system was created in order to safeguard democratic principles in the procedures – to remove the governmental monopoly, to mobilize the private sector, pluralism and competition”. The “ministry’s role was reduced to simply regulating the procedure, but in the end precisely what the reformers wanted to avoid happened – one monopoly was replaced by another”. Their use of the word “monopoly” is curious, especially in view of complaints that the content of the textbooks was said to be too dissimilar. ISRP asserted that the instructions should have clearer requirements in terms of content, rather than form.

The “formal formalism” of the instructions and its discontents

The existing government regulation is inspired by liberal proceduralist principles, but it is precisely their application that produces the supposed rehabilitation of totalitarianism. The goal of the instructions is to secure market competition and intellectual freedom – any group of university professors may write a textbook, which is in turn proposed to a publishing house, then academic referees and teachers decide whether the competing book adheres to the guidelines and more widely to academic standards. The assumption here is that the government can only introduce criteria over form but not over content, which needs to be the prerogative of academics. This liberal model is supposed to secure transparent public procurement and a level playing field for all participants, be them private or public publishing companies.

For instance, one of the expected results is that the textbooks “explain the economic changes during the Communist regime”. However, this allows historians to mention free education and healthcare. This is one of the statements perceived as manipulative by anti-communist memory activists (BNT, 2019). Another example is that the guidelines aim to be merely formal by asking authors to include important personalities from the period, without listing who they should be. One of the textbooks included Elena Lagadinova – the youngest partisan in the Bulgarian anti-fascist resistance who later led the the Bulgarian Women’s Movement, which was influential in the UN women rights’ activism during the Cold War. She recently gained prominence in international academic debates as a model for alternatives to mainstream liberal feminism (see Ghodsee, 2019). The inclusion of Lagadinova in one of the textbooks was criticized in the original open letter by Hristov and Kelbecheva, and was later, after the intervention of the government, removed from the edited publication. According to Iskra Baeva, influential left-leaning historian and one of the authors of the said textbook, after the government intervention,

1. It is called a law, but in practice it is a declaration via which the majority in Parliament at the time condemned the regime and the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) for the repressions, brutal violations of human rights. Communism was also blamed for “ruining the values of European civilization” and “dissolving people’s moral values”. The aim of the document was not to propose punishments for concrete crimes, but “to declare the criminal nature of the communist regime”.

the name of Lagadinova had to be replaced by Stefka Kostadinova¹. Kostadinova is a beloved Bulgarian athlete who still holds the world record for high jump, which she made in 1987, and who is politically active, chairing the Bulgarian Olympic Committee, and supporting the center-right GERB government².

But even prior to the activists' intervention, the apparent formalism of the new guidelines was merely formal, in the sense that the formal requirements already presuppose certain content. For instance, the guidelines posit that the textbooks have to provide evidence of the personality cult, to "discover forms of political resistance against the communist regime", repressions, etc. In fact, students are expected to learn about "the forms of resistance" not only under socialism, but under Ottoman and Byzantine rule, but not about, say, the Bulgarian anti-fascist resistance or about the mass peasant resistance movement in early 20th century. An illustrative example of the "formal formalism", which inevitably presupposes specific content, is the way that the guidelines address the socialist regime's treatment of minorities. One of the criteria suggests that the textbooks should "represent the policies of the Bulgarian Communist Party towards the Bulgarians from Pirin Macedonia". This is a hardly veiled hint at the need to denounce the early socialist period governmental decision to recognize the existence of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. The recognition of this minority was short lived and it turned into a negation of its existence. The very next criterion is "giving examples of the attitudes of the communist regime towards ethnic communities", and the new key concept pupils need to learn is "the Revival process". The so-called Revival Process is the commonly used term for the repressions and forced renaming of Muslim populations in Bulgaria during late Socialism, that culminated in the 1980s and ended with mass expulsions of Bulgarian Turks to Turkey in 1989. In the first case, the tacit assumption is that the population in Pirin Macedonia (part of today's national territory of Bulgaria) there is no Macedonian minority, but only Bulgarian majority. A preposition reflecting today's official political line that does not recognize such a minority, despite the factual existence of people who do identify as such. Similar unspoken and implicit suggestions are contained in the guidelines for other historical periods as well. For example, in the section with criteria on teaching the interwar period there is no mention of the 1923 military coup, but only of the left-wing violence that followed in the next years.

