Reclaiming Memory: The History and Legacy of Concentration Camps in Communist Bulgaria

by

Lilia Topouzova

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Department of History
University of Toronto

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Abstract

In the immediate aftermath of 1989, following the collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes, it was revealed that communist Bulgaria had operated one of the most extensive and repressive forced-labor camp networks in the entire socialist bloc. In a country of 7 million people spread across 111,000 square kilometers, there were close to forty camp complexes where people were interned, often without trial during different stages of the communist regime. The camps were fully operational from late 1944 until 1962. Furthermore, the Bulgarian camp network was never completely dismantled and camps continued operating into the 1980s, albeit at a significantly diminished scale and with reduced visibility. In early 1990, news of the atrocities committed in the camps attracted the attention of local and foreign media, earning Bulgaria the rather sinister moniker “Little Siberia.” The revelations of human rights abuses prompted post-communist Bulgarian governments to attempt various transitional justice initiatives aimed at overcoming the repressive legacy. To date, however, the history of the Bulgarian concentration camp system and its aftermath remain largely untold.

This dissertation focuses on the camp system as a way of exploring the experience of political violence in Bulgaria during the communist era and the diverse post-communist forms of
representing this experience. The study uses a wide variety of sources, including recently
declassified archival material, private archival collections, oral history interviews, memoirs,
unpublished manuscripts, films, and media investigations. More than thirty interviews were
conducted with individuals impacted by the Bulgarian camp system, over twenty of which with
camp survivors. Archival research was conducted in the collections of Bulgaria’s Ministry of the
Interior (AMVR) in Sofia, the Central State Archive (TsDA) in Sofia, the National Archives in
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My inquiry into the Bulgarian camp past began a little more than a decade ago. In the summer of 2003, while browsing the stacks of the John P. Robarts Library at the University of Toronto, I came across a black-and-white photograph of an older woman sitting in a courtroom with a young female guard beside her (see Figure Preface). It was an unremarkable image, but I found something unusual in the expression of the older woman. I understood that she had been a forced-labor camp guard in Bulgaria during the early 1960s, and the photograph pictured her during her trial in the mid-1990s. Her name was Julia Ruzhgeva, nicknamed “Julia the Beautiful.” Former camp inmates described her as the most beautiful and the cruellest of guards from the Belene and Lovech camps. The photograph triggered memories from my childhood in communist Bulgaria. I first learned about the existence of camps when I was about ten years old and a proud member of the Lenin Youth organization called the Young Pioneers. My great-grandfather was visiting our home, and perhaps in reaction to my enthusiasm for the communist youth league, he decided to tell me about his experience in the Belene camp. His story became even more pertinent in late 1989 and early 1990 when the communist regime collapsed and I, like many Bulgarians at the time, listened in shock as camp survivors started telling their stories on television, at public meetings, and in newspapers. In 2003, as a graduate student, I became curious to revisit this past. I wanted to learn more about Julia Ruzhgeva and about the Bulgarian concentration camp system. To my surprise, however, few investigations of the topic existed, scholarly or otherwise. That summer, I learned that Ruzhgeva was still alive. I wanted to meet her. I decided to return to Bulgaria.
At the outset of my search, I met with Atanas Kiriakov, the director and writer of the important documentary film about the Bulgarian camps. I asked him for his notes for the film, and also to advise me as to how I could reach Ruzhgeva. Kiriakov told me that she would never talk to me. He also said that after finishing the film, he had destroyed the entirety of his research: personal notes, names of people, archives on anyone involved in the documentary, including survivors, guards, politicians, prosecutors, and police investigators. What was Kiriakov’s rationale for such a drastic effacement of memory? Simply fear, he told me, fear of authorities and fear of retaliation by family members, “that same fear that had characterized my entire generation,” he concluded. Only after this fear has disappeared, Kiriakov claimed, could the story of the camps actually be told. Several days after meeting with him, I knocked at the door of the most feared woman in the history of the Bulgarian camps, Julia Ruzhgeva.

1 Atanas Kiriakov, dir., *Otzeelite [The Survivors]*, produced by Bulgarian National Television in 1990.
Though she did not answer, I waited in front of the door, and after a few hours, her daughter came into the building with bags of groceries. I later learned that Ruzhgeva never answered the doorbell and no longer left the apartment. I did not meet her that evening, nor the following day when I returned to her home. An entire year passed before her daughter decided that living in fear was not the only option. This change of perspective finally allowed me to talk to Ruzhgeva, and I used these conversations and my initial research on the history of the camps as the basis for a documentary film that I initiated, wrote, and assistant-directed.3

During the following ten years, I knocked on many more Bulgarian doors and had the chance to sense the fear of those who answered: survivors from the camps, a former secret police agent responsible for the establishment of the largest camp, the former attorney general who attempted to bring the camp perpetrators to trial, the principal investigative journalist who covered the camps in the early 1990s. In the summer of 2006, I stood at the entrance of what during the communist era used to be the country’s most feared building, the home of the institution responsible for the creation of the camps: the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior. I eventually entered to access the archive of the former secret police. In the following years, I continued combing through archives, knocking on doors, and meeting with people who had been, in one way or another, impacted by the camps. This dissertation tells the story of these encounters.

3 Andrey Paounov, dir., Problemat s komarite i drugi istorii [The Mosquito Problem and Other Stories] (Bulgaria/USA/Germany, 104 min, 2007). Screenplay by Lilia Topouzova and Andrey Paounov.
INTRODUCTION

On November 10, 1989, a day after the Berlin Wall collapsed, Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria’s head of state and the longest serving of all communist leaders, was ousted in an internal coup d’état. He had been in office for thirty-five years. Symbolically, at least, the date marks the collapse of communism in Bulgaria. Yet its dissolution was not nearly as spectacular as the revolutions that swept through the rest of Eastern Europe: somehow Bulgaria’s 1989 failed to impress people beyond the country’s borders. Although the events in fact shook the country to its core, international news coverage focused on the more dramatic upheavals in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. Bulgaria, after all, had no wall to traverse or tear down, nor a massive and sustained resistance movement to the communist regime—such as Poland’s Solidarity—whose victory in elections could be celebrated. In fact, it was the former Communist Party that emerged victorious from the first free elections held in Bulgaria in more than half a century in June of 1990.¹ Bulgarians did not stage a funeral to rebury the remains of one of their famous dissidents as the Hungarians did with Imre Nagy, and although there was a Bulgarian Charter 77, none of its signatories were internationally celebrated architects of the doctrine.

Throughout its history as a communist state, Bulgaria often seemed the one country

that stood aside from, and sometimes in opposition to, the renowned reform movements in the rest of Eastern Europe. In 1947, Bulgaria was the first satellite state to adopt a Soviet-model constitution. In the early 1960s, when some still held out hope that Nikita Khrushchev’s Thaw policies of openness would continue their liberalizing effect throughout Eastern Europe, the most violent of the Bulgarian forced-labor camps, Lovech, was in operation. Bulgaria carefully distanced itself from the tumultuous events of 1968 by clinging to Soviet orthodoxy, sometimes even criticizing Soviet authorities for their supposedly lax ideology.² It was the first country of the Warsaw Pact to offer military support for the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and, when the Soviet Union brutally crushed the Prague Spring—and with it the dream of “socialism with a human face”—Bulgaria was preparing to host the ninth World Festival of Youth and Students under the banner “For Solidarity, Peace, and Friendship.” Such behavior on the part of the Bulgarian communist leadership cemented the country’s image as an incorrigible Soviet handmaiden and as the staunchest supporter of Soviet Politburo hard-liners.

It has prompted scholars to ponder the dearth of dissidence and organized resistance during the communist regime, but also to overlook Bulgaria’s role in the global history of 1989, to the point where one prominent study dedicates more pages to US anchorman Tom Brokaw, who was stationed in Berlin when the Wall came down, than it does to Bulgaria.³ The complex

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² For instance, some time before the Prague Spring, the Bulgarian drama critic Stefan Karakostov criticized Soviet art for being tainted by “foreign influences.” Karakostov warned, “Comrades, the most dangerous ideological sabotage is coming to us via … the Soviet Union!” Quoted in Georgi Markov, The Truth That Killed (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1984), 197. Around the same time, certain Soviet films and books were censored in Bulgaria for straying from the ‘socialist realist’ norm. See Markov’s chapter titled “Dialectics of Censorship,” in The Truth That Killed, 193–99. On the impact of the Prague Spring in Bulgaria, see Vladimir Migev, Pražhka Prolet ‘68 i Bulgaria (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2005).

³ Multiple accounts—scholarly, journalistic, and personal—were published on the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2009. Most of these publications, including those aiming at an international history of the revolutions, give but a cursory look at Bulgaria. For the Tom Brokaw and Bulgaria references, see Mary Elise Sarotte, 1989: The Struggle to Create Post–Cold War Europe (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009). For a historical perspective on the conditions that led to communism’s collapse in 1989, see Stephen Kotkin, with a contribution by Jan T. Gross, Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment (New York: Modern Library, 2009); Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed. The Revolutions of 1989 (New York: Routledge, 1999). From an international relations perspective, see Jeffrey Engel, The Fall of the Berlin Wall: The Revolutionary
reality of Bulgaria’s relationship to the Soviet Union, coupled with the question of Bulgarian active opposition during the communist era, remain understudied topics, though the few extant scholarly accounts suggest that Bulgarian dissident culture was much more developed than previously believed. The prevailing trend in the literature, however, still echoes a familiar tune: there was hardly anything redemptive about the end of communism in a country seen as the pinnacle of Soviet obedience and loyalty. And this is indeed the outside view; Bulgarians inside the country, however, witnessed a radical and transformative shift.

In the days and months following November 10, 1989, the streets of the country’s


5 When scholars do acknowledge revolts against the communist regime in Bulgaria, they do so in a manner that once again emphasizes Bulgaria’s overall obedience to the Soviet Union. See Tony Judt’s analysis of the 1953 tobacco strikes and his characterization of Plovdiv, Bulgaria’s second-largest city, “as an obscure and typically cowed imperial outpost.” Tony Judt, Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945 (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 310.
largest cities—Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, and Ruse—filled with thousands and sometimes hundreds of thousands of people who gathered at rallies and shouted the names of Bulgarian dissidents: Zheliu Zhelev, Radoi Ralin, and Blaga Dimitrova, to name a few.⁶ Outside of Bulgaria, these opposition figures remain largely unknown to the present day, as do the names of the civil rights organizations that played a decisive role in the toppling of Zhivkov’s regime: the green movement, Ecoglasnost, which became a significant opposition force in the late communist years; the active independent student movement, which played a critical role in the eventful months of 1989 and 1990; and the large-scale tent demonstration in Sofia dubbed the “City of Truth,” which lasted for almost two months in the summer of 1990 as a peaceful protest against the results of the first multiparty elections won by the successors of the former Communist Party. Along with the more well-known dissidents, many local actors in Bulgaria’s 1989 have yet to be acknowledged or examined in the scholarly literature.⁷

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⁶ All three were writers and intellectuals who had been members of the Bulgarian Communist Party and with time became critical of the regime and party policies. Some of their writings were censored in Bulgaria during the communist era. See, Zheliu Zhelev, Fashizmut. Dokumentalno isdledvane na germanskia, italianskia i ispanskia fashizum (Sofia: Narodna mladezh, 1982); Blaga Dimitrova, Litse (Sofia: Agabar, 1997); Radoi Ralin, Liuti Chushki narodni epigrami s iliustratsii na Boris Dimovski (Sofia: bulgarski hudozhnik, 1968). Zhelev also became the first democratically elected president after 1989 and Dimitrova became vice-president.

⁷ For an insightful analysis of Zhelev’s writing and his position as an intellectual dissident, see Zhivka Valiavicharska, “How the Concept of Totalitarianism Appeared in Later Socialist Bulgaria,” Kritika, 303–334.
One aspect of the turning tides in Bulgaria did, however, become front-page news and drew the attention of Western media: the nature and scale of human rights abuses committed by communist authorities during the regime. Revealed was the existence of an extensive concentration camp network in the country, one of the most repressive in the entire socialist bloc. In a country of 7 million people, spread across 111,000 square kilometers, there were close to forty camp complexes where people were interned, often without trial during different stages of the communist regime.⁸

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⁸ Within the forty camp complexes there were eighty individual camp sites. AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.153. Penka Stoyanova and Emil Iliev list 113 camp sites for the period 1944–62. See, Penka Stoyanova and Emil Iliev, eds., Politicheski Oпасни Лиса: Vudvoriavania, trudova mobilizatsia, izslevania v Bulgaria sled 1944 (Sofia: Universitetsko izdadelstvo “Sv. Kliment Ohridski,” 1991), 77–96. Even when scholars agree on the existence of eighty camps in Bulgaria, this number needs to be interpreted critically, as it does not specify whether it refers only to forced-labor camps or whether it also includes temporary camp settlements and internment camps. Furthermore, the camp statistics also need to be examined against the background of another statistic: in 1952, the International League for the Rights of Man documented the existence of more than four hundred forced-labor camps in Central and Eastern Europe. See, Open Society Archives, “Reference Operation Paper 8: Forced Labor...
The camps were actively in operation from 1945 until 1962, at which point the Bulgarian camp network was officially closed. Bulgarian scholars in particular, often point to 1962 as the years in which camps ceased functioning. The system of camps, however, was not completely dismantled. Unusually, during the later stages of Bulgarian communist rule, that is, during the period of “late” or “mature” socialism, camps continued to operate, albeit at a diminished scale with fewer sites and victims, as well as with reduced visibility in society.

Key political milestones that eventually led to the closing of the camps in the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern European states, such as Stalin’s death in 1953 and Khrushchev’s Thaw, captured by his 1956 Secret Speech to Twentieth Party Congress, did not fully take hold on Bulgarian territory. Camp internment without trial and sentence continued to be practiced in communist Bulgaria: in the 1960s, 1970s, and with renewed vigor in the 1980s, as part of a violent campaign against the country’s Muslim minority, and during the time when the rest of the Eastern bloc had welcomed Mikhail Gorbachev’s social and political reform policies. This is not to imply, however, that the Bulgarian repressive apparatus did not at all comply with these important historical turns and that it did not reform its penal practices. Rather, it is to indicate that Bulgarian communist authorities never fully abandoned the option of internment without trial.

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Camps Under Communism,” compiled by Olga Zaslavskaya and Bosko Spasojevic, April 1999. Revised by Csaba Szilagyi et al., September 2001. http://osaarchivum.org/files/rip/Rip08.pdf, last accessed on April 19, 2013. If this number is indeed correct, it would mean that a quarter of all Eastern European forced-labor camps were situated in Bulgaria.


10 For a different but poignant discussion on the contradictory characteristics of mature socialism in the Soviet Union, see Juliane Fürst, Stalin’s Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20–29.

Two main camps became emblematic of the violence of the Bulgarian gulag: Belene, known for its longevity and Lovech, infamous for its cruelty. The Belene camp complex was located in Northern Bulgaria, on an island in the Danube River, and it was the country’s principal and longest running camp. A rock quarry just outside the central-Bulgarian city of Lovech was the site for the Lovech camp. It functioned as such from 1959 to 1962.

Both in Bulgaria and in the West, sensationalist coverage of the camps circulated widely. In the early 1990s, news about Bulgaria’s gulag reached the pages of the Washington Post and made repeated headlines in the New York Times. The “lurid tales” and “horror stories” of Bulgarian camp survivors even captured the attention of some smaller-scale US newspapers, which ran misleading and hair-raising articles about “Bulgarian death camps.” The news also prompted an in-depth BBC documentary, which took the crew of the popular current-affairs program Panorama through the Bulgarian countryside in search of both victims buried in mass graves and the former agents of the secret police and Communist Party officials responsible for these deaths. The reports generated by leading Western media sources only seemed to reaffirm what was to be expected of “the least known of the dominoes”: that the most devout and obedient of Eastern European states had also turned out to have been the most repressive.

Bulgarians themselves, however, received the discovery of the repression with greater

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12 The Belene camp complex consisted of five separate sites, one of which was also a prison. Belene operated as the principal camp for a period of ten years from 1949 until 1959. It was reopened in 1974 and in the mid-1980s for the internment of Bulgaria’s Muslim minority. Today, one of the sites continues to operate as a maximum-security prison.


surprise. Although Bulgarian newspaper headlines echoed their Western counterparts’ sensationalist tone, media coverage in the country took on a different meaning. Bulgaria saw a veritable explosion of news regarding camp violence in 1990. The stories of camp survivors flooded the printed press, describing in graphic detail the suffering behind barbed wire. Some newspapers even published documents, smuggled from archives, attesting to the abuses perpetrated in the camps. Bulgarian National Television regularly screened stories about the camp network, often accompanied by interviews with survivors and their family members. Some members of the former Communist Party made public admissions about the excesses committed by the authorities. The discovery and acknowledgment of the atrocities roused public awareness and became a locus of the transition from communism to post-communism.

The revelations of human rights abuses prompted post-communist Bulgarian governments to take various transitional justice initiatives aimed at overcoming the repressive legacy. Most notable among them were the creation of a public inquiry commission (1990) and a criminal investigation (1990) that turned into a trial (1992-2002), which attempted to criminally prosecute those responsible for the abuses perpetrated at the Lovech camp. Ultimately, however, the prosecutorial efforts failed and the case was discontinued due the expired statute of limitation.

Despite the attention it received both locally and internationally, the history of the Bulgarian camp system and its aftermath remains largely untold. A legal sentence was never

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18 Prosecutors tried, and failed, to open a case for crimes against humanity, which would not have had any statute of limitations, the crimes committed in these two camps were treated as regular murders. See entry on Bulgaria in Encyclopedia of Transitional Justice, vol.2, ed. Lavinia Stan and Nadya Nedelsky (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 73–79.
passed, a state memorial was never built, no scholarly monographs about the camps have ever been published, and current history textbooks barely mention the existence of the camps. Thus, almost a quarter of a century after news of the Bulgarian gulag first struck the Bulgarian psyche, the memory of its troubling past has now receded into silence, while the camps’ legacy continues to haunt those few remaining survivors unable to forget and unwilling to relegate their experiences to historical oblivion.

Reclaiming Memory: The History and Legacy of Concentration Camps in Communist Bulgaria focuses on the camp system as a way of exploring the experience of political violence in Bulgaria during the communist era and the diverse post-communist forms of representing this experience. It examines the history and memory of the Bulgarian camp system as recorded in the archives, narrated by survivors and perpetrators, and represented in the work of journalists, filmmakers, and public officials. It does this through an analysis of a wide variety of new archival evidence from public archives, incorporating this previously unexamined archival record with material from private archives, published and unpublished survivor memoirs, media representations, documentary films, court records, and oral history interviews that I carried out. I draw on recently declassified secret police files from Bulgaria’s former Ministry of the Interior (AMVR) and archival records from Central State Archive (TsDA) in Sofia, the National Archives in the United Kingdom, and the Open Society Archives in Budapest, Hungary. Throughout the work, attention is given not just to the story of the gulag, but also to how the story was framed and how it came to be remembered based upon a combination of limited information, systemic silence, intentional silencing, and

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sensationalism. By examining these multiples sources, this work explains the emergence after 1989 of a meta-narrative about the Bulgarian gulag that limited debate and public understanding to a narrow range of questions about individual moral culpability, effectively restricting the focus of inquiry to the actions of a few individuals.

Access to Bulgaria’s secret files became officially possible only in 2007 when Bulgarian parliament elected a Commission which took possession of the documents of the former secret police and subsequently made them available to the public. However, I started working with the files in the fall of 2006, prior to the adoption of the disclosure law and before the files were transferred to the Commission. After I completed research using the declassified secret police files from Bulgaria’s former Ministry of the Interior, some of these files were subsequently reclassified and were no longer publicly accessible at the time of this dissertation’s completion.

One of the challenges in writing about repression in Bulgaria during the communist era, in general, and about the camps, in particular, stems from the fact that about 40% of the archival material held at the Ministry of the Interior was destroyed in 1990. Scholars who write about Bulgaria’s experience of political violence frequently lament the incomplete state of the archives. The historian Roumen Daskalov insisted that “the establishment of even an approximate number of the victims […] proves impossible because of the lack of documents.” “If no records were kept or the documents were destroyed, the historian remains powerless,” stated Daskalov. Though he is certainly correct in his claim that working with purged archives complicates the reconstruction of precise numbers, it is nonetheless feasible.
and necessary to attempt to piece together the history of the camps based on the limited archival evidence.

There is only so much, however, that the archives can tell us about the camp experience. Because a great deal of the representation of the history of the camps has been constructed through the dynamic work of post-1989 politics of memory, a historical analysis of the Bulgarian gulag benefits greatly from a consideration of the legacy of the camps in the immediate post-communist period. Furthermore, these processes of post-communist political reflection can themselves be seen to be influenced by characteristics of the communist camp past itself. The historical narrative of the Bulgarian gulag and its contemporary representation as the lynchpin of the post-communist transition complement each other and are historically intertwined. The present work, therefore, provides an account of both the history of violence and the attempt of coming to terms with this violence. To the historical presentation of what took place in Bulgarian camps during the communist era, therefore, I adjoin the analysis of the myriad post-communist judicial, media, and collective images of these events, since, as Daskalov noted, “the print and electronic media played a prominent role in reassessing the past.”

Throughout this study, I consider Bulgaria’s experience of political violence through the interpretative perspective of those who created and carried out the punitive policies, as well of those who became its victims. In attempting to preserve the memory of the historical experience of the people who endured the concentration camp system, I traveled across Bulgaria in 2011 and interviewed more than thirty individuals who had been interned in camps and sentenced to prisons in the period between the mid-1940s and the early 1970s. I recorded a total of twenty interviews by employing a method based on the “life-stories” methodology of

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22 Daskalov, Debating the Past, 304.
23 I began collecting survivors’ testimonies in 2006, though I carried out most of my interviews in 2011.
oral history, developed by the Center for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University in Montreal. This oral history approach aims to extend the interview beyond the narrative of atrocity to a more in-depth account of each person’s experience. Thus, the interviews I collected span the life stories of Bulgarian survivors from the period of internment during the communist years until the present day. My aim is to shed light on the survivors’ experiences of repression but also on the ways in which these experiences were articulated once the regime collapsed. Therefore, I also juxtapose the survivors’ narratives with Bulgaria’s transitional justice initiatives and hope to contribute to the larger debate on the historical modes of a post-communist reckoning with the legacy of repression in Eastern Europe.


**Historiography**

All Eastern European states established concentration camp systems guided by Soviet authorities and operated by the secret police in each country. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent these camps were modeled after the Soviet gulag, but it seems that in each case, soon after they were created, the individual camp systems developed apart from the Soviet model and acquired their own specific characteristics. The question of the uniqueness of Bulgaria’s camp system in comparison to the rest of the Eastern European states is difficult to address. Scholarly research on the camp systems in Romania, East Germany, Poland, Hungary and the former Czechoslovakia is not yet available in English and it is still in its infancy in the countries themselves. The few comparative scholarly investigations indicate that there are two specific features of the Bulgarian communist regime that set it apart from the rest the Soviet satellites. Bulgaria was most likely the first country where the camps were established (1945) and also the only country to maintain a camp system into the 1980s, long after the camp systems in the neighbouring countries had been disbanded. Moreover, researchers are often baffled by the late existence (between 1959 and 1962) of Lovech, Bulgaria’s most severe camp. A comparative study of life in the camps in the Eastern European states is necessary and

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29 The rest of the Eastern European states established their camp systems between 1948 and 1950 and disbanded them by the mid 1950s. Applebaum notes, however, that the Soviet Military Administration set up “special” concentration camps in Germany also as early as 1945, which were NKVD control. “Two of them, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, were located on the site of the former Nazi concentration camps.” Applebaum, 454-5.
such a study will help illuminate how the specific cultures in each of these countries impacted the camp systems that they maintained.

A study in this direction has already been initiated by the international research network on Physical Violence and State Legitimacy in Late Socialism at Potsdam’s Center for Contemporary History (ZZF). The research findings of this project, which aim to shed light on various forms of violence in the Eastern European context, will generate much necessary insight on how to define repression in the socialist context in both the Soviet Union and in its satellites.  

My work on the camp system in communist Bulgaria contributes to both this broader research project on physical violence and state-socialism and to the more specific study of the camp experience in one of the Eastern European states.

Of all the former Soviet Bloc countries, Bulgaria is the least studied in the scholarly literature. As a consequence, it is also “gratuitously represented in overall generalizations.” This holds especially true for the country’s history of repression during the communist era. Following the collapse of the communist regime, there appeared multiple Bulgarian language publications on the topic of political violence. However, it was not scholars, but rather survivors of repression, investigative journalists, and sometimes, former high-ranking

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communist functionaries, who authored many of these sources.

In his historiographical study on modern Bulgarian history, Daskalov offered one plausible explanation as to why the scholarly engagement with the topic has not been more thorough: “Most of the historians simply avoided the period as too ‘hot’ and heavily ideologized, and some made a start in it but soon withdrew.”

There are also practical reasons that ought to be considered. For instance, there is no national Bulgarian institute dedicated to the memory of the communist past, while all other former Warsaw Pact states have one. In this sense, we can understand the reasons for Bulgaria’s apparent reluctance to address the history of the former regime as political, rather than historiographical. In the absence of a state-led effort to engage with the communist memory, and bearing in mind the post-1989 ideological battles to which Daskalov refers, the scholarship on Bulgaria’s repressive communist experience has not received much institutional support.

These challenges notwithstanding, several academic studies dealing with various aspects of the communist repressive apparatus have been published in Bulgarian. There have also appeared articles and chapters in English on Bulgaria’s experience of political violence in the context of the Stalinization of Eastern Europe. Since its inception in 2005, the Institute

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33 Daskalov, Debating the Past, 242. Daskalov’s monograph provides an excellent historiographical analysis and synthesis of the major historical debates of modern Bulgarian history from 19th Century until the present. On the communist period, see his extensive bibliography, 306–318.

34 I am grateful to the journalist, Matthew Brunwasser for our email discussion on this point.


for Studies of the Recent Past, a private non-governmental research organization in Bulgaria led by Professor Ivaylo Znepolski, has systematically engaged with the study of the communist regime. The Institute has collaborated with leading Bulgarian scholars who have authored an impressive number of studies dedicated to historical research of Bulgaria’s communist period, comprising the largest initiative undertaken in the country. The Institute has published twenty-six monographs so far, exploring questions such as the sociocultural mechanisms of the regime, the power structures of the Bulgarian Communist Party, and the political economy.\textsuperscript{37} The communist repressive apparatus has been subject to two monographs, one investigating the role of the secret police in the governance of communist society and the other exploring political violence against Bulgaria’s Muslim minorities.\textsuperscript{38}

The historiography of political repression in communist Bulgaria is in its early stages. The historiography of the camp system, however, is largely nonexistent. There are several noteworthy non-academic investigations that have appeared since 1989; several edited oral history collections containing the testimonies of camp survivors; documentary films; a journalistic book on transitional justice; and an edited collection by medical researchers

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\textsuperscript{38} On political violence against Bulgaria’s Muslim minorities during the communist era, see Mikhail Gruev and Aleksei Kaloyanski, \textit{Vuzroditelniat Protseks: nsulamnshite obshnosti i komuhestehskii rezhim} (Sofia: Ciela, Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo, 2008). On the role of the secret police, see Momchil Metodiev, \textit{Mashina za legitimnost: Rolyata na Durzhavna Sigurnost v komunisticheska durzhava} (Sofia: Ciela, Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo, 2008)
working with survivors of repression. Some of these sources have had a significant impact on how the memory of the camp past has been articulated in post-communist Bulgaria in both the public and academic spheres. For this reason, throughout this work, I engage with these investigations by situating their findings in the larger context of the history and memory of the Bulgarian camp past.

To date, no historical monograph on the Bulgarian camps has been published and in general, the topic has received little academic scrutiny. The first study based on archival

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Hristov’s work in the field of investigative journalism is particularly noteworthy. Hristov, an award-winning journalist, who after a six-year court battle was one of the first researchers to gain access to the secret police archives has published numerous articles and several monographs in connection with Bulgaria’s communist repressive communist apparatus. In addition to his aforementioned work on transitional justice, he has also authored an important investigative study on the assassination of the Bulgarian dissident, Georgi Markov, see, Hristov, Ubite “Skimik” – Bulgarskata i Britanskata duzhavna politika po slucaia “Georgi Markov” (Sofia: Ciela, 2005). In 2011, Hristov created the independent web site, www.desebg.com, which aims to make available to the public easily accessible information, including declassified archival documents, about the functioning of the former secret police.

40 Since 2009, the topic of the camps has been subject to discussion in several broader academic studies, including Dinio Sharlanov’s Istoria na Komunizma v Bulgaria vol. 1 (History of Communism in Bulgaria) (Sofia: Ciela, 2009), 379–446; Roumen Daskalov Debating the Past, 265–275; Evgenia Kalinova and Iskra Baeva’s Bulgarskite Prehodi 1939-2010 (The Bulgarian Transitions) (Sofia: Paradigma, 2010), 95–104; Stéphane Courtois, et al., the Black Book of Communism, 417–423; Richard Crampton mentions the Belene camp on several occasions, see Crampton, Bulgaria, 344–6, 375. These studies have not yielded new archival information about the Bulgarian camps. Sharlanov’s text does provide a revised number (28,380) of the individual interned in the camps, however, the author cites only one archival unit in support of his revised estimate. See, Sharlanov, Istoria na Komunizma, 394. For the most comprehensive historical account of the Belene camp, tracing its institutional formation and evolution, see the work of the independent researcher, Borislav Skochev, “Kontslagerut Belene, 1949–1986,” Sofia, unpublished manuscript, 2014. Skochev is in the final stages of completing his large study, and until it is published, draft versions of sections of his manuscript can be made available to interested researchers.
evidence appeared in 1991, edited by two Bulgarian academics, Penka Stoyanova and Emil Iliev, *Politicheski Opasni Litsa: Vudvoriavania, trudova mobilizatsia, izslevania v Bulgaria sled 1944* [Politically dangerous people. Internment, labor mobilization, exile in Bulgaria after 1944].\(^1\) The study is based on archives from the Central State Archive, the Central Party Archives, files from the Ministry of the Interior, publications from the press, and the findings of the Special Inquiry Commission in 1990. At one hundred and eighty-five pages, approximately half of the study comprises appendices of transcriptions of archival documents.\(^2\) *Politicheski Opasni Litsa* was the first scholarly documentary investigation into the Bulgarian archival holdings on the topic of the camps. This initial academic undertaking provides valuable research material and it is an important document collection. In fact, *Politicheski Opasni Litsa* often serves as the main reference point for subsequent investigations on political violence in both Bulgarian and English.\(^3\) More critical scrutiny should be applied, however, with respect to Stoyanova and Iliev’s research findings when it comes to the number of camps, their composition and the intent behind their creation and functioning, since the research duo used only a limited range of sources (those available in 1991) and some of the document references they cite do not correspond to the current archival holdings.

Until 2009—that is twenty years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall—the Bulgarian scholarly output on the topic of the camps was negligible. Since then, three new publications have appeared: a collection of oral history interviews, a book of photographs and accompanying texts, and an edited volume that combines oral history interviews and

\(^1\) Stoyanova and Iliev, eds., *Politicheski Opasni Litsa.*  
\(^2\) *Politicheski Opasni Litsa* is divided into five parts: a thirty-page introduction, two short analytical sections, of five and ten pages respectively, a nineteen page list of all the camp sites in Bulgaria during the communist era, and two appendices of eighty-six pages altogether.  

