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THE OTHER FACE OF THE COMMUNIST REGIME: CONCENTRATION CAMPS IN BULGARIA ACCORDING TO CIA REPORTS (1944-1955)

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Abstract: *Fascism and communism are ideologies that have affected millions of people's lives. The spreading and fascist politics of Nazi led the world into chaos. Nevertheless, the communists who came to power in Russia were the only hope of the Balkans and Eastern Europe against the spread of fascist Germany in World War II. As all the other European countries affected by the political winds of the 1930s and 1940s, Bulgaria also experienced serious political crises. Communism and Russia became the saviour for opponents and minorities in Bulgaria, who have been dealt with frequent military coups and have been ruled by the fascist government for years. On September 9, 1944, the fascist power in Bulgaria was smashed and the communist party took power with the support of Russia. But contrary to expectations, the communist government imposed policies that resembled fascist management, being contrary to its ideology and its promises. The communist regime, which suppressed all ethnic and religious groups whom they considered as opponents and violated their right to live, filled up the concentration*

camps that is the remainder of fascism. In this study, the activities of the communist regime from 1944 to 1955 will be closely examined using the documents of the American Central Intelligence Agency.

Keywords: *Bulgaria, Communism, Concentration Camps*

**KOMÜNİST REJİMİN ÖTEKİ YÜZÜ:
CIA RAPORLARINA GÖRE BULGARİSTAN'DAKİ
TOPLAMA KAMPLARI (1944-1955)**

Öz: *Faşizm ve komünizm, milyonlarca insanın hayatını etkileyen ideolojilerdir. Nazilerin yayılması ve faşist politikaları dünyada kaosa sebep olmuştur. Buna karşın Rusya'da iktidara gelen komünistler, faşist Almanya'nın yayılmasına karşı Balkanlar ve Doğu Avrupa'nın tek umudu olmuştur. 1930'ların ve 1940'ların politik rüzgarlarından etkilenen tüm diğer Avrupa ülkeleri gibi, Bulgaristan'da da ciddi politik krizler yaşandı. Komünist Rusya, sık sık askeri darbelerle uğraşan ve faşist hükümet tarafından yıllarca yönetilen Bulgaristan'ın ve oradaki azınlıkların kurtarıcısı oldu. 9 Eylül 1944'te Bulgaristan'daki faşist iktidar devrildi ve komünist parti Rusya'nın desteğiyle iktidara geldi. Fakat beklentilerin aksine, komünist hükümet, faşist yönetime benzeyen, ideolojisine ve vaatlerine aykırı politikalar uygulamaya koydu. Muhalif olarak gördükleri tüm etnik ve dini grupları baskı altına alan komünist rejim, faşist yönetimden geri kalan toplama kamplarını muhaliflerle doldurdu. Bu çalışmada, 1944'ten 1955'e kadar komünist rejimin faaliyetleri, Amerikan Merkezi İstihbarat Ajansı'nın belgeleri kullanılarak yakından incelenecektir.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Bulgaristan, Komünizm, Toplama Kampları.*

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Introduction

World War II (1939-1945) is the bloodiest war in human history. Directly and indirectly, it affected hundreds of millions of people. World War II also proved how the brutal and violent mankind can be. The Holocaust being the ultimate example, the things that were done to the opponents revealed the monster in mankind. The unprecedented tortures, massacres and executions sadly became natural. The war lasted only six years, but the destructions and deaths which occurred in such a short period are very important to indicate the violence of the war.

Even though World War II virtually ended, the Cold War afterwards continued for years. In the years of a bipolar world, when countries showed hostility, parties dealt with each other with the utmost caution and sometimes even extreme cruelty. The USSR, one of the greatest parties of the Cold War, pursued a distant yet expansionist policy towards the western world. Soviet Russia wanted to consolidate the kinship between them, Eastern Europe and the Balkans that was based on centuries ago with regime unity as well. After the war, the primary goal of Soviet Russia was to establish Soviet-type socialism in all of Eastern Europe and the Balkans and to become the sole power in this region through satellite governments. The easiest place to carry out this plan was the Balkan countries that are densely populated by Slavs. The establishment of the Communist regime had been relatively easy especially in Bulgaria. Because in this period, the presence of pro-Nazi Germany's fascist rule in Bulgaria had made the Communist coup succeed with the support of Russia.