The bias of this "formal formalism" is recognized by the authorities. During the public debate in 2019, Krasimir Valchev, the Minister of Education, claimed that the formal requirements in the guidelines already contain the spirit of the values at the core of the current political regime and its values. According to him, concepts that the guidelines require to be taught, such as repressive apparatus, peoples' tribunal, state security (the secret police) and most of all totalitarianism are not an attempt at a neutral representation of facts, but reflect a certain "civilizational choice". Valchev argues that the "correct" interpretation of the past is crucial to securing the future – "young people" need to "recognize dictatorship" because "developments in Artificial Intelligence may lead to digital dictatorship in future" (Darik, 2019). Illustratively, in one of his interviews, the

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1. This was shared by Baeva during the public presentation, which took place on the 5th of October 2020 in the Goethe Institut in Sofia, of the Bulgarian translation of Kristen Ghodsee's book *Second World, Second Sex*, which deals largely with the life and work of Lagadinova.
 2. As she frames it, "I support GERB, my parents are from BSP [the ex-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party], but my friends are from DPS [a pro-minorities liberal party]" (*apud* Filipov, 2014)

minister claimed that historical education in totalitarianism should teach the youth that there are some practices that should never again be accepted as normal, such as the existence of secret police (Darik, 2019).

The minister was displeased with some “techniques” that the authors of the textbooks used to avoid adhering to “the spirit” of the guidelines, despite formally abiding by them. Academics accused the Ministry of censorship over content through interventions after the formal procedures of selecting textbooks. Valchev responded by insisting that there can be no academic freedom for totalitarian and antidemocratic values. He also suggested that there is a need for new guidelines with “more than formal” requirements. The vice minister even suggested that the government should write the books directly (BNR, 2019). Despite these statements, the existing procedures were not changed.

Importantly, the critics of the political interventions also employed anti-totalitarian rhetoric. According to a petition “in defence of academic freedom and the Bulgarian education against political censorship”, the fact that the government demanded the rewriting of the books after the procedure smacks of totalitarianism (Korchakova, 2019). According to the historian Rumiana Marinova-Hristidi (Hristova, 2019), the author of some of the edited textbooks, the whole controversy was staged by “the American establishment” and their “right-wing Sorosoids”¹ who “impose Stalinist censorship”. The uses and abuses of the allusions to totalitarianism and dictatorship are indicative of the fact that anti-communist memory activists are forced to defend a direct governmental intervention over the correct memories, akin to the aforementioned “memory laws”. And their adversaries, on the other hand, resort to liberal pluralism, academic freedom and competition.

The Eternal Recurrence of Totalitarianism

These recent debates are nothing new, even though they often present themselves as totally novel. In fact, history textbooks have been rewritten countless times precisely in view of the question of the representation of the socialist past. Back in 1992 the government banned the old textbooks and the procommunist, but also antifascist parts were removed (see Deyanova, 2009, p. 78). The textbooks were entirely rewritten again in 1996 and in 2000, when the current liberal-proceduralist model for producing the instructions was adopted. But even prior to the most recent reform the textbooks did not contain positive representations of socialism and the notion of totalitarianism was central.

In 2013, for example, the National Polling Center, the European Research Center and The Hannah Arendt Center conducted a large study on “Education about the Communist Regime and the Democratic Values of Bulgaria’s Youth Today” (Kadrinov, 2013). The study had similar anti-communist assumptions and was used to argue that the Bulgarian education system fails to teach young people about “the true meaning of communism” – the study found high levels of positive assessment of the socialist past amongst the youth. In the study itself, researchers admit that the official school books at the time did conceptualize the communist regime as totalitarian and that it is evaluated negatively. The problem, according to them, was that the result is unsatisfactory due to the high levels of “lack of knowledge” about the past.

1. The term “Sorosoid”, derived from the name George Soros, is a highly pejorative, conspiratorial and polemic term. It is used to denote liberals in Bulgaria by some on the Left, conservatives and the far-right.