Koleva’s work offers an anthropological survey of the town of Belene in the post-communist period, based on interviews that she and a team of researchers conducted with residents during two visits in 2008 and 2009.\(^{45}\) In order to situate the interviews in the post-communist context, Koleva provides an insightful, archival-based introduction that surveys the history of the camp. *Without A Trace? The Belene Camp, 1949–1959 and After . . .* is a book of photographs based on the eponymous exhibit held in the National Art Gallery in Sofia in November 2009. Though important in their articulation of the memory of the camp past, neither of these investigations offers a systematic engagement with the archival material.

In 2012, Anna Luleva, Evgenia Troeva, and Petur Petrov published the edited bilingual (Bulgarian-German) collection, *Prinuditelniat Trud v Bulgaria (1941–1962). Spomeni na Svideteli* [Forced-Labour in Bulgaria (1941-1962). Memories of Witnesses]. *Prinuditelniat Trud* is a compelling study that provides important insights into the history and memory of forced labor on Bulgarian territory between 1941 and 1962.\(^{46}\) The study is mostly based on oral history interviews with former camp inmates. Although the authors partially contextualize the various forms of forced labor, the perspective privileged is that of a certain uniformity of repression throughout twentieth-century Bulgarian history. Yet it is precisely the various, and, in this case, vastly different sociopolitical contexts that in turn determine the varieties of


\(^{45}\) Koleva, *Belene*, 7. The author has also published an article in English on the topic of her Bulgarian monograph. See Koleva, “Belene,” 1–18.

\(^{46}\) Luleva, Troeva, and Petrov, eds., *Prinuditelniat trud v Bulgaria (1941–1962).*
forced labor and produce multiple memories of the experience of political violence. Those memories are critical yet it is they which remain unexplored. It seems that if the survivors’ memories were treated in a more rigorously comparative manner, this collection may have produced a more nuanced analysis of the legacy of Bulgarian forced labor. Koleva and Luleva’s work has appeared in translation in English in the form of articles. 47

The most powerful and important scholarly work as of yet to address the history and memory of the Bulgarian gulag, is the edited volume *Voices from the Gulag: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria* by Franco-Bulgarian literary theorist and public intellectual Tzvetan Todorov. 48 Published in France in 1992 and eventually translated into English in 1999, this illuminating work is based on the transcripts of the Bulgarian documentary film *The Survivors*, as well as on additional materials provided by former camp inmates and their families. 49 Todorov compiled and edited the accounts of women and men who survived the Lovech camp alongside the testimonies of perpetrators, such as former camp guards and officers. He also provided a theoretically insightful introduction to situate these narratives in the context of the experience of political violence in the twentieth century. 50 *Voices from the Gulag* was not the first book Todorov penned on the general topic of concentration camps, but it was his most personal one. 51 Between 1959 and 1962, when the Lovech camp operated, Todorov still lived in Bulgaria and he was around the same age as most of the young people sent to this particular

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49 Atanas Kiriakov, dir., *Otzelette* [The Survivors]. Produced by Bulgarian National Television in 1990.

50 See Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 1–37.

site. “I was guilty of the same ‘crimes:’ I wore the same clothes, listened and danced to the
same music, . . ., felt the same way about the police. . . I was an adult and did not turn a blind
eye to all that surrounded me. Yet the fact remains: that horror was part of my world but I did
not know it.” The resulting book gives a deeply moving account of camp survival, a
powerful testimony that both reveals the extreme cruelty of the Lovech camp and lends a voice
to those who survived it, or those who perished in it. *Voices from the Gulag* was meant to
provide a reflection on, but not a historical account of the experience of violence in communist
Bulgaria. “The factual historical record of this phenomenon is being established by others,”
Todorov stated in 1992; “I am instead interested in the fundamental historical experience of
the men and women who passed through these camps.”

The absence of a scholarly survey on the topic of the camps has led to very divergent
representations of the Bulgarian gulag and the question of how the camp system impacted
society continues to be debated. For instance, the historian Mark Mazower has characterized
communist Bulgaria as “Little Siberia,” and Todorov has argued that “the entire country bears
the brutal stamp of the concentration camp system.” Historians in Bulgaria today remain
split. The present work answers the call of some of Bulgaria’s leading scholars for a more in-
depth look at the country’s history of forced-labor camps and the stories of those who survived
them. Moreover, this dissertation challenges the conclusions of those historians who, while
acknowledging the brutality of the camps, also paradoxically claim that these had only

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52 Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 3. Todorov was born in Bulgaria in 1949 and immigrated to France in 1963.
53 Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 3.
54 Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 2.
Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 2.
56 See Ivaylo Znepolski’s introduction and Daniela Koleva’s essay on oral history, “Ustnata istoria i arhivnata
revolutzia,” in Ivaylo Znepolski, ed., *Istoriata na Narodna Republika Bulgaria: Rezhimut i Obshtestvoto* (Sofia:
marginal impact on society. I also hope to remain faithful to Todorov’s approach and preserve the memory of the “fundamental historical experience” of the people who endured the camp system.

Situating Political Violence in Communist Bulgaria

The question of how to situate the experience of communist violence seems especially pertinent as 2014 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and both public and scholarly debates about the nature of communism are waged with a renewed vigor and from a new reflective perspective. Broadly speaking, two competing narratives continue to frame the discussion on what characterized the communist experience in Eastern Europe. One strand of thought emphasizes the violence, the repression, and the curtailment of political freedoms. The other highlights the value of free access to health care, free education, and overall social stability, viewing these as indicators of social justice. State socialism, then, is either condemned or celebrated. Yet as the intellectual historian Maria Todorova has remarked in her study on communist remembrance, the communist legacy is multilayered and one should question the “mandatory and moralizing” calls for “coming to terms” with the communist past. There is, indeed, much more to the communist experience than the legacy of violence. Nevertheless, the question of how to address human rights abuses, which took place during communist rule and were committed by communist authorities, remains unanswered. In addressing this particular historical lacunae, the questions that my research considers emerged from a distinctly Bulgarian context. At the same time, however, they also relate to larger processes of remembering, representing, and reassessing the ambiguous communist past.

throughout Eastern Europe.

Scholarly engagements with the latter processes are frequently polarized. Within intellectual history, scholars such as Maria Todorova, Szusza Gille, and Svetlana Boym have explored the role of nostalgia, as well as the complexities and ambiguities that have helped shape our understanding of the communist regimes. Meanwhile, political scientists, such as Lavinia Stan and Monika Nelepa, have focused specifically on the human rights abuses in the communist era and on the ways in which Eastern European states have attempted to remedy them in the post-socialist years. These studies, however, do not address what appears to be the central question of the multidimensionality of the communist experience. Despite the excellent analyses on the modernizing impetus and the authoritarian tendencies of communist regimes, scholars working in this field have not yet examined the fundamental importance of the very interaction between the two facets of communism, the violent and repressive, on the one side, and the emancipatory and progressive, on the other. Both realities were staples of communist rule and describing one does not automatically negate the historical existence of the other.

Thus, in 1960 in communist Bulgaria, almost half of all students enrolled in universities were women. That was a number considerably higher than anywhere else in the world. During the same year, the harshest concentration camp, Lovech, was also operating in the country. Hence, more than a decade after it was founded, the People’s Republic of Bulgaria had become both a leader in women’s higher education and a place where institutionalized

60 See Nalepa, Skeletons in the Closet; Stan, Transitional Justice in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union.
62 Finland also led the way for women’s enrolment in higher education. See Hobsbawm, The Age of Extremes, 311.
repression had turned into a norm. It is the existence of such arresting contradictions, in this case, elements of violence and progress, that render impossible an unambiguous narrative about Bulgaria’s communist experience. Perhaps a better way to think about its legacy is to consider instead the historical interconnectedness of these seemingly irreconcilable realities. A major premise of the present work is that these two facets overlapped, leaked into each other, and thus propelled the regime’s functioning. To engage in an analysis that refuses to condemn or redeem does not amount to an endorsement of moral relativism, nor is it an attempt to whitewash history. Is it not possible that by shedding light on repression, we also begin to better understand the calmness and security that bred the paradoxical structure of “real socialism”? Without such a complex understanding, we are left with an inadequate analysis that tends to divide scholarly investigations and fluctuate between attempts to condemn communist crimes and tendencies to idealize state socialism.63 In other words, it is time to move beyond the oversimplified dichotomy of the good-old communist days and the communist days of terror.

While I focus on the most repressive episode of Bulgaria’s communist past, the experience of political violence, and how it is remembered, the analytical context of this work extends beyond these themes. There were certainly progressive and emancipatory facets of society during this period.64 Although I do not provide an explicit account of this side of Bulgaria’s communist reality, I contend that its acknowledgment is a necessary condition in the assessment of the concomitant large-scale institutional violence. In this sense, what became a sprawling camp network, prompting prominent scholars to claim that two in nine workers of

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63 Ulf Brunnbauer reaches similar conclusions in his assessment of the most recent literature on the politics of memory in post-communist Eastern Europe. See his review article, “Remembering Communism during and after Communism.”

Bulgaria’s industrial workforce were slave laborers, must necessarily be understood in the broader context of policies bent on remodelling and reorganizing society. The institutionalization of state violence and its use as a governing strategy required a large workforce that eventually came to staff Bulgaria’s growing repressive apparatus. Tens of thousands of individuals came to be employed in the proliferating sites of violence and in the central and regional governmental offices that operated them. A close analysis of institutionalized violence in this particular context reveals the ways in which the victimization of some individuals also extended opportunities to others.

Multiple individual human threads run through my work: the personal and collective accounts of survivors of political violence marked by their struggle to have their voices heard and their experience remembered in the post-communist era; the chronicle of a communist general who attempted to both preserve and destroy the historical evidence detailing the atrocities committed in the camps; the tale of a small town on the Danube River that became the site of the longest-running forced-labor camp; and the perplexing journey of its citizens from the communist past to the present and an uncertain European future. Yet the most unsettling thread, and the one that spells out most directly the ambiguous legacy of the communist historical reality is the story of the woman whose black and white photograph had triggered my interest in the camp past. Between 1959 and 1961, Julia Ruzhgeva worked as a guard in the Belene and Lovech camps, and in the post-communist years, she stood trial for her alleged crimes. While never sentenced in court, she was convicted by public opinion, and came to embody the darkest years of socialist rule. Ruzhgeva was the only woman who stood trial for crimes committed in the camps. Her persona, both real and imagined, has continuously

Tony Judt writes that in the 1950s “In Bulgaria, from an industrial workforce of just under half a million, two persons out of nine were slave laborers.” Judt, Postwar, 192. However, it is difficult to verify Judt’s claims since he does not provide the source of his statistic nor does he specify what constitutes a slave laborer.
fascinated film directors, journalists, and magistrates. However, despite the nature of her employment and her post-communist ordeal through courts and media outlets, Ruzhgeva claimed that she never regretted her employment as a guard. Examining the history of communist violence and post-communist transitional justice in Bulgaria by highlighting the role of gender and shedding light on the story of a low-ranking perpetrator of the camp system allows for an in-depth understanding of the multilayered nature of the communist experience, its contradictory realities, and the complicated directions confounding its assessment.\(^{66}\)

**On Terminology and Language**

As I began writing this dissertation, the absence of an adequate language to describe the specific experience of political violence in Bulgaria became obvious. The terms I borrow from scholars working in different historical contexts present a convenient shorthand, but I believe that a new vocabulary is needed to address and situate state-sponsored violence typical of socialist Eastern Europe. For example, the diverse members of the Bulgarian community of camp and prison survivors identify themselves as *Represirani*, translated in English as “the Repressed.” They have never been able to unite themselves into a single organization and are presently subdivided into several factions usually in conflict with one another. There are, for example, the “Repessed Agrarians,” the “Repessed Anarchists-Marxists,” the “Union of the Repressed.” For the sake of clarity in English, I have opted to use the term *survivors* instead of *repressed*. The linguistic nuance of the Bulgarian term, however, should not be lost: the

majority of those interned in camps and prisons in communist Bulgaria actually survived them.

The bureaucratic language used by those involved in creating and administering the camps also raises terminological questions. The Bulgarian authorities at the Ministry of the Interior, for example, employed the term TVO (Trudovo Vuzpitatelno Obshtezhitie), which translates as “labor correctional facility,” to refer to the sites of violence they created. In the early 1960s, the term TG (Trudova Grupa), “labour group,” was also briefly used. Both abbreviations, TVO and TG, are euphemisms for the various types of concentration camp operated by the Bulgarian secret police. In fact, in secret police records from the mid to late 1940s, there is evidence of the word lager (camp) being used by officials. Todorov employed both “concentration camp” and “gulag” to describe Bulgaria’s sites of violence.67 Like Todorov, Bulgarian scholars such as Ivaylo Znepolski and Daniela Koleva, journalists and independent scholars such as Hristo Hristov and Borislav Skochev, and camp survivors such as Stefan Botchev generally employ “concentration camp” and “gulag” to describe Bulgaria’s sites of violence.68 Scholars who write broadly on contemporary Bulgarian history, such as R. J. Crampton, Iskra Baeva, and Evgenia Kalinova, have used the term “labor camps” or “labor detention camps.”69 The pattern I detect here, and what I think accounts for these slight terminological differences, is quite simple. Those who work in the more general field of Bulgarian history opt for the more general term, labor camp. Those, however, who work more closely with the secret police files and with the stories of former camp inmates have determined that concentration camp is the more accurate term.70 I belong to the latter category. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s definition of the camp

67 Todorov, Voices from the Gulag.
70 Informal conversations with several of my colleagues, some listed in note 68, have led me to understand that they opt for the term concentration camp instead of labor detention camp because they feel that the latter
as an extrajudicial space where individuals are deported and isolated from society without a trial and sentence, where human life is reduced to its barest form, I refer to the Bulgarian camps of the communist era as concentration camps. In the context of discussions of internees doing work in the camps, I sometimes refer to forced-labor camps—including the important modifier to emphasize that internees were forced to work. At times, I also employ the term *gulag*, understood in its broadest sense, to refer to the entire forced labor detention system imported from the Soviet Union to Eastern Europe in the mid 1940s.

A Culture of Silence

It was not until 2007, when Bulgaria officially ascended to the European Union, that the country was seen as having definitively exited the Soviet sphere of influence. Even though by 2007, the Soviet Union no longer existed, the spectral presence of the deeply entrenched geographical, political, and cultural Cold War divisions still manifested themselves in the everyday lives of Bulgarian citizens. The country’s entry into the powerful alliance, Bulgarian and Western media triumphantly declared, finally brought Bulgaria back to its European home. EU and NATO flags now fluttered in place of the red star and the hammer and sickle. Yet, despite these significant symbolic swaps, seventeen years after the collapse of the communist regime, its legacy continued to mark the EU’s poorest member.

It is emblematic that in 2007, one of the country’s leading authors, Georgi Gospodinov, 

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published a provocative essay on the peculiarity of the communist experience and its aftermath in Bulgaria. He identified a particularly Bulgarian “culture of silence” and inquired into its origins and persistence:

The Bulgarian community and Bulgarian families have kept silent now for ages: we have an exceptional culture of silence. Looking back, … we might find it accumulating through the years of fear under totalitarianism. […] In Bulgaria, our silence about the past during the last eighteen years of transition is born of the silence we kept during the time of communism. This is a continuing silence, a great accumulation of silence that was mastered long ago, and became a sort of second nature. It is denser—more monolithic—compared to the silence of the other Eastern European countries. It is a continuous silence, unbroken. The conformist silence imposed by late socialism during the ‘80s, and then the politically profitable wilful ignorance regarding the recent past that we witnessed during the ‘90s (a strategy of postponement), form two parts of the same tendency.72

Although many commentators have noted the ways that authoritarian rule can suppress speech and create cultures of fear and reticence, I agree with Gospodinov that Bulgaria has a unique culture of silence that took shape under communism and persisted into the post-communist era.73

I do not think, however, that Bulgaria’s culture of silence is simply the result of the

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authoritarian communist regime. It is the product of systematic acts of silencing carried out by the communist regime, of which the camps were an integral and central part. In the most general sense, the threat of internment in the camps created fear and an unwillingness to speak out against the regime. From the seizure of power in the fall of 1944 until its demise in the early winter of 1989, the communist regime consistently resorted to repression, and sometimes to extreme brutality, maintaining a concentration-camp system for a variety of purposes, but ultimately to exert strict control over society. In many ways, the camps offered a convenient way of doing away with individuals who could not legally be sent to prison. At first, the Bulgarian communist leadership exercised its control overtly to consolidate power, and repression was as rampant in Bulgaria’s early communist years as it was in the rest of the Soviet satellite states. Unusual for the Soviet bloc, however, the network of camps continued to operate during the later stages of communist rule.

The particular history of the Bulgarian camp system—its violence, its longevity, its secrecy, and how it came to be remembered in the post-communist period—contributed significantly to forming Bulgaria’s peculiar culture of silence. For example, unlike in the Soviet Union, there was little fluidity between the inside and the outside of the gulag and there was not a “revolving door” between the camps and society. In the Bulgarian case, new towns and cities did not develop around camps, and people forced to labour in the gulag did not usually move back and forth between camps and areas beyond the barbed wire.74 Even though not all camps were located in isolated areas, life for all internees was structured in a way to ensure little or no contact between those interned in the camps and the civilian populations

outside the camps. The regime went to great lengths to hide or disguise the activities of the camps, even resorting to night-time deliveries and making interned workers at the quarry at Lovech hide when trains passed nearby so that passengers would not see any evidence of the camp.

These particular features of the Bulgarian gulag limited the amount and detail of knowledge about the camps amongst the general population. While many people may have had some awareness of the existence of camps, most did not know much about the system as a whole or the treatment of those interned in the camps. But they knew enough to be afraid and this allowed a silence to remain around the camps and permeate society in general. This limitation on the amount of available information and the fear surrounding the camps were compounded by the fact that the Bulgarian government was relatively successful in suppressing dissidents and others who would have been most likely to bring attention to the camps and disseminate information about them.

In addressing how and why people do not, or cannot, articulate representations of traumatic historical events, scholars have recently attempted to move beyond older ideas of historical amnesia to theorize “historical aphasia.” Although these ideas have been stimulating and illuminating when applied to experiences of those who lived through the end of Soviet history or French colonial history, the culture of silence is a more appropriate concept for Bulgaria’s communist history and the transition to a post-communist society.75 While the theoretical metaphor of amnesia relies upon forgetting, and aphasia relies upon the inability to speak, a culture of silence is characterized by the pairing of awareness and reticence. It is characterized by the presence of the unsaid—the lasting result of violence and the threat of

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violence. Hence, it is traumatic and permeated by fear. In a culture of silence, people have the basic ability to speak about a topic, but structural features of their society limit access to relevant information while also creating a system of strong disincentives to speak. The silences become habitual and the ability for meaningful speech is limited. Unlike amnesia or aphasia, a culture of silence is characterized by a present absence—that which is known in some general sense and could be spoken about, but is not. In the case of Bulgaria’s culture of silence, the camps are the exemplary case of what was known of, but not spoken about.

The experience in the Bulgarian forced-labour camps, their regime, their violence, their longevity, and how they came to be remembered is contingent upon Bulgaria’s peculiar culture of silence. They are both a product of it and they helped form it. In the following chapters, I survey the ways in which the silence about the camps was eventually transformed into a culture. Each of the chapters investigates different manifestations of this silence: the “conformist silence” of the communist years fuelled by fear (chapter 1), the “continuing silence” of the transitional years (chapter 2), and the various acts of silencing perpetrated by the communist authorities before 1989 (the burial of bodies in unmarked graves away from families) and after (destruction of files) (chapter 3). In tracing the voices of the survivors through these silences, I show the emergence of the processes that subsequently led to the marginalization of the survivors’ memories, and the eventual ouster of these memories from the public sphere.

The first chapter, “Concentration Camps and State Repression in Communist Bulgaria,” surveys the origins of the Bulgarian camp system, focusing on the particular characteristics of its structure and functions as officials created it over the course of four decades. By shedding light on the origins of political violence, we can also trace the origins of the silence. The chapter spans the entire communist period, from 1945 until 1989, and
incorporates new statistical information on the number of inmates interned in camps. The next two chapters demonstrate how the culture of silence provided some limited opportunities for survivors to speak, but also erected barriers to their full expression. Chapter 2, “Surviving Bulgaria’s Culture of Silence,” investigates the ways in which the official silence about the camps during the communist era was transformed into a “culture” of silence after 1989; the chapter sheds light on the role of the press and media in how they commemorated the camp experience. The story told here seems idiosyncratic; for this chapter demonstrates that, in fact, the immediate post-communist period was marked by an overwhelming, albeit sensationalized publicity about the camp’s brutality. The chapter juxtaposes four accounts of camp survivors in the present day. Chapter 3, “To Exit from The Closed Circle: 1989 and The Memory of Violence,” focuses on late 1989 and 1990. In March 1990, the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior appointed a commission officially named the Special Inquiry Commission for the Investigation of the Atrocities in the Camps of Lovech, Skravena, and Others (SIC). The chapter demonstrates how this marked a momentary, yet powerful, reprieve in Bulgaria’s culture of silence. Momentary, because it lasted only for a short time; powerful, because it propelled the memory of violence to the forefront of public, judicial, and media discourse.

The final two chapters of the dissertation are dedicated to the most famous Bulgarian camps and discuss both the history of these camps and their post-communist representations. Chapter 4, “The Bulgarian Pearl of the Danube: Belene, The Prison Camp Island, 1949-1959,” looks at the creation of Bulgaria’s largest prison-camp complex and the post-communist “surface silence” in the town of Belene. Chapter 5 “Lovech: the Last Gulag Camp, 1959-1962” demonstrates the terrible living and working conditions of the camp and the powerful silence that this created. Camp officials took dramatic steps to silence the camps internees and to keep the public from knowing about the camp. Internees were not allowed to talk to one
another while in Lovech and bodies of those who died there were buried without being returned to families. The conditions in the camp often left survivors unable to speak of what they experienced. After this chapter about the camp that created the greatest variety of silences, I return, in the conclusion of the dissertation, to the moment when the silence was broken. I look at the high profile camp trial, focusing on Ruzhgeva, one of the guards at Lovech, as a means of reflecting on Bulgaria’s failed attempts at transitional justice and the deeper problems of its reckoning with the historical past.
CHAPTER 1

CONCENTRATION CAMPS AND STATE REPRESSION IN COMMUNIST BULGARIA

This chapter surveys the origins and the evolution of the violence of the Bulgarian camps in the broader context of state repression. It establishes important factual information necessary for the assessment of the overall role of the camps in the governance of society: the periodization of the camp system, the categories and the number of inmates interned, and the living conditions in the camps. Taking into account Todorov’s theoretical formulation of the camp as the “institutional cornerstone” of communist Bulgaria, this chapter argues that the creation and the running of the camp system led to the blurring of the boundaries between the judiciary and the executive branches of government and was one of the major factors that allowed widespread state repression to unfold.

On October 18, 1944, P. G., “an old Communist Party member,” sent a letter of complaint to the attention of the newly appointed Bulgarian minister of the interior, Anton Yugov, and the director of the People’s Militia, R. R. Vidinski.¹ P. G. protested that there were too many young and arrogant dandies and hussies having fun in cafés in Sofia while workers were toiling in factories, and fighting on the front continued.² “Crossed-legged, with painted lips, a cigarette in their mouth, feeding their dogs with pastries […] dancing and engaging in debauchery”—this is how the loyal communist angrily condemned “the spoiled

1 AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.102.
2 AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.102.
offspring of the bourgeoisie." P. G. acknowledged that the minister of the interior and the director of the militia were busy with much more important things, but insisted that he was not raising trivial issues:

Does our country today need these bars full of dandies …? No!! All of them [should] be chased down and brought to public view before those who are building the foundations of modern Bulgaria. … These idlers are to be sent to forced labor … to concentration camps, and there, let them dance, sing, and debauch to their fill, without anyone bothering them. Comrades, I believe that you will take measures concerning this.  

When P. G. wrote this letter, Bulgaria had just begun a new political age, the era of “people’s democracy.” On September 9, 1944, a coup d’état backed by the Red Army had established the Fatherland Front (FF) at the helm of the country. The FF was a coalition of leftist parties, including the Communists, who though not numerous, were powerful because they had been given the crucial ministries of the interior and of justice. Yugov, the minister of the interior and a prominent communist, had himself been interned in a camp in 1941, by the authoritarian government of the preceding decade (1934–44). Yet despite his experience in the camps, Yugov went on to help plan one of the most repressive political purges in contemporary Bulgarian history and spearheaded the communist camp system.  

Notwithstanding the crudeness of P. G.’s letter, it expressed general sentiments shared by important figures in the Ministry of the Interior like Yugov. Internment in concentration camps.

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3 AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.102.  
4 AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.102.  
6 In December 1944, on Anton Yugov’s proposal, the Council of Ministers adopted an ordinance law to create forced-labor camps.
camps started only a few months after Yugov’s appointment, and by early 1945, the camp system had been formally institutionalized as a method of political repression. Camps acquired legal status and began to operate under a set of laws decreed by the Council of Ministers and promulgated in the State Gazette (Durzhaven Vestnik), on January 20, 1945. In 1948, a year after the Communist Party had consolidated its control over the country and Bulgaria was officially in the Stalinist mold, internment in a camp—without a charge, a trial, or a sentence—was recognized as an administrative measure and established in the Law of the People’s Militia.

The concentration camps, and internment in them, thus figured prominently in the foundations of communist Bulgaria. They also formed part of a larger repressive apparatus, which operated in the country from 1944 until 1989. Show trials, mass shootings (only at the outset of the regime), prisons, forced-assimilation campaigns targeting minorities, coerced collectivization, exile in the countryside, house arrests, interrogation cells, surveillance, a web of informants, the confiscation of property, exclusion from educational and employment institutions, censorship, and travel restrictions all, to varying degrees, fit into the same system of repression. The severity of the different practices varied widely, however, as did their timing. The political scientist Martin Dimitrov noted that between 1953 and 1954, the Bulgarian secret police, for instance, reoriented its efforts from overt repression to surveillance. Similar to the East German Stasi, the staff of Bulgaria’s secret police increased when the intensity of repressive policies decreased. Scholars generally agree that the early socialist years of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria (from 1944 through early 1960s) were far

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7 AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.12.
more repressive, in general, than the years of “socialist normalization” (from the mid to late 1960s through the 1980s). A close examination of the Bulgarian camp system suggests that this was indeed the case, as the most active period of internment ended in 1962. Throughout the duration of the regime, state-sponsored repression—whether overt and manifesting itself in rampant political violence, or covert and focused on the targeted persecution of select political opponents—remained the monopoly of the secret police. Since various governmental agencies aided in the implementation of coercive measures, however, it is not feasible to speak of a monolithic repressive apparatus in communist Bulgaria.

In this sense, it is important to point out that there was an overlap between the offices responsible for human rights violations through legal means. The Ministry of Justice was responsible for the confinement, in a prison, of individuals who went through a trial and received a sentence, whereas the Ministry of the Interior was charged with interning individuals, in a camp, who had had neither trial nor sentence. However, the two institutions collaborated and the repression of individuals for political and for other, broadly put, “dissenting” reasons was thus carried out through both judicial and non-judicial means. On the one hand, administrative means allowed the ruling establishment to send to concentration camps individuals it deemed inconvenient. On the other hand, the selective application of existing criminal law and the creation of new laws for political crimes allowed people to be sentenced in court and sent to prison. Reasons for internment in camps varied, but often, when there was not enough evidence for an individual’s prosecution in the courts, the person was simply disposed of in a camp. In other words, the existence of camps enabled the efficiency of repression. Every one of the leaders of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria—Georgi Dimitrov (1944–49), Vulko Chervenkov (1949–54), and Todor Zhivkov (1954–89)—resorted to the facile recourse of camp internment when he faced political opposition or wished to exert
control over the population. In particular, Todor Zhivkov, who held power for thirty-five years, depended on the office of the secret police to intimidate and, when necessary, to eliminate detractors and critics.

Tzvetan Todorov has described the site and the event of the concentration camp as the “institutional cornerstone” of the authoritarian regime in communist Bulgaria. Todorov noted that even though communist judicial procedures were distorted, they still provided a measure of justice, which was not afforded to those sent to a camp. Thus he underscored that the “crucial difference” between camps and the prisons was the difference between administrative internment in camps and judicial internment in prisons, a distinction he believed lay at the core of the regime’s ideological substructure. The prison was clearly a legal establishment, and to be sent to prisons, people had to be tried and sentenced. They were thus subjects of the law, which, however “wicked,” nonetheless constituted a form of legality. The camp formed an extension of the ideological: sent there without sentence, individuals were simply “enemies,” deviants from the official state ideology.

Todorov’s clear and systematic distinction proves useful, but it also has its limits. Between 1950 and 1953, around fifty five hundred sentenced (mostly political) prisoners were interned in the Nozharevo and Belene camps resulting in a mixed population in these sites. Available evidence, therefore, does not always support Todorov’s straightforward division between the camp as an ideological and the prison as a legal institution.

Nonetheless, the distinction can stand as a valid descriptive category. The “crucial difference” between the enactment of the law by the Ministry of Justice and the abuse and

11 Petur Mladenov (1989-1990) is the exception here, he is formally considered the last communist leader of Bulgaria but technically, he presided over the dissolution of the regime.
13 Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 17.
14 Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 18.
15 Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 17–18.
16 Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 18.
arbitrary bending of the law by the Ministry of the Interior provides a useful analytical model with which to assess communist Bulgaria’s repressive apparatus. At the same time, I see the two ministries’ collaboration as paramount. That between 1957 and 1959, as well as from 1964 to 1977, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice comanaged the territory of Belene Island—which housed both the biggest and longest-running concentration camp and a prison—corroborates such an appraisal. More specifically, the blurring of the boundaries between the judiciary and the executive branches of government was one of the major factors that allowed widespread state repression to unfold. Furthermore, from 1946 to 1951, the same department in the Ministry of the Interior administered the prisons as managed the camps. That is, the operative personnel responsible for the administration of camps and prisons was supplied by staff from the Ministry of the Interior, and some of its employees transitioned between the secret police and other departmental units.

The Bulgarian show trials against leading politicians and clergymen in 1947, 1949, and 1952 provide another important example of the functional overlap between the two ministries for the purposes of repression. These trials also show how much the courts of justice had an intended ideological function. The political proceedings in court were necessary, first, as an outward demonstration of lawfulness and the identification of the Communist Party with the state, and, second, as a juridical justification for the repression of entire social categories. The public trials against major leaders and representatives of certain social groups were always followed by not-so-public repressions against lesser members of these same categories, including internment in camps. For instance, after the trial in 1947 of Nikola

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17 From 1946 until 1953, the camps’ administrative and economic management was executed by the Office of Prisons and Camps (Zatvori i TVO).
Petkov, the leader of the Bulgarian Agrarian Union (BZNS), came the prohibition of the union as a whole and the internment of its MPs, leading functionaries, and active party members in concentration camps. The trials against the communist (and president of the Council of Ministers) Traicho Kostov in 1949 were followed by the internment of communists; the trials against Protestant church ministers in 1952 led to the internment of practicing Protestants; and the trials against Catholic priests in 1952 marked the beginning of internment for practicing Catholics—in 1953, the Catholic Church even had its property seized.

**Conditions in the Camps**

An analysis of four documents from two very different ideological perspectives provides a useful way to begin characterizing the living conditions in the Bulgarian gulag in the first years of its establishment and its systemic development. Comparing two reports from Western intelligence organizations and two reports from officials involved in the operation and oversight of the camps reveals a surprising agreement about the nature of life for those interned.

In November 1953, an internal memorandum about Bulgarian concentration camps circulated between several departments of the British Foreign Office.\(^{19}\) Four months later, in early March 1954, the Bulgarian Evaluation Desk at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) issued a document on the same topic, a report titled, “Concentration Camps in Bulgaria,” covering the period 1945-1952.\(^{20}\) Though notably different in tone and length, the

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\(^{19}\) November 11, 1953, The National Archives of the UK (hereafter TNA), Foreign Office (hereafter FO): FO 371/106258. At least five departments within the Foreign Office received the memorandum between November 11 and November 24, 1953. See individual signatures, agency acronyms and dates on the minutes section preceding the extract on Bulgaria.