Fascist Period in Bulgaria (1923-1944)

Bulgaria declared its independence on September 22, 1908. But long before this date, there was not a unanimous agreement on how and by which system the state should be governed. For this reason, there had been serious issues in Bulgaria's domestic politics. The vast majority of the Bulgarian population in the 19th century was peasants and the main economic source of income was agriculture. In this century, socialism was influential in Europe and began to find support in Bulgaria, where the majority of the population was farmers. Socialism was the ideological source of peasant uprisings that began in 1899 against the monarchy. Teachers and peasants came together and formed Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (*Bălgarski Zemedelski Narodni Săjuz*) at the

end of the same year. BANU gained great success in the elections held in 1908 right after Bulgaria declared its independence. It received 31% of the votes in 1919 elections and came to power. The union imposed a series of reforms, such as the distribution of land to poor peasants, the review of tax and judicial systems, and the regulation of mandatory labour hours. It got the support of the people through their work and received 52% of the votes in 1923 elections. But the other political groups, which are annoyed with the growing strength of the union, started to dissent with the support of the army. The government of Agrarian National Union was overthrown by a military coup, on June 9, 1923. However, the union revived after a while and took part in the National Block Government, which was in power from 1931 to 1934.

Bulgaria experienced its first military coup 15 years after independence and the second one in 1934. Bulgarian Army seized power on May 19, 1934 and proclaimed that it stands by Nazi Germany with the government they formed. As Hitler's influence in Europe increased, the fascist power in Bulgaria grew stronger. Tsar Boris III formed a government of Fascists in 1940. With logistical support from Germany, the government established a dictatorial administration with the laws they imposed. Also, many Fascist youth organizations were formed under the name *Brannik*. The civilian population was made *militants* in one sense.

Despite the implementations of the fascist government, the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party wanted the German troops in the country to be expelled and to cooperate with the Soviets. Their propaganda worked and: Strikes started nationwide with the participation of industrial and agricultural labourers. With the ongoing strikes, the government declared the *Law for the Defence of the Nation* in 1941. According to the government, demonstrations in Bulgaria were supported by hostile countries. This law was enforced to prevent betrayals and to take necessary precautions. Concentration camps opened the same year in Bulgaria to punish the criminals. According to this law that was made under the influence of Nazi Germany, labourers who did not start work in the morning hours were punished. Therefore, strikes could have prevented. Jews would have changed their names and have new names with Bulgarian origin. Citizens of Jewish origin were banned from entering public areas that were declared and marrying Bulgarian people. Jews were also banned from exercising certain economic activities. They had to pay a one-time tax up to 20% of their net earnings. As a result of this law, a quota was imposed for the number

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of Jews who would study at Bulgarian universities. On the other hand, the Fascist Government continued to make a variety of laws to maintain the public order. According to one of these laws, people were banned to go outside after 6:00 p.m. It was imperative to get a police permit if one needed to go out after 6:00 p.m. It was forbidden to walk on the sidewalks in case one went on the street after 6:00 p.m. These people had to walk in the middle of the street while holding their permits in their hands. If the police order them to stop, the person has to act as the police tell them. Police would shot those who did not obey these rules. Bulgaria became a complete police state during the period of Fascist Government.¹

Despite all the pressures, especially the socialist parties continued to struggle against the government. Since 1944, the military superiority of Soviet Russia in the war directly affected Bulgarian politics. From the very beginning, Russia supported the socialist parties in Bulgaria, but that support did not have an impact because the fascist army owned the military force. By changing conditions of World War II, Russia began to take a close interest in the Balkans, and finally, on September 9, 1944, the Red Army occupied Bulgaria. This occupation fundamentally was a coup; Russia took over the fascist power with the call and help of the communists in the country. Subsequently, a multi-party governance was established under the name The Fatherland Front Government.