Along with the statistical data and its analysis, a book was published that aimed to help teachers learn about good educational practices from other ex-socialist countries that are “more interactive”, “innovative”, “with higher critical perspective” and provide “a clear picture of the totalitarian and the democratic system”. The good practices include memory laws, “museums of terror”, seminars, workshops, “truth committees”, tourist routes and others. It is recommended that students take part in events that enhance “emotional memory” (Kadrinov, 2013, p. 78), the young should develop “desire to contribute to the free and democratic order”, to learn about their “future in united Europe” (Kadrinov, 2013, p. 84), as well as about the dangers of “left extremism today” (Kadrinov, 2013, p. 66).

In addition, the nationally representative public opinion poll asked young people if they know which are the “basic human rights” with the goal to see if they understand the truth about totalitarianism. According to the study (Kadrinov, 2013), there is an “informed” opinion, which is present among “well educated citizens of large cities”, which understand the “global and value aspect” of rights. On the contrary, what tends to be more prevalent is the “uninformed” opinion of the “poor and less educated” young people, who tend to live in “rural areas” and to be members of “ethnic minorities”. The “uninformed” made the mistake, according to the research’s interpretation, to interpret human rights as “social protection and labour rights” (Kadrinov, 2013, p. 43). Another problem, which the study finds, is that “only 10% are prone to depict the ones who enriched themselves during the Transition in positive terms” (Kadrinov, 2013, pp. 50-51). Hence it is possible to argue that the stakes in the memory anxieties are mediated by social contradictions that exist today, namely the widespread discontent with the rising social inequalities, and not entirely the actual memory of socialism itself. In this sense, the spectre of totalitarianism cannot be exorcised by installing a “correct” memory. More importantly, nevertheless, is that the very assumption that some objective and total truth about the Bulgarian communist past exists in the research, is dubious. This can be seen also in the literature that is dedicated to unravel the truth about the recent past from the point of view of the notion of totalitarianism.

I already mentioned that one of the paradoxes lies in the fact that the anti-communist memory activists and researchers are forced to decry liberal proceduralism in high school books selection and to call for direct government intervention. Their adversaries, on the other hand, adopt the position of the oppressed by the “new totalitarianism” on part of the current liberal regime. Those insisting on stricter anti-communist values claim that it is not a question of opinion, because the truth about communism expressed in the concept of totalitarianism itself is also contained in historiographical research. The most commonly cited research project here is the work of ISRP, which I will turn to in the following section in order to show the internal tensions within the empirical research of the Bulgarian recent past that is supposed to be used as the foundation of the objective truth.

III. ISRP and the Impossible Truth about Totalitarianism

It is possible to argue, with the risk of overgeneralization, that the most common critique raised against ISRP’s historical studies (and against the totalitarian framework they aim to apply) is that they presuppose a coherent totality of the Socialist regime that could be derived from the notion of totalitarianism. In the totalitarianism framework, socialism appears as a field of social relations where everyone is nothing but a helpless victim to

an all-powerful party, manipulating everyone with its total ideology and repressive apparatus. This critique, articulated by revisionist approaches¹, is valid for the so-called “totalitarian paradigm” (Fitzpatrick, 2008) more broadly, and not limited to the Bulgarian application of the totalitarian approach. I will not deal with the debates between revisionists and totalitarians² in the current article. This is because the article deals with the (impossibility of) the attempt to provide a total truth about the past that can be used by the state to impose a unified national memory. The so-called revisionists do not have such ambitions.

My main argument here is that we cannot extract a singular truth about the totalitarian nature of communism from the work of ISRP. The concrete empirical research done by ISRP is too pluralist in order to be able to speak of a singular content. In the previous section I showed how the formal requirements of the governmental instruction disappeared when the government intervened in 2019 to impose a specific content that is supposed to present the truth about communism. In this section I show that the content also disappears, inasmuch as the concrete publications and arguments, produced within the rubric of the Institute, are incommensurable to each other and do not adhere to some coherent totalitarian paradigm either.