\(^{20}\) “Concentration Camps in Bulgaria,” March 2, 1954. HU OSA 300-1-2-44311; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute (hereafter RFE/RL): General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest (hereafter, HU OSA). Between August 1951 and December 1956, close to ninety reports on the topic of the concentration camps were released by the Bulgarian Evaluation Desk. See the following sources “The Belene Concentration Camp,” 1 April 1955; HU OSA 300-1-2-56818; HU OSA 300-1-2-32640; HU OSA 300-1-2-4501; HU OSA 300-1-2-17051; HU OSA 300-1-2-21613; HU OSA 300-
two documents painted a bleak picture of life in the Bulgarian camps.\textsuperscript{21}

The British memorandum discussed an extract from a larger paper on “Forced Labour in Eastern Europe.”\textsuperscript{22} The three-page section on Bulgaria, however, brief, and according to one of the readers, “incomplete,” nonetheless provided alarming evidence about “frightful conditions” in the Bulgarian camps during the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{23} The eyewitness accounts of former inmates testified to the “severity of the Bulgarian forced labour regime,” and described it as one characterized by malnutrition, hard labor, and brutal treatment by guards.\textsuperscript{24} The long work hours and “impossible to fulfill” quotas were made unbearable by beatings and punishments.\textsuperscript{25} Disease, occasional epidemics, and severe weather conditions placed an additional burden on the weakened inmates who received scant medical attention.\textsuperscript{26}

The tone of the British Foreign Office paper was overwhelmingly negative, emphasizing the atrocities committed in the various camps. Inmates were depicted as powerless victims, condemned men and women who would gradually perish, subject to the whims of sadistic guards.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, the paper led one Foreign Office functionary, C. Howson, to conclude that: “The presence of these camps in such large numbers indicates […] the

\textsuperscript{21}At nineteen pages, the Radio Free Europe report was longer and in addition to discussing the violence in the camps, it also provided details about, the administration, the structure of the camps and life within them. HU OSA 300-1-2-44311. The report is subdivided in different sections. Refer to the following pages for more detail on the administrative organization of the camps, 2-3, 5-6; on the categories of inmates and procedures for release, 3-5, and 17; on life in the camps, including living quarters, 7-9; food 9-11; cultural life 11-13; espionage and counter-intelligence, 13-15; punishment and disciplinary measures, 15-17.

\textsuperscript{22}FO 371/106258.

\textsuperscript{23}The paper listed seven campsites, Kutsian, Bogdanov Dol, Tutrakan, Breshlen, Bulgarovo, Gigen, Krupnk, and devoted most of the report to the eight and largest site, the Belene camp complex. See handwritten note by P.C.Storey pertaining to the Bulgarian section of the larger paper.

\textsuperscript{24}FO 371/106258.

\textsuperscript{25}Beatings, solitary confinement, withholding of mail, and reduced rations were some of the more common forms of punishment. Additionally, former camp inmates described instances of more sadistic ill treatment. For instance, after being beaten, a prison was thrown naked into a two metres deep, two meters wide pit, “and exposed to the torture of being bitten by myriads of mosquitoes, and in winter runs the risk of freezing to death.” See, FO 371/106258.

\textsuperscript{26}FO 371/106258

\textsuperscript{27}FO 371/106258.
continuing and cynical violation of human rights by Bulgaria.”28 In contrast, the tone of the Radio Free Europe report was hopeful and the document extended its analysis beyond the narrative of violence: “[…] instead of being ‘re-educational schools’ […], the Bulgarian concentration camps were schools for resistance. In these camps, diplomats met peasants, political men met workers, conspirators met priests, scientists met ignorant men, etc. and all of them could exchange their own experiences.” Hence, the report situated the camps in the larger context of opposition to the regime. The inmates, according to this assessment, were not merely victims of an exploitative system who lost their agency once they entered the camp. Rather, they united together and even defied the terrible circumstances that befell them.29

In short, to the British Foreign Office, the Bulgarian camps were solely sites of violence and to Radio Free Europe, they were sites of resistance. Notwithstanding these interpretive differences, the two reports do not contradict each other in their general appraisal. Rather, they both reveal the magnitude of repression in the camps.

Several important questions emerge in examining the British Foreign Office paper and the Radio Free Europe investigations. Who were the authors of these documents and what were their motivations? Who were their sources? And most significantly, how accurate was their depiction and analysis of the Bulgarian camp reality?

Even though the reports themselves were intended for internal circulation neither of them revealed the confidential identity of their sources. Both documents make it clear that their findings were at least partially based on the eyewitness accounts of former inmates, some of whom had fled both the camps and Bulgaria.30 Anonymity was not reserved solely for the

28 FO 371/106258. See handwritten note by C. Howson.
29 HU OSA 300-1-2-44311.
30 Both reports based their findings on interviews with “refugees,” “defectors,” and “immigrants.” See, FO 371/106258. In addition, the RFE/RL field reports relied on the accounts of “Western travelers returning from stays in East European communist countries” and additional informational information “collected through correspondence with anonymous sources from behind the Iron Curtain.” It is important to keep in mind that
sources informing the investigations, as their authors also remain unnamed. What is known, however, is that the institutions that created the reports had ideological agendas that raise questions about the legitimacy of the documents they issued for use as historical evidence.

A secret, anti-communist propaganda unit with the Foreign Office, the Information Research Department (IRD), which operated between 1948 and 1977, prepared the British paper. The other report was produced by the Munich-based research team of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, an American anti-communist broadcast service, for a while funded and managed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Therefore, the investigations were products of agencies that were themselves policy instruments for the West in the competition for ideological hegemony during the Cold War.

The sources and motivations behind these reports raise questions about whether the findings and analyses are merely propaganda marked by Cold War politics and stereotypes. Until twenty-five years ago, it would have been possible only to speculate about the reliability of these sources, reading them against each other and attempting to account for their biases and motivations. However, recently declassified files from Bulgaria’s communist era archives now allow us to compare and reassess the information contained in the British FO paper and the RFE/RL reports. In these declassified Bulgarian files, we learn, for example, that on

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November 8, 1953, four inmates had attempted an unsuccessful escape from Belene, Bulgaria’s largest prison-camp complex. On November 30, 1953, Lieutenant Colonel Vasil Donchev, deputy head of the secret police unit, responsible for the camp, wrote a three-page analytical report, addressed to the head of the unit, which endeavoured to explain the reasons for the attempted escape. “The main reasons are hunger and fear of the severe winter weather conditions,” stated Donchev. In order to support his claims, the camp’s deputy head incorporated excerpts from interrogations conducted with the escapees after they were caught. “What can I do? Before coming to the prison, to Belene, I was able to carry 150 kilos on my back, and now, I am barely able to carry my own weight. I often feel faint, I cannot fulfill the quotas, I do not have any undergarments or outerwear,” explained A.G. Tsankov, one of the four runaways. “Overall, I am in bad shape,” he concluded, “I decided to drown [myself] in the Danube, or run away. I have become indifferent to everything.” The other escapees provided similar statements.

The inclusion of inmate testimony, though rare, was not completely uncharacteristic for such administrative reports. What is unusual here, however, is that Donchev framed the inmates’ claims in a sympathetic manner. At the end of the report, he suggested ways for improving the living conditions in the camp. Increased bread rations and “the appointment of a commission that would judiciously review the inmate files and talk to each one of the prisoners personally,” were some of what turned out to be rather unsuitable suggestions that the camp’s deputy head put forward.

Lieutenant Colonel V. Kusovski, Donchev’s superior and the head of his secret police

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33 Tsentralen Durzhaven Arhiv (hereafter TsDA), f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.196.
34 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.196-199.
35 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.196.
36 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.197.
37 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.199.
unit, was rather outraged with his subordinate’s assessment and proposal. Kusovski authored another report, addressed to the Assistant Minister of the Interior, in which he dismissed Donchev’s analysis and characterized the latter’s appraisal as “superficial.” What angered Kusovski, in particular, was that Donchev put the onus of the escapes not on the inmates themselves but on the institutional management of the camp. In other words, he did not condemn the prisoners for their attempt to flee. In fact, by suggesting that the camp conditions needed to be improved, Donchev implicitly legitimated the escapees’ claims. Kusovski seemed especially outraged because his subordinate appeared to be moved by the testimonies of the inmates and had decided to take them at their word, even lent them a voice in his report. “Comrade Lieutenant Colonel Donchev has shed two rows of tears […] he portrays them [the inmates] as martyrs. […] What he does not say is that these miscreants had been planning their escape for 1 month before they fled.” “It is clear that this is a prison, and not a resort” stated Kusovski and rejected all proposals for improving the bread rations or further investigating the inmates’ living conditions.

Yet while vigorously attacking Donchev’s report, Kusovski did not actually contradict his subordinate’s assessment of living conditions in the camp. He conceded, in fact, that they were far from ideal. He even made critical references to some of the more serious transgressions that Donchev had omitted from his report, such as, “atrocities committed during solitary confinement” and “the creation of conditions that led to torture.” Unlike Donchev, however, Kusovski was not as troubled. “Well yes, it is bad, but that is why it is a prison,” he stated in no uncertain terms.

38 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.199.
39 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.195, 196.
40 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.195.
41 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.197
42 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.195.
Juxtaposing the insider perspective of the Bulgarian secret police reports, authored by Kusovski and Donchev with the outside assessments of the British FO paper and the Radio Free Europe investigations allows us a glimpse into Bulgaria’s forced-labor camps at the time when these sites of violence were still officially operational, at the end of 1953. While there may be some discrepancies among these four accounts, for the most part the Bulgarian reports confirm the harsh reality of the Bulgarian camp system depicted in the investigations produced by the Western intelligence agencies. The severity of the forced-labor regime and the desperation of the people subjected to it become especially apparent in all investigations. The Radio Free Europe report echoed the abuses described in the British Foreign Office paper and in the secret police reports. Most explicitly, by dubbing the country’s largest camp, Belene, “the Bulgarian ‘Buchenwald,’” the RFE report evoked notions of extreme violence associated with the infamous Nazi concentration camp. Although symbolically potent, such comparisons are incorrect, for the Bulgarian and the Nazi forced-labor camp systems differed radically in their intent, scale, and functioning. Though state-directed, the political violence of communist Bulgaria of which the camps constituted an important component, was not genocidal. Furthermore, though demeaning, destructive, and criminal, the forced labor regime of the Bulgarian camp network was neither socially or politically purposeless, nor solely punitive.

The camps’ objectives, according to all four investigations, were to serve the regime’s ambitious industrial plans, to isolate its political opponents, and to “re-educate” inmates

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43 TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.195. See, especially Kusovski ‘s discussion; HU OSA 300-1-2-44311, 7-17.
44 HU OSA 300-1-2-44311. This was not the first time that the RFE/RLE office had issued a report, which drew a parallel between the Bulgarian and the Nazi concentration camps. A year earlier, on April 8, 1953, the broadcaster research unit released an eleven page report on the living and working conditions of the Belene camp complex titled, “Belenе, The Bulgarian Dachau,” which also included a detailed map of the camp sites. See, HU OSA 300-1-2-32640. Despite their provocative titles, neither of these reports, however, engaged in a comparative analysis between the Bulgarian and the Nazi camps.
through labor.\textsuperscript{45} Though the camps were originally intended to serve the regime’s ambitious industrial plans, based on the available archival evidence, it is not possible to argue that the Bulgarian camp system was primarily an institution that functioned to fulfill the goals of economic development. Rather, just like the Soviet Gulag system, the Bulgarian one was driven originally by political imperatives and it continued to be throughout its expansion.\textsuperscript{46} By the time of these reports, there was already a significant gap, however, between the stated aims of the camp system, and the actual functioning of the camps. Donchev’s and Kusovski’s reports indicate that by 1953, the economic enterprise of forced-labor in Bulgaria’s largest camp was inefficient and the “re-education” efforts had been largely scaled down.

\textbf{Periodization}

The Bulgarian camp system went through multiple cycles, underwent numerous changes, and camps did not operate continuously throughout the entire period. The most repressive period lasted from 1945 until 1962, the camp population reached its peak late in the 1940s, and the camp system witnessed its most elevated level of violence in the early 1960s. The camps officially closed down in 1962.\textsuperscript{47} In fact, however, a few smaller concentration camps remained in operation during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Internment in the camp of Nozharevo occurred from 1968 to 1977, and in Belene from 1964 to 1977 and from 1984 to 1986.\textsuperscript{48} The last known internment without a trial or a sentence happened in the summer of 1989.\textsuperscript{49} It is thus more accurate to say that although the overall scale and character of repression drastically diminished during those decades, it did not disappear. Entire families

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\textsuperscript{45} See HU OSA 300-1-2-44311, 2, 17; FO 371/106258; TsDA, f.33, op.6, a.u.3, l.194-199.
\textsuperscript{46} For a compelling study, which argues that the Soviet Gulag was primarily a political institution, see Oleg Khlevniuk, \textit{The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror} (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 328-338.
\textsuperscript{47} See the historiographical summary by Valentina Sharlanova in Luleva and eds., \textit{Prinuditelnat Trud v Bulgaria (1941–1962)}, 55–60.
\textsuperscript{48} R. J. Crampton, Bulgaria, 389.
\textsuperscript{49} AMVR, f.1, op.12, a.u.935.
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still found themselves exiled to the countryside, and political opponents of the regime continued to be prosecuted and imprisoned, many of them languishing in the cells of the notorious Stara Zagora and Pazardzhik prisons.

In 1975, Bulgaria signed the Helsinki Peace Accords, and though they were not binding, many ordinary Bulgarians celebrated that their government’s signature acknowledged, at least on paper, Article 7, which promulgated “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.” Yet in the fall of 1978, the Bulgarian secret police assassinated Bulgaria’s most outspoken dissident, the writer Georgi Markov, as he was crossing the Waterloo Bridge in London. The murder forever silenced an unrelenting critic of communist Bulgaria’s sustained human rights abuses, whose powerful voice had regularly (and clandestinely in the Soviet satellites) been transmitted on the BBC and on Radio Free Europe.

A decade later (1987–88), with Mikhail Gorbachev serving as the general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, the USSR and the rest of Eastern Europe embraced policies aimed at curbing rigid authoritarian practices. Though Bulgarian leaders allowed for some political and economic liberalization, they mostly turned their backs on reform promises with respect to human rights. In the winter of 1984, Zhivkov’s government unleashed the fourth and most violent instalment of a prolonged forced-assimilation drive against Bulgaria’s Turkish and other Muslim minorities (Pomaks), which made up around 10 percent of the

50 For the full text of the Helsinki Accords, see, http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/osce/basics/finact75.htm, last accessed on December 20, 2013.
51 Georgi Markov was a prominent writer who defected from Bulgaria in 1969. See Markov, The Truth That Killed.
52 For a brief discussion of the economic and political liberalization in late communist Bulgaria, see Martin K. Dimitrov, ed., Why Communism Did Not Collapse, 288–89. On Zhivkov’s attempts to limit the impact of perestroika and glasnost policies in Bulgaria, see Emil Giatzidis, An Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 38, 44–46, 75–77.
population. With the extreme duress of assimilationist pressure, which included the military occupation of ethnically mixed regions, the euphemistically termed Revival Process (Vuzroditelen Protse) forced these minority groups to change their Turkish names to Bulgarian ones. In 1985, Bulgaria reopened its main concentration camp, Belene, to confine Turkish leaders who resisted forced assimilation. In the summer of 1989, Zhivkov’s regime had fallen into isolation, and recognizing the failure of the campaign, it allowed—and even urged—emigration to Turkey: around three hundred thousand ethnic Turks left Bulgaria for Turkey in 1989.

It appears paradoxical and particularly unsettling that this late socialist period coincided with significantly improved living standards for the average Bulgarian citizen, as well as with high literacy rates. The historian Mikhail Gruev asserts that what set Bulgaria’s final communist decades apart from the rest of Eastern Europe was the peculiar “amalgamation between communism and nationalism.” The continuous presence of the camp system coupled with the forced-assimilation campaign indicate that in Bulgaria, socialist normalization did not go hand in hand with the complete “fading out” of repressive measures.

It is possible to identify six separate stages in the history of the Bulgarian

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The communist camp system from 1945 until the summer of 1989. The first period, which saw the system’s building and legal establishment, went from 1945 to 1949. During this first phase, authorities attempted to turn the camp sites into economically viable institutions, but ultimately, these efforts failed. At the time, various camps for forced labor, internment, and labor mobilization were scattered across the country. The regime at these sites varied according to the type of camp. For instance, the labor quotas and overall camp conditions proved particularly harsh for those interned at the Pernik forced-labor camp complex, where inmates worked in mining, in comparison to the much lighter regime and work quotas in Chomakovtsi, where internees labored on the Iskar river canals. Recently unearthed evidence reveals the existence of a secret camp, referred to simply as “C,” located just outside the town of Pazardzhik, which operated between 1947 and 1950. Camp “C” was supposedly neither a forced-labor nor an internment camp, and it is only one of two camps to be managed directly by the counterintelligence directorate of the secret police. More than 47 percent of those interned there died. While not much is known about this site, the available information suggests that its existence and strikingly high death rate represent an aberration not only for the first phase of the Bulgarian camp system but for its entire duration.

The system’s second period, which runs parallel to the forced-collectivization campaign of the Bulgarian countryside, lasted from 1949 to 1953, and during this stage, all camp sites were consolidated into one: the Belene camp, located in northern Bulgaria on an island archipelago in the Danube River. Following Stalin’s death in 1953 and the processes of

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56 Tzvetan Todrov also identified six stages, but his periodization slightly differs from mine. See Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 39–40. Borislav Skochev, taking into account the institutional history and evolution of the camp system, has identified four stages. See Skochev, “Ot Purviat do Posledniat Den,” Dialog, November, 17, 2012. 57 See the section titled “The Communist Camp System: Beginnings” in this chapter for a brief historical summary of the first phase of the Bulgarian camp system. 58 AMVR, f.10, op.1, a.u.776. In particular, see the statement of fund “TVO” for the preceding year (1948). 59 AMVR, f.10, op. B (Б), a.u.8. 60 AMVR, f.10, op. B (Б), a.u.8. 61 AMVR, f.10, op. B (Б), a.u.8.
de-Stalinization, most camp inmates in communist Bulgaria were granted amnesty and released from the camps. Between 1953 and 1956, no further internments occurred. After the Hungarian revolution was crushed in 1956, Belene reopened and continued to operate until 1959, marking the camp system’s third phase.

Phase 4 began in 1959, when Belene’s administrative staff was transferred to a site located in central Bulgaria close to a stone quarry. The site was then split into two camps, known as Lovech and, from the summer 1961 onward, the female section called Skravena. Lovech and Skravena operated until 1962. After another hiatus of no camp interments between 1962 and 1963, the fifth phase commenced in 1964 and ran to 1984, while a sixth period went from 1985 to 1989. Both final phases remain relatively unknown to researchers. During this time the camps’ legal status changed, and internment in Belene in 1964, for instance, was referred to as “forced establishment in new residence.” The euphemism again shrouds the fact that individuals were sent to Belene without a trial or sentence and could not leave the island. In the 1970s, women were interned in Nozharevo, and testimony indicates high violence rates and brutal work quotas. The sixth phase comprised the forced-assimilation campaign and the internment of ethnic Turks and Pomaks.

The number of people who passed through the Bulgarian camp system has never been established. Reliable data remains elusive, and numbers are generally contested. Estimates have ranged from a total of twenty-three to five hundred thousand camp prisoners.

66 The estimates in the range of twenty-three thousand are based on census figures published by the Special Inquiry Commission (SIC), created in 1990 and tasked with investigating the abuses in the camps near Lovech, Skravena, and others. Please see chapter 3 in this study for the history and legacy of the SIC. For other estimates on the number of inmates in the Bulgarian camps during the communist era, see Boncheva, Sugarev, and Putov, Svideteli, 1–23; Penka Stoyanova and Emil Iliev Politicheski Opasni Litsa, 14, 21, 25, 33; Momchil Methodiev, “Bulgaria,” 152–76. Sharlanov and Ganev, “Crimes Committed by the Communist Regime in Bulgaria”;
The British Foreign Office and Radio Free Europe estimated the number of inmates in the 1950s at around fifty thousand. In 1951, the Chancery of the British Legation in Sofia issued a confidential report stating that the number of people in camps in Bulgaria was fifty-five thousand or higher. An accurate reconstruction of the numbers is hampered by actions such as those of General Atanas Semerdzhiev, who in 1990, as minister of the interior, instructed his staff to destroy 150,000 ministry files, mostly secret police documents.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the exact number of people who died in the Bulgarian camps will never be known. What can be said conclusively, however, is that between 1944 and 1989, around eighty individual camp sites existed, comprising forty camp complexes, including different types of camps: forced-labor camps, temporary camp settlements, internment camps, and labor-mobilization camps. During these forty-five years, my research indicates that around forty thousand individuals passed through these sites. More than three-quarters of them, around thirty-six thousand, were interned during the most active camp phase from 1944 to 1962.

Numbers

The following numbers and table represent the individual and collective efforts of three researchers. Borislav Skochev, Marian Gyaurksi, and I all carried out independent archival research in Bulgaria, and all three agree that between 1944 and 1989, around eighty individual camp sites existed, comprising forty camp complexes, including different types of camps: forced-labor camps, temporary camp settlements, internment camps, and labor-mobilization camps. During these forty-five years, my research indicates that around forty thousand individuals passed through these sites. More than three-quarters of them, around thirty-six thousand, were interned during the most active camp phase from 1944 to 1962.

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67 FO 371/9507. Confidential report by the Chancery, British Legation Sofia to the Southern Department, Foreign Office dated on the 9th of June, 1951. The report also states that “we did not get the impression that the Yugoslavs knew much more about this question than you do.”

68 See chapter 3, “To Exit from the Closed Circle: 1989 and the Memory of Violence,” in this study.
research and then we collaborated to establish the figures.\(^69\)

Table 1: Number of People in Camps, 1944–1962
This table establishes the minimum number of people who were in camps during these years. Because of the state of the evidence available in the purged archives, it is impossible to determine a definitive total number at this time. These calculations, however, yield the first archivally based totals of the numbers of those interned in the camps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Secret Police</th>
<th>The People’s Militia</th>
<th>Sentenced Prisoners in the Belene and Nozharevo Camps</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>3,860</td>
<td>640</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
<td>980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>3,550</td>
<td>536</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>2,357</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>3,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>2,150</td>
<td>2731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>2691</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Labor Mobilization 1947-1949
Camp “C” [secret camp] 1947-1950
Zeleni Dol/Pavel Bania [special camps] 1944-1945
Camps in 1944 [before the decree officially creating the camps]
Belen 1956–1959 574 3,203 3,777
Belen 1959–1962 1,500

Grand Total Interned, 1944–1962 36,510

Camp Inmates and the Governing Structures at the Ministry of the Interior

The question of who was sent to the camps is difficult to answer. As Todorov succinctly, and aptly, put it: “enemies.”\(^70\) The Ministry of the Interior, responsible for the

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\(^69\) The primary archival sources for the figures are as follows: AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.12, l.13–15; AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.225; AMVR, f.17, op.1, a.u.43, l.2; AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.1653; AMVR, f.12, op.1, a.u.10; AMVR, f.12, op.1, a.u.391; AMVR, f.12, op.1, a.u.1568.

\(^70\) Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 18.
administration of and internment in the camps employed various categories to identify “undesirable elements” in the population who were to be deported to camps.\textsuperscript{71} This ministry had multiple offices, departments, and agencies to identify these alleged undesirables. In the simplest terms, two main categories existed: political and criminal. From the perspective of the camp administration and as shown in the table above, political inmates were interned through the Office the Secret Police (DS, \textit{Durzhavna Sigurnost}) and criminal inmates were interned through the office of the People’s Militia (DNM, \textit{Durzhavna Narodna Militsia}). The so-called criminal offenses that could land one in a camp could be of an actual criminal nature, but the category also comprised economic, administrative, and moral transgressions.

In 1945, persons considered a “political threat to national order and state security” were deemed “politically dangerous.”\textsuperscript{72} The category was open to interpretation and included various groups of people seen as political enemies. There were the so-called “former people,” individuals who had belonged to the ruling elite of yore: merchants, industrialists, lawyers, military personnel, policemen. There were also those considered to be “against the Fatherland Front,” in other words, people who opposed the new power coalition but who went without any specific political or social affiliation.\textsuperscript{73} This last group, the most difficult to define, accounted for the largest number of people interned in the camps during the regime’s early years. By 1949, following the show trials and executions of two popular Bulgarian politicians, Nikola Petkov in 1947 and Traicho Kostov in 1949, all those in the opposition were perceived as political enemies: members of the Bulgarian Agrarian Union, social democrats, anarchists, communists who supported Kostov, armed guerrilla fighters of the resistance movement, leaders and members of religious organizations, individuals caught in their attempts to flee the

\textsuperscript{71} AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.2174, 6–10.
\textsuperscript{72} AMVR, f.1, op. 1, a.u.12.
\textsuperscript{73} AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.2174, 6–10. TsDA, f.1-B, op.6, a.u.4749
country, peasants resisting forced collectivization, artists, musicians, and intellectuals. Once again, in terms of the camp population, the largest group consisted of those who did not belong to any actual political group, peasants among them. In other words, they were apolitical politicals: their acts of defiance, not political in nature or origin, became such through the interpretation of the secret police.

Two important shifts took place in 1958. The first was the introduction of the category of the “hooligan” among criminal offenders.\(^\text{74}\) The Bulgarian communist government embarked on a campaign, led by the Ministry of the Interior, to restrain hooliganism, which in the span of two months led to mass arrests and the internment of more than eighteen hundred individuals to one camp.\(^\text{75}\) The campaign against so-called hooliganism constituted a means for criminalizing the behavior of men and women seen as potential threats to the regime. Many of the alleged hooligans were young people who enjoyed listening to Western music and wore tight pants or short skirts. People caught telling political jokes found themselves especially targeted, and by 1960, they too were deported to camps. After 1958, in many ways the distinction between criminal and political inmates blurred significantly. Statistics reproduced in table 2 indicate as much: prior to 1956, the majority of people were interned in camps through the Office of the Secret Police. After 1956, however, and especially from the winter of 1958 forward, the figures were reversed and the People’s Militia was responsible for the internment for most of the camp population. The second shift, which also occurred in 1958, was the naming, and internment in a camp, of an ethnic enemy. Bulgaria’s Turkish, Roma, and Pomak minorities all became targets of several repressive waves from the late 1950s forward, but the most violent one swept the country in the 1980s.

\(^\text{74}\) TsDA, f.1B, op.6, a.u.3518; AMVR, f.12, op.1, a.u.1541, 1533, 1535, and 1540.
Importantly, all the above categories remained fluid and fluctuated according to the camp system’s scale at any given time. Over the years, the camp population became mixed, including communists who had fallen out of party favor, former members of the bourgeoisie, peasants refusing to collaborate with labor-cooperative farms, youths who listened to rock ’n’ roll, musicians who played jazz, clever political jokesters who dared mock communist leaders, hardened criminals, priests, nuns, and those of various political persuasions, such as anarchists and agrarians. This list is not exhaustive, but it indicates the difficulty of painting a neat picture of the repressive system’s victims. Here, I follow the cue of David Shearer’s analysis of policing and social order in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, in which he argues that repression was directed “not only against individuals, but, increasingly, against whole categories of the population that officials believed to be harmful or alien.”

Perhaps what is most important to note is that as the bureaucracy of state repression evolved, so did the attempt to collapse the boundaries between political opponents of the regime and imagined enemies. By the end of Bulgaria’s most active internment phase, in the early 1960s, “political” and “criminal” had become interchangeable categories, and on paper one cannot distinguish the hardened criminals from the political dissidents or from the youths fascinated by Western culture. A cursory look at the Ministry of the Interior’s complex governing structures reveals a similar tendency: an overlap between the functions of the secret police and those of the People’s Militia. Both were responsible for the selection of individuals for interment in camps, while the militia also enforced the law for the population at large. The secret police was in charge of what was known as surveillance and intelligence operations (agenturno-operativno) within the camp network: the recruitment of agents, the creation of spy grids, and the collection of information from political inmates. The main camps themselves,

76 David Shearer, Policing Stalin’s Communism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924–1952 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).
called TVOs (Trudovo Vuzpitatelno Obshtezhitia/ Labor Correctional Facilities), were not administered by the secret police but by different, central and district units within the ministry. From 1946 until 1953, the administrative and economic management of the camps lay in the hands of the Office of Prisons and Camps (Zatvori i TVO), which aimed at running the camps as efficient economic enterprises. From 1956 until 1977, a separate central department called Internment and Resettlement (Vudvoriavane i Izselvane) was in charge of the camps. However, the latter was solely responsible for organizing and managing internment in camps. Administratively, the district offices of the Ministry of the Interior ran the camps. During this later period, at both the central and the district level, there was little mention of any economic ambitions regarding the camps. The secret police, however, administered two camps during the duration of the regime. Secret police authorities were directly in charge of camp “C” between 1947 and 1950, and indirectly they governed the Lovech camp between 1959 and 1962, with disastrous outcomes in both cases. The second directorate of the secret police, which was in charge of counter-intelligence operations, managed Camp “C” between 1947 and 1950. Between 1959 and 1962, the Lovech camp was under the auspices of the Department of Internment and Resettlement and the secret police was in charge of the regime in the camp. Hence, when the secret police was given direct administrative control of the camps, the ensuing destruction was severe. For camp “C” and Lovech were not only the most violent sites of the Bulgarian camp system but also had the highest death rates: 47% and 12% respectively.

Antecedents and Origins

Concentration camps had existed in Bulgaria during the period preceding the communist takeover. The Third Bulgarian Kingdom, a constitutional and authoritarian monarchy under the reign of King Boris III (1918–43), at various times sent political opponents of the regime—namely, communists—to the camps of Enikyoi, Gonda Voda,
Krusto Pole, and others.\textsuperscript{77} The most active time of incarceration occurred between 1941 and 1944, while Bulgaria was allied with Nazi Germany. Estimates suggest that between 1941 and 1943, two thousand individuals were interned in these camps, and this number also included around 150 women.\textsuperscript{78} During the Second World War, Bulgaria did not deport to the Nazi death camps Jews who held Bulgarian citizenship, but anti-Jewish legislation meant that Jewish men were sent to forced-labor camps on Bulgarian territory and that the urban Jewish population was exiled to the provinces.\textsuperscript{79} Following the establishment of the Fatherland Front on September 9, 1944, the government, in accordance with the Allied Control Commission’s agreement instructions, established a camp in the village of Zeleni Dol for the internment of citizens of Nazi Germany and its satellite countries.