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Communist Period in Bulgaria (1944-1955)

In the first years of their rule the Communists, who took control over the Fascist Government with the support of Red Army, began to explain Communism to Bulgarian people through some organizations such as women's and employee associations and teach them the new regime. Governors were trying to legitimize their power by giving importance to rally and propaganda activities. On the other hand, although it was the The Fatherland in power, the main political power was in the hands of the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party. All the press, local governments and the police organization were linked to the party. The Fatherland, in other words, the pluralistic form of government was merely an instrument for legitimizing the revolution. Socialism was

1 Esra Sarıkoyuncu Değerli ve Hasan Karakuzu, "Türkiye- Bulgaristan İlişkilerinin Askeri İlişkilere Yansımaları (1939-1945)," *SSS* 3, sayı. 8 (2017): 663-664, http://sssjournal.com/Makaleler/1485588415_28_ID93_SSSJournal_V3_I5_Esra%20SARIK_OYUNCU%20DEĞERLİ_658-667.pdf.

officially declared in Bulgaria after 1947, and with the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Stalin-type administration ruled in Bulgaria. Especially after the 16th Party Plenum held in 1948, Stalin socialism was the sole regime until 1953.² Between 1948 and 1953, Bulgarian leader cult, single-party system settled and thus a totalitarian rule was established by the communists.³ During this period, the economy was nationalized, all the bureaucracy and state apparatuses tied to the Communist Party, the pressure and sanctions against the opponents especially Muslims and Jews increased.

Things like socialist industrialization, social rights, equal-proletarian society, and economic reform were the prominent discourses of the Bulgarian Communist Party propaganda. Furthermore, during the communist rule in Bulgaria, socialist revolution, socialist modernization, and the type of socialist person were constantly mentioned in official press, rallies and party speeches. The regime, while conceptualizing its polity, was trying to secure its legitimacy by suggesting that the construction of the advanced socialist society was successfully completed.⁴ The most important self-justifying discourse of the Communist government is the anti-fascist idea. Owing to the communists' opposition to Fascism, Soviet Russia gained credibility. The Communists proclaimed themselves as the most powerful enemies of fascism and defenders of democracy. Therefore, communism became the idea of saviour in the international arena.⁵

For the sake of the victory of the saviour and invincible The Fatherland, and against reaction and fascism, advance! The Fatherland emerges as the union of our people's all anti-fascist, democratic, developed forces, with the intention of the establishment of the People's Republic, against reaction and remains of fascism as a whole.⁶

But soon after, the government began to use the term fascist to label all of the regime opponents. The hatred against the German occupiers started to extend towards the whole bourgeoisie over time. The

2 Владимир Мигев, "България по време на комунистическия режим (1946-1989)," *Исторически преглед*, God: 1-2, (2002): 137- 138.

3 Iyaylo Znepolski, *Bulgaria Under Communism* (Routledge, New York, 2018), 35-36.

4 Ibid., 26.

5 Georgi Dimitrov, *Halk Cumhuriyetine Doğru*, trans. Sulhi Dönmez-Sahir Ertan (İstanbul, Habora Kitabevi, 1970), 116- 117.