For example, many of the authors that are close to ISRP claim to be against the “normalization” of the socialist past. In an edited volume (see Gruev, Mishkova, 2013) devoted to the debates and interpretations of the socialist past by a number of authors close to the Institute we read a variety of definitions of “normalization”. “Normalization” is analysing socialism as a “normal political system” (see Gruev, Mishkova, 2013, p. 33), which is expressed in exaggerating the continuations between socialism and other periods and not thinking of the socialist past as a radical rupture (see Gruev, Mishkova, 2013, p. 100), for others it is a lack of “moral-ethical” qualifications. But authors within the ISRP’s milieu have criticized “non-normalization”. Roumen Avramov attacked the “obscurantist” idea for final closure of historical research (see Gruev, Mishkova, 2013, p. 237) and insisted on fostering democratic debate (see Gruev, Mishkova, 2013, p. 241). Furthermore, Avramov’s influential historical studies are known precisely for highlighting the continuations between the pre-socialist and the socialist periods. According to Avramov, “the anticapitalist rhetoric that flooded Bulgaria after 1944 steps on (and exacerbates) well known patterns, developed mostly before World War I” (Avramov, 2007). His work has

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1. Revisionism in sovietology should not be confused with the historical revisionism of Ernst Nolte and François Furet, whose equation of Fascism and Communism (as totalitarian twins) brings them closer to the so-called totalitarian paradigm akin to the work of the ISRP. Importantly, Nolte’s assertion that Nazism should be understood as a defence reaction of Western civilization against Eastern Communism, and that the Holocaust is comparable to Stalinist crimes, lead to the famous West German *Historikerstreit* (historians’ dispute) of the 1980s. Many, Habermas among others, perceived Nolte’s positions as serving to downplay Nazi crimes. Paradoxically, in Bulgaria today, one’s reluctance to equate Nazism and Communism might justify accusations of an intentional downplaying of Socialist crimes.
 2. In Bulgaria there is a vibrant revisionist scholarship, inspired by historians such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, Jochen Hellbeck, Stephen Kotkin, by social anthropologists of (post)socialism as Alexei Yurchak, Gerald Creed or Katherine Verdery, as well as from the Foucauldian and Bourdieusian theories. Some of its representatives, including Momchil Hristov, Todor Hristov, Liliana Deyanova, Andrei Bundzhulov and many others, are part of Institute for Critical Social Studies, but as previously mentioned, their work lies outside of the scope of the current article, because I focus on the relevance of the ISRP research and their participation in the public debate.

also shown the continuations between the anti-semitic repressions (as the expropriation of Jewish property) and the post-war socialist nationalization (Avramov, 2012).

Martin Ivanov (2007), on the other hand, critiques Avramov's understanding of continuity between and after 1944. He proposes to think of a violent rupture with the "natural" modernization tendencies. According to him there could have been a "normal" historical course if the "freakish communist project was not imposed by the Soviet Army" (Ivanov, 2007, pp. 332-333). He claims that "in the 1950s keynesian revolution" was in its peak, but by the end of the 1960s "the democratic etatism" would have been defeated by the "new monetarist counterrevolution" and only a decade later Bulgaria would have followed this "optimistic" scenario. Mihail Gruev (2009), on the other hand, critiques the speculations about what would have happened "if only" something else had happened. He resolves the contradiction between continuities and ruptures by proposing a detailed analysis of the conflictual political projects for economic development before 1944 and their trajectories within the forced land collectivisation in the 1950s.

Alexander Vezenkov, who has also published with ISRP, dubs the totalitarian approach "meaningless" (Vezenkov, 2013, pp. 256-257) and studies the persistence of narrative structures in mainstream historiography during and after Socialism in the totalitarian approaches. He points to the recurring "cliches" imposed on past regimes. "Slavery" used to be Ottoman, then fascist, and communist today (Vezenkov, 2013, pp. 248-250). Historians often argue that the number of victims is exaggerated, "the people" always suffer under "foreign yokes", the economy is in ruins, reforms are always fake, there is a constant demographic crisis and even genocide. According to him, these common tropes are simply transposed from one past (fascist before 1989) to the next (communist after 1989).

The ISRP published Vezenkov's historical study of the 9th of September, the date when the anti-fascist Communist-dominated coalition "Fatherland Front" came to power (Vezenkov, 2014). The book itself looks at the impossibility of systematizing and unifying the contradictory and heterogeneous nature of this historical event. In other words, it does not paint a picture of a centralized and unified singular power, orchestrating social agency, but, on the contrary, it points to its internal contradictions and problematizes the presupposed totality of the centralized communist power. This study is key insofar as it demonstrates the radical divergence between different publications of ISRP. A growing number of publications by the Institute are influenced by the methods of micro-history, everyday history, social, oral, economic and cultural history, social anthropology, historical sociology and so on. These "new" non-positivist methods, along with the growing empirical work, destabilize the image of an ahistorical totality of the Totalitarian System. Some researchers like Daniela Koleva and others, who have published with the Institute, even make positive references (2013) to popular revisionists, who are known for their criticisms of the so-called totalitarian paradigm, like Alexei Yurchak or Gerald Creed. Koleva (2020) recently published a study entitled *Memory and Justice*, where she explicates how the complexities of the past (for instance, one could be both a victim and perpetrator) breeds multiplicities in the post-socialist social memories.