Given the dearth of research on the repressive apparatuses in Bulgaria, it is difficult to ascertain at this stage if, or what kind of, a link existed between the communist system of concentration camps and the forced-labor practices preceding it. A recent study argues that the “tradition” of forced labor can be traced back to June 1920, when the government of the Agrarian Prime Minister, Aleksandur Stamboliiski, introduced national labor service (\textit{trudova provinost}), which effectively obliged all citizens to work on various labor sites, mainly on the construction of railways and roads.\textsuperscript{80} Nonetheless it seems imprudent to consider all types of camp institutions in twentieth-century Bulgaria on a continuum of a local \textit{univers}

\textsuperscript{77} Stoyanova and Iliev, \textit{Politicheski Opasni Litsa}, 9–11. Scholarly research, on the topic of these pre-communist camps is rather sparse.
\textsuperscript{78} Luleva, Troeva, and Petrov, \textit{Prinuditelniat Trud v Bulgaria}, 17.
\textsuperscript{79} Bulgaria’s Jewish population avoided deportation and by the end of the war remained at about fifty thousand, approximately the same as before the war. In 1943 Bulgaria deported non-Bulgarian Jews from the acquired territories in Greece and Yugoslavia to Nazi-occupied Poland and they were deported to the Nazi extermination camps. See Tzvetan Todorov, \textit{The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria’s Jews Survived the Holocaust} (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2001); Michael Bar-Zohar, \textit{Beyond Hitler’s Grasp: The Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria’s Jews} (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1998); Frederick B. Chary, \textit{The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940–1944} (Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972). An older survey on Bulgaria and World War II, Marshal Lee Miller’s, \textit{Bulgaria during the Second World War} (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), provides some (sparse) insight into the plight of the Jewish inmates. See Miller, \textit{Bulgaria}, 106.
\textsuperscript{80} Luleva, Troeva, and Petrov, \textit{Prinuditelniat Trud v Bulgaria}, 10.
This approach does not take into account the qualitatively different historical stages or the distinct political regimes, institutional structures, and incarceration procedures that defined forced-labor practices through the years.

Despite the importance of establishing the connections between the communist versions of forced labor and internment and those preceding them, the communist concentration camps clearly present us with a different category of ideological and structural organization and thus merit a separate study. Two fundamental characteristics set apart the communist camp system from its precursors. First, politically, the communist concentration camps were premised on an ideological intent, one set on transforming individuals through labor, which in fact translated into overall repression, isolation, and intimidation. The camps of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom also meant to isolate and intimidate its political opponents—communists, for instance—but there was no systematized approach within a transformative discourse and ideology such as Marxism-Leninism. Second, the communist camp system’s scope—its duration, structure, and bureaucracy, which reached immense proportions—as well as the sheer number of victims and the degree of violence perpetrated on them are all unprecedented in Bulgaria’s history.

The Communist Camp System: Beginnings

The origins of the Bulgarian camp system have to be considered against the backdrop of the Soviet gulag. There was hardly any resistance to the arrival of the Red Army on Bulgarian soil in September of 1944, which ensured a rapid and ubiquitous administration of Soviet-style governance. The goal was to transform Bulgaria into a communist society based

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82 AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.114, 37, 38, 39. Statistics on one Bulgarian region indicate that between 1941 and 1944, there were 614 people interned in concentration camps. Also, estimates for the period 1941–43, indicate that 2,000 people altogether were interned in camps. See, Luleva, Troeva, and Petrov, *Prinuditelniat Trud v Bulgaria*, 17.
on the Soviet model, or, as one scholar puts it, the country was to become a “replica state.”

The Soviet-style system, complete with Soviet advisors, extended to every facet of Bulgarian society and permeated the economic, political, and cultural life of the country. Developing Bulgaria according to the Soviet model also meant the import of state-sanctioned political and social repression. A wave of forced collectivization and industrialization, show trials, mass executions, purges, and the increasing role of the secret police in the social governance of the country all marked Bulgaria’s Stalinization process. Concentration camps constituted an integral part of the imported repressive mechanism, so it is plausible to assume that initially the Bulgarian forced-labor camps were modeled after the Soviet gulag, though they were not necessarily guided by Soviet authorities.

Communist rule was gradually imposed in Bulgaria from September 1944 until the end of 1947. In the weeks and months following the Fatherland Front’s takeover on September 9, 1944, unprecedented violence was unleashed against various parts of the population. What began as an act of revenge—the physical liquidation of select opponents in the administration, police, and army—eventually turned into bloodshed that spread well beyond the circle of immediate political adversaries. Even though Stalin had urged caution, Bulgaria’s communists embarked on a vicious process of elimination.

The most modest estimates put the number of executions during the first weeks following the September coup between three thousand and four thousand people. Others suggest, however, that the numbers are much higher, somewhere between twenty-five

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85 Crampton, *Bulgaria*, 187. Also see Methodiev, “Bulgaria.”
86 TsDA, f.1, op.5, a.u.3.
89 Dimitrov, *Stalin’s Cold War*, 71.
thousand and thirty thousand “killed or disappeared” in those first few weeks. ⁹⁰ Most scholars agree, however, that more than twenty thousand people were executed “in extrajudicial proceedings, in one of the most extensive purges per capita in any country in the region,” as the historian Momchil Methodiev has stated.⁹¹

During this tumultuous period of radical violence the camp network was forged and established. With time, the punitive apparatus would even engulf the unfortunate “dandies and hussies” targeted in P. G.’s letter from 1944. Scores of young people, nicknamed zozi (women, or “hussies”) and suingi (men, or “dandies”), were sent to the camps in 1949 and again between 1959 and 1962. In his foreword to Todorov’s volume, which recounts the painful details of survivors of the Lovech camp, the historian Istvan Deak writes that theirs were some of the most “heartrending chronicles” he had ever read.⁹² Deak appears especially moved by the stories of the “apolitical youngsters who committed no greater crime than that of listening to Western ‘imperialist’ pop music, or dancing the twist, or wearing tight trousers.”⁹³ And indeed it seems puzzling how and why the camp network, within the relatively short time of ten years, would descend into such violence.

It took a little more than three years before the Communist Party became the sole governing force in the country: on December 6, 1947, a new constitution established a “people’s democracy,” and Bulgaria was proclaimed a republic. Most scholars consider 1947 the beginning of Stalinization in Bulgaria, as the country officially became part of the Soviet sphere of influence at that time. Yet it is possible to argue that the Stalinist trajectory was already laid out in September 1944, as soon as the Communist Party took control of the Office

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⁹² See the foreword by Istvan Deak in Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, viii–x.
⁹³ Deak, foreword.
of the Secret Police.

The first camps opened in late 1944 and in January 1945, decrees published in the Bulgarian Communist newspaper rendered the camps’ existence official.\textsuperscript{94} On a semantic level, the formal designation of the Bulgarian sites, Labor Correctional Facility (\textit{TVO}) mimicked the appellation of the camps in the Soviet gulag.\textsuperscript{95} The qualifying adjectives clearly indicate that the camps were intended to re-educate and transform individuals through labor. In hindsight, however, these formal names seem unmistakably euphemistic, aimed at disguising and neutralizing the camps’ true nature. In both the Bulgarian and the much-better studied Soviet cases, evidence suggests extreme brutality as the everyday reality in most cases. Many inmates lost their lives due to backbreaking physical labor, shootings, beatings, and other forms of torture, malnutrition, disease, and cold. At the same time, it is important to remember that the general purpose of the camp system, in both the Soviet and the Bulgarian context, was not to kill those interned in the camps. Although death was a common outcome of internment, these were not death camps in the sense of some of the Nazi camps, which were killing centers.\textsuperscript{96} Nothing in the files found in the archive of the former secret police at the Bulgarian Ministry of Interior, the institution responsible for administering the concentration camps, suggests that the Bulgarian communist authorities were solely interested in producing corpses at the sites of cruelty they had created. Oral history testimonies from both victims and perpetrators of the Bulgarian camp system support this conclusion. Certainly, this does not minimize the torturous and inhumane conditions endured by the many who passed through the

\textsuperscript{94} AMVR, f.1, op. 1, a.u.12.

\textsuperscript{95} The Soviet gulag corrective camps were called \textit{Izpravitel’no-trudovye lagera}.

\textsuperscript{96} I am specifically referring to the Nazi killing centers designed to enable genocide. Namely, Chelmno (1941-43; 1944-45), Belzec, Sobibor (1942-43), Treblinka (1942-43), and Birkenau at the Auschwitz camp complex (1942-44). For more information, see Omer Bartov, ed., \textit{Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, Aftermath} (London: Routledge, 2000).
camps. In the words of a survivor of the Soviet gulag, people died, “but not in the ovens.”

This difference is essential, and its significance becomes tangible as soon as we realize that it derives from the fundamental distinction between the ideologies behind the communist gulags and the Nazi death camps. This distinction helps us identify a major institutional characteristic: the Bulgarian camp system was not designed to *annihilate* but to confine, isolate, terrorize, and break individual and collective will, to intimidate, and to instil obedience to the communist regime, all the while giving a jolt to local economies. For the German National Socialist camp system, Wolfgang Sofsky, for instance, convincingly argues that meaningful analyses of the camp as a “locus of terror” must distinguish between concentration camps and extermination camps. 98 This holds true even if the differing formal designations of forced-labor camps—the Nazi *Arbeitslager* (1933–36), the Soviet *Izpravitel’no–trudovye lagera* (1930–53), and the Bulgarian *Trudovo Vuzpitatelno Obshtezhitie* (1944–62) or *Trudova Grupa* (1961–62)—are “discursive manoeuvring attempts” aimed to conceal the crimes committed there. 99 Notwithstanding the contested nature of “transformation” and how with the years it became an epithet of brutality, it is worth noting that in the Bulgarian case, memoranda addressed to the minister of the interior in 1948 also suggest that some bureaucrats within the state apparatus genuinely sought to find meaning in the transformative polices of the regime and opposed the brutality of the camps. 100 Here is an excerpt of one letter to the minister:

> With the decrees that sanctioned the creation of the TVOs, the government of the Fatherland Front assigned us with the task of creating proper daily, cultural,

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100 AMVR f.1, op.1, a.u.98, l. 91–93.
and labor conditions to transform the places [where we send citizens affected by
the abovementioned decrees] from concentration camps [like those created by
the fascist governments] into labor-correctional communities.  

The author of the memorandum emphasizes the need to “pour true substance” into the concept
of the TVO and criticizes practices current in the camp sites. He reserves his most serious
criticism for the “lack of sufficient nutrition,” which he believes would be “possible to provide
under the current budget.” The document reveals that as early as 1948 a gap existed between
the conception of the TVO and its reality. It informs us of the actual conditions in various
camps, information that confirms the accounts of many former inmates who speak at length
about meager food rations and hunger.

The documents also reveal a commitment of some within the administrative ranks of the
secret police to actually run the camps according to their ideological intention: as
transformative institutions. A detailed set of regulations concerning internal order clearly
stated that the TVO’s main goal was to “isolate individuals from society and re-educate them
through labor.” Nonetheless, there were also voices within the state apparatus that called for
the physical annihilation of camp internees. In the words of a high-ranking officer with the
secret police at the Ministry of the Interior in 1948: “. . . the enemy interned in the TVO
should feel that he/she is in a TVO [camp] of the DS [secret police]—i.e., to be exposed,
imimated, broken, and even destroyed.”

In this sense, the tension between the system’s intended goals and their harmful
outcomes must remain a significant factor in understanding the violence that marked Bulgaria’s early communist years. A highly disorganized state apparatus, employing both administrative and judicial methods, was put in charge of reorganizing an entire society. It is difficult to say, however, whether the violence of the Bulgarian concentration camp system was predetermined from the start. As the letters cited above demonstrate, in 1948, individuals within the Ministry of the Interior advocated two distinct paths for the camps. One was correctional, the other punitive and violent: camp inmates were either to be “transformed” or “destroyed.” By 1962, authorities had abandoned the transformative vision, but notwithstanding the high death rates in some camps, the calls for annihilation had also mostly been kept in check. Destruction, however, did take place.

\[107\] Lynne Viola makes this point on the discrepancy between “policy and actuality” in the Soviet case through her study of Stalinist planning in the special resettlement villages in the early 1930s. “The disjunctures between planning and reality which we see in the Soviet case, therefore, should be viewed less as an aberration than an essential feature of 20th-century social engineering, imposed from outside on subject populations, in a void of local knowledge, and within the context of an illiberal polity. In a sense, this phenomenon was a signal feature of Stalinism and one, moreover, that continually rebounded in excesses, violence, and terror.” In this vein, the 1940s offshoot of Soviet Stalinism in communist Bulgaria supports Viola’s conclusions. See Lynne Viola, “The Aesthetic of Stalinist Planning and the World of the Special Villages,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4,1 (2003): 101–28.
CHAPTER 2:

SURVIVING BULGARIA’S CULTURE OF SILENCE

This chapter surveys the ways in which the memories of camp survivors were articulated in the post-communist Bulgarian public space. In the first half, I focus the discussion on the role of the press and the media, highlighting the tendency of filmmakers and journalists to sensationalize the stories of repression. In the second half, I return to the memoirs of survivors and I present four accounts, based on oral history interviews I conducted, of individuals who survived the regime’s penal institutions. Thus, the chapter spans the period from 1989 until 2011, and I contrast the initial publicity surrounding the memory of violence with the way the memory exists in the present day. By doing so, I trace the formation of Bulgaria’s culture of silence with respect to the memory of the camp past and the lived experiences of survivors of political violence. I contend that the absence of a meaningful state effort to address the historical legacy of violence has significantly contributed to the marginalization and ouster of survivors’ memories from Bulgarian public, state, and academic discourses.

In the summer of 2006, I made my way across northeastern Bulgaria to arrive, eventually, in the city of Ruse. Situated on the right bank of the Danube River, Ruse is renowned for its neo-baroque architectural landmarks and lush nature parks, both once threatened by pollution from a factory in neighboring Romania. Plagued by a prolonged economic decline, Ruse continues to attract travelers interested in its historical heritage.
Strolling through the main square of Bulgaria’s “Little Vienna” alongside a handful of enthusiastic but bemused German cruise-boat tourists, I gradually drifted toward the outskirts of the city. Soon I stood in the midst of a panel-block neighborhood of gray, crumbling buildings. These concrete structures, built throughout Soviet and Eastern Europe during socialism’s heyday, continue to house the majority of Bulgarians, and they are ubiquitous reminders of the country’s communist past.¹ Though it was a far cry from Ruse’s neo-baroque sites, my visit to the panel quarter was still of a historical nature. I was meeting Krum Horozov, a former political prisoner who had spent eleven years in Bulgarian camps and prisons during the 1950s and early 1960s.² After the fall of the communist regime, Horozov had written books about his experience in the Bulgarian penal system, and he had published an album with impressive sketches and drawings of the notorious prison-camp island Belene.³ None of his publications, however, was available for purchase in Bulgarian bookstores.⁴ In fact, Horozov’s industrious efforts to preserve the memory of political violence and to reaffirm his story of survival had remained confined to self-publishing. His detailed and informative narrative would not, in fact, have made it into these pages had it not been for a chance meeting a few days before my trip to Ruse. At the end of our interview, as he stood at his front door to

² Krum Horozov was given a twenty-year sentence in 1951, of which he served twelve years in the Pleven, Belene, Stara Zagora, and Samovodene prisons.
³ Krum Horozov, Ozarenieto (Sofia: Scorpiion, 1999); for a self-published translation in English, see Krum Horozov, The Brainwave (undated). In 1976, inspired by a visit to the memorial site of the Buchenwald Nazi concentration camp in Germany, Horozov decided to recreate through sketches and drawings the Belene camp. From memory and with the help of fellow prisoners and inmates, Horozov completed a forty-four-page booklet titled Zatvorut-Belene, which he and several other former inmates self-published in the mid-1990s.
⁴ In 2006, Horozov’s memoirs were not available for purchase anywhere in Bulgaria, be it in university, chain, or secondhand bookstores. Shortly after my first meeting with him in 2006, I purchased several copies of his memoir and of his album booklet and distributed them to journalists and scholars in Sofia. While select writers, journalists, and scholars such as Hristo Hristov, Ivaylo Znepolski, Ana Luleva, and Ilijia Trojanow, as well as the politician Lachezar Toshev, have provided a platform for Horozov’s texts and drawings, his work is yet to be meaningfully incorporated into the scholarly, educational, and state narratives about the communist camp past.
see me off, visibly moved by our conversation, he made me promise that I would continue my research: “Our voices will not suffice, there need to be others,” he pleaded.⁵

Obvious as Horozov’s statement might be, its urgency has motivated my work. It gave rise to a series of questions about the continuity of historical silence in Bulgarian culture and in the country’s politics of memory. Whose voices was I supposed to hear and in what context was I supposed to interpret them? These questions seemed innocent enough at first, but they turned out to be rather complicated. In the early 1990s, the discussion of human rights abuses during the communist period had stood front and center in Bulgarian public and judicial discourses, but now it was largely absent, at best relegated to purely academic scrutiny. Important questions about the nature of repression and the fate of its victims were raised, but never answered. This silence has sprung in part from the contested nature of communist memory: the initial outright condemnation of the system as oppressive and totalitarian in the early 1990s has given way more recently to a tide of nostalgia for a time irretrievably discarded in the dustbin of Cold War history, it seems.⁶

The voices and experiences of those who endured and survived the repressive apparatus of communist Bulgaria do not easily fit into either of the two primary categories in today’s ideological contest. The approach that focuses overwhelmingly on the past’s oppressive nature tends to use victims’ stories as tropes that but reaffirm the inherent injustices of left-wing ideology. On the other hand, examinations that delve into the complexity of communist nostalgia frequently, and inexplicably, dismiss the experiences of those oppressed by the regime. The survivors of repression thus become victims of suppression, and their muted voices get lost in a public sphere largely unwilling and unprepared to listen to them. In January

⁵ Krum Horozov, interview with the author, Ruse, May 23, 2006.
1991, in the inaugural publication of Bulgaria’s first dissident and civil rights organization, Ilia Minev wrote: “The greatest threat to humanity is denial, denial of everything and everyone.” Minev was one of the country’s longest-serving camp and prison inmates, who had spent twenty-eight years in the penal system, five of them in solitary confinement. Yet in the case of Bulgaria’s history of communist violence, denial has proven sadly effective, excluding survivors’ voices from the official memory of the past. The particular culture of silence that has resulted permeates state, public, and educational discourses. Although camp and prison survivors continue talking—their voices exist in print, in audio, and on film—they are rarely heard. This Bulgarian culture of silence thus constitutes the necessary frame through which we must view and can begin to understand the repressive past and the narratives of its victims.

There have certainly been challenges to Bulgaria’s taciturn approach to the memory of repression. The work of individual journalists, scholars, and filmmakers, as well as of NGOs and private research institutes, constitutes an important breach of the overall silence and of the lack of organized political will to address the communist past. But these individualized efforts have not translated into a successful public engagement with questions surrounding the communist legacy.

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7 Ilia Minev, “Zhiv ili Murtuv,” Svobodno Slovo, January 1, 1991. Ilia Minev is one of the founders of Bulgaria’s first dissident civil and human rights organization, Nezavisimoto Druzhesvo za Zashtitata Pravata na Choveka (Independent Society for Human Rights), founded in January 1988. Considered one of the country’s leading dissidents and most prominent human rights defenders, he was posthumously awarded Bulgaria’s highest honor, the Order of Stara Planina, by then president Petar Stoyanov in 2000. Between 1941 and 1944, Minev was a member and in charge of one of the branches of Suyzut na Bulgarskite Legioneri (Union of Bulgarian National Legions), an extreme right-wing political organization known for its open rejection of liberal values and its affinity for national socialist ideas, whose history remains largely untold. Minev's participation in this radical organization has led some to question the legitimacy of his human rights activism in the late communist years. Nonetheless, Minev’s considerable experience as a victim of the communist repressive apparatus and his efforts to speak out against human rights abuses (especially the mistreatment of Bulgaria’s Turkish and Muslim minority) cannot be disregarded on account of his membership, however objectionable, in the Union of National Legions. Minev’s murky pre-communist track record coupled with his victimization by the communist regime and his dissident activities represent a compelling case study on the complexity of political participation and of contested historical memory in modern Bulgarian history. See Ivan Gadzhev, Neprimirinat: Ilia Minev—ot Purvo Litze i Drugi za Nego (Sofia: Gutenberg, 2003); Dimitrina Petrova, “Bulgaria,” in Dissent and Opposition in Communist Eastern Europe: Origins of Civil Society and Democratic Transition, ed. Detlef Pollack and Jan Wielgohs (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 161–85.
The absence of a sustained, institutionalized state effort in post-communist Bulgaria to address the memory of violence is the most eloquent, the most ominous, example of the country’s culture of silence. In none of its political incarnations since 1989 has the Republic of Bulgaria offered an official apology to camp and prison survivors. In their memoirs and interviews, this is what Bulgaria’s victims of state repression most lament. Nonetheless, there have been state initiatives aimed at addressing the abuses committed in the camps: a public-state inquiry commission (1990), legislation meant to secure financial compensation for victims of state repression (1991–2010), and a trial against select camp guards (1992–2002), which was discontinued due to the statute of limitation. Yet these were generally insufficient and politicized projects, initiated by state officials and politicians, and aimed at manoeuvring the memory of violence to gain political advantage. Almost a quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there is no official Bulgarian national institute dedicated to the study and remembrance of the communist past, something all other former Soviet satellites have. There is also no equivalent to Russia’s Memorial, a civil rights society responsible for “perpetuating the memory of victims of political repression.”

History textbooks in Bulgarian secondary schools rarely devote more than a page to the history of the communist repressive apparatus, and the names and stories of camp and prison survivors are never incorporated. While monuments dedicated to the victims of communism do exist, these are private initiatives financed exclusively through personal donations. The place that Bulgarian camp survivors

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8 Krum Horozov, Petko Ogoiiski, Nikola Dafinov, Rafael Rashev, Petar Burnev, Pavel Karukov, interviews with the author, Sofia, Chepintsi, Samovodene, and Pernik March and April 2011.
10 See Istoria na Bulgaria, 382–83, 389. The information provided in the textbook regarding the camp system is brief and incomplete. More puzzling, however, is the misleading passage on the creation of the Lovech (1959–62), in the context of an increasing crime rate. For more on the creation of the Lovech camp, see chapter 5 of the present study. For more on the absence of information on communist history in Bulgarian textbooks, see Evelina Kelbecheva, “Istoriata kato pamet ili kato prikazka-lichen pogled vurhu komunizma v Bulgaria,” in Bulgarskiat Komunizum, 68—84.
would most like to see turned into a memorial, the site of Bulgaria’s longest-running forced-labor camp, the island opposite the town of Belene, is currently part of a maximum-security prison that houses some five hundred inmates. “And when we die, which will be soon, who will remember what happened on that island in the 1950s, and will they know that people were sent there without a sentence and trial?,” Krum Horozov asked in 2011.11

The Bulgarian culture of silence, which is often aided by a legacy of distorting sensationalism, has effectively marginalized the survivors of communist repression as a group. Hearing their voices is not only about hearing specific details of the camp experience; it is also about the very act of hearing—of listening, in fact—about the act of acknowledging their testimony and the experience it represents. In talking with survivors, I attempted to structure interviews around information about the camps’ and prisons’ histories. But the survivors were often just as concerned with a sense that public and private silence had subsumed their memories. In most of my interactions with survivors, they spent a lot of time talking about the silence. They obsessively returned to discussions of its characteristics, its causes, and the pain it has caused them. The present chapter investigates the silence that most survivors feel muffles the public resonance of their voices. It also attempts to situate and give context to the survivors’ stories, whether I found them in written or filmed records or whether I gathered them from the oral-history interviews incorporated into this and successive chapters.

**On Truth and Silence**

It is difficult to ascertain how much public awareness of the camp and prison violations existed before the end of the communist regime in late 1989. Some suggest that the repressive camp system was a badly kept government secret, implying that most ordinary citizens knew of its existence. In 1991, one of Bulgaria’s dissidents and literary scholars turned diplomat,

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Edvin Sugarev, wrote: “We all knew something about Belene and Lovech. But it is only now that we dare speak of it.”¹² For dissidents like Sugarev and for the urban liberal intelligentsia this was perhaps the case, but it is difficult to gauge how widespread the knowledge was among the general public during the regime’s duration.

Georgi Markov’s “in absentia reports” about the communist experience in Bulgaria in the 1950s and 1960s appear to confirm Sugarev’s assessment with respect to the early communist years. Rumors about camps and prisons, the secret police’s intimidation, and the fear it engendered fill the pages of Markov’s text, written in the 1970s while in exile.¹³ Although repression had drastically declined by the 1970s and 1980s, it was still impossible to publically address the plight of victims: unlike in the former Soviet Union, glasnost (openness) and perestroika (reconstruction) did not completely take root in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian communist government never committed itself to the promises of the Soviet reform policies of the late 1980s, although measured political and economic liberalization did take place and the regime allowed for broader reforms in certain areas.¹⁴ This gradual relaxation of economic and political censorship did not, however, extend to information about the survivors of political violence. Thus, prior to 1989, it was impossible to officially reassess the camp and prison past. At the same time, rumors about repression circulated widely, though they were never made public.¹⁵ Instead, they existed as muted truths and half truths that, as the regime fell apart, gave way to cries for justice, calls for revenge, and an obsession with the reconstruction of historical

¹² See Edvin Sugarev’s introduction in Boncheva, Sugarev, Patov, Solomon, eds., Bulgrskiat Gulag: Svideteli, 4
¹⁵ The monitoring and analysis of rumors seems to have been extremely important to the Bulgarian communist regime, and they were systematically tracked by three entities from the late 1960s to the end of the regime. See Dimitrov, “The Element of Surprise in 1989 Reconsidered: Institutions for Assessing Popular Discontent in Communist Party-States,” draft paper presented at the Pembroke Seminar, Brown University, February 12, 2014.”
truth. As the scholars Ivan Elenkov and Daniela Koleva assert, “broader public circles demanded ‘the truth’ about all the events and processes that had been misrepresented or altogether unknown before. In the first years after the ‘tender revolution,’ there was a rush … to hear silenced voices, to restore truth and justice.”16 Significantly, however, the silence about the camps, though briefly ruptured, remained dominant even in the following years. Many calls for the “uncovering of hidden truth” were never answered even though Bulgaria gradually embarked on a democratic path, integrating human rights, free speech, and a multiparty system into the new political fabric.17

By 2006, I had met with Krum Horozov and thus understood how the culture of silence marginalized former camp and prison inmates. Some twenty-five years after the veil of secrecy was lifted, the survivors of political violence are still struggling to have their voices heard. The post-communist book market has been largely dominated by the autobiographies of former members of the Bulgarian Communist Party and by those of generals from the secret police. The stories of the repressive regime’s executioners have fared much better than the few memoirs penned by victims. “Out of fashion” was how the owner of a prominent secondhand bookshop in the capital put it.18 Yet there was a time, in the immediate aftermath of 1989, when the stories of survivors of political violence had relevance.

Soon after the collapse of the Bulgarian communist regime in early November 1989, revelations about human rights abuses during the early communist years dominated the newly uncensored press.19 Most of these were graphic and sensationalist reports. With vivid details

19 Demokratia, Zemedelsko Zname, Trud, and Standart are the main newspapers that published the stories of survivors in the immediate post-1989 period. The first article depicting the violence of the Bulgarian camp system, in particular the abuses perpetrated in Lovech, appears to have been published either on February 3, 1990. See Ivan Paskalev, “Slunchev Udar na Slunchev Briag”, Naroden Glas, February 3, 1990.
they exposed the horrors of camps, prisons, and secret police detention centers. The headlines of yellow journalism proliferated: “Death Certificate: Mengele-Style,” “Persin Island: The Island of Death,” “Monday through Sunday: Killing Times,” “Exile in Bulgarian Siberia,” “Death Was Their Craft,” “The Morgue Is Also Salvation.”\(^{20}\) The Bulgarian and foreign press, but also state officials, erroneously referred to the concentration camps as death camps and made comparisons with notorious forced-labor camps, such as Dachau in Nazi Germany and Vorkuta in the Soviet Union.\(^ {21}\) A special government-appointed commission led by the Ministry of the Interior was set up to investigate the atrocities committed in one of the camps. The Bulgarian government embarked on a complicated trial for past political crimes, but ultimately the case was dropped and a sentence never passed because of the expired statute of limitation.\(^ {22}\) Documentary and fiction films explored “the trauma of the Stalinist years,” and numerous broadcasts, both in Bulgaria and abroad, focused their attention on the extensive network of concentration camps and the ensuing repression.\(^ {23}\)

In a sense, Bulgaria witnessed an explosion of the memory of violence. These early official investigations echoed and fed the public outcry of ordinary people who confronted these very same news stories. When they were not lining up in long queues to buy necessities like bread and oil, exalted Bulgarians, sometimes in the millions, marched through city streets chanting “The time is ours” and holding signs that read “Vox Populi, Vox Dei.” Crowds sang along with Bulgaria’s most popular rock band the anthem of the oncoming democracy, “I am not a communist and I will never be one … I’m just a person.”\(^ {24}\) Newspaper headlines urged communist officials to redeem themselves for the past forty-five years of authoritarian rule,

\(^{20}\) See reprinted Bulgarian newspaper articles and editorials from 1990 and 1991 in the collection edited by Boncheva, \textit{Svideteli}. Also see some of the headlines quoted in “Kak Mediite Zapochnaha Temata za Lagerite: Hronologia ’90,” \textit{Kapital}, November 27, 2009. Also, see, HU OSA 300-20-1-173.

\(^{21}\) See reprinted Bulgarian newspaper articles and editorials from 1990 and 1991 in Boncheva, \textit{Svideteli}.

\(^{22}\) For a brief history of the failed trial, see Hristov, \textit{Sekretnoto Delo}.

\(^{23}\) Dina Iordanova, \textit{New Bulgarian Cinema} ([Scotland]: College Gate Press, 2008), 267.

\(^{24}\) The title of the hit song is “I Am Only a Person” from \textit{Shturtzite} (1990).
and feisty young television journalists, for the first time free in their reporting, called on the people to ask for justice. And the people did, as did many public intellectuals, priests, dissidents, and some communists who had abandoned the party. They all agreed that a terrible crime had been committed.

Within this cacophony of condemnations, accusations, reports, and cries for retribution the voices of former camp and prison inmates originally made themselves heard. The stories of the people who came forward in late early 1990 constituted the first critical and public rupture in the accumulated silence. Some of them joined the ranks of political parties, while in the press others were assigned symbolic status as martyrs.²⁵ For a brief while, survivors became heroes. Yet their time in the public eye was short-lived. These first attempts to bear witness remained the only widely circulated evidence of what took place during the most repressive years of the communist regime. Which stories were told? How were they articulated? To what extent did these initial stories coincide with the actual lived experiences of the camp survivors? What prevented them from becoming established in Bulgarian historical memory?

A critical look at the most enduring document of the era, Atanas Kiriakov’s documentary *The Survivors*, provides some answers.²⁶ Released in 1990, the film enjoyed fair distribution on Bulgarian and later on French television. *The Survivors* shaped the discourse on political violence in post-communist Bulgaria. In a way, its influence extended well beyond national borders, as Tzvetan Todorov used the film as his main source for the book *Voices from the Gulag: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria*.²⁷ Todorov’s tome, in turn, has become the main source of information about the Bulgarian camps for publications in English.

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²⁵ Ilia Minev, for instance, who spent twenty-eight years behind bars and barbwire, was dubbed by the Bulgarian media the world’s longest-serving political prisoner, surpassing even Nelson Mandela. Another survivor, Petko Ogoiiski, became a party deputy in the Union of the Democratic Forces, the political party established in 1989 through the convergence of several dissident groups, in opposition to the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

²⁶ *The Survivors* (*Otzelelite*), written and directed by Atanas Kiriakov. Produced by Bulgarian National Television in 1990.

²⁷ Originally published in French, Tzvetan Todorov *Au nom du peuple*; Tzvetan Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*. 76
In effect, almost all English-language references to the Bulgarian camps are based on this one film.\(^{28}\)

The film, with a run-time of almost four hours, contains archival documents and interviews with former functionaries and guards from the camp system, but the core of the footage focuses on the personal narratives of survivors. The visual testimonies concentrate almost entirely on the most disturbing and graphic details of the experience of violence.\(^{29}\)

Hence we begin to digest the information about the camps in the form of infinite snippets of cruelty and sadism. “They cracked my skull and I was tortured … they threatened me with castration,” says a man turning away from the camera. An elderly and elegantly dressed woman stares ahead: “The horror … you can’t imagine the horror,” she utters and begins to sob, her frozen frame dissolving under the memory of violence as she describes vicious beatings in detail. Part 1 of Kiriakov’s documentary captures the first meeting of camp survivors on the grounds of the Belene camp in 1990. A crowd of white-haired men and women, hundreds of them, some accompanied by their children, walk through the site of the former camp. Many are crying, some are recounting their stories, a few are shouting in anger. Others remain afraid to speak, and we hear the film director’s voice intervening, urging a man to tell his story, “Don’t worry … it is safe now.” At this beckoning, the man sits on the ground and begins to cry quietly. The camera moves slowly from one person to another, from one tale of horror to the next, and the lens zooms in on the faces and hands of the elderly survivors.