6 Ibid., 88.

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government made the term fascist as the ideological cover of class hostility. It also provided the required motivation to mobilize the masses through this term. After the revolution, the poor-rich and labourer-bourgeois conflict that was always a part of the official discourse began to function as the single ideology. Therefore, even though the bourgeois element in the country was annihilated in a short time, the anti-fascist propaganda continued until the end of the regime.⁷ In Bulgaria where the peasant culture is predominant, the bourgeois hatred that the government has continually incited was intolerance towards the capitalist way of life. Distinctive clothing, food and entertainment habits of the city were all portrayed as traps of imperialist powers. The communist government fought severely against the imperialist forces and their extensions, which wanted to exploit the Bulgarian state. All these habits were projected as a bourgeois-fascist way of life and this provided the government with an important ground for legitimacy. To be defined as anti-fascist, it was enough to reject the old capitalist order altogether and show loyalty to the Soviet Union. Anyone who thought otherwise was naturally the enemy. Those people, their families, relatives and friends were being traced and labelled as potential criminals. Intentionally twisted use of such terms by the communist government was a frequently applied method to present the regime as legitimate and powerful. However, this method caused permanent damage to social psychology. As a matter of fact, people used random terms which didn't have any content, without being aware of their true meanings, and started to perceive the world with the same confusion. After 1944, the primary task of The Fatherland government was to remove the ignorance in the country, especially by enlightening Turkish and other minority groups through education. The purpose of this education was not only to increase literacy but also to create a new socialist type of person in accordance with the principles of the Communist Party. In the 1950s and 60s, some authorisations of the judicial bodies were transferred to the newly formed comrade's courts, and the participation of people to inspect the innovative activities was tried to be provided. These institutions imposed punishments, such as branding people who broke the official rules, and this was considered as an expression of the socialist democracy and the self-government. In reality, the comrade's courts enabled The Fatherland to penetrate into the deepest layers of the society. So much so that the inquest which was inserted in the areas such as friendship and neighbourhood relationships kept the individuals under constant control. Drunkenness, hostility and gossiping among neighbours which was punished by different methods

7 Znepolski, Bulgaria Under Communism, 118- 122.

like expostulating and exposing were deemed as corrupt lifestyle. This punishment that seemed to protect the moral values of the society, in fact, triggered distrust among the people and caused everyone to doubt even their closest friends. Indeed, one of the most important citizenship duties of the individuals was to prove their loyalty to the party by reporting to the authorities immediately when they see any mistake around them or in their family.⁸

Since 1957, The Fatherland took an active role in cleaning up the remains of bourgeois fanaticism in the society and of supervising atheist training activities. Institutions emerged under the name of Atheist House later became Socialist Life and Culture House. The Fatherland also conducted weekend mass cleaning activities - cleaning of settlement areas, parks and school gardens - which took place in April and known as Lenin Saturdays. The Socialist Life and Culture Houses, whose basic function was to educate people on patriotism and communism allowed the regime to penetrate into every aspect of life. The Fatherland, by managing all the changes in political and social spheres between 1970s-1980s, played a central role in the Rebirth policy in 1984.⁹

The Other Face of the Communist Regime

The State of the Jews:

Before the socialist regime, Bulgaria's political, social and economic situation was quite bad. The society suffering from poverty needed a new saviour and this saviour was socialism and The Fatherland.¹⁰ However, the structure of The Fatherland which was promising democracy and freedom was abandoned shortly after the revolution. The Bulgarian Communist Party held the government entirely. The BCP claimed they aimed to redevelop the state and acted against the fascists and the bourgeois whom they blamed for causing the state to become the way it is. They started to arrest clergymen, teachers, politicians, businessmen, and the opponents that were declared an enemy and sent them to concentration camps and prisons. According to the records, until

8 Ibid., 123-124.

9 Михаил Груев, "Политическо развитие на България през 50-те и 80-те години", *История на НРБ: Режим и общество, История на народната република България: режим и общество*, (София, 2009), 155-156.