Some researchers argue communism is "anti-national" (Kelbecheva, 2013), "a foreign occupation", "a national betrayal". It is also compared to the Ottoman period (Kiriakov, 2013, p. 195) (understood within the national ideology, that is: foreign oppression of Bulgarian people). Other researchers take the opposite path, pointing towards the nationalist turn after the 1960s (Gruev, Kalionski, 2012). Similar tensions do not exist only between authors and texts, but also within one and the same text. Momchil Metodiev

(2008), in his study of the secret service during socialism, published by the Institute, writes that “the ideological motivation was dominant” (Metodiev, 2008, p. 143) for the secret police members. But on the very next page he claims the opposite – “ideological motivation” was “substituted with... a material” (Metodiev, 2008, p. 143). This sudden shift of argumentation is without any further reflection or explanation, and does not concern different periods.

Even though most researchers claim there is a truth about communism, this truth is only operational if it remains a Total Truth about Everything in Communism, but, at the same time, each concrete assessment of any of the specificities of the period is understood in radically opposing ways (too nationalist or too unpatriotic, driven by ideology or interests, etc.). What I am trying to show is that the Institute’s publications do not produce a kind of a standardized, internally homogeneous singular truth as intended, but rather truths in the plural. As I have mentioned, while in the public debates on high school textbooks form disappears, here what disappears is content (understood as singular). Authors associated with the totalitarian paradigm, such as Hannah Arendt, are often quoted, however this does not signify a kind of a blind following of their models. In other words, there is a strong tension between the stated aim to follow a kind of a totalitarian paradigm and the concrete arguments the implementation of this aim generates. What enables totalization of the plurality of truths about communism that are being produced cannot be found in the content of the publications, but in the shared form, the formal adherence to the understanding of the past in terms of totalitarianism. This formal adherence is played out not so much in the intellectual work, but rather in its public mobilization in memory battles in the public sphere, which I have touched upon in the previous section.

Ivaylo Znepolski (2008), the head of the Institute, for example, quoting Hannah Arendt, defines Bulgarian totalitarianism as a “deliberate formation of a working class” (Znepolski, 2008, p. 199), even though that for Arendt (1979) it is precisely the opposite – the collapse of classes is key characteristic of totalitarianism. Arendt insists on the “anti-utilitarian” character of totalitarianism (for her masses are not driven by interest and in that sense they are not identical with classes). But for Znepolski it is not the “ideological clichés”, but the “feeling of a real class interest” that is “fundamental to the communist orchestration of the masses” (Znepolski, 2008, p. 78). The question of the importance of ideology crops up in comparison with Friedrich and Brzezinski’s ideal-typical approach to totalitarianism, where the first characteristic is a coherent “guiding ideology” and not interests. Znepolski criticizes the “normalization” of communism, understood as acknowledging continuities between regimes, but in his work he also speaks about such continuities. He talks about the “habits” and in the “pastoral mountain areas, where animal slaughter is practiced routinely” as an explanatory instrument for the understanding of political violence prior, during and after socialism (Znepolski, 2008, p. 104). He also claims that in the early years of the socialist regime in Bulgaria, there was “planned implementation of a totalitarian regime” and “forging of a Weberian iron cage”. During that time “the totalitarian model is present” without being “completed” in form (Znepolski, 2008, p. 183). “Paradoxically”, he writes, the visibility of its essence, exists before its “most authentic form” (Znepolski, 2008, p. 104).