Raw and often unedited, most likely shot intentionally in one long take for maximum drama, these early testimonies are emotional and painful to watch. The violence of the camps, finally

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\(^{29}\) All quotes are taken from the testimonies in Kiriakov, *The Survivors*. 
unsilenced, erupts on the filmmaker’s reel.

In the second part of The Survivors, the documentary crew visits the city of Lovech and the nearby abandoned rock quarry that served as the site of the harshest of the Bulgarian camps. “The stones are silent, people are silent,” reminisces Kiriakov’s voice-over as the camera slowly observes the empty site. The interviews that follow brusquely shatter this initial silence. In their recollections, the survivors of the Lovech camp focus even more narrowly on the particulars of countless atrocities. Some of the interviewees do not look into the camera. “It is terrible to hear the blows and the sound of the human skull cracking.” “They set a woman’s hair on fire while she was being beaten … we looked away, we couldn’t bear it.” “The worst part was carrying the sacks with the dead bodies.” “It was so revolting … I can’t believe that I lived through it.”

According to Kiriakov, one of the main problems with the survivors’ stories was that as early as February 1990, only weeks after the fall of the communist regime, several Bulgarian newspapers simultaneously published shocking, though not necessarily untrue, accounts by former inmates about life in the camps. The film director in fact uneasily acknowledged his difficulty in determining whose testimony was true and whose experience real. In the early months of democratic euphoria, a number of people came forward to claim they had been sent to the camps. Official documents, such as recently declassified dossiers, corroborated the statements for some. Other testimonies were validated through that elusive process of eyewitnessing, that is, by the accounts of fellow inmates, guards, caretakers, nurses, and other camp staff. Notably, however, many of the survivors that spoke up seemed to be telling and reinterpreting the same story. The historian Nanci Adler refers to a similar phenomenon with

31 Kiriakov, interview with the author, November 17, 2003.
32 Kiriakov, interview with the author, November 17, 2003.
gulag survivors in post-communist Russia, whereby the proliferation of individual and intimate memories of repression turned into collective and public recollections, shared and recounted by survivors. Discussing the same issue, the scholars Jehanne Gheith and Katherine Jolluck likewise confirm that the “explosion of Gulag-related memoirs in the late 1980s and early 1990s” transformed the process of remembering to the point where “many people now tell the stories of others’ memories as if they are their own.”

Irina Paperno, a literary scholar, similarly acknowledges the stream of personal recollections of victims of government repression published in post-Soviet Russia, while also situating these accounts in a proper historical and cultural context. Paperno’s insight, that “what impressed readers even more than the stories themselves was seeing them published,” also applies to the Bulgarian context. The oral accounts of Bulgaria’s camp survivors further highlight the tenuousness of the process of resurrecting silenced narratives of repression after years of state censorship. What seems to have mattered most in these early moments was the collection of as much information as possible from as many witnesses as possible. Doubting the authenticity of some survivors’ testimonies, Kiriakov insisted that one had to trust one’s instinct because, after all, these stories needed to be told.

In a way, The Survivors attempted to convey the experiences of former camp and prison inmates outside of the sensationalist framework prevalent in the months immediately following the communist collapse. On the surface, survivors do appear to relate their experiences directly, without any interference. Yet the survivors do not speak for themselves.

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36 Paperno, Stories of the Soviet Experience, 2.
The filmmaker’s editorial interventions and his narrative voice subsume their stories. Kiriakov insistently asks each interviewee the same question about the camp experience:

“What was the most frightening?” The question begets the traumatic testimonies that follow it. The film director’s double intervention as a narrator and an interviewer is important because it enabled survivors to testify for the first time and also enabled viewers to witness for the first time the silenced event of the forced-labor camps. In this sense, it is important to question, as scholars of testimonial narratives do, “what are we as spectators made to witness?”

Though exceedingly centered on the experience of violence, the survivors’ testimonies do not successfully articulate or explain this experience. To use Dominic LaCapra’s influential Freudian formulation on trauma, the visual narratives act out the violence of the camps but do not work through it. In other words, the testimonies become ritualized performances in which the survivors get trapped in an eddy of time, caught in the repeated re-enactment of their past experience to which they cannot truly return or beyond which they cannot reach. LaCapra reminds us that “in the cases of trauma, acting-out may be necessary and perhaps, never fully overcome.” That is, for people who have undergone severe trauma, “it may be impossible to fully transcend acting out the past.” These almost mythological, repetitive experiences turn the four hours of narration in The Survivors into “an act of silencing” or into a moment frozen in time, to follow LaCapra. From this perspective, the accounts, thus arranged, only seal the violence and render it anonymous. At the same time, however, it is necessary to remember

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40 LaCapra, Representing the Holocaust, 205.
41 LaCapra, Representing the Holocaust, 205.
42 La Capra, Representing the Holocaust, 267.
43 Communication theorist Nadia Kaneva has argued that in Voices from the Gulag Todorov similarly displaces the survivors’ narratives from their original context, appropriating their voices into what she terms “a rhetoric of conscience, directed at Western public opinion.” The trauma of the camps and the survivors’ memories enter into
that Kiriakov’s film was shot and released in 1990. It exhibits the tone of many works published immediately after the fall of the communist regime. In other words, at the time, “what was most frightening” was the only possible and plausible question for Kiriakov to ask in order to begin excavating the silenced narratives. What is troubling, however, is that after his crucial intervention into the memory of violence, there were no follow-up questions.

In the absence of a serious historical study of the camps, the narratives from the film and the representations from the newspapers, all from 1990, penetrated much of contemporary reality and shaped perceptions about the camp past. Three enduring images have now been turned into mythologies about the camps: The “Pig Farm” in Belene, a place where the corpses of prisoners were allegedly fed to wild boars; the “Circle of Death” in Lovech, where during morning roll call a particular guard supposedly placed a pocket mirror before a random inmate with the words, “Here, take a look at yourself for the last time”; and the “Mosquito Torture” in Belene, during which camp guards stripped naked a beaten inmate and tied him to a tree to expose the wounds to the bites of thousands of mosquitoes. Such images are magnified by descriptions of sadistic guards, especially that of the unsurpassed cruelty of “Julia the Beautiful,” a female guard who apparently took particular pleasure in torturing women. Melding fact and fiction, sensationalism and suffering, these representations, historically unverified, become the main tropes of the camp past—tropes sometimes spoken by survivors, and often reproduced by journalists—finding their way into various publications and oral

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a polemic that transforms them into evidence affirming the moral triumph of the West and once annexed into the ideological realm, the voices of survivors are no longer their own. See Nadia Kaneva, “Remembering Communist Violence: The Bulgarian Gulag and the Conscience of the West,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 31, 1 (2007): 45—57. I disagree with Kaneva on this point. It seems that Todorov was much more concerned with situating the survivor as well as the perpetrator accounts in the context of the experience of political violence in the twentieth century than in the ideological rhetoric of the Cold War. As he himself stated, the intent of his book was “neither polemical nor accusatory” but rather, meant to “provoke reflection on the fate of human beings trapped in the mechanism of totalitarianism.” See Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 2.
histories.\textsuperscript{44}

Communist state repression thus depicted became cemented as unquestionable fact in the Bulgarian public space. The effect of such sensationalist storytelling was twofold. Initially, the stories stimulated public attention and much sympathy. Over time, however, the general population lost interest in what happened. Todorov even argues that certain individuals have made a conscious effort to collectively erase this past “in the name of civil peace.”\textsuperscript{45}

The now infamous tales about the camp experience became the pillars of memory both for the public and for those who had experienced the camp system. At the same time, however, they concealed within the public space the actual expressions of survivors’ memories, thereby muting them and denying a genuine understanding of the camp past. This process highlights the need for a scholarly framework that properly contextualizes the oral testimonies. Presented without sensationalism and the distorting effects of being harnessed to ideological ends, they can help create a richer and more accurate account of the history of the Bulgarian camp and prison system.

The Memoirs

A first step toward retrieving an account of lived camp-experiences is to return to the memoirs penned by the victims of repression. Here, I distinguish between the edited collections, which contain hundreds of individual stories, and the published and unpublished manuscripts authored by individual survivors. Furthermore, I have narrowed the category of

\textsuperscript{44} I interviewed more than thirty prison and camp survivors between 2006 and 2011, and the majority of those interviewed frequently refer to at least one of these images as events and happenings they remember witnessing. On closer analysis, however, very few of the men and women I interviewed could speak with certainty or any level of detail about the “Mosquito Torture,” the “Pig Farm,” the “Circle of Death,” or “Julia the Beautiful.” That is, many of the survivors are convinced they witnessed these events, but few were actually certain of it, especially when I probed them for details about concrete experiences. For recent journalistic accounts that employ these tropes, see articles published in the Bulgarian Daily \textit{168 Chasa} in 2013, for example, Ivan Butovski, “Palachut ot Lagerite Iuliana Ruzhegva se obesila v baniata,” January 24, 2013; and “Bozhidar Vitanov, zatochen za slushane na muzika: Ubivaha I po 15 dushi na vecherna proverka v lagera v Lovech,” January 16, 2013.

\textsuperscript{45} Todorov, \textit{Voices from the Gulag}, 27.
survivor to encompass only those interned in camps and prisons, since I focus here on interpreting the historical meaning of the records left by those who survived the sites of violence.46 To date, I have been able to collect forty memoirs, two of which are unpublished.47 Of the published ones, with few exceptions, the majority of the memoirs were written and printed after 1989, and were distributed by unknown, smaller presses; some were self-published.48 Only a few of these memoirs came out under the imprint of more established publishing houses.49 It is difficult to summarize the essence of these firsthand accounts, though the trauma caused by state-sponsored repression left an enduring mark on all of the manuscripts. Noticeably, most of the memoirs, with two exceptions to date, were written by men, while female narratives about the camp experience are generally only available elsewhere. The two published female memoirists, a former anarchist and a Trotskyite, were

46 The memoirs of dissident political activists not interned or imprisoned, as well as of those who were deported and lived in exile in the countryside, or those of the children of victims of repression, technically also belong to the wider category of survivor testimonies.


interned in the camps of Belene and Bosna in the late 1940s and early 1950s. While it may be difficult to explain the absence of female memoirs of repression, the women’s reluctance to publicly bear witness draws attention to an imbalance in the historical discourse and its concomitant interpretation of the camp experience, as the few existing accounts by women offer a rather different narrative from the one proffered by men. The writings by women should thus be treated as a distinct yet integral part of the greater history of the camps.

These texts describe personal odysseys, at times providing intimate accounts of the authors’ lives. Some concentrated almost entirely on the camp or prison experience, while others dedicate but a few pages to it. From poetry to drawings and sketches, through detailed descriptions of arrests, interrogations, deportations, prison cells, working conditions, hunger, torture, murder, resistance, friendship, and survival methods, these memoirs offer invaluable personal accounts of the reality in the camps and prisons. Gender and political affiliation, however, delimit the range of experiences. The majority of authors belonged to various political or religious organizations, such as agrarian unions, anarchist organizations, and evangelical movements, opposed to the Bulgarian Communist Party at the time. In this sense, the written voices tend to favor the perspectives of the regime’s political opponents. The narratives of women, as well as of those who found themselves behind barbed wire and iron bars for non-political reasons, have yet to be incorporated into the overall camp narrative. The

50 Liliana Pirincheva, Po bodlite na idealite (Sofia: Abagar, 2007); Tsvetana Dzhermanova, Spomeni ot lagerite (Permik: Farago, 2011). Fragmented accounts about women’s experiences in camps and prisons (told by former women inmates) are also available in Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 113–34; Hristov, Sekretnoto delo za lagerite, 34–63; and Boncheva, Svideteli, 362–82.

51 For instance, in his three-volume memoir, Zapisiki za Bulgarskite Stradania: 1944-1989 (Sofia: IK Roksana, 2008, 2009) Petko Ogooiiski is committed to describing the reality of the camp in its every detail. Stefan Bochev’s memoir, Belene: skazanie za kontslagerna Bulgaria also aims to precisely capture the camp experience but in literary style. Also, see the memoirs of the political prisoner Georgi Konstantinov, Adsiki kaleidoskop, Spomeni na zatvornika (Sofia: Shrapnel, 2006); Boicho Ognianov, Az biah samo na 17 godini; Atanas Moskov, Spomeni: vazhodi i padini. All five of these texts are written with painstaking attention to detail about life in the camps. In contrast, Aleksandur Nakov’s memoir of about one hundred pages dedicates only three of them to the camp experience. See, Nakov, Dosie na obekt No.1218 (Sofia: Shrapnel, 2006). Iosif Petrov’s memoir consists mostly of poems and drawings, chronicling the author’s experience in the Belene camp. See, Petrov, Vik ot katorgata. Stihove (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BZNS, 1990).
most striking absence, however, is the lack of a memoir by a survivor from Lovech. Although
testimonies about the Lovech camp certainly exist in edited collections, newspaper articles, or
on film, these accounts usually remain brief and incomplete.52

Within the existing memoirs, some authors employ the familiar tropes, such as
Belenе’s pig farm or the sadistic predilections and violent excesses of some guards. Yet not all
memoirs follow the sensationalist tone of graphic details so widespread in the popular press.
Most of the individuals were detained in the camps between late 1944 and 1962. Their release
did not, however, leave them free to recount their experiences publicly, because the communist
regime was still in place then and information about the camps was kept secret until the
demise of the system in 1989. Many refused to talk about what they had gone through even
with their families and friends. In some instances a former camp inmate might even have been
cut off from his or her family, so that contact ceased completely.53 Most memoirs have
passages that manifest the anger, condemnation, and sometimes calls for retribution
accumulated during decades of forced silence. These sections mirror the visual testimonies in
Kiriakov’s documentary in which former inmates shout at the camera. They seem to be a
common characteristic of trauma narrated: survivors inevitably pass through repeated self-
recreations and attempts to retrieve a lost identity that cannot, in fact, be retrieved. As a result,
the memoirs generally do not appear to achieve a working through or integration of the past.
The writings of Bulgarian camp and prison survivors thus remain within the confines of the
historical, social, and cultural framework of their time of production, the immediate post-
communist years. It was a time with a high demand for the exposure of victims’ experiences,
but not for any genuine reflection on them.

52 The accounts of Lovech camp survivors can be found in English in Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 45–130
and in Bulgarian in Ivan Minkov, “Slunchev Briag” lagerut na smurtta (Sofia: Izdatestvo na BZNS, 1990), 86–93.
Perhaps understandably, then, much memoir literature concerns itself with listing the names of fellow inmates and, occasionally, of guards.\textsuperscript{54} These inventories again emphasize the will to bear witness, to leave a record. While the narratives may contain differences regarding the number of people interned and the attitude of the guards, as well as disagreements about political affiliations, true commitment to a cause, or the identity of informers, all of them speak with one voice when it comes to the absolute necessity of remembering their past. This expressed need for integration into the collective memory is essential when writing a history of the political violence in communist Bulgaria.

\textbf{Confronting the Silence of Indifference}

It seems remarkable that the disorganized community of survivors, confined to self-publishing and relegated to the margins of Bulgarian public life as it was, actually succeeded in crafting and preserving a record of its collective experience. The task of historical scholarship, of which this study forms part, is to gather the fragmented testimonies both written and visual. Accessing and collecting these records is difficult because they, just like the survivors themselves, are spread throughout the country. Diaries, handwritten notes, and sometimes glossy booklets remain in many apartments and houses across Bulgaria, where the will to bear witness appears more powerful than the lack of an official effort to sustain it.

Though many of the survivors have now passed away, those still alive continue to gather annually at unofficial memorial sites, usually former camps. The meetings are informal events: about thirty elderly men and women gather, bring flowers and homemade desserts, and talk quietly among themselves. I attended several of these events between 2006 and 2010, gradually becoming convinced that collecting the stories circulating there was of utmost

\textsuperscript{54} To the point where Ogoiiski’s second volume is filled almost entirely with the names of former inmates.
significance. So in 2011 I returned to Bulgaria to carry out a large-scale oral-history project. Many of my Bulgarian colleagues reacted with both surprise and dismissal. Some offered practical caveats: the survivors were too old, they suggested, and their memories flawed. Others objected with accusations: Why pick at old wounds? Why embark on this project now, so many years after the camps had closed down and when this difficult past had receded into the background of Bulgarian life? I pressed on, however, because, to paraphrase Jean Baudrillard’s insight on the importance of remembering, forgetting the violence is part of the violence, “because it is also the extermination of memory, of history, of the social, etc.”55 In this sense, we can claim that the historical trauma left by camp experiences underlies and tacitly affects even the academic-historical capacity to reflect on, culturally assimilate, and account for this past.

In 2011, I spent four months almost exclusively in the company of survivors. I traveled to remote villages and visited lavish apartments in the capital. My definition of survivors expanded, and I interviewed people who lost their homes in the city and were deported to the countryside, as well as those who went to camps without sentencing or those who spent years in prison because of harsh sentences. I wanted to capture a wide range of experiences, and I also sought answers to practical questions that could not be found in the archives. To my surprise, I managed to collect relevant factual information: I learned what life was like in prisons for those who had had trials, and how it differed from that experienced by those interned without sentences. I saw the material distinction between forced-labor camps and prisons that imposed harsh, punitive regimes. I unveiled the fates of those exiled in remote rural locations. And I found evidence of many survivors’ inability to discuss internment and deportations after their release, as well as of the resulting trauma and, for many, shame. One of

the main goals of the oral-history project was to capture the experience of both men and women, and in this instance, gender played a particularly important role in how people lived through repression. Without exception, men found the regime in the camps much more difficult to endure than the one in the prisons. Conversely, women’s experiences tended to indicate that camp life was preferable to time spent in prisons because generally, the forced-labor regime was lighter in the female camp sections.56

Chronology often determines context, and in this case, periodization is a key factor in elucidating how people lived through the camp system. The Bulgarian camp population reached its peak in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. The regime in camp settlements in the mid-to-late 1940s was not as ruthless as later, and most people who passed through them survived. Life in Belene, the hybrid prison-camp island, tended to vary depending on the year of internment and on the camp commander. According to most narratives, the most difficult years for camp inmates and prisoners were those between 1956 and 1959 and this coincides with the operation of the Lovech camp, from 1959 to 1962. What remains undisputed is that all interviewees view repression as a continued experience, one that outlasts the release from a camp or a prison. The men and women who shared their stories were invariably marked by their internment. The trauma of the camp and the prison remains at the center of their lives even today, when they can openly discuss their experiences.

The oral-history narratives I collected can be divided into three categories. The first surveys the experiences of those who had publicly spoken about their past previously and have either published memoirs or excerpts in edited collections or newspapers or have participated in documentary films. Some of these men and women have full mastery of their narrative and approached the interview as a professional commitment. The second category comprises those

56 The exception here would be the Lovech camp where the regime for women was extremely demanding.
who had never before spoken about their experience of internment. The reasons for their silence varied: For some it was fear, and this fear predominated during our conversations. Others had no apparent motives; it was as if they had simply never been asked to speak. In the third category I include the narratives of those who could not remember. Some of them were too old; their memories were lost or they suffered from dementia. Some did remember that they had been in a camp, but nothing more. The details of their experiences were permanently silenced, but they wanted to contribute their stories anyway. All three groups can and ought to be understood through silence. In the first case, we glean an understanding of how active testimony simultaneously disposes of and also remains in silence. In the second, we become aware of how silence alienates and absorbs into anonymity. In the third, we understand how the culture of silence can relegate the experience of violence to oblivion.

**The Voices of Survivors**

My interviews with survivors made clear that in addition to the trauma of their experience as inmates, their struggles against various silences, imposed by the state or otherwise, in communist and post-communist Bulgaria most marked them. Silence surrounded and threatened them, whether they had to contend with the conformist silence of the communist period, the continuous silence of the transitional years, or the current silence of indifference as they approach the end of their lives. They repeatedly expressed the difficulty and importance of breaking through what they perceived as barriers to people hearing and understanding their narratives. This held true for those who had spoken and written about their experiences as well as for those who had never done so. The following narratives represent the diverse ways in which survivors of political violence have sought to position themselves and stage their memories in the absence of a comprehensive state effort aimed at addressing their
experiences in Bulgarian public life. The purpose for including these oral histories is to demonstrate the ways in which, more than twenty years after the initial publicity surrounding their experiences, survivors continue to struggle to have their voices heard.

Nadezhda Vassileva Bozhilova-Kasabova

Nadezhda Vasileva Bozhilova-Kasabova is a former political prisoner who had never spoken about her experiences before meeting with me in 2011 (see figure 2.1). Though she had not hidden that she been a political prisoner, having served six years of a fifteen-year sentence in Sliven Prison from 1949 to 1955, she had never really told her story. No one had asked her, she confided, no one beyond her immediate circle of friends and family. About three hours into our four-hour-long interview, she said, “I regret that I could not relate things as systematically as I had planned. . . . I hope that what I have said will be useful to you.” I assured her that her story was indeed very valuable, especially because so little is known about women’s experiences in the camps and prisons. “Women generally do not talk,” I explained. “Because they are afraid,” she answered. I asked her, perhaps naively, to explain this fear so frequently described by survivors. Bozhilova-Kasabova looked directly at me and said, “You cannot understand this fear. This fear can only be understood by someone who has passed through the secret police. Do you know how many times when I go out somewhere, and I see a policeman, I get scared?” I asked her if she continued to feel the fear. Fifty-seven years had passed since her release from prison. “Yes, I do. I was in Sofia at the art exhibit of my niece; it was an exhibit of children’s drawings. And as I was climbing up the stairs, I suddenly saw a policewoman [in uniform] coming down the stairs.” Bozhilova-Kasabova’s voice revealed alarm as she reached this part of the story. “It was as if I saw the devil before me,” she

57 Nadezhda Vasileva Bozhilova-Kasabova, interview with the author, Gorna Oriahovtitsa, March 26, 2011.  
58 Bozhilova-Kasabova was a prisoner in Sliven Prison from May 10, 1949, to November 5, 1955.
exclaimed. Then she fell silent for a while. “They are just afraid. It is a fear of talking. And always when we go out together, a group of people, I am always silent. I always wait for the others to speak. Before complete strangers, I can't. . . .” She did not finish her sentence and tried to explain this sense of fear once again: “Look, try to understand it like this: there’s a circle, a small circle. This is a primary circle. And in this circle, I put things that have accumulated through the years, things that I have not shared with anyone ever. I said them to you for the first time.” My surprise at this revelation prompted her to repeat her words: “Yes, I have not shared these things with my husband [who had also been a political prisoner]. It is the first time that I speak about these things with you. Until now, I had not told anyone about anything.” Bozhilova-Kasabova’s voice broke off, but she tried to quickly compose herself. “It is because they cannot understand me. They cannot.” At this moment, she extended a request to me: “I just want you to write everything down verbatim. Verbatim.”

Bozhilova-Kasabova’s story is one of the most detailed narratives of repression I recorded. It is also one of the more difficult ones, as it is full of violence and seemingly
infinite suffering. Her descriptions of the beatings she endured in prison and her confinement in holding cells are particularly harrowing. As is her story of the trauma she endured after her release: her family cut off contact with her. In the middle of the interview she mentioned keeping a record of all the women she remembered from her years in prison. Bozhilova-Kasabova said that she felt compelled to write down each of their names, the reason for their sentences, and what she remembered about them. The list included sixty-six women. She showed it to me, along with other written memories recorded in her small red diary (figure 2.2). Bozhilova-Kasabova concentrated her narrative almost exclusively on the experience of violence, and her account reminded me of the survivors’ narratives published in the early 1990s. At the first opportunity to talk through her ordeal, Bozhilova-Kasabova expressed the most painful and the most traumatic details of her prison past, much like the majority of those who began speaking after 1989. Only she waited twenty-one years longer.

Figure 2.2 The diary of Nadezhda Vasileva Bozhilova-Kasabova with a list of the names and memories of sixty-six of her fellow female inmates at Sliven Prison, March 26, 2011. Photo by author.

Tsvetana Dzhermanova

On February 26, 1950, a female inmate of the camp near Bosna wrote a letter:
Lubo,

I received the jacket and I am very grateful to you. I am sorry for all the trouble that I have caused you so far. I have not had any news from you since your last visit. But this is becoming a common occurrence, isn’t it? I am doing fine. You should think about yourself. Go ahead with your life in the way that it best suits you. Think about your health.

Most sincerely,

Tsvetana

Tsvetana Dzhermanova was almost twenty-two years old when she wrote these words to her husband from a forced-labor camp in northern Bulgaria. She had already spent a year in the camp, and since she was never tried and sentenced, Dzhermanova had no idea how much longer she would be away, or when, if ever, she was to return. In the summer of 1951 she would be transferred to the female section of Belene, to be released in the summer of 1953. Like many Eastern Bloc states in the period following Stalin’s death, the Bulgarian regime granted general amnesty to political prisoners and camp inmates in the 1950s. By that point, Dzhermanova had spent almost five years in confinement. Arrested at the age of twenty because of her affiliations with Bulgaria’s anarchist movement, she was one of the youngest people to set foot in the newly formed forced-labor camps operated by the secret police. Her correspondence with her husband documents Dzhermanova’s remarkable odyssey through the camp system. Some twenty letters exchanged between the newlyweds survive as a testament to their profound bond. On the first anniversary of their marriage, her husband sent the following note, which poignantly captures the sorrow of separation and the emotional toll it took on the couple:
Dear Tsetse,

31.10.1950, Sofia

Today, I celebrate one year since the signing of our lawful marriage. Yes, this is true and it merits my attention. I assume that you remember this date and perhaps you’re celebrating in some small way? Although we have only had during this time a symbolic family (married) life, a life of sad separation, it still is a family life and this can not be disputed. Reasoning and proceeding from the simple analogy that after every bad thing something good is bound to happen, I am not only consoling myself but I await this moment with joy, the moment of our family happiness…

Dzhermanova’s letters also provide a glimpse into the psychology of camp inmates and their families as they dealt with internment. In addition, the letters offer details about the material and everyday life of the female camp section. I met Dzhermanova in April 2011, but I had already seen her tell parts of her story for the 1990 documentary *The Survivors*. At the time of our interview, she had just turned eighty-three, and though her narrative proved somewhat erratic, our conversation succeeded in capturing important details and impressions about her experience in the camp system (see figure 2.3).59

59 Tsvetana Dzhermanova, interview with the author, Pernik, April 12, 2011.
During the interview, she spoke passionately about her turn to anarchism in the mid-1940s and about her political activities, which she deemed immature and naive but which nonetheless resulted in her arrest, a month in solitary confinement in the headquarters of the secret police, and her eventual internment without trial in Bosna (1948–51) and in Belene’s female section (1951–53). Our interview touched on the details of life in the camps: the nature of the forced labor, which was at times backbreaking and at others sporadic; the overall poor nutrition and accompanying hunger, compensated by the camaraderie and friendships she developed with other inmates. Dzhermanova generally described her relations with camp guards, educators, and administrators in positive terms, even though she spent time in isolation and in the sick ward. The interview also briefly covered her life after her release and her take on the situation of survivors of political violence in post-communist Bulgaria. Dzhermanova insisted that the absence of a state effort to address the memory of repression had resulted in the disintegration of the memory itself. This lacunae finally prompted her to write her memoir.

The interview was marked by her constant laughter, so that it sometimes misleadingly
seemed as if Dzhermanova were relating an adventure story. Yet as I continued to listen closely to her words, I realized that she used laughter as her shield, as her way of framing the experience. Laughing was a way of coming to terms with her trauma. As she herself remarked on one occasion: “Look, I try not to burden myself too much, I am trying to remember the comical moments.” Similarly, two lines she wrote to her husband in 1950 stand out: “I pretend that everything is well. I am very well.” Prompted to speak of the other moments, the ones that were not always “well,” she again used laughter to minimize the impact of my questions, though she did gradually reveal the violence and suffering that marked her time in the camps. However post-traumatically loaded her laughter might have been, it provided me with another lead about how to articulate the history of the camps further. Laughter and the seemingly carefree narration were not only coping mechanisms. They were also possible ways of voicing her experience through acts of personal staging and catharsis.

In March of 2012 Dzhermanova finally released her memoir, *Camp Memories*, only the second published survivor’s account penned by a woman.

The narratives of Dzhermanova and Bozhilova-Kasabova suggest that women found the regime in prisons much harder than the camp regime: Bozhilova-Kasabova’s account of her prison sentence is much harsher, filled with many more abuses than Dzhermanova’s memories from the two camps where she was interned.60 Conversely, all the testimonies of men that I have recorded or studied spoke to the harshness of the camps and the lighter, preferable regime in prison.61

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60 Also see, the memoir of the camp survivor Liliana Pirincheva, *Po bodlite na idealite* and the collected testimonies of female internees in Boncheva, *Svideteli*, 362–82. Truvka Bukeva, who was interned in the female section of the Belene camp in the early 1950s also indicated that her camp experience was not as difficult as that of her female friends who had been sentenced in prisons. Truvka Bukeva, interview with author, Ruse, March 2007.

Petko Ogoiiski

Petko Ogoiiski is one of the most famous male survivors of the Bulgarian penal system. He is a public figure. In 1950, he was sentenced to five years in prison for conspiratorial activities and for writing what were deemed to be “enemy poems.” He spent part of his five-year sentence in the prison section of Belene. In 1962, he was sentenced for another two years. After 1989, he emerged as one of the most outspoken advocates for camp and prison survivors, even becoming a deputy in the Union of the Democratic Forces, the newly formed political party that stood in opposition to the legacy of communism. He wrote a trilogy, Notes on Bulgarian Suffering: 1944–1989, which described his and other former inmates’ experiences in Belene and other camps.62

When I visited him in Chepintsi, a village outside Sofia, where he resided with his wife, he was already eighty-two years old. Yet his mind remained lucid and he had mastery of his narrative. Ogoiiski knew what he wanted to tell me before I even started asking him questions. His experiences were already narrated, stylized, and ready for consumption by historians. Only in two moments did his emotions overcome his narrative: when he described meeting his mother after his release from prison, and when he showed me the scarring and deformation of his leg he had sustained more than half a century earlier, during his imprisonment in Belene.63

In addition to writing and talking about his memories of the prisons, Ogoiiski built a museum dedicated to Bulgarian history. He and his wife lived in a two-room residence, above which he had erected a six-story tower, an imposing structure in the small village (figure 2.4). Displays of items he had collected testified to a number of eras in Bulgarian history. One section of the tower memorialized his experience in the penal system. Two pieces of dry bread

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62 Ogoiiski, Zapiski za bulgarskite stradania.
63 Petko Ogoiiski, interview with the author, Chepintsi, March 4, 2011.
represented the daily food rations. A recreation of a cloth neck-harness used by prisoners to move heavy stones in Belene represented the trials of forced labor. A pair of wooden clogs worn by a prisoner in the Stara Zagora prison represented the condition of the prisoner’s clothes, while the hollowed-out heel of the clogs, used for smuggling notes and letters, testified to the prisoner’s ingenuity and defiance (figure 2.5). Ogoiiski assured me that the clogs were authentic. Did it really matter, I wondered.