10 Georgi Dimitrov, *Halk Cumhuriyetine Doğru*, 6.

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the end of 1944, 26,850 people were killed without a court order. The Special People's Courts, which was established by the BCP to prosecute fascists, sentenced 1050 people to death. According to the BCP, fascists were all the opponents of the communists constantly. In addition to extrajudicial executions, fascists were sentenced to imprisonment. The Special People's Courts imprisoned 6188 people and 5000 families exiled. By the end of 1945, 10.000 people disappeared in concentration camps. Nikola Petkov, the president of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union showed the strongest opposition to the BCP. He was executed in 1947 after being charged with high treason. Subsequently, all non-communist NGOs and other political movements were banned and opponent deputies were arrested. To adopt Soviet-like economy, BCP confiscated all businesses, industrial organizations, banks and commercial corporations that belonged to the private sector. Landlords were exiled.¹¹ In short, Bulgarian communists brutally took revenge on fascists, their political opponents. According to the records, the ratio of those who were executed to the population was higher than any other AXIS state.¹² Bulgarian Communist Party claimed that communists prevented Bulgarian Jews from being sent to concentration camps during the World War II. The primary aim of this claim was surely to glorify the Bulgarian Communist movement and to increase participation. However, the Bulgarian Communist Party had an important condition for Jews' participation to resistance; Jews were supposed to fight against class conflict, not ethnic genocide. Because according to the communists, they were exposed to identical torture during the war that Jews were exposed.¹³ Bulgarian Communist Party claimed to fight fascism and fascists at every opportunity. Regime's approach to opponents, different ethnic and religious groups in Bulgaria was not different from the fascism that they were fighting. The basic policy of the BCP Government towards Jews was making them as invisible as possible in society. Of course, the main goal of the government was to assimilate Jews. The Jewish community in Bulgaria began to emigrate between 1947 and 1949 because they were aware of this situation. According to the records, within a two year period, 43-46 thousands of Jews left Bulgaria. After this great immigration, Communist Bulgarian

11 Miroslav Lehký, *I. náměstek ředitele, Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů Klasifikace zločinů spáchaných v letech 1948–1989 a jejich stíhání po roce 1990*, erišim Eylül 9 2019, <https://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/publikace/sborniky/crime/miroslav-lehky.pdf>.

12 Milena Savova-Mahon Borden, *The Politics of Nationalism Under Communism in Bulgaria Myths, Memories, and Minorities*, (Ph. D., University of London, 2001), 330.

13 *Ibid.*, 356.

Government started to implement a gradual assimilation policy towards the remaining Jews. First, the Bulgarian government claimed that the Jews in Bulgaria were ethnically different from the rest of the Jews in the world, those in Israel being in the first place. In this context, Jewish culture, language and history were started to be studied. Jewish culture was made to be part of the Bulgarian cultural national tradition. Thus, a new Jewish culture would be created. The reason behind this was to prove that Bulgaria is a culturally and ethnically homogeneous country and there is no separate Jewish culture based on Jewish ethnicity. In order to do this, it was declared that Jewish culture was not related to Bulgarian Jews. Then, Jewish schools were closed in 1943. Some of these schools were renovated and reopened in 1944. But, most of them were closed by 1949. Bulgarian authorities claimed that the Jewish community supported school closures due to low enrolment. The main purpose of this policy was to assimilate Jews by melting them in the Bulgarian nation. The other assimilation policy of the Bulgarian government was to shut down the Jewish social institutions. For instance, Jewish Club and Jewish Chorus in Sofia were under constant pressure with the accusation of being Zionists. The Jewish Drama Circle faced similar accusations. It was ordered that the Israel-style content in their repertoire be removed. Sophia synagogue, which was closed in 1943-1944 and destroyed during the bombing in 1944, was kept mostly closed throughout the communist regime on the pretext that it was being renovated. The Communist government initially planned to turn the synagogue into a concert hall, but the Jewish community opposed this plan. The situation of the other synagogues in the country was similar. Synagogues were not destroyed as brutally as some of the mosques in Bulgaria, but in reality, there was no place in the country where Jews could freely worship during the communist era. The BCP government didn't allow Jewish festivals to be celebrated in public places. As a result, the Bulgarian government made Judaism a marginal issue. The regime's purpose was to replace old religious and cultural institutions with new communist style organizations. Finally, the attitude of the Bulgarian Government towards Jews was affected by the politics of the Soviets in the Middle East. Soviet Russia was hostile to Israel and friendly to the Arab countries in the Cold War era. Especially after the 1967 Arab-Israel war, relations between the Soviet bloc countries broke down. This tension directly affected Jews in Bulgaria.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., 369-371.