The reference to Weber is indicative, as Weber used the concept of iron cage in his theory of modern Western capitalism, and not of some supposed deviation. Moreover, the iron cage, and Weber’s analysis, had been appropriated within the field of critical theory in the 20th century to develop a critique of formal rationality and modern capitalism

precisely within the rubric of the notion of totalitarianism. What I am arguing for here is that, along with the strongly varied actual research within the work of ISRP, we can observe slips within the uses of the notion of totalitarianism as an element of implicit (albeit unintended) critique of modern capitalism. It is in this sense that content disappears, as I have stated before. As I have written in the beginning, this problem is presupposed by the very notion of totalitarianism, which already contains both critiques of modernity and of its negation. Let me briefly turn to Hristo Hristov, who is one of the most prominent contributors to the Institute. He seems to find the truth of communism in anyone who had dissented during the period. Actually existing dissent, nevertheless, was rarely framed within liberal democratic and anti-communist discourses, there had been many instances of immanent opposition, perceiving actually existing socialism as not socialist enough.

Hristo Hristov writes that the “truth [about communism] that should not be forgotten” is wages, during socialism, did not respond to consumer needs for a “large number of families” (Hristov, 2007, p. 258). Or that the forced cooperativization of agriculture “transformed” farmers into “waged laborers” and thus “fully depersonalized the individual”. He approvingly quotes the radical left economist Nikola Kufradzhiev, who in the 1960s criticized the “deformation” of socialism, created by the fact that the “means of production... do not belong to workers” but are property of the state and thus “the workers collectives are deprived of real participation” (Hristov, 2007, pp. 90-91). I am not saying Hristo Hristov is a supporter of workers’ self-management or democratic socialism. However, the way the Truth about Communism is constituted, as I have described, in the anti-communist narratives enables the rehabilitation of figures that were repressed not because to their opposition to socialism, but due to their unrelenting support of the idea of communism. And if we keep the notion of totalitarianism, people like Kufradzhiev were repressed not because they were anti-“totalitarian”, but since they thought Bulgarian socialism was not “totalitarian” enough. This is the case if we associate the notion of totalitarianism with socialism. As I have explained in the beginning, however, the concept embodies a contradictory trajectory, both critique of revolutionary popular transformation of society as well as of formal rationality and modern Western capitalism. In other words, the conditions of possibility for the production of a singular truth, that is, as anything that could be seen as oppositional to the empty signifier of totalitarianism, cannot be contained, that is to say, they are at the very same moment, its conditions of impossibility. Now I turn to how the contradictions embodied in the notion of totalitarianism condition the tensions that appear in the Bulgarian debate. In the current and previous sections I showed that we cannot extract a coherent image of totalitarianism neither in the form of governmental educational instruction, nor in the empirical research that is supposed to produce a unified content of what socialism really was. In the next section I look into the common tendency that needs to sublimate those contradictions – that is, the adherence to the notion of totalitarianism. I do that in order to explicate that the tensions within the notion are already contained in its history. As I have stated in the beginning of the article, the contradictions within the work of ISRP are not an effect of an intellectual fallacy of the researchers, but are a product of the very notion that enables the apparent consistency of their research project.

IV. The Paradox of Totalitarianism

The history of the notion of totalitarianism is contradictory, but all contradictions boil down to a central tension – that between the critique of formal rationality and modernity, on the one hand, and the critique of crowd psychology, revolutionary social transformations and the dangers of the tyranny of the majority, on the other.

I will develop my critique by showing that it is possible to extract these two incommensurable uses of the signifier *totalitarianism*. The (older) critical notion of totalitarianism is *antielitist* and understands totalitarianism as the culmination of instrumental reason of both state and capitalist bureaucracies, as a *product of capitalist modernity*. The *anti-populist* approach, on the other hand, sees totalitarianism as an “irrational” *popular will* (or a product of *crowd psychology*) that is left unchecked by constitutional protections of individual rights, in other words as a *totalitarian democracy*¹.

The Italian anti-fascist Giovanni Amendola, who coined the term *totalitarianism*, argued that fascists want to become a “master caste”, “a minority”, which “has the exclusive right [...] to command the entire remaining population [-] a people of slaves” (see Petersen, 1996, pp. 1-21). Anti-totalitarianism was not articulated against the presumed revolutionary and irrational impulses of masses who abuse democratic procedures to overturn liberal rights. Rather totalitarianism was seen as an elite restoration of the privileges of the *ancient regime* and a way to oppress the masses. Furthermore, these early anti-totalitarian imaginaries linked totalitarianism explicitly to modern bureaucratic reason, formal rationality and capitalism. Similar anti-totalitarian critiques can be found in Wilhelm Reich’s (1980) *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, published originally in 1933, who argued that Soviet totalitarianism should be understood as not revolutionary and anti-capitalist enough, since it did not dismantle the structures of patriarchal domination and the family along with private property.