![Figure 2.4 Petko Ogoiiski’s residence in Chepintsi, including the tower that he has turned into a private museum of Bulgarian history. Photo by author.](image-url)
Krum Horozov

In March 2011, I met again with Krum Horozov, the former political prisoner and the first survivor I interviewed (figure 2.6). He was attending a two-day conference at the New Bulgarian University in Sofia, organized by the Department of History and the Union of the Repressed, dedicated to the history of movements that resisted the communist regime. Horozov was not an invited speaker, but he sat in the first row and listened attentively to all the presentations (figure 2.7). Outside the auditorium, the walls of the university hallways were decorated with Horozov’s sketches of the camps and prisons where he had spent eleven years of his life.
He had aged since I last saw him in 2006 and he seemed somewhat frail, but he still carried
bulky bags full of his self-published books. I asked him what he thought of the conference and why he had made the long train journey all the way from Ruse to Sofia: “I came to bring my sketches, because I know that after we die, no one will be interested, no one will care, but at least now I can leave something behind, a memory of what it was like … it has to be known.”  

Unfortunately, no students either from the New Bulgarian University or from any other educational institution attended the conference. Undergraduates and graduates walking past Horozov’s drawings had no idea what they represented. Seeing the students smoking outside the building, I asked them if they would have liked to attend the conference. “Yes,” they confirmed, “only, they never tell us about these events. We want to know more, but who do we ask?”

Despite the significant differences in the narratives of Bulgarian camp survivors, it seems relevant here to take into account Luisa Passerini’s insights on the role of silence and oral history in relation to the Holocaust. Writing in 1992, Passerini pointed out that “the work of oral history has moved beyond its earlier, naïve assumptions that one of its tasks is simply to give voice to those who had been silenced by history. Fighting silence is not enough; ‘silence’ is not even the appropriate term to navigate the task to come: what is to be fought is not only silence but distortions.” In the Bulgarian case, Passerini’s suggestion implies challenging the distortions resulting from state silence and sensationalist narratives within the socio-psychological mechanisms of constituting and preserving historical reality and truth. Yet in this precise respect, is not silence, the cultural halt in the production of discourses on a certain traumatic experience, a more adequate expression than the incessant proliferation and repetition of lurid images and stories? Do not these proliferations and repetitions acquire the

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64 Krum Horozov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 23, 2011.
character of a ritualized repression of memory, merely covering the substance of an experience lived in its own uniqueness, specific circumstances, historic-cultural context? Must we not instead try “to make the silence speak”?

It seems that Bulgaria’s silence about Belene and Lovech enables us to witness and actually address the violence of the camps, rather than face the relativizing abundance of mythologies.

As far as our choice at present is one between multiple loud utterances that silence what they talk about and silence itself, the kind of silence that spells out our current inability to actually cope with the past, the step forward seems clear: we have to listen more closely to Bulgaria's silence and to better understand its culture. To this end, we must return to the only moment at which Bulgaria’s culture of silence was shattered, temporarily but meaningfully, in the months following the collapse of the communist system, at the end of 1989 and throughout 1990. During this time a genuine desire to hear the voices of survivors and to understand why the violence had occurred manifested itself throughout the country. Maybe paradoxically, this time of transition also witnessed the first wilful attempts at manipulating the memory of repression.

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67 Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 266.
CHAPTER 3

TO EXIT FROM THE CLOSED CIRCLE:

1989 AND THE MEMORY OF VIOLENCE

This chapter investigates the struggle for the memory of violence following the collapse of the Bulgarian communist regime in November 1989. Simply put, it was struggle to define the past in order to influence the future, waged in various public and private arenas and involving a wide set of actors: civil society and state representative, journalists, politicians, survivors and perpetrators. More specifically, this struggle was marked by both a desire to establish what took place in the camps but also by an ambition to define how the camps should be remembered and to what use, if any, the memory of the camps should be put.

Two examples, which best demonstrate the attempts to mold the memory of the camps, are examined in detail in the following pages. One was an overtly political campaign surrounding the first democratic elections in the post-communist years, and another was the creation and the workings of a public state commission tasked with investigating the abuses committed in the camps. Shorty after it surfaced, the memory of the camp violence became politicized and exploited by the actors engaging with. Most notably, officials at the Ministry of the Interior and politicians from the two competing parties fighting for electoral victory in 1990, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), comprising former Communist Party members, and
the newly formed opposition, the Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF). Whether they sought to hold on to power following the regime’s collapse or whether they hoped to win the election and thus become part of the ruling elite, politicians used the memory of violence as a vehicle to project their personal ambitions. In examining these attempts to both make sense of the past but also to instrumentalize its symbolic capital, this chapter demonstrates the complex workings of the politics of memory, linked to political agendas and a genuine desire to reflect on and make sense of a traumatic historical experience.

**Mapping the Violence**

One of the first election campaigns launched by the UDF in 1990 included a poster showing a map of Bulgaria that used skulls to mark sites of violence, forced-labor camps and prisons during the communist regime. (See Figure 3.1) The map was originally conceived in the offices of *Demokratsia*, Bulgaria’s leading opposition daily newspaper after 1989, by a team of journalists and political activists, consisting of Ekaterina Boncheva, Edvin Sugarev, Svilen Patov, and Zhan Solomon. Throughout 1990, they interviewed men and women who had been sent to camps and prisons, and they sifted through and read countless letters by survivors of repression flooding the paper’s offices. Twenty-two years later, Boncheva and Sugarev shared their memories of these events with investigative journalist Hristo Hristov. In 2009, at a conference marking the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, I also spoke with Boncheva about “the momentous days” at *Demokratsia* when it was decided that “the violence had to be mapped.” Sugarev recalls that initially many of the former camp inmates who came into the newspaper’s editorial offices were afraid to speak and wished to

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1 Translations from Bulgarian, Българска Социалистическа Партия (БСП) and Съюз на Демократичните Сили (СДС).
2 Ekaterina Boncheva, in conversation with the author, Prague, November 2009.
remain anonymous. In the following months, however, as the newspaper published more and more stories, the number of people who decided to openly share their experiences increased. “There was a daily procession of people, who wanted to talk, for the first time in forty-five years, about the months and years they spent there [in the camps],” Boncheva reminisced. The swelling number of survivors who came forward convinced Boncheva that “the newspaper could not be their only platform” of expression, and, together with the editor in chief of Demokratsia, the decision was made to publish a book, even though there was not much time to properly process and edit the material.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 3.1** The Electoral Map. The caption above reads, “45 years: enough!” At the bottom it says, “Map of the socialist concentration camps and prisons.”

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5 Boncheva, in conversation with the author, Prague, November 2009. Also see Boncheva, interview with Hristov, Sofia, April 2012.
It took only about three months to put together the book and prepare it for publication.\(^6\) The hasty publication suggests that what really mattered in those early days of testimony gathering was to collect as many stories as possible in order to break through the prolonged silence, or as it was commonly referred to at the time, “the forty-five years of silence.” Boncheva remembers this period of intense interviewing as the most emotionally charged and challenging moment in her life, as well as one that brought her tremendous satisfaction because she felt she was, for the first time, “experiencing truth.”\(^7\) Sugarev, too, fondly recalls the months working on the book as extremely moving, and he remembers that he and his colleagues listened carefully to the stories of former inmates, looking for intersecting points in their narratives; it was not always easy to confirm whether things had happened as the survivors described them.\(^8\) It was in this context that the map of the Bulgarian concentration camps emerged. Boncheva, Sugarev, Patov, and Solomon began mapping the camp and prison sites based on the oral recollections of the survivors they interviewed. It was the first public counting and charting of the sites of violence.

The original map did not employ skulls to mark the concentration camp sites. Instead, it used the five-pointed Soviet star. “In our view,” Boncheva recalls, “the star was the stronger symbol of communism. It [the map] was daunting but it wasn’t frightening.”\(^9\) In 1991, the authors published the book of survivor recollections, containing more than one hundred stories, titled *Bulgarskiat Gulag: Svideteli (The Bulgarian Gulag: Witnesses).*\(^10\) The original map appears on the last page.

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\(^6\) Sugarev, interview with Hristov, Sofia, April 2012.
\(^7\) Boncheva, in conversation with the author, Prague, November 2009.
\(^8\) Sugarev, interview with Hristov, Sofia, April 2012.
\(^9\) Boncheva, interview with Hristov, Sofia, April 2012.
\(^10\) Ekaterina Boncheva, Edvin Sugarev, Svilen Patov, Zhan Solomon, eds., *Bulgarskiat Gulag.*
In its initial conception the map was not meant to be part of the political election campaign, but rather a tool of remembrance. “Perhaps it was a bad pre-election advertisement for the UDF but the map itself was authentic,” Sugarev noted. In this sense, the map as originally conceived was political only insofar as it was impossible at the time (1989–90/91) to separate the political rejection or even assessment of the communist regime from a desire to learn the truth about the past. “How did the map get modified before the elections and who switched it around [the star with the skull], to this day, I do not know,” acknowledged Boncheva. In fact, the electoral map did not fully get rid of the five-pointed Soviet star but simply minimized its appearance, situating it right underneath the flag of black skulls. In addition, the new map reduced the number of camp sites and drew Bulgaria’s borders in barbed wire, representing the entire country as one big concentration camp.

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11 Sugarev, interview with Hristov, Sofia, April 2012.
Both maps referred to “socialist concentration camps,” thus drawing a direct connection between the past violence in the camps and the current Bulgarian Socialist Party. The message was clear: the same party members running for office today, in 1990, had also created the camps. They may have changed their name, but they had blood on their hands. The overall emphasis on the camps and violence seems to have turned voters off, however, and as one of the campaign’s key strategists, Petko Simeonov, acknowledged in 1990, “It promotes frustration and negative feelings. We will not stop campaigning on this issue but we will decrease it relatively.”

Though it is impossible to establish a causal connection between the UDF’s electoral loss in June 1990 and the map of skulls, it is worth noting the map’s proliferation: several thousand copies of it were printed and pasted throughout the country, socially and symbolically drenching Bulgaria’s cities and towns in the misery of the gulag. Yet this visual avalanche of mass violence did not resonate well with the Bulgarian public, and in the following elections, contestants strategically downplayed the topic of the camps.

Twenty years later, in 2009, Simeonov no longer considered the skulls map a political error or believed that the election necessarily failed because of it. The issue was, he interjected, “a matter of debate.” In 2009, Simeonov also provided the broader context for the map’s printing, which formed part of a larger campaign titled “We do not want such a Bulgaria,” aimed at conjoining the memories of violence in the pre-and post-communist periods:

Influenced by the Spanish experience [of transitional justice], we had planned a large-scale campaign … the excavation of a mass grave [of individuals]

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12 Petko Simeonov, a Bulgarian sociologist and key strategist for the UDF campaign, quoted in Harden, “Bulgaria Lifts Curtain on Its Stalinist Gulag.”
murdered after the communist takeover], and a reburial together with murdered partisans. We put a cross on top of it and we say: this is the end to political violence in Bulgaria. The skulls map was just an element of this larger campaign. The campaign failed but the posters were already printed.14

Simeonov’s words underline how emotional, fragile, and controversial the multiple memories of violence were in the immediate post-1989 period. The communist regime had privileged the memory of the repressions suffered by communists during the 1920s and 1930s, and by partisans from 1941 until 1944, while silencing the memory of those whom it itself had repressed from late 1944 through the 1980s.15 Yet with the silence now shattered, what was to become of these competing memories? Whose narrative was to be favored? In a way, the UDF initiative had conciliatory overtones: it proposed a reburial of victims of violence from both the left and the right in a common grave resting under a Christian cross (though this gesture excluded members of the country’s Turkish and Muslim minority suppressed during the duration of Bulgaria’s communist regime). The intent of reconciliation did not, however, translate into political cooperation between the two parties, and the memory remained divided.

For communist politicians, the memory of violence presented an opportunity to rebrand and reform their image, a gesture both practical and symbolic that was much needed if they were to remain in power. A wing of reformers from the Bulgarian Communist Party who had orchestrated the internal coup d’état in November 1989 had also formed the Bulgarian


15 On the initiative and efforts of the Bulgarian communist government to sustain the memory of the repressed partisans and Communist Party members, see Ana Luleva’s discussion of the memoirs of camp survivors from the pre-communist years and the academic material published on forced-labor and concentration camps for the 1941–44 period in Prinuditelniat Trud v Bulgaria, 15–38. Also, see Georgi Markov’s description on the gap between the official representations of the repressions suffered by members of the Bulgarian Communist Party in the years before 1944 and the actual content, “eloquent, moving and powerful,” contained in the files of the secret police. See Markov, The Truth That Killed, 137–44.
Socialist Party, and unlike other members of the communist ruling establishments in Eastern Europe, they managed to survive the transition period and retained power until October 1991. ¹⁶ This group of reformers quickly distanced itself from the human rights violations, and especially from the crimes committed in the concentration camps, associated with the Communist Party. To this end, they assigned responsibility for the creation of the camps to their communist predecessors, especially to Zhivkov who had been discredited after 1989; they also vowed “never to use repression again.”¹⁷ In the spring of 1990, two leading communist reformers, Andrey Lukanov and Petur Mladenov, Bulgaria’s prime minister and president, respectively, visited the site of the Lovech camp for a commemoration ceremony to unveil a monument and a plaque in the name of those who died there.¹⁸

![Figure 3.3 Petur Mladenov on his visit to the Lovech camp site to unveil a commemorative plaque dedicated to those who died there. A BBC documentary crew is trailing the Bulgarian premier. March 1990. Photo courtesy of Hristo Hristov.](image)

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¹⁷ Harden, “Bulgaria Lifts Curtain on Its Stalinist Gulag.”

¹⁸ The visit and the protests are captured by the BBC cameras in “The Crimes of the Comrades.” They can be seen between minutes 23 and 25.
The two former party officials’ visit was not welcomed by some of the people also gathered at the former camp. Protesting against what they saw as an act of opportunism and cynicism on behalf of the former communist leadership, they held a banner, a Soviet red flag with the inscription “We do not want monuments from murderers”; another read “The Murderers Return to the Crime Scene.”

![Protest against Mladenov’s and Lukanov’s visit in Lovech, March 1990, holding a banner that reads, “The Murderers Return to the Crime Scene.” Photo courtesy of Hristo Hristov.](image)

In an interview with the BBC investigative journalist Gavin Hewett, Lukanov addressed the complicated gesture of leading representatives from the former ruling establishment laying wreaths at the site of a camp the Communist Party had created. Speaking in rambling but fluent English, Lukanov stated: “Well, I would not consider myself to be part of that party, or that body of the party, which was actually, [a] structure, not a political
structure but a terror structure, established to maintain a regime, which for me has nothing to do with the real objectives and the real ideals of the party.”

Understandably, camp survivors were, and remain, deeply suspicious of the motives of former Communist Party officials concerning the memory of the camps. In 1990, a former political prisoner, Ivan Nevrokoski, who would later chair the Union of the Repressed, stated, “They are simply trying to conceal their crimes.” In an interview I conducted with him in 2011, Nikola Dafinov, who was interned in the Lovech camp at the age of seventeen for speaking several foreign languages, English among them, and for associating with Western tourists, refused to address the possibility of a genuine attempt at apology or reconciliation on the part of former Communist leaders.

Likely Lukanov’s and Mladenov’s visit to the Lovech site was indeed a strategic move. And despite claims of protecting the historical truth from obliteration and of guarding the memory of the camps against trivialization, the UDF campaign also constituted a staged attempt at gaining political advantage by capitalizing on the history and memory of repression. Yet just because these efforts were calculated, we must not necessarily dismiss their outcomes. Something genuine accrued from the politicization and exploitation of the memory of violence in post-communist Bulgaria. For a brief period in 1990, Bulgarians successfully debated the practice and legacy of violence. Paradoxically, the most meaningful conversations about human rights abuses were not always intended as such. Nowhere is this more evident than in the transcripts from the Special Inquiry Commission, a government-appointed body tasked with investigating the crimes committed in the Bulgarian forced-labor camps.

20 Ivan Nevrokoski, interviewed by Gavin Hewett for “The Crimes of the Comrades.” From 1991 until 1994, Nevrokoski was chairman of the Union of Persons Repressed after September 9, 1944, as well as on the board of the governing council; between 1989 and 1992, he was also a member and a coordinator of the Bulgarian National Agrarian Union–Nikola Petkov.
21 Nikola Dafinov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 29, 2011.
The Special Inquiry Commission at the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior

In March 1990 the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior appointed a commission officially named the Special Inquiry Commission for the Investigation of the Atrocities in the Camps of Lovech, Skravena, and Others (SIC). The SIC was chaired by Bulgaria’s Minister of the Interior, General Atanas Semerdzhiev, and had twenty-two members. (Figure 3.5) Eleven of the committee members, including its chairman, were staff at the Ministry of the Interior, with military ranks of major, major-general (the equivalent of brigadier-general), and colonel. The rest of the commission was composed of a historian at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; three journalists representing television and print media; a member of the Party Ethics Committee of the Bulgarian Socialist Party; a member of the National Council at the General Assembly; and a member of the Governing Board of the Bulgarian National Agrarian Union. The remaining four members were former political prisoners: a representative of the Union of the Repressed after 1945; a representative of the Union of Repressed Communists; a representative of the Citizens’ Initiative Movement; and a member of the reestablished

22 The transcripts of the commission record a shift in its name. It is referred to both as the Special Inquiry Commission for the Investigation of the Atrocities in the Camps of Lovech, Skravena, and Others and as the Public-State Commission for the Assistance of in the Investigation of the Atrocities in the Camps of Lovech, Skravena, and Other Places. The dates of the eight sessions held by members of the Special Inquiry Commission in 1990 are as follows: Session 1, March 30; Session 2, April 4; Session 3, April 6; Session 5, April 9; Session 6, April 12; Session 7, April 16; and Session 8, May 15. All eight sessions are contained in two archival units, 140 and 142, and each of the archival units is separately paginated. I will refer both to the archival unit information and to the session number.

23 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 141 (Session 1) Special Inquiry Commission, chaired by Colonel-General (the equivalent of a two-star general) Atanas Semerdzhiev, Minister of the Interior. These were the other members: Angel Nikolov, Committee of Party Ethics of the Bulgarian Socialist Party; Vasil Gadzhanov, Evening News (newspaper); Dimitar Batalov, Union of the Repressed after 1945; Dobri Minchev, History Institute at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; Zelezan Raikov, Governing Board of the Agrarian Union; Ivan Viktorov, National Council at the General Assembly; Ivan Konstantinov, Bulgarian Television; Ivan Nevrokopski, Bulgarian National Agrarian Union–Nikola Petkov; Krasimir Samandzhiev, Ministry of the Interior; Leonid Katsamunski, National Bureau of Investigation; Lilian Kostadinov, Ministry of the Interior, Luben Dinov, Union of the Repressed Communists; Lubomir Sobadzhiev, Citizens’ Initiative Movement; Petko Kiprov, Ministry of the Interior; Svetlozar Pavlov, journalist; Snezhana Trendafilova, Ministry of the Interior; Stoyan Stoyanov, Ministry of the Interior; Tancho Chalburov, Ministry of the Interior; Todor Boiadzhiev, secretary general of the Ministry of the Interior; Hristo Velichkov, director of the Militia (police); Tsviatko Tsvetkov, Ministry of the Interior.
Bulgarian National Agrarian Union–Nikola Petkov.\textsuperscript{24} Only half of the SIC’s members were civilian; the other half were mid- to high-ranking officers, and with the exception of Colonel Snejana Trendafilova, whose voice is rarely heard during the meetings and then only to read formal pronouncements, they are all men.\textsuperscript{25} The SIC met eight times between March 30, 1990 and May 15, 1990. All sessions took place in Sofia.\textsuperscript{26}

The SIC has a far-reaching legacy, since much of what is known about the Bulgarian gulag today is based on the commission’s findings, which were themselves based on secret police files provided by the Ministry of the Interior. Commission members reviewed these files collectively and individually, and they conducted interviews with former camp guards, administrative and ancillary staff, and former camp inmates. The claim that about one hundred concentration camps existed from 1944 to 1962, and that they held twenty-three thousand

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure3.5.jpg}
\caption{General Atanas Semerdzhiev, Bulgarian Minister of the Interior (and Chairman of the Special Inquiry Commission for the Investigation of the Atrocities in the Camps of Lovech, Skravena, and Others (SIC). Photographer unknown.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{24} See note 35 for a complete list of the members of the Special Inquiry Commission.
\textsuperscript{25} AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 24 (Session 4); a.u.141, 26 (Session 8).
\textsuperscript{26} AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 141 (Session 1).
internees, originated in the commission’s findings. Scholars and journalists in Bulgaria and abroad immediately employed these statistics in their narratives, and they continue to shape the current understanding of the camp past. Two main studies, Tzvetan Todorov’s *Voices from the Gulag* in English and Penka Stoyanova’s and Emil Iliev’s *Politicheski Opasni Litsa* in Bulgarian, rely on the statistical information reported by the SIC; the statistics as reported in these two works are in turn cited in many other publications. Yet despite the importance of the SIC’s findings, scholars have remained silent about the actual workings of the commission or about its members and their motivations.

Officially, the SIC was created in response to the discovery in 1989 of Bulgaria’s repressive apparatus and to answer to the overwhelming amount of information about crimes perpetrated in the forced-labor camps during the communist regime. Revelations about the abuses in the camps of Lovech and Skravena, the neighboring female section, drew special attention. In the words of the commission’s chairman, spoken at the first meeting on March 30, 1990:

*I do not remember a Commission such as this one to have ever been created [in Bulgaria] before. This is a new phenomenon in our public political life caused by extraordinary circumstances—the discovery about the creation and functioning of the Lovech and Skravena camps, and the evildoings committed there. I do not use the word*

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27 The Commission’s estimates were too high when it came to the number of camps and too low on the number of people interned in the camps. My research indicates that there were around forty camps during the entire communist period (1944 to 1989) and around thirty-two thousand internees between 1944 and 1962.

28 The statistics and information published by the SIC are frequently used as evidence by two Bulgarian academics in 1991, in one of the earliest Bulgarian scholarly studies on the topic of internment, forced labor, and deportations after 1944. See Stoyanova and Iliev, *Politicheski Opasni Litsa*, 7–39. Stoyanova’s and Iliev’s study in turn often serves as reference point for subsequent investigations in both Bulgarian and English. For example, see Rumen Daskalov, *Debating the Past: Modern Bulgarian History, from Stambolov to Zhivkov* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 272; Jordan Baev, “Stalinist Terror in Bulgaria, 1944–1956,” in McDermott and Stibbe, *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe*, 189, 197, Daniela Koleva, *Belenе—Miasto na Pamet?* 8. Todorov also incorporates the SIC statistics in the “Historical Summary” section of *Voices from the Gulag*, 40–41.
evildoings accidentally, because what is at stake here are serious offenses against people, against their dignity and their life—nature’s most precious gift.  

In the most general sense, the SIC’s stated purpose was to “reveal the truth, the whole truth” free of any “political bias.” The commission quickly distinguished its functions from those of the newly formed Office of the Prosecution, which was initiating several cases aimed at bringing to trial former communist officials. The majority of those cases would fail, including those against the people accused of holding responsibility for the human rights violations in the Lovech camp.  

At the SIC’s inaugural meeting, General Semerdzhiev highlighted the ways in which the commission differed from the Office of the Prosecution: “We have to distinguish our functions from those performed by the Prosecution in its investigation and criminal inquiry, which is carried out by an order of the State. We do no have the right to interfere in their activities.” The Office of the Prosecution could compel witnesses to appear and could press charges, while the SIC had no such authority. The individuals who came to testify before the SIC, former camp inmates as well as former camp authorities, did so voluntarily. The general described the commission as a “public-state” (obshtestvenno durzhavna) institution that did not carry out prosecutorial functions but aimed at the “self-purification” of Bulgarian society.

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29 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 1 (Session 1).
30 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 1 (Session1).
31 Of particular interest here is Case #4/1990, an investigative case that started in 1990 and that eventually became Case #2/1994 of the Military Prosecutor’s Office in 1994, indicting four defendants, two of which were charged with carrying out “premeditated, especially torturous and intentionally cruel murders of more than one person” in their capacity as guards in the Lovech camp. See Bill of Indictment of Case #2/1994 of the Military Prosecutor’s Office, 17. The former prosecutor general of the Republic of Bulgaria, Ivan Tatarchev, provided me with a copy of the Bill of Indictment during my interview with him in September 2003; he subsequently passed away in December 2008. For a somewhat dated but still compelling journalistic investigation of the failed Case #4/1990, see Hristov, Serkentoto Delo. For a more recent a summary of lustration and transitional justice procedures in post-communist Bulgaria, see Momchil Methodiev, “Bulgaria,” in Lavinia Stan, 152–75.
32 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 1–2 (Session 1).
33 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 25 (Session 1).
That is, the SIC did not aim to establish a guilty verdict. The commission’s position vis-à-vis the Office of the Prosecution nevertheless remains complicated, and the initial distance, articulated by General Semerdzhiev, was quickly breached by the chairman himself: “All the evidence that we collect will be handed over to the Prosecution. This is one of our goals, to collaborate with the Prosecution.” Furthermore, the chief investigator and first prosecutor for the Office of the Prosecution, Lilko Iotsov, was present at SIC meetings, and he participated in discussions about the commission’s rights questioning individual witnesses. At the very least we should note the close collaboration between the two institutions. The evidence collected and compiled by the SIC was turned over to the Office of the Prosecution, and the latter made note of the individuals, whether former inmates or camp guards, questioned by the commission. The Prosecution later called as witnesses some of these individuals, and it eventually laid charges against two of them.

Outside the purview of prosecutorial functions, the SIC had four specific tasks as it embarked on the quest for truth. First came the “search for documents relating to the creation and the functioning of the camps and the gross violations of law committed there and the cruel methods of torture.” Second, the SIC was to “seek out victims, their families, and officials responsible for running the camps, as well as those who worked there,” in hopes that the oral history testimonies could pad out information gleaned from the documents. The third goal articulated by the commission, “to analyze the information in its entirety and make the appropriate conclusions to determine responsibility, to determine those who are responsible

34 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 25 (Session 1).
35 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 6–34 (Session 3).
36 The camp guard and State Security representative at Lovech, Nikolai Gazdov, and the Lovech camp commandant, Petur Gogov, both of whom testified before the Special Inquiry Commission on April 9 and April 12, 1990, were charged with “premeditated, especially torturous and intentionally cruel murders of more than one person.” See Bill of Indictment of Case #2/1994 of the Military Prosecutor’s Office, 16–18.
37 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 2 (Session 1).
38 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 2 (Session 1).
[for the crimes in Lovech and Skravena],” appeared less tangible and also seemed to contradict its claim of not meddling in the affairs of the judiciary. The fourth and final goal constituted a nod to the Bulgarian public, acknowledging that its opinion now mattered. The commission situated its investigation, as several of its members repeatedly stated, within the realm of “public inquiry.” In Semerdzhiev’s words, “ultimately, we have to enable our [Bulgarian] community to form a position with regard to these dark pages of our national life, because I am deeply convinced that the public’s strict moral assessment of these facts is actually the result that we seek.” The commission’s fundamental objective was thus to enable the Bulgarian public to form an opinion and to take a stance on the question of the abuses perpetrated in the camps.

On paper, the SIC’s creation was indeed a formidable endeavor and its goals lofty and laudable: a depoliticized inquiry into the abuses of the Bulgarian gulag to arrive at a historically accurate appraisal for the Bulgarian public by considering both archival evidence and oral testimonies. Some facts seemed odd, however, for example, that the camps to be investigated by the commission, appointed by the Ministry of the Interior, had actually been regulated by that same ministry. It is of course possible that the Ministry of the Interior, at this time undergoing a massive transformation, including the disbanding of its notorious secret police, had been jolted into an act of conscience. As one of the SIC participants pointed out in reference to the commission’s formation: “This initiative is an honor for the Ministry.”

39 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 2 (Session 1).
40 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 9 (Session 1).
41 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 2 (Session 1).
Although the person making this statement remains unnamed in the transcripts, his words reveal him as civilian commission member. He addressed the employees at the Ministry of the Interior and SIC members: “What you are doing is very impressive—to come into contact with the public. To exit from the closed circle [Da izlezete ot kruga na tazi zatvorenost].”\(^{43}\) It seemed improbable that what had until recently been the most feared branch of the Bulgarian communist government, the Ministry of the Interior, responsible for running an extensive repressive apparatus, had now created “a public governmental body, which took it upon itself to publicly reveal the truth [about the camps].”\(^{44}\) And it was indeed improbable.

Two months before the SIC sessions started in late March 1990, the Governing Collegium of the Ministry of the Interior had ended a round of several private meetings. These meetings, also chaired by General Semerdzhiev, took place between December 1989 and January 1990.\(^{45}\) It was during these private sessions that the ministry’s overhaul was planned, and shortly afterward Semerdzhiev publicly announced, as the Bulgarian and Western media widely reported, the disbandment of the country’s secret police.\(^{46}\) But during the last of the ministry’s closed-door meetings, on January 24, 1990, another decision was made, this one kept private: All files from the archive of the Interior Ministry deemed compromising would be destroyed. Besides Semerdzhiev, three additional future SIC members attended the

\(^{43}\) AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 9 (Session 1). On the politically legitimizing functions of the Bulgarian secret police, see Methodiev, *Machina za Legitimnost*, 296, 303.

\(^{44}\) AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 16 (Session 1).

\(^{45}\) “Transcripts of the Proceedings of the Collegium of the Ministry of the Interior held on 24.01.1990 at 10:00 a.m. in the Boardroom of the Ministry.” The transcripts are available online in Bulgarian on the site of the independent investigative journalist Hristo Hristov (http://desebg.com/2011-01-13-09-25-08), last accessed on June 9, 2013.

Governing Collegium’s meeting: Krasimir Samandzhiev, Leonid Katsamunski, and Stoyan Stoyanov. At the outset of the proceedings, the question of documentation had been put in general terms, “Within a couple of days, a list of internal-regulatory [vutreshnonormativni] documents, which should be invalidated and destroyed, will be presented before the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior.” Semerdzhiev addressed more specifically the concern with regard to the ministry’s regulations and governing documents (podzakonovi nortmativni aktove i rukovodni dokymenti): “Part of this problem is the destruction of a large series of documents, which come into gross contradiction with the new situation and present us as violators of the constitution.” He reiterated, “In the coming days, a list of the documents to be destroyed has to be submitted.” While nothing precise was said about the information contained in the documents, Semerdzhiev, aware that time was running out, urged “organizational procedures with regard to the deadlines for the destruction of the documents” and reminded his staff that this had to be done both in the headquarters and in branch locations. Semerdzhiev and other participants in the private meetings clearly considered some of the archival files inflammatory, so that, as the proceedings drew to a close, the general again reminded the Governing Collegium that documentation had to be “cleared” of everything “that could be used for a pogrom.”

Two months later, as the SIC began its investigation into the history of the camps, General Semerdzhiev made adamant pronouncements with regard to the retrieval of archival evidence, starting with his pledge at the inaugural meeting: “I want to assure you that we are

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determined to shed full light, to reveal the complete, objective truth.”  

During the commission’s second meeting, on April 2, 1990, several of its members raised concerns about documentation missing in the files provided by the Ministry of the Interior. One of the most active commission members, Svetozar Pavlov, a journalist who had personally reviewed the documentation, expressed doubt about the files’ completeness. In particular, he was concerned about missing lists of the leadership responsible for the camps’ organization and management. Pavlov wanted to focus the commission’s efforts on tracing the origins of the repressive apparatus, which had culminated with the gross violations at Lovech. He also wanted to delve into the question of accountability. He clearly and specifically articulated the requirements to achieve this end:

I would like to announce what, in my opinion, is needed. These are: a complete and accurate list of the Ministry of the Interior county supervisors [okruzhnite nachalnitsi] for the period of January 1, 1959, to 31.12 [sic], as well as their aids within VI [Department of Internment and Deportation], officer-agents, a list of the county prosecutors for this period of time, as well as their replacements. I do not know if this is within our right, but the compiling of the list is a technicality, which could be implemented. And perhaps what is necessary is also a list of the first secretaries of the District Party Committees, including the people responsible for liaising with the Ministry of the Interior, their instructors and assistants. … In addition to this, what I think is missing is the list of the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior at the time.