The Concentration Camps and the State of Opponents

In 1946, the first The Fatherland government ministries were divided between the BCP, Znevo, BANU and the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party. Within a year, the BCP used all its power to clean up all opponents and dominate The Fatherland. A national referendum was held in the same year and the monarchy was declined in favour of the People's Republic. In the autumn of 1946, the BCP won the elections and Georgi Dimitrov became Prime Minister. In December 1947, the new Constitution was accepted unanimously and the Communists took all the important ministries. Therefore, the final phase of the consolidation of the communist dictatorship started. Prime Minister Dimitrov transformed Bulgaria into a traditional communist state. All non-communist commercial and cultural traces in the country were begun to be erased. In the new system, a Presidency Board which was approved by the National Assembly and the Communist Party had the right to exercise legislative, executive and judicial powers.¹⁵ Fighting against the fascists and fascism continued while Dimitrov was taking and implementing decisions to make the country stronger. Communist government was labelling all of its opponents as fascists and punishing them harshly. The irony, in this case, was that Communists applied the methods of Nazi Germany in the fight against the opponents. Concentration camps which are a shame of humanity continued to exist after the communist regime. The regime condemned thousands of people and left them there to die.

As a result of the research I carried out in the archives of the CIA, which is accessible to the public, I have reached striking information about the living conditions of the concentration camps in Bulgaria. Documents covering the years 1948-1955 provide elaborate information on camps, prisoners and imprisonment conditions throughout the country. It is possible to see in these documents the approach of the Communist regime towards all the opponents they labelled as fascists and different ethnic groups, in all clarity.

After the Communist revolution in Bulgaria, many citizens were arrested for their political backgrounds. The regime declared big landowners, intellectuals, industrialists, businessmen and those who work for foreign small and medium enterprises as public enemies. These people were

¹⁵ Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Human Rights and Democratization in Bulgaria* (1993), erişim Nisan 19, 2018, <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/1993HRinBulgaria.pdf>.

usually interrogated at night. The interrogators changed every six hours, but the interrogated person was being kept tortured, not allowed to sleep, eat or drink. The regime usually blamed people for the following:

- a. The attempt to flee from Bulgaria,
- b. Not to report family or friends who plan to flee from Bulgaria.
- c. Sabotage
- d. Spying¹⁶

Two concentration camps came to the forefront in the report of May 4, 1950. The first one is Kufaldje concentration camp. It was known by the people as the Black Company because the most dangerous politicians were kept there. Prisoners were given a 100 grams of bread a day and they were used as labours in dams and agriculture. The second camp in was Camp Belene. 1800 people were kept imprisoned in this camp in the winter of 1950. The total number of inmates was constantly changing in time and at least 40 new prisoners were transferred in every day. Prisoners in this camp were forced to work in port construction 10 hours a day, with only 1-hour break at noon. Sundays were rarely a holiday and prisoners had no vacation during the whole year apart from half day leave on Stalin's birthday.¹⁷

The CIA report dated back December 21, 1950, provides important information about how the Communist regime introduced the concentration camps to the public and the perception that it wanted to create. According to the report, the Communist Government placed people whom they considered politically dangerous or unreliable in the Labour Educational Communities, which was known as Troudovi Vuzpitatelni Obstetagiya. The purpose was to re-educate these ruthless fascists.¹⁸

According to another CIA report dated back to November 30, 1951, there was a total of 15,000 prisoners in eight different concentration camps. These prisoners were forced to work in mines and dam

16 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00810A007000810003-5.pdf>. accessed May 07, 2018.

17 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R005000150008-6.pdf>. accessed March 09, 2018.

18 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R006500290005-1.pdf>. accessed March 13, 2018.