The anarchist Rudolf Rocker, who also wrote in the 1930s, similarly insisted that totalitarianism “is an epoch of state capitalism”, resulting from the applications of Taylorist principles of economic efficiency, which reduces humanity to cogs in a machine. For him totalitarianism is an “economic dictatorship” which “subordinate[s] the innumerable expressions of social life to the mechanical tempo of the machine and force[s] organic life into lifeless forms” (1997). Associations of totalitarianism with capitalism, modernity, formal rationality and economic efficiency, remained a central element of critical theory after World War II, for instance in Marcuse’s (1969) critique of repressive tolerance or in Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1997) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they claimed *the whole enlightenment project is totalitarian*.

The genealogy of key nodal points of totalitarianism discourses about mass irrationalities and revolutionary impulses could be traced back to Le Bon’s late 19th century crowd psychology. Le Bon presented crowds as emotional, irrational, fanatical, easily manipulated by magnetic leaders, prone to violence, crimes and destructive revolutionary impulses, feminine, simultaneously too atomized and too collectivist. He explains both 19th century socialism and the French Revolution, but also the extension of suffrage and mass democracy, in terms of the alleged dangers inherent in crowd psychology. Homological discursive elements could be found in the literature on totalitarian democracy today. In fact, 20th century explanations of totalitarianism as an effect of pathologies of crowds is directly

1. A wide range of historians of ideas and philosophers have pointed out this tension in the notion of totalitarianism, such as Enzo Traverso, Domenico Losurdo, Ishay Landa and Alberto Toscano.

derived from Le Bon's crowd psychology, as we can see from Christian Borch's book *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (2013).

The spread of this interpretation could be traced to the Cold War, but became hegemonic only after 1989. As Ranciere (2006) shows in his book *The Hatred of Democracy*, in this "new totalitarianism [...] the properties that were formerly attributed to totalitarianism, conceived as the State devouring society, (...) become properties of democracy, conceived as society devouring the State." The most common interpretations of totalitarianism today blame unmanaged mass democracy, the tyranny of the majority, the fanaticism of crowds and their exaltation before their charismatic leader.

In the tradition where totalitarianism is seen as abnormal, pathological, Oriental or an effect of mass revolutionary irrational and backward impulses it is defined as "totalitarian democracy". Here, for example, we have Noltes' understanding of totalitarianism as a defense reaction of European civilization against the original Eastern (and foreign) totalitarianism in Russia. On the other hand, Furet, for example, can trace it as the unneeded (for the Enlightenment modern project) mass revolutionary movement in the French Revolution (see Furet, Nolte, 2004). Already in the 1950s Jacob Talmon talks about "totalitarian democracy" in these terms. The influential theories of Friedrich and Brzezinski or Raymon Aron's can also be read in terms of defining totalitarianism as the radical negation of Western modernity.

The distinction between anti-elitist/radical and anti-populist/reactionary is superimposing an abstract ideal-type over concrete authors, whose texts are inescapably richer. There are, for example, psychological and anti-populist elements in radical authors. Say, in Wilhelm Reich's *mass* psychology of fascism or Marcuse's critique of "repressive tolerance", where he uses the notion totalitarian *democracy*. Nevertheless, the tensions between anti-elitist and anti-populist significations of totalitarianism do not disappear. In the case of Marcuse or Wilhelm Reich, for example, totalitarianism is not an effect of undisciplined drives of the masses, but, on the contrary, it is seen as a product of modern capitalist disciplining and civilizational repressions of those drives.

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is an emblematic example of a clash of the two notions of totalitarianism. In the first two volumes, her argument is highly critical of European elites, colonial violence, capitalist political economy, modern bureaucracy, imperialism and liberal governance. Totalitarianism is an effect of the transposition of the logic of capital (growth for growth's sake) onto the rest of society, mainly politics. Arendt sees totalitarian destruction as continuation of the logic of capital. In volumes I and II we easily find statements such as:

The most radical and the only secure form of possession is destruction, for only what we have destroyed is safely and forever ours. [...] A social system based [...] on property cannot possibly proceed toward anything but the final destruction of all property (Arendt, 1979, p. 145).