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53 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 22 (Session 1).
54 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 5–6 (Session 2).
including the complete list of the Collegium, the head and the directors and the staff at department VI, including the technical assistants.\textsuperscript{55}

Semerdzhiev waited until almost the end of the meeting to respond. He commended Pavlov for his “comprehensive” concerns and questions,\textsuperscript{56} but remained vague when it came to the lists the journalist requested. Regarding a list of the camp leadership, he said, “As far as the documentation made it possible, we have already found out [some of the names] and we’ll continue to seek others.”\textsuperscript{57} The general made clear that some of the other lists, specifically the ones that concerned connections between the District Party Committees and the Ministry of the Interior, went beyond the commission’s reach, but he promised to ask for them nonetheless.\textsuperscript{58} Rounding up the meeting and attempting to clarify the state of the archival investigation, Semerdzhiev addressed the SIC members:

I want to bring your attention to the fact that we do not consider that what we have presented is the complete documentation. The search continues. It will also incorporate the territorial structures of the Ministry of the Interior. The question that arose before me today concerns the former district regional offices [\textit{okruzhni i oblastni upravlenia}], where there is no information concerning these events [the human rights abuses], and even if there had been, it is destroyed. … But we will look for it. I can assure you that in this regard we will be rigorous.

\textsuperscript{55}AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 5–6 (Session 2); italics added.
\textsuperscript{56}AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 16 (Session 2).
\textsuperscript{57}AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 16 (Session 2).
\textsuperscript{58}AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 16 (Session 2).
Whatever there is and wherever it is, we will find it and we will provide it for use to all the members of the Commission.  

For the remaining six sessions the commission’s chairman continued reassuring the rest of the members that an active search for files pertaining to the camps was underway in the Ministry of the Interior archives. Yet given the orders that the general had issued his staff four months earlier, it seemed unlikely that the documentation would ever be found, retrieved, and presented to the commission. It seems plausible to assume that Semerdzhiev misled the SIC investigation about the complete retrieval of documentary evidence from the Ministry of the Interior.

When one combines Semerdzhiev’s statements from the two meetings held months apart in 1990, it is easy to conclude that, in many ways, the Special Inquiry Commission was a façade. Its stated intention, to fully reveal the historical truth about the abuses in the Lovech, Skravena, and other camps, was insincere, and the commission’s creation constituted an attempt by the Ministry of the Interior to control the memory of violence. Under the guise of truth-seeking, the SIC became truth-staging. These circumstances make it difficult to consider the SIC a public-state commission, which it purported to be.

How, then, do we treat the commission’s findings? Are they necessarily false? It seems imprudent to dismiss the SIC’s insights simply because they are rooted in an attempt by the Ministry of the Interior to maneuver the specifics of the camp past. Alongside efforts to manipulate the memory of violence, the 340 pages of transcripts left by the commission also

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59 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 17 (Session 2).
60 With the exception of Session 4 on April 6, 1990, which General Semerdzhiev did not attend, he made certain to emphasize that the search for archival information in the Ministry of the Interior files was ongoing. See AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 39 (Session 3). His pronouncements were almost always a variation of the following: “We will continue to look for the entire documentation, what is kept in the archive will be made available. We will not compromise.” See AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.142, 9 (Session 6).
reveal genuine attempts at addressing the truth about the camps. While the documentary evidence presented by the Ministry of the Interior to the SIC may have been lacking, it nonetheless provided the basis for a discussion about what took place behind the barbwire in Lovech and Skravena. During the first four meetings, between March 30 and April 6, 1990, SIC members discussed multiple issues related to the nature of the archival evidence—whether it was falsified, why so much of it was missing, why the camps were created, and who was responsible for the violence inside the Lovech camp. They also discussed the SIC’s role vis-à-vis society, the media, the Office of the Prosecution, and foreign international organizations like Amnesty International, which took an active interest in the Bulgarian camps. They raised questions about how to determine the validity of the oral history testimonies, how to record them, and how to present the findings to local and international media, as well as to Bulgarian society at large. Repeatedly, they engaged with the question of how to establish truthfulness.61

While it is difficult to speak to each commission member’s individual motivation, it is critical to note that not all members of the SIC participated equally in the particular staging of truth organized by the Ministry of the Interior. Some of the civilian members candidly engaged with the investigative goals set forth by the chairman at the inaugural meeting. They carefully examined the archival evidence, expressed concerns about its authenticity and incompleteness, and sought ways to compile more.62 At times, Ministry of the Interior staff and the civilian members of the commission disagreed about the treatment of evidence and about perceptions of the SIC.63

Questions of public perception and the commission’s legitimacy became especially pertinent when former camp inmates were called to testify about their experiences. In this

61 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 1–195 (Sessions 1, 2, 3, 4).
62 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 1 (Session 2); a.u.140, 25 (Session 3).
63 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 15, 23, 24 (Session 4).
context, one of the civilian members, Lubomir Sobadzhiev, insisted that the commission “does not belong only to the Ministry of the Interior” and suggested that “we [the SIC members] need to think in a civil manner [da razszhudavame po-grazhdanski].” Sobadzhiev wanted to reaffirm the commission’s civil society angle before the members themselves. In the same vein, Dimitur Batalov, another civilian member of the SIC and a representative of one of the survivor unions, reminded the commission that “people are still afraid.” Ivan Nevrokopski, one of the most active civilian SIC members, addressed the issue even more directly, at the commission’s first session, appealing to former camp inmates:

Comrades and Gentlemen,

I would like to tell you that in this Commission, there are not only people from within the Ministry of the Interior, but also people who, just like you, were in camps and in prisons. I am one of them. My name is Ivan Nevrokopski, from the Bulgarian National Agrarian Union—Nikola Petkov. I spent 12 years in prison. So the Commission wants to hear you, and all others, who know the truth about these things. And [you should] tell things as they were, without exaggeration, so that the truth may be understood. So you shall not be afraid. Be completely at ease, we want you to say the truth, such as it is.

Nevrokopski, Sobadzhiev, and Batalov seem to have been aware of the fear that still permeated the lives of those victimized by the former regime. They understood that the commission’s affiliation with the Ministry of the Interior would make many survivors feel unwelcome to share their experiences. Yet Nevrokopski’s words appear to have given some

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64 Lubomir Sobadzhiev of the Civil Society Initiative, AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 24 (Session 4).
65 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 14 (Session 4).
66 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 1 (Session 1).
assurance, as people who had been interned in the camps gradually came forward. Some thirty people, among them camp survivors willing to testify before the SIC members, contacted the commission within days of the first meeting.\(^6^7\) Although the commission welcomed individuals’ testimonies from the second meeting onward, it was not until the fifth session, on April 9, 1990, that a significant number of interviews and question periods took place. Testifying were former inmates as well as former agents of the repressive policies.\(^6^8\)

Perhaps the SIC’s most important contribution is that it provided people with an opportunity to engage in a conversation about the camp past and enabled them to shape their own narrative. Both victims and perpetrators from the Lovech camp sat together with SIC members and told of their experiences. The commission became a forum for encounters between former guards and prisoners, as well as between camp authorities and family members of camp inmates. Both victims and perpetrators indicated that fear significantly shaped these encounters for them. “It is the first time that I am among so many people [discussing this],” one former Lovech inmate told the commission; he continued, “actually I doubted for some time whether to come here; you know, a person who has passed through death has difficulties making up his mind.”\(^6^9\) The man went on to give the commission a lengthy narrative about his camp experience. He ended his testimony by underlining his fear. “Are there guarantees,” he asked, “that when I get in my car tonight, I will return home?”\(^7^0\) Semerdzhiev appeared moved by the testimony. He thanked the witness for his “heartbreaking story” and declared: “If someone tried to harm you, I would take that as an attack on me.”\(^7^1\)

\(^6^7\) AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 14 (Session 3).
\(^6^8\) AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 1–53 (Session 5); a.u.141, 1–144 (Sessions 6, 7, 8).
\(^6^9\) AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 33 (Session 5).
\(^7^0\) AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 50 (Session 5).
\(^7^1\) AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 50 (Session 5).
In light of the general’s misdirection of the archival investigation, one can perhaps dismiss his guarantee of safety and read false sentimentality into his overall reaction. Yet a genuine concern appears to permeate Semerdzhiev’s behavior in the interviews with former camp inmates. His condemnation of the abuses committed in Lovech, his outrage at the systemic injustices, and his sympathy for those interned there, including criminal inmates, appear more than only simulated expressions of sympathy. Furthermore, his interview sessions with the former camp authorities demonstrated a commitment to have them reveal as much information as possible about life in the Lovech camp, as his conduct on April 9, 1990, with Major Petur Gogov, the head of the Lovech camp, and with Colonel Delcho Chakurov, the former director of the Department of Internment and Deportation, makes plain. It can also be seen on April 12, 1990, when he questioned Lieutenant Nikolai Gazdov, the chief of the secret police at the Lovech camp, and Major Tsviatko Goranov, deputy chief of the Lovech camp.

Semerdzhiev interrogated the camp officials and guards about the reasons for the extreme violence that characterized life at Lovech and also inquired into their personal involvement and knowledge of the abuses. He wanted to know how many people were interned, how many perished, and how and why executions were carried out. The SIC’s chairman was the most active interrogator, and his questions attempted to stir the discussion in a meaningful direction, toward an understanding of the events in Bulgaria’s most violent camp. And herein lies the complexity and paradoxical nature of the Special Inquiry Commission, best embodied in the figure of General Semerdzhiev and his seemingly contradictory behavior. On the one hand, he withheld some documentary evidence available

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72 See especially Semerdzhiev’s opening and concluding remarks in his interview with N. Hristov, AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 33, 50–53 (Session 5).
73 AVMR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 5–32 (Session 5); a.u.141, 44–82 (Session 6).
from the archive at the Ministry of the Interior by ordering the destruction of compromising files. On the other hand, he enabled and led some of the most fruitful question periods with both victims and perpetrators of the camp system. How is it possible that the general was committed to both unveiling and concealing the truth about Lovech?

Devoid of context, Semerdzhiev’s behavior and the work of the Special Inquiry Commission indeed appear puzzling. When understood within the explanatory framework of the fall of a regime and the collapse of a system that had defined life for almost half a century, the proceedings of the SIC can be read as an expression of the desire to make sense of a dramatically changing reality at a time when “one could ask oneself whether one’s life had been real at all.”

And if one takes at face value the general’s concern about the danger of political unrest, which had enveloped the rest of the region, his behavior perhaps seems comprehensible and guided by the wish to contain political instability. More significantly, however, revelations of full archival disclosure would also have delegitimized the Ministry of the Interior. Threatened with extinction, or at least with a serious diminution of power, the ministry instead tried to preserve its status and reputation, with Semerdzhiev acting as the key player here. Of course, this came at the expense of the truth. By casting light on life in the camps while simultaneously ordering the destruction of important evidence, the general helped

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75 When reading General Semerdzhiev’s memoir of the political transformations in post-communist Bulgaria, including the workings of the Special Inquiry Commission, one may certainly detect a self-justifying narrative about the general’s role in the tumultuous transition. See Atanas Semerdzhiev, *Prezhivianoto ne podelzhi na obezhalvane* (Soﬁa: Trud, 2004). While the book belongs to the genre of post-communist nonfiction, which the cultural theorist Ivaylo Znepolski dubbed “biography laundering,” the memoir also reveals the general’s commitment to protecting the Communist Party and the structures of the Ministry of the Interior, which had merged with it. A former partisan, he considered himself a soldier of the Bulgarian Communist Party, even after its historical demise. At the same time, Semerdzhiev is also a general, and as a representative of the military establishment, which was not in charge of the camp network, he claims that he did not feel responsible for the atrocities committed in the camps.
enable the creation of a public discourse on the camps and minimized the possibility of assigning criminal liability for human rights violations at the same time.

Even though Semerdzhiev’s duplicitous behavior may have been partially guided by good intentions, his actions led to an investigation against him and another general from the Ministry of the Interior, Nanka Sekerdzhieva, in 1992. They were accused of destroying 144,235 files from the Ministry of the Interior, roughly 40 percent of the entire archive, among them many personal ones on agents and collaborators of the Bulgarian secret police. In April 2002, the Supreme Court handed down a prison sentence of four years and six months to Semerdzhiev and one of two years to Sekerdzhieva. Semerdzhiev served two and a half years under house arrest, but in early 2006 his sentence was overturned and the case against him terminated.

To this day the general denies ever having given orders to destroy records from the Ministry of the Interior. He insists that the archive was simply “restructured and everything valuable and necessary for national security was preserved using modern technologies. Valuable information was microfilmed and photocopied and the material was taken to a secret facility of the Ministry of the Interior outside of Sofia.”76 In 2012, when asked to provide the facility’s location, Semerdzhiev said he could not make that information available.77 The transcripts of the proceedings of the Governing Collegium of the Ministry of the Interior on January 24, 1990, reveal a different reality from the one the general describes today. Would the records that he ordered destroyed have yielded some important evidence? Would they reveal a missing thread in the history of the Bulgarian gulag? Would the files indeed have caused the “pogrom” that the general feared? Perhaps we will never know because the

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transcripts reveal little about the content of the destroyed records. The only specific reference ever made is to the Belene camp. Recognizing that the camp had emerged as the indisputable embodiment of the secret police’s terror, Semerdzhiev warned in a closed session: “Belene should vanish as a symbol of the repressive system. What should remain [in its place] is only an agricultural business company. Not to be used as a penitentiary.” It can thus be said that the general issued two orders, one for the physical destruction of the files and the other for the effacement of the memory of repression. While we may never know for certain whether the order for the physical destruction was carried out, we do know that the Ministry of the Interior did not succeed in obliterating the memory of the Belene camp. The site of the former camp forms part of a maximum-security prison complex that continues to operate on the island across from the town of Belene. The name, Belene, too continues to be recognized across Bulgaria as a symbol of communist repression.

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78 “Transcripts of the Proceedings of the Collegium of the Ministry of the Interior held on 24.01.1990,” 44.
CHAPTER 4

THE BULGARIAN PEARL OF THE DANUBE:
BELENE, TOWN AND PRISON-CAMP ISLAND

In this chapter, I examine the history of the Belene prison-camp complex, the most widely known symbol of the Bulgarian camp system, and the town of Belene from 1949, when the camp was created, until 2006. By extending the narrative into the post-1989 era, I address both the politics of memory and the collective memory of Belene as a site of violence, remembrance, and everydayness. The following focuses on the creation and the expansion of the Belene camp and prison and the ways in which the village of Belene developed into a town symbiotically with these penal institutions.¹ I explore these developments through institutional archives and the experiences of individuals. In bringing together the archives and the narratives, I ask what was the relationship between the camp and the town during the communist period. Furthermore, I inquire into how this relationship developed once the regime collapsed. By engaging with these questions, I aim to re-articulate current scholarly and public depictions of Belene.

Bulgarian discourses sustained by academics, journalists, and filmmakers posit Belene as an exceptional space within the country, the most potent symbol of communist repression but also a marker of amnesia, oblivion, and silence. The present chapter argues that far from

¹ Although this study substantially differs from Alan Barenberg’s study on the legacy of the Soviet Gulag in the prison camp town of Vorkuta, I am indebted to Barenberg for his subtle theoretical formulations and the ways in which his work has influenced my own understanding of the complicated relationship between camp and town, space and identity, in the Bulgarian context. See, Barenberg, Gulag Town, Company Town, 1–14.
exceptional, Belene is, in fact, representative of contemporary Bulgaria’s complex relationship to its communist past.

My study of the lives of different people connected to the Belene camp and town—including survivors, perpetrators, and town residents—revealed how their positionality within communist and post-communist society shaped the ways in which they both understood and represented their experiences before and after 1989. Their narratives indicate a difficulty of reconciling what the linguistic anthropologist, Serguei Oushakine, has termed, “a world of words” with a “world of things,” that is, they demonstrated a difficulty in expressing their individual and collective experiences under communism within the language of a post-communist society.

The absence of language becomes especially apparent in the case of Belene, as narrated by different individuals in this chapter or marked as an absence in the missing files in the purged state archives. Drawing on Oushakine’s formulation that “speechlessness does not mean wordlessness,” I contend that speechlessness does not equal amnesia in the context of present-day Belene. This chapter reveals how Belene’s silence, present on the surface, ought in fact to be seen as a language of its own to talk about the painful camp past.

Belene is located in northern Bulgaria, on the shores of the Danube River. It is a quaint little town with a population of about nine thousand people. Old peasant houses and Soviet-style architecture absurdly blend with the serenity of the Danube and its archipelago of islands. Island Persin, or Belene Island, as it is more commonly called, is the largest of these islands.

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4 Oushakine, “In the State of Post-Soviet Asphasia,” 998.
the fourth in size on the Danube and the biggest in Bulgaria. Measuring fifteen kilometers in length and six kilometers in width, it is considered one of the most ecologically important areas in the region and is home to an idyllic nature reserve with more than 170 rare water bird species. Its unique environmental characteristics have been globally recognized, and the island constitutes a protected area, part of the European Ecological Network and a wetland of international importance. In addition to the nature park, the island currently houses a penitentiary, a small portion of a nonoperational nuclear power plant, some Roman ruins, and a medieval fortress. Ecologists and nature enthusiasts have expressed much admiration for the picturesque island, dubbing it the Bulgarian Pearl of the Danube and urging visitors to discover its rich and captivating historical heritage. To this end, eco trails, kayaking and cycling tours, and a special water route, “In the Embrace of the Danube,” are offered to those interested in exploring the region. While these landmarks and facilities appeal to travelers’ imaginations, references to Belene Island's more sinister historical past are commonly omitted and obscured.

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5 In 2002, the site was recognized by the Ramsar Convention: The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as waterflow habitat. For more information, see http://www.ramsar.org/cda/ramsar/display/main/main.jsp?zn=ramsar&cp=1_4000_0_, last accessed on January 21, 2014.

6 The ancient Castrum Dimum is considered one of the most important medieval fortresses in Bulgaria.


9 The official Web site of the municipality of Belene and printed brochures courtesy of the same municipality do not contain any information about the camp. See http://obshtina.belene.net/, last accessed on January 16, 2014. The Danube Parks Network of Protected Areas, an EU cofinanced transnational project dedicated to nature preservation, contains the following oblique historical passage in reference to the region (italics mine): “In the lands of Pleven and Veliko Tarnovo districts as well as Nikopol, Belene and Svishtov municipalities many important events have happened. These areas have been played a key role in the history of the Bulgarian country. This region has still kept the scar of the eventful historical past as it conserved for the generations many historical places, monuments and sites from the Roman, Early Medieval and Medieval periods.” See http://www.danubeparks.org/?activities=4, last accessed on January 21, 2014.
What is often left unsaid is that Belene Island became the site of the longest-running concentration camp in the Bulgarian camp system during the communist era. With a three-year interruption beginning in 1953 following early de-Stalinization reforms, it actively operated from 1949 to 1959. In 1952-3 part of the island was also transformed into a prison, situated a few kilometers from where the camp had been. At the time many camp inmates were granted amnesty and released, but a few remained on the island. A Politburo resolution decreed that inmates considered “most dangerous for the public order” were to receive sentences and transferred to the newly established prison. Yet when the camp was reinstated at the end of 1956 in the aftermath of the Hungarian uprising, the prison did not close down. Starting in 1957, Belene Island thus housed both a prison and a camp. The camp was most actively used

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10 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.144. Also see, Daniela Koleva, “Belene,” 3.
until 1959, though it remained functional until the end of the regime in 1989. The Belene prison continues to operate to this day.

Officially, the camp closed down in the summer of 1959 and inmates were transferred to another site, near the town of Lovech. The island archipelago system, however, remained operational even though no camp internment took place there for a few years. The dead bodies of inmates killed in the Lovech camp (1959–62) were transported some one hundred kilometers back to Belene. Sometimes transports arrived twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening.\textsuperscript{11} The corpses were either thrown into the Danube River or buried in unmarked graves on one of the smaller islands.\textsuperscript{12} The archipelago’s remoteness and its natural frontier, the majestic river surrounding it, turned it into the ideal location for both the isolation of “enemies” and a silent graveyard for those who perished in the camps. In particular, the archipelago’s smaller islands, which regularly flooded, became convenient, anonymous, and secret burial grounds. According to officials of the secret police, the arrival of transports from Lovech and the burials sometimes stirred a fuss among the village population, but Belene Island’s remove nonetheless prevented “the oncoming flood of relatives of the deceased, cries at the graves, and the possible theft of the corpses.”\textsuperscript{13} Barred from mourning or retrieving the bodies of their loved ones at the time of death, the families of victims attempted to reclaim their remains in the post-communist years. The search for unmarked mass graves in early 1990 proved unsuccessful, however, whether due to the “unreliable evidence and slack investigation” conducted at the time, the uncertainty of eyewitness recollections, or the islands’ geography.\textsuperscript{14} The Danube naturally exhumed and disposed of the bodies, ultimately fulfilling the goal of the secret police to confine the killings to silence: “Erasing the traces of

\textsuperscript{11} AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.109.
\textsuperscript{12} AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u. 109.
\textsuperscript{13} AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u. 109.
\textsuperscript{14} Ivaylo Znepolski, \textit{Bez Sleda?} 7.
the dead is also the erasure of death itself as a camp reality,” the Bulgarian cultural theorist Ivaylo Znepolski aptly observed.15

Belene Island was so well situated that despite official pronouncements of its closure in 1959, the camp never completely shut down and remained operational throughout most of the communist regime. As Bulgaria’s head of state, Todor Zhivkov remarked in 1959 at a Politburo session discussing the fate of the camp and the pressing need to close it, “Belene should remain [open] for when times get complicated.” Times seem to have remained complicated until the end.16 From 1964 until 1977, people were interned in Belene at a significantly reduced scale, without a trial or a sentence. Between 1984 and 1986 the camp once again functioned at an increased rate during the final mass-scale repressive operation of the communist government, the forced-assimilation campaign against Bulgaria’s Turkish and Muslim minority. The island’s shore had also briefly been used for internment in the pre-communist years. Between 1942 and 1943, some soldiers and peasants were mobilized for national labor service (a form of compulsory labor) at Belene.17 During the camp’s most active phase from 1949 to 1959, an estimated twelve thousand people passed through Belene without sentences; if we take into account internment from 1959 until 1989, there were around fourteen thousand altogether.18 One scholar estimates that perhaps as many as thirty thousand people were sent to the camp and/or the prison for the entire period of 1949–86.19

Unfortunately, the available records from the purged secret police archive do not provide enough evidence to estimate with any reasonable certainty the number of those who died.

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15 Znepolski, Bez Sleda, 7.
16 Zhivkov, cited in Znepolski, Bez Sleda, 22.
18 Skochev, “Kontzlagerut Belene,” 316; Znepolski, Bez Sleda, 22.
19 Znepolski, Bez Sleda, 22.
Given the longevity of forcible internment and labor on this Danubian archipelago, the name “Belenе” unsurprisingly stands as a symbol of the communist regime’s enduring repression in Bulgaria. Even before the government’s collapse, Belene had already become part of underground socialist folklore. In the mid-1950s, a saying went, “if you dance the swing, you are off to Belene.” In the late 1960s, children sang songs mocking the camp’s sinister reputation, and parents warned them that if they did not listen, they were going to send them to Belene.20

In 1983, a foreign press of unknown name published the memoirs of former camp inmates, and that same year the recollections and “in absentia” reports of the exiled and assassinated Bulgarian writer Georgi Markov were also released in English.21 Belene, or more specifically the fear associated with Belene, frequently appeared in Markov’s descriptions of everyday life in Bulgaria in the 1950s and 1960s. The most poignant passage related the writer’s encounter with the physical space of the island. In the late 1950s, Markov traveled on a cruise boat on the Danube alongside some French tourists:

The boat glided elegantly along with the current of the river, we sunbathed on the upper deck and cooled off under the showers, the radio played pleasant light music, when somebody—on every journey, this ghostly voice speaks up—said:

“Belenе.”

All the Bulgarians on the boat turned and stared for a long time at the green island until it was left far behind. It was as if the music in the wireless had

20 A popular children’s street song during this time included the lyrics, “Jeep-Jeep Belene, ‘tis the new resort, five years labor, ain’t so bad after all.” The song was referred to in the title of a 1990 newspaper article about the Belene camp; see Luba Manolova, “Dzhipsi, Dzhipsi Belene . . .” Narodna Mladezh, April 2, 1990.
21 Georgi Zhechev, Persinskata Golgota (n.p., 1983). The memoir was published in Bulgarian, as noted in Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 2. I have not been able to locate a copy of it, however. Also see, Nedialko Geshev, Belene, ostrovut na zabravenite (n.p.,1983). Georgi Markov, The Truth That Killed.
suddenly become the hooting of an owl, the whole innocent enchantment of the river had disappeared and the sun had faded, darkened by frightening memories of so many tales and rumors about this island, Bulgaria’s Calvary. There is hardly a Bulgarian living who has not known some inhabitant of this socialist showcase.

[. . .] I remembered how, feet dangling over the edge of the boat, a youth with a guitar once sang a strange song:

Danube, white river, how quiet you flow

Danube, black river what anguish you know . . .

Starting in 1990, seventeen years after Markov’s words first appeared in English, Belene made newspaper headlines as “the Island of Death” in Bulgaria and abroad. Bulgarian scholars, writers, and journalists to this day characterize Belene as the embodiment of the Bulgarian communist “Gulag.” Yet their investigations frequently ponder the dearth of research on the Belene camp and lament the absence of a real memory about its past. The titles of the two main Bulgarian investigations on the topic, both punctuated by a question mark, imply this nonexistent memory. The Institute for Studies of the Recent Past, the nongovernmental, Sofia-based organization dedicated to the research of Bulgarian communist history published both Daniela Koleva’s Belene: A Site of Memory? (2010) and Ivaylo Znepolski’s Without a Trace? The Belene Camp, 1949–1959 and After . . . (2009). Znepolski’s photographic book focuses on the material culture of the camp, and contains photographs of the site from 1942, 1985, and many more from the annual meetings held by former inmates on the grounds of the former camp in the post-communist years. The written text accompanying the photographs reminds

23 For more recent international news coverage of Belene as a site of violence, see Anna Mudeva, “Belene: The Forgotten Death Camp,” Reuters, November 9, 2009.
24 See Daniela Koleva, Belene: Miasto Na Pamet 8. Also see the documentary film by the German-Bulgarian writer Iljia Trojanow, Vorwärts aber nie vergessen: Ballade über bulgarische Helden [Moving on, But Never Forgetting: A Ballad about Bulgarian Heroes], 2007.
readers that thus far no visual evidence of the camps during the communist era has been retrieved from the archives.\footnote{Znepolski, \textit{Bez Sleda}, 7. While no photographs of the camps from the communist period haven been found in currently declassified archival holdings, it is certain that such photographs exist in private collections. For instance, see the photographs from Julia Ruzhgeva’s private album in this chapter.} Various other fragments from the camp’s history, drawings, paintings, and poems by former inmates, and historical summaries (supported by archival documents) that span the camp’s long years of operation and post-communist attempts at commemoration and transitional justice comprise the tome.

Although Znepolski’s and Koleva’s publications do not offer a comprehensive historical account of the Belene camp, they provide important insights into the “archeology of the concentration camp past” through differing methodologies.\footnote{Znepolski, \textit{Bez Sleda}, 9.} Koleva’s oral history project tackles the collective memory of the camp by Belene’s present-day (2008–9) residents. The photographic book, supplemented by Znepolski’s analytical text, presents a compelling visual narrative of the camp in an attempt to resurrect its silenced history and bring its presence to the fore of contemporary remembrance practices. Taken together, these studies constitute a significant intervention into Bulgaria’s culture of silence. Koleva’s and Znepolski’s examinations are valuable, furthermore, because they reveal how various social groups currently remember, imagine, and interpret Belene.\footnote{Znepolski, \textit{Bez Sleda}, 9.} In other words, they reflect dominant narratives, both public and scholarly, worth examining in greater detail.

Contemporary Bulgarian discourses posit Belene as a continuous other, distinct from the rest of Bulgaria’s towns and cities when it comes to the recent communist past. Belene’s otherness is rooted principally in the complicated relationship between the camp’s gruesome history and the town residents’ acknowledgment, or lack of acknowledgment, of this difficult past. Both Znepolski and Koleva are preoccupied with the silencing of the camp past:

\footnote{Znepolski, \textit{Bez Sleda}, 7. While no photographs of the camps from the communist period haven been found in currently declassified archival holdings, it is certain that such photographs exist in private collections. For instance, see the photographs from Julia Ruzhgeva’s private album in this chapter.}
Znepolski refers to all Bulgarian camps as “non-places” (*nemjasto*), while Koleva asserts that “the collective memory of the camp in Belene is a collective amnesia, or rather, a ‘collective repression’ possibly grounded in an unreflective collective guilt.” Koleva’s anthropological examination of what she terms “the vernacular of remembering” in Belene aims to trace the ways in which memory operates in the town “below the level of the institutions, media, and national history.” Koleva concludes that Belene’s community is unwilling to take on the legacy of the camp past: “No local institution or group has engaged with this aspect of the town’s past.” Her conclusion, however, demonstrates the inherent contradiction in any attempt to trace vernacular memory beyond the intuitional level. In Belene, in particular, it is difficult to separate the institutional from the vernacular concerning the camp’s history and memory. The institutional, the creation and administration of the camp by the secret police, and the vernacular, the participation of the town’s residents in the running of the camp, have coalesced. A useful point of departure, and one that I explore in the following pages, would be to unearth the path of this mergence: How did camp administrators and town residents interact? What ensued of these institutional-vernacular interactions in the post-communist years?

Without taking into account the ways in which the legacy of the camp lends meaning and context to the present, and in the absence of national state remembrance, it seems imprudent to place the onus of remembering the violence onto Belene’s residents alone. To claim that they “avoid the theme [of the camp], except when they express their chagrin at the ill fame of their town,” seems like a rather premature conclusion. I spent four years in and out of Belene between 2003 and 2007, mostly residing there in 2006. In the course of filming

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and fieldwork, I conducted more than sixty interviews, several of them in depth and over a sustained period of time, with Belene’s residents.\footnote{Some of the interviews can be seen in the feature-length documentary film Problemat s komarite i drugi istorii (The Mosquito Problem and Other Stories).} Initially, I too felt the temptation of comprehending the town only through the familiar tropes of violence and silence that have come to define it in Bulgarian public discourse. With time, however, I recognized the importance of unpacking Belene of its conventional meaning to try and grasp how it had become such a potent symbol of repression, and why, furthermore, this reputation was sustained.

My research indicates, somewhat contrary to Koleva’s conclusions, that Belene’s residents discuss the camp quite openly, though not immediately. An initial silence indeed prevails when it comes to the topic of the camp, or lagera, as the locals refer to it, but it is a surface silence. Furthermore, it seems to me not born from willful amnesia, as Koleva suggests, but rather from discomfort and, sometimes, fear.\footnote{Koleva, “Belene,” 16.} In fact, the topic of the camp is an ever-present specter. Since most residents expect visitors to reproach them about the camp, they usually wait for the topic to be broached. Instead, as do many people who live near the Danube delta or in proximity to large swamps, Belene’s residents will talk at length about mosquitoes. Each year, thousands of mosquitoes swarm the area and descend in dark clouds on the little town, with locals trying to defeat them in every way possible: fumigation trucks, disinfection helicopters, vacuum cleaners, Raid spray, and manure smoke. Proudly describing their life in the quiet provincial outpost, a local couple claims that “our only problem here is the mosquitoes.”\footnote{Josephina and Ivan Dobranchevi, interview with the author, Belene, August, 2006.} Belene’s mosquitoes are an actuality, a fact of everyday life—but a “metaphorical reality that hovers above all other realities,” as literary scholar Oana Popescu-
Sandu indicated. Everyone’s prolonged mosquito talk veils something unstated. Soon enough conversations about life in an idyllic town by the river, one plagued only by an army of insects, give way into something more pressing. To paraphrase one interviewee, all of a sudden it seems that the mosquitoes are the least of anyone’s worries.