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constructions. In the same report, the purpose of these camps was clearly expressed by saying “the climate is extremely bad, and internees are destined to certain death” regarding camp Belene, the biggest concentration camp in Bulgaria.¹⁹

Another report dated back to March 13, 1952, revealed the real face of the Communist regime. Traicho Kostov was the leading name of the Bulgarian Communist Party. On March 31, 1949, he was unseated as the President of the Council of Ministers and President of Economic and Financial Committee. 15 days later, he was appointed as the director of the Bulgarian National Library in Sophia. He was subsequently accused of spreading anti-Soviet ideas for ultranationalist sentiments and of opposing Communist Party leader Georgi Dimitrov. Kostov was accused of establishing a secret. He was openly criticizing the economic practices of the USSR in Eastern Europe. He claimed that Russia bought tobacco from Bulgaria at a very low price and sold it for a very high price. Kostov’s criticism was considered as a statement for breaking friendly relations between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union and he was accused of treason. He was suspected of serving British and American intelligence services. As a result of all these charges, Kostov was put on trial together with ten people in Sophia, on 7 December-14 December 1949. He was executed two days later on December 16, 1949.²⁰ After the execution of Traicho Kostov, the regime sent 4,000 people, who were accused of being Kostov’s supporters, to the Bogdanov Dol Camp in three days. This camp was also used to imprison the members of BANU. Clearly, in the Bulgarian Communist regime, even being a Communist was not enough to escape from the concentration camps. At the time the CIA report was dated, there were 9000 prisoners in camp Belene. It was reported that there were 3,000 prisoners in Belene, on November 30, 1951. The number of prisoners tripled in a year. As a punishment for these prisoners, various types of works and work quotas had been established. Those who cannot fill their quota were punished severely. Even though camp commander Captain Gershanov had beaten several prisoners to death, a report was compiled that the cause of these deaths was the prisoners trying to escape. In 1950-1951, 30 prisoners in Belene died of hunger and cold. And according to the same report, there were 14,000 prisoners in Kufaldzha camp which consists of eight small camps. Women and men here had to break a cubic meter of stone (about

19 https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82_00457R009500330001-4.pdf, accessed March 13, 2018.

20 For more information, see also Anton Koev ed., *The Trial of Traicho Kostov and His Group*, (Sofia, 1949).

2.5 tons) per day. Prisoners were also tortured psychologically. First of all, prisoners were allowed to read only those newspapers that were making regime propaganda such as *The Rabotnichesko Delo*²¹ and *Otechestvan Front*. But even more importantly, it was told prisoners that if there were a war between Europe and Soviet Russia, everyone in the camps would be killed.²²

As is known, the largest concentration camp in Bulgaria was camp Belene on Danube River, Pernik Island. The camp consisted of 7 different small camps. Camps number 1 and 2 were on the island, and the others were on the Danube coast. All the prisoners in these camps were forced to work in various agricultural and construction projects. There were only two small wooden sheds for prisoners in camp number 1, which were not suitable for winter conditions. In the camp number 2, there was only one building that could be used in winter. According to the report, on May 1-15, 1951, large-scale arrests were made throughout the country, which was called by the action of the 50,000 on behalf of the Communists. Most of the apprehended people were farmers. A large number of prisoners were sent to Belene to work in various irrigation projects, on June 3-20, 1951.²³ The report dated back to August 7, 1952, provides detailed information particularly about all sections of the Belene camp, prisoners, working and living conditions. This report also shows the Communist regime's view on Jews. Belene camp had a section called Tel-Aviv. This was the place where disciplinary punishments were imposed. Only 100 grams of bread and a glass of water from the Danube River were given to prisoners per day.²⁴

Another report dated back to August 28, 1952, reveals the dimensions of physical and psychological abuse towards the prisoners based on the testimonies of inmates of the camps. According to those statements, Major Kitov who served as the camp Commander was trying to break the spirit of prisoners by saying;

21 *Rabotnichesko Delo* was the media outlet of the Bulgarian Communist Party Central Committee.

22 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R011000160004-2.pdf>. accessed March 15, 2018.

23 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R011800180002-4.pdf>. accessed March 15, 2018.

24 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R012500350009-0.pdf>. accessed March 15, 2018.