Importantly, Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism in the first two parts cannot be disconnected from the historical convergence of capital accumulation, imperialism, and modern bureaucracy. Totalitarianism is not a check-list of abstract features, as it is in other popular Cold War texts on totalitarianism. Instead, Arendt speaks of a crystallization of multiple elements in concrete historically situated practices, which are in turn an effect of capitalism, European anti-semitism and imperialism.

She situates her study in the tradition of classical theories of imperialism, and takes inspiration from Hobson, Hilferding, Lenin and, in her words, the brilliant insights of

Rosa Luxemburg. Nevertheless, Arendt remains critical of Lenin for his claim that imperialism is the last stage of capitalism – Arendt claims it is actually the first in which the bourgeoisie governs alone – without the need for democratic mediation (see Arendt, 1979, pp. 138, 148).

In the third volume of her book, which is the most widely quoted, she suddenly shifts her analysis to stalinism, and the rich empirical studies of European imperialism and anti-semitism, are displaced by general statements about the essence of soviet totalitarianism. She even goes back to crowd psychology:

The attraction of evil and crime for the mob mentality is nothing new [...] Eminent European scholars and statesmen had predicted, from the early nineteenth century onward, the rise of the mass man and the coming of a mass age. A whole literature on mass behavior and mass psychology had demonstrated and popularized the wisdom, so familiar to the ancients, of the affinity between democracy and dictatorship, between mob rule and tyranny (Arendt, 1979, pp. 307-316).

Losurdo (2004) tries to explain these contradictions in Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as a tactical attempt on her part to integrate into the US academic milieu in the context of the early years of the Cold War. He points to the fact that the first two volumes were written before she was in the US and reflect a more radical period of her thinking. Even if there is a merit to this argumentation, it cannot explain why there are continuations, along with the ruptures, between the volumes. Moreover, Losurdo's argument does not account for the fact that this particular tension between the two understandings of totalitarianism is present in other influential theories of totalitarianism (e.g., Marcuse, Reich, etc.), and even oozes in the Bulgarian debates, as I have shown in the previous section.

Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* embodies the central contradictions of the notion of totalitarianism, between the critique of liberal capitalism and critique of democracy; critique of capitalist political economy and of crowd psychology; critique of formal rationality and critique of revolutionary fanaticism. This tension is manifested in the Bulgarian debates on its totalitarian past, as I have demonstrated. But are the tensions embodied in the notion not prevalent in our societies today? Are we witnessing a destructive explosion of crowd irrationalities, abusing the democratic process, when looking at phenomena such as Brexit or Trump's presidency? Or is it, on the contrary, unbridled corporate power and formal rationalities that are endangering our future? Such questions cannot be answered intellectually, but only in social practice. In this respect, I find the passion with which Bulgarian anti-communist memory activists fight for the past to secure a common future more than relevant.

Résumé: L'article propose une explication des anxiétés liées au passé socialiste dans la Bulgarie d'après 1989, et du rôle qui revient à la recherche historiographique *mainstream*. Il se concentre sur les publications et les interventions publiques de l'Institut (indépendant) d'études du passé récent, fondé en 2005 pour contrer les supposées tentatives de «réhabilitation tacite du communisme». Ma démonstration s'appuie sur l'analyse du cadre dominant des études et des programmes d'enseignement promus par cet Institut, et plus particulièrement par la notion de totalitarisme, qui contiennent des contradictions insurpassables et font augmenter les anxiétés concernant la mémoire sociale et l'identité nationale.

Mots-clé: mémoire sociale, histoire du socialisme bulgare, totalitarisme

Rezumat: Articolul propune o explicație a răspândirii anxietăților legate de memoria trecutului socialist în Bulgaria de după 1989 și a rolului cercetării istoriografice dominante. Se concentrează asupra publicațiilor și intervențiilor publice ale Institutului (independent) de studiere a Trecutului Recent (ISRP), întemeiat în 2005 pentru a contracara presupusele tendințe de „reabilitare tacită a regimului comunist”. Principalul meu argument este că acest cadru dominant pe care-l constituie studiile și cursurile de istorie a socialismului, îndeosebi prin noțiunea de totalitarism, și promovarea lor prin principalele proiecte academice, precum cele ale ISRP, conțin contradicții de netrecut, care sporesc aceste anxietăți privind memoria socială și identitatea națională.

Cuvinte-cheie: memorie socială, istoria socialismului bulgar, totalitarism

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