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You wait for Americans and the English to come and liberate you. You'll have to wait a long time before you are able to turn your faces to the light. Don't expect that some will do anything for you or interest himself in you. No, you will be here until the last judgement.

Another witness also mentioned the torments of the political supervisor Boris Mitev in his statement; if one of the prisoners behaved against the rules, Boris Mitev had punished that person by leaving him to sit outside with his t-shirt on for the entire night in cold. Prisoners had to carry four cubic meters of soil (6,5 tonnes) a day for the construction. These people were not given any wheelbarrow to carry the soil. They had to carry the soil with some kind of wooden box similar to a stretcher. Those who cannot fulfil the limits were called saboteur and sent to dungeons as a penalty. In dungeons, they were given a piece of bread, a little water and a blanket. There were no windows in the ground level dungeons and the health of those staying here was deteriorating within 10 days. Despite the bad weather conditions, prisoners were constantly forced to work without rest. For lunch and dinner, prisoners were eating soup, which consisted of plenty of water, a small amount of vegetables. Prisoners oftentimes ate leaf and roots because of the poor diets in the camps. Eating leaf or roots was a crime and those who got caught eating them thrown into prison for ten days.²⁵

Prisoners that were brought to the Belene concentration camp stood trial here once more. These trials usually sentenced prisoners to one to seven years imprisonment regardless of the decision of the previous court. The reason for this formality was to legitimize the punishments that were arbitrarily imposed against the prisoners by the government. Decisions in these trials were based on the laws like defence of peace. Every prisoner who came to Belene camp had to sign a document in the reception centre (camp number 1). Here, the prisoners were informed about the *training* they were supposed to get. Life in camp Belene was getting worse every day. Tortures were making it even worse. Hunger and cold was the real enemy of the prisoners rather than the punishments. 30 centimetres of water piled up under the pieces of wood that prisoners used as their beds.²⁶

25 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R013400180006-2.pdf>. accessed March 16, 2018.

26 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP8000809A000600150148-1.pdf>. accessed March 16, 2018.

It's known that the influence of Soviet Russia on Bulgaria gradually diminished with the death of Stalin in 1953. This situation also emerged in the camps because in 1953 a total of 3,000 prisoners were released from various camps in the country. Only those prisoners that were imprisoned for ordinary crimes were released. Those that were imprisoned for political reasons were kept in camps. According to the report, released from camps and moderate measures were an effort to create an artificial atmosphere to lower the tension among the people.²⁷ As it is stated, this is mere eyewash. Because, 10,000 to 12,000 people in various camps, especially the camp Belene, were replaced by ordinary criminals in other prisons before the pardon. Therefore, it was aimed to create the perception that people in concentration camps were released. On the other hand, the released prisoners were forced to sign a document that they had to cooperate with the government officials for the detection of individuals that were believed to be dangerous for the development of communism.²⁸

Conclusion

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Bulgaria declared its independence in 1908. Since then, it started to experience serious political and military crises. Bulgaria was ruled by fascists between the years 1923-1944, under the influence of fascism that was rising in Europe. In this period, concentration camps were filled with opponents and people from different ethnic and religious groups under the influence of Nazi Germany. In 1944, with the change of the course of the war, the fascist government in Bulgaria was ended with the support of the USSR. However, Communists that took over the power established a Communist dictatorship with methods that did not make people miss fascists. They punished thousands of opponents that they labelled as fascists. Nazi remainder concentration camps continued to operate actively. The regime's opponents were convicted here under bad conditions. Heavy assimilation policies for Jews and Muslims were implemented. In short, they did everything that they criticised the fascist government.

27 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00810A002600490008-2.pdf>. accessed March 16, 2018.

28 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00810A003700330004-1.pdf>. accessed March 22, 2018.

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January – Mai 1945	1050 death sentences, 6188 people imprisoned
1946 – 1975	Death sentences: 680 people
1945 – 1985	Arrested: 485 200 people
1944 – 1962	Imprisoned in 82 Concentration camps: 89,430 people
1946 – 1986	Political prisoners: 36 500 people

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