Geographically and economically isolated, Belene suffers from high unemployment rates. The search for financial stability is on everyone’s mind, but the town’s inhabitants are also preoccupied with questions of perception. Belene’s residents today insist that their identity be seen as separate from that of the island and the camp. A play, “The Long Journey,” penned by a writer from the town and performed by Belene’s amateur theater troupe in 2006, tackled somewhat indirectly the complex identity of the town’s past and present. Post-play interviews with the performers, however, pointed more explicitly to Belene residents’ desire to be seen as more than just inheritors of the island’s unhappy legacy. “Belene is not the island, as everyone thinks,” declared one of the actors while the rest enthusiastically agreed.

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40 The Belene theater troupe, BelaArt, interview with the author, Belene, June, 2006.
As Koleva noted, there is a “fairly consensual public narrative” about the Belene camp as a site of extreme atrocity.\(^4\) “Belene is not the island, as everyone thinks,” thus constitutes a plea to acknowledge the difference between camp and town, for the island is the camp, as well as the prison, and therefore a site of continuous of violence. But if Belene is the island, then Belene is also the camp, and its residents agents of this violence. And some of them indeed were.

Bulgarian discourses collectively depict Belene as a milieu de violence (a physical site of violence) during communism and a contested lieu de mémoire (a realm of memory) in the early 1990s, which gradually transformed into a lieu d’oubli (a realm of forgetting) in the present day. This straightforward trajectory of Belene as a memoryscapes of atrocity and forgetting fails to take into account, however, questions of agency implicit in the relationship

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between the state and resident populations in the context of central planning.42 Furthermore, the depiction reinforces a simplistic opposition between the local Belene and the national Bulgaria. Belene is thus turned into symbol of otherness, which proves redemptive and convenient for those outside the Belene community who wish to point a finger for a failed reckoning with a criminal past. As the mayor of the town, Petur Dulev, stated in 2006: “We are a country within a country.”43 And the country within has become a scapegoat. Public and scholarly discourses, as revealed in Koleva’s study or in the journalistic sources, for instance, continuously engage in hermeneutic scapegoating when they assign Belene its status of an exceptional space within the Bulgarian state.

Belene’s silence about the concentration camp past is also Bulgaria’s silence. It is not confined to a particular place, but spread across the country, though maybe most evident in this small town. In this sense, I see Belene as a microcosm of Bulgaria’s difficult relationship with its communist past. It is ultimately a relationship fraught with contested memories and underlined by the absence of a state discourse on the violence past. Belene—as a village turned into the longest-running concentration camp site (1949) and a prison (1952/3), then into a town (1964) and a site of nuclear hope (1981)—is perhaps the most exaggerated but also most explicit representation of state experimentation in modern Bulgaria. How were the lives of ordinary peasants in 1949 impacted by the state’s decision to build a camp? What did it mean to grow up in a town with a concentration camp as the main employer? How were residents affected when the ideological grounds shifted in 1981, and the camp past was replaced with the nuclear future?

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42 See James Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).
43 Petar Dulev, mayor of Belene, interview with the author, Belene, March 2006.
Before communist authorities established the camp in 1949, Belene was an impoverished village in which the Bulgarian Communist Party did not enjoy much support. Given the absence of strong ideological backing by the locals, the secret police authorities were unsure if the camp location was even suitable. During the following forty years, Belene’s identity became unequivocally transformed and the location branded a site of violence. As the village grew into a town, the camp and the prison that grew alongside it subsumed its identity. The village/town itself provided specific conditions that made possible the particular evolution of the camp both as an institution and a habitat. The village/town imprinted its character onto the reality of that habitat. In one sense, this is the story of the town/village/island Belene that became the site of one of the most enduring symbols of terror: a case study, if you will, in the history of concentration camps. It is the story of a community whose reality and livelihood was determined by a state decision to legitimize the existence of a repressive institution and to implicate it in the implementation of the coercive measures necessary for the running of a camp.

However, Belene’s history does not lend itself to an easy, one-dimensional representation of the “repressive state at the top and the oppressed at the bottom.” If Belene’s case reveals any broader truth at all, it is that state repression is always conditional on human agency. The latter seems essential to any “engagement and experience with power.” Hence this is also story of the establishment and fortification of the camp as an institution, one on which the ethnographic character and individuality of the town residents left a decisive mark. Three dimensions exist in the lifeworld of Belene that are distinct yet deeply intertwined.

During the communist era, inmates (later survivors), camp employees (later perpetrators), and

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45 Radamacher, “The Symposium of the Turtle.”
town residents negotiated complex relationships of power within the repressive setting of the camp and the prison, which gradually extended into the town. These relationships were also embedded in the post-communist period when camp and prison survivors in search of catharsis, followed by representatives of the media and the judiciary in search of accountability, returned to the town and the island.

The various convergent narratives and lived experiences that constitute Belene unfold and intersect in the following pages. The Belene of the perpetrators is presented through the stories of the guard Julia Ruzhgeva and her superior, Mihail Kurchev the former superintendent of the camp, the local secret police representative and town mayor, who was responsible for establishing the camp but unlike Ruzhgeva never stood trial in the post-communist era. The Belene of the victims is narrated by a survivor of the camp and prison in the 1950s, Nikola Kurtukliev, through the drawing and writing of Krum Horozov, a former inmate from the Belene prison, and through the collective narratives of the survivor community. Throughout are heard the voices of Belene’s residents, those living in the town as well as those living on the island.

**Continuities: Camp and Prison**

Starting in 1949, Belene Island alongside the smaller islands functioned as a large camp (and from 1952/3) prison complex, consisting of five separate sites, designated with Roman numerals. Site I, located close to the shore, was the prison, and Site II, located more than ten kilometers into the island, at its farthest end, was the camp. Between 1949 and 1959, the majority of inmates were held at these two sites; each facility housed anywhere from two

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thousand to two thousand and five hundred individuals during this time. Most people who found themselves either sentenced at Site I or interned without sentence in Site II were, broadly put, considered political enemies of the regime. About two hundred inmates, some of them sentenced for criminal offenses, others not, were also imprisoned at Site I; they were kept isolated, however, in separate quarters. Sites III and V were used for farming and brickworks, respectively. Site IV, the women’s camp, was located on a smaller island, called Shturets, and about one hundred and twenty women without sentences were interned there.

In the first ten years of its existence, the Belene camp operated in two phases. The Ministry of the Interior administered the territory of the island from 1949 until the end of 1956. On January 1, 1957, the Ministry of the Interior transferred the administration of prison institutions to the Ministry of Justice. At this time, the Ministry of the Interior also agreed to have the Ministry of Justice manage most of the island’s territory. One site, however, was excluded from this general transfer of authority and domains: Site II, at the far end of the island where the actual camp was located, remained under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior. Thus, starting in 1957, the island housed both the camp and the prison. The camp section housed both men and women, while the prison was for men only. Situated only kilometres apart, these two institutions functioned simultaneously under different jurisdictions that nonetheless frequently collaborated. Some conflicts also arose between the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of the Interior regarding the economic activity and

48 Znepolski, Bez Sleda, 27.
49 From May 1949 until September 1953 and from November 1956 until August 1959. AMVR, f.23, op1, a.u.153.
50 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.144, l.9. Memorandum #920, April 30, 1958.
51 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.145, l.45. Decree #422/30.
52 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.144, l.9. Memorandum #920, April 30, 1958.
53 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.145, Decree #422/30, 45.
54 The female section of the camp, the Zhenobekt, was located on a smaller island in the Danube, Shturets, which also formed part of the prison-camp complex.
55 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.145, l.45.
production on the island, since the sites were also managed, poorly, as industrial enterprises.\footnote{FO 371/106258.}

A secret memorandum signed by both ministers in fact obliged the administrations of the camp and the prison to work together. Nonetheless, the memorandum also underlined that the commander of the camp served as the single authority of the industrial enterprise.\footnote{AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.144, l.9. Memorandum #920, April 30, 1958.} Even though the Ministry of the Interior managed only a small portion of the island territory, it still held more power on Belene than the Ministry of Justice. In later years, the two ministries continued to co-manage the island, namely, between 1957 and 1977 and between 1984 and 1986, when, alongside the prison, a modified version of the camp operated again on Site II. During these years, around two thousand individuals were sent to the Belene camp.\footnote{Skochev, “Kontzlagerut Belene,” 171.}

The interministerial management of the island territory makes clear that the principle of the separation of powers between the judiciary and the executive was not actually enacted, even though the Ministry of Justice existed as an autonomous institution. It also reflects the degree of the Ministry of Justice’s implication in the repressive apparatus operated by the Ministry of the Interior. In addition, the participation of Belene’s inhabitants as employees was also required for the successful implementation of repressive policies, though the latter were not initially considered ideal candidates for the task.
In 1949, Belene was a farming settlement. A report by the secret police regarding plans to build a camp on the island acknowledged that Belene’s residents would not wholeheartedly welcome its presence. At the time, the village’s population totaled 7,500 people, of which only around 200 were members of the Communist Party. Fifty percent of the inhabitants of the mostly Catholic village were considered to actually oppose the party, leaving the local party organization with little influence. The report, drafted in 1949, shortly before the opening of the camp, projected: “The peasants will become disgruntled and turn into worse enemies because thus far, they would have used the island for their farming purposes, mostly to raise cattle, from which they would earn around 200 leva annually, and now that the cattle have been removed from the island, they are very discontent.”

Ten years later, by 1959, many of these anticipated and discontented enemies had found work in the camp and in the prison. Not only did the island complex serve as the main

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59 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.143, l.57-63.
60 AMVR, f.23., op.1, a.u.143, l.57-63.
61 AMVR, f.23., op.1, a.u.143, l.57-63.
62 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.143, 58.
employer but it also paid the highest salaries. In 2006, most of Belene’s residents did not like to mention where they lived. As one of the owners of a local restaurant and the daughter of a long-standing Belene family explained: “It doesn’t feel good when you go somewhere and people tell you . . . oh, you’re from Belene, from the prison . . . you are criminals.” Her husband, a former military officer added: “We have nothing to do with the prison, and it is not our fault that the authorities decided to build a labor camp here.” Their son, however, works as a guard in the prison—in “the real, normal” prison, as some of the locals will insist, thus distinguishing it from Site II, the former camp. Yet lumping the camp and the prison together, referring to them as one whole, as if there were no distinctions between the two institutions, is also not unusual for Belene’s residents in the present. The camp and the prison have existed in a continuum across time and regimes, as a single site of punishment, located on the island.

And in a simple sense, this is true: the Bulgarian state has used the island to impose punishment from 1943 until today. During the communist era, however, at least half of those sent to Belene Island were never convicted of any crime, and many of those convicted of political crimes were not guilty. That Belene’s present-day residents do not make a distinction between the administratively repressive and the judicially punitive functions that set the camp and the prison apart does not spell a failure or a refusal of the local community to recognize the “inherently criminal nature of the camp,” as Koleva suggests. It does reveal, however, the extent to which the lines between legal punishment and political repression were blurred in the

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63 Koleva, Belene, 21.
64 Josefina and Ivan Dobranchevi, interview with the author, Belene, August 2006.
65 Josefina and Ivan Dobranchevi interview, with the author, Belene, August 2006; italics added.
67 Koleva and her research team reach similar conclusions regarding the conceptual merging of the camp and the prison by Belene’s residents. See Koleva, “Belene,” 11–12.
68 Namely: briefly in the pre-communist period, throughout and most actively during the communist regime (1949–89), and since 1989 until the present (2014).
actions of Bulgaria’s communist authorities. The absence of checks and balances between government branches was one of the key structural conditions that enabled the authoritarian character of Bulgarian regime even in the late 1980s. Although direct repression had been drastically scaled down by then and most people enjoyed considerable freedom in their daily lives, the coalescence of powers was still in place. However limited and isolated punitive measures actually were by then, their possibility continued to permeate the Bulgarian public sphere. The fact that the last known administrative internment in Belene took place three years before the toppling of the regime clearly demonstrates the government’s structural authoritarianism.

The Belene prison, established in 1952/3, never closed down and continues to this day to provide employment for many of the town’s residents. In fact, former camp guards became prison guards, and a former prison accountant became a priest in the prison parish in the post-communist era. Many of those employed in various service positions, such as drivers, electricians, telephone operators, deliverymen, and farm technicians, went back and forth between the two institutions. The site of the former Belene camp, Site II, has now become integrated into the penal complex and is used as a prison farm. In 2006, the senior prison inspector in charge of it gave me a tour of the empty buildings, including the old house that served as the camp commandant’s office and the watchtower. “They say there used to be a concentration camp here,” the inspector told me; “I began working here only recently and I

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70 In a sense, the existence of both the camp and the prison on Belene Island demonstrates the communist administration’s tendency to sustain the overlap of power functions between the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary to enable efficient repression. Precisely this overlap made it possible for people to become political enemies in the 1950s or ethnic enemies in the 1960s and 1980s. It also made it easy to isolate and dispose of them in camps.

71 From 1949 to 1959, the camp was the main employer in Belene, and afterward the prison continued to provide jobs for a portion of the town’s residents. Reliable data on the exact employment statistics for this period has not been produced. For partial statistics on the employment of Belene’s residents in the camp in 1952, see Koleva, “Belene,” 10. In 2006, around three hundred people were employed as full-time staff in Belene’s prison, and the majority of them were residents from the town.

72 Koleva, Belene, 20.
don’t know if it’s true or not.” He had worked at the site for ten years, but was very reluctant to answer questions about its historical past. “I am a few years away from retirement and don’t want any problems,” he explained. “They are different stories about Belene. Some people exaggerate. Others tell the truth. It’s a complicated thing . . . .” The prison inspector appeared opaque and decided to only talk about the site’s present: “Now, there are fifteen, twenty prisoners here, as well as goats, sheep, rabbits, a horse . . . and the cross and the crescent.”

What of the last two? “It seems that the cross and the crescent were put here in memory of the people who were in . . . the camp?”

The two modest wood and metal structures, no more than six feet tall, were a makeshift memorial erected by survivors’ organizations in the early 1990s. Together with a small plaque hanging on the wall of one of the empty buildings, they were meant as temporary memorials until a permanent one was built. But the construction of an official monument never happened. In 2009, a concrete wall on top of a concrete pedestal were placed where the cross and crescent had been. The concrete slab was supposed to be the foundation of the future memorial, and the names of former camp inmates were supposed to have been inscribed on the wall. To date, however, the concrete wall remains empty, resembling a segment from an unfinished construction site.

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73 Senior prison inspector of the Belene prison, interview with the author, Belene, August 2006.
74 He was also reluctant to tell me what kind of problems he might have if he spoke in more detail about the history of Site II.
75 Senior prison inspector of the Belene prison, interview with the author, Belene, August 2006.
76 Senior prison inspector of the Belene prison, interview with the author, Belene, August 2006.
77 Koleva, Belene, 20.
For the rest, the prison inspector’s description of the site was fairly accurate. Several crumbling buildings, used for the internment of Bulgaria’s Turkish minority in the mid-1980s, remained deserted, as did the watchtower erected in the 1950s, from when the camp had operated at full capacity. Although the buildings were rather neglected, they were not fully abandoned. A young mare, some racing pigeons, a pet pig, and an encaged wild boar lived there. Such are the memory keepers of Bulgaria’s longest-running site of violence. And such are the narratives produced by representatives of the government responsible for managing the site: vague and ambiguous, punctuated by doubt about the historical events that took place at the Belene camp.
Occasionally, people other than the fifteen to twenty prisoners and the prison staff visit the former camp site. Since 1990 survivors have tried to gather there once a year. In the early post-communist years, the meetings were large, frequented by survivors, their families, and friends, as well as journalists, filmmakers, priests, and politicians. Survivors delivered passionate speeches, priests read prayers and held mass. With time, however, the numbers have begun to shrink noticeably: Survivors aged, and many of them died. Their friends and families moved on with their lives. Politicians no longer need the camp past to build election platforms. Journalists have more pressing stories to cover, and priests are busy holding liturgies elsewhere. In other words, many formerly motivated by politics no longer have any investment in attending survivors’ meetings. Yet for the few remaining camp and prison survivors, elderly men and women, the annual pilgrimage to the former Belene camp is still extremely important.78

Visiting the island, however, is not easy: bureaucratic challenges abound, and accessing the former camp site proves rather difficult. Since the island still operates as a prison, a visit requires authorization by the Bulgarian minister of the interior and approval by the prison governor. In 2006, for example, camp survivors did not obtain permission to hold their annual meeting there.79 Instead of convening in Belene, they gathered in another part of the country, at the site of one of the first camps, the harsh coal mines of Bogdanovdol, just outside the city of Pernik. It was a casual meeting at an unofficial and unmarked site, on a

78 The majority of the thirty camp and prison survivors that I interviewed between 2006 and 2011 insist that attending the annual survivors’ meetings in Belene “keep them going,” to quote Krum Horozov. Horozov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 2011.

79 The director of the Belene Prison, Zlatko Zlatev, explained that because of the unusually high levels of the Danube River and the floods on the island, he was “afraid to have these old men and women there because something might happen to them.” Zlatko Zlatev, interview with the author, Belene, August 2006.
grass field just off the highway. It was “close enough to where the camp had been,” one of the survivors informed me. 80

The small group of senior citizens, around thirty of them, exchanged remarks about the weather and caught up with one another. There were no speeches or ceremonial procedures. Unless one listened closely to their conversations, it would have been difficult to guess that they had congregated to commemorate their shared experience of political violence. One of them carried several self-published copies of his memoir; I was his sole customer. Many of them were upset that their gathering had been refused in Belene. Even though not all of them had been interned there, they all insisted, much like the other survivors I interviewed, that the Belene site had to be transformed into a memorial, one easily accessible to both survivors and future generations. “It is a mockery that the state maintains a prison where once the camp had been,” contended a former political prisoner. 81 Many in the survivor community argue that this is an intentional blurring of the lines by the Bulgarian government, one meant to whitewash the history of communist violence. 82 Survivors interpret the decision to maintain the Belene prison as a deliberate, coordinated effort by state agencies to erase the memory of the camp past, much in line with General Semerdzhiev’s 1990 orders to destroy secret police files and “vanish” Belene as a “symbol of repression.” 83 Although it is difficult to ascertain whether intent or indifference have motivated the various post-communist Bulgarian governments to keep the Belene prison intact, the decision has certainly had a negative impact on the community of camp and prison survivors. Not only are its commemoration efforts hampered

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80 Alexandur Nakov, interview with the author, Pernik, August 2006.
81 Todor Anastasov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 11, 2011.
82 Krum Horozov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 23, 2001; Georgi Konstantinov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 16, 2011; Mato Koritski, interview with the author, Plovdiv, April 19, 2011; Nikola Alurkov, interview with the author, Samovodene, March 27, 2011.
83 See Chapter 3, “To Exit from the Closed Circle: 1989 and the Memory of Violence,” in this study.
by administrative challenges but in Bulgarian public discourse, the site itself has gradually been stripped of the meaning bestowed on it by survivors.

In 1951, at a time when around 2,500 inmates were interned at Site II, David Rousset, most likely unaware of Belene’s existence, spoke in a courtroom in Paris, delivering one of the first public accounts of the Soviet gulag camps: “The enormity of the camp is not due to the fact that people suffered and died in it but to the fact that people experienced it.”

It is precisely this denial—of the possibility to memorialize their experience—that Bulgarian camp and prison survivors bemoan. As they age and pass away, the memory of the camp slowly recedes without being acknowledged by the state, by the town, or by the history textbooks. And the continuous existence of the Belene prison, especially in the post-communist period as a legitimate punitive institution (“a real, normal prison”), will eventually usurp the memory and historical reality of the Belene camp. The fear that most survivors express, then, is that General Semerdzhiev’s order to render Belene as a symbol of violence obsolete will eventually be carried out—whether willfully or inadvertently seems irrelevant here.

At the 2006 gathering in Pernik, survivors complained about how unwelcoming the Belene prison authorities tended to be when they made requests to visit the site. “And the people in Belene, the locals, aren’t too friendly with us either,” an elderly woman confided, though she requested that I withhold her name, while others nodded in agreement.

The only time survivors visit the town of Belene is when they are allowed to hold their annual meeting on the island. During these visits, they keep mostly to themselves and do not mingle with the townsfolk. “We want to avoid the begrudging and disapproving looks of the locals,” explained

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85 Anonymous, interview with the author, Pernik, August 2006.
one survivor.\textsuperscript{86} They rarely take a walk on Belene’s pleasant central promenade, and they do not make much of the opportunity to enjoy freshly caught fish from the Danube in one of the town’s restaurants. Instead, they spend time in the lobby of the more prominent of the two local hotels, which offers a special “survivor” discount for those who decide to stay overnight.

Unlike the survivors, our film crew obtained access to Belene Island in 2006. There was only one prisoner present at Site II where the camp had been: Ahmed Hasanov had already spent three years on the island.\textsuperscript{87} He seemed to be familiar with the site and the buildings, was on friendly terms with the pig and the horse, and, most important, he showed more willingness to talk than the prison inspector had:

They say it used to be a labor camp, I don’t know anything about it. We have only heard about this place. What would I know? They gather here—the former prisoners from the camp. Since I am here, they have gathered twice, but we are not allowed to approach them . . . we have only heard bad things. I know that they used to work here, on this site: agriculture, logging. . . . The people imprisoned here were against the communist regime. That’s what I’ve heard. People with long hair used to be interned here. As a boy, even I used to have long hair and at the bakery they refused to sell me bread. . . .\textsuperscript{88}

The Town of Light

After my tour of the island, I left the well-guarded, bucolic site and headed toward the town. As I stood on a long pontoon bridge at the edge of the Danube and looking in Belene’s

\textsuperscript{86} Anonymous, interview with the author, Sofia, March 2011.
\textsuperscript{87} Ahmed Hasanov was serving a ten-year sentence for murder.
\textsuperscript{88} Ahmed Hasanov, interview, with the author, Belene, August 2006.
direction, massive, rusty cranes became visible in the distance, remnants of another communist
dream planned for this town: the great nuclear future. The decision to build the Belene Nuclear
Power Plant was made in 1981. Despite warnings from environmental organizations, the plans
for Bulgaria’s second nuclear power plant went ahead and the foundation was laid on top of an
active fault in 1987. Nuclear ambition seemingly ended with the breakdown of the communist
regime, and construction stopped abruptly in 1990.

The cranes of the failed communist dream gradually became the new capitalist hope, however. Foreign investors and government officials resurrected the nuclear vision and
reimagined it as the European future for this sleepy Bulgarian town. Since then, the
nonoperational Belene Nuclear Power Plant has been mired in controversy over international
capital, domestic corruption, building contractors, and environmental concerns. Though it
remains to be realized, the dream of nuclear prosperity has already changed Belene’s
landscape. It prompted, for instance, the building of the Marie Sklodowska-Curie Nuclear
Energy high school and the official adoption of a new civic motto: Belene, Town of Light. The
municipality started displaying the nuclear logo alongside that of the town, adorning
stationary, tourist brochures, and the interior walls of its main building. People’s houses also
started filling with nuclear paraphernalia: vases, ashtrays, and plates engraved with that same
logo. Whether you are checking in at the Hotel Energy or sipping a drink in the Energy Bar,
you will undoubtedly learn about the revival of construction for the nuclear power plant and

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89 The literature on the Belene Nuclear Power plant in specialist journals is extensive: there are more than 1,500
articles and reports in English alone dealing with questions of nuclear energy and economic considerations related
to Belene. See, for instance, “HSBC Chosen as Consultant for Belene,” Nuclear Engineering International 56,
683 (2011); MacLachlan, “Bulgaria May Start Tendering for Belene Plant Vendors This Month,” Nucleonics
Week 6, 14 (2005); “Financial Consultants Picked for Belene Completion Project,” Nucleonics Week 45, 51
90 Mathew Brunwasser, “Nuclear Ambitions Fan Controversy in Bulgaria,” International Herald Tribune,
91 See municipal brochure, Belene, Town of Light, Belene, 2006.
the coming of a new age, when thousands of jobs, and the accompanying prosperity, will swamp the town with the arrival of the electric industry. Until then, however, the prison will do.

“Belene is a town in waiting,” claimed Padre Corrado Gasbarro, an Italian Catholic priest from the Passionista congregation who lived in the town during the decade (1999–2009) when the nuclear conversation was most active, capturing the uncertainty of Belene’s contemporary residents.\(^{92}\) He witnessed firsthand how eagerly and, to his surprise, “naively” locals anticipated the economic prosperity of the nuclear age.\(^{93}\) “It is a town troubled by its past but always looking forward, and awaiting what will come next.”\(^{94}\) In the meantime, Belene’s residents are caught in an ideological loop between communism and capitalism, between the concentration camp past and the nuclear future. The literary scholar Oana Popescu-Sandu has eloquently described how the town’s physical structures reflect the ambivalence of its daily reality:

The City of Belene aims to show evidence of an orderly life, to clearly mark its existence in space. They have signs with arrows pointing to the different attractions in town: prison, bus station, nuclear power plant. However, the demonstration, in the image below, is misleading and partly fictional. The nuclear power plant does not fully exist, it is a project and a projection everybody dreams of and hopes for but there is no sign yet that it will become reality. The prison brings with it the dual meaning. In Belene they have “a normal prison,” the statement implying an opposition . . . to the old labor camp.

\(^{92}\) Padre Corrado Gasbarro, interviews with the author, May 2004 and June 2006, Belene.
\(^{93}\) Padre Corrado Gasbarro, interviews with the author, May 2004 and June 2006, Belene.
\(^{94}\) Padre Corrado Gasbarro, interviews with the author, May 2004 and June 2006, Belene.
I found more telling, on the symbolic and narrative level, the sense (or lack) of direction given by the cranes abandoned at the site of the power plant. The cranes point toward numberless directions, not unlike the past and the possible ways in which it can be hidden or interpreted. Therefore the cranes do not create the narrative of order that the signposts aim to create. They lack agency, they just are. For now their potential remains unfulfilled.  

![Figure 4.6](image)

**Figure 4.6** The cranes of the Belene Nuclear Power Plant and a Belene street sign. Belene, 2006. Photo stills from the documentary film *The Mosquito Problem and Other Stories* (2007), courtesy of Agitprop.

Despite the giant construction cranes looming over the town and the regular media buzz the half-built plant generates, nuclear hope has failed to fully overshadow the camp memory. In 2014, the town of Belene prepares to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary with several festivities to mark the date. Among the most honored guests will be town’s first mayor, Mihail Kurchev.

**Mihail Kurchev: Town Mayor and Camp Superintendent**

Many years after retiring, Mihail Kurchev, or Grandpa Michael, as he insisted the younger generation address him, was still an important figure in Belene. Not only was he the man “who had turned the village of Belene into a town” in 1964; he was also the town’s

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longest-serving mayor.\textsuperscript{96} The older residents still remember the shift that 1964 brought about, and many credit Kurchev with the transformation of the small, muddy village into a town. A functioning sewer system, proper electrification and water supply, the planting of trees, the creation of a small park, a town hall, and the like: Kurchev himself still proudly revels in the achievements of his administration.\textsuperscript{97} When he became mayor in late 1959, he embarked on a two-year plan to urbanize Belene, mobilizing everyone along the way. “People were confident in what they wanted. Hey, we will make a town! And that is exactly what happened. I was a little strict, somewhat fierce, but they listened to me.”\textsuperscript{98} And this is indeed how Belene’s residents describe him: a dedicated but fierce “natural-born” leader.\textsuperscript{99} At the age of eighty-four, the small but vivacious man still commanded the respect of the townspeople in 2006.


\textsuperscript{96} Boiko Ruzhgev, interview with the author, Belene, February 2006.
\textsuperscript{97} Mihail Kurchev, interviews with the author, Belene, May 2004 and March 2006. Also see Daniela Koleva’s interview with Kurchev conducted in 2008, Koleva, Belene, 33–43.
\textsuperscript{98} Koleva, Belene, 36.
\textsuperscript{99} Boiko Ruzhgev interview with the author, Belene, February 2006. In 2004, Ruzhgev had written an article for the local newspaper about Mihail Kurchev, and he interviewed many of Belene’s residents, inquiring about their attitudes toward Kurchev.
An avid hunter, Kurchev proudly displayed his hunting trophies and his rifle from Stalingrad, and he was glad to share stories from his days in the partisan squads and from the front during World War II. Kurchev had always been on the left: he joined the Worker’s Youth League (the young communist league tied to the Bulgarian Communist Party) in 1938, when he was eighteen. In 2006, at eighty-six, and at time when it was no longer beneficial or even desirable, he continued to describe himself as a “proud member of the Communist Party.”

The year 1989 and the ensuing changes meant little to him, he assured me. Moreover, Kurchev wanted to make certain that I did not confuse the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the post-1989 reform communists, with the still existing but largely marginalized and discredited Bulgarian Communist Party in which he held membership.

Before he became mayor, Kurchev had quite a different career: he was the superintendent of the Belene camp from 1949 to 1959 and the local representative of the secret police. In fact, he was one of the people responsible for establishing the camp. After serving as mayor and in the town administration until 1966, Kurchev returned to work in the camp and prison complex once again as the man in charge of a large pig farm, a position he held until 1970. Afterward and until his retirement in the mid-1980s, he was chairman of the National Cooperative, a state retailer of grocery stores. Although many people’s lives in Belene intersect the camp, the prison, and other non-penal employers, nowhere is this more evident than in Kurchev’s case. Kurchev appears to have seamlessly transitioned between repression and civil administration, applying the same resourcefulness to the building of the camp in 1949 as he did ten years later to the building of the town. The coalescence of Belene the camp and Belene the town can thus be traced to Kurchev, who actively participated in the creation of both.

100 Mihail Kurchev, interviews with the author, Belene, May 2004 and March 2006.
101 Kurchev, cited in Koleva, Belene, 36.
Kurchev explained that Todor Milenkov, the head of the camp administration along with the first commandant of the Belene camp, originally approached him with a request to start organizing the camp. In May 1949, Milenkov asked him if he had ever heard about “TVO” (the euphemistic appellation for the camps). “I had heard something about it, but I didn’t know [much],” recalled Kurchev, who at the time was twenty-nine years old.

Milenkov clarified that a superintendent was needed for the newly planned facility on Belene island: “They told us from Sofia that you know everyone in the area, you know all the people. . . . you will be responsible for the selection of personnel. You will do the best job.” “I wasn’t too thrilled,” remembered Kurchev, “but an order is an order, and so I immediately began working on it.”

From his descriptions to me and other interviewers, it became clear that Kurchev received a substantial sum of money (250,000 leva) and was asked to begin picking individuals from Belene and the surrounding villages who would be suitable for the different positions required to staff the camp: one hundred militiamen, twenty to thirty guards, foremen for agricultural work, construction workers, and boatmen to facilitate transportation to and from the island, since the pontoon bridge was not yet built. In addition to the selection of appropriate staff, Kurchev was also responsible for organizing the physical building of camp installations on the island and for the basic readying of the terrain, which meant the cutting down of some trees and the ploughing of land. The main physical labor, the building of dams, for instance, and other heavy construction and farm work, was left for the future.

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103 Kurchev, cited in Koleva, Belene, 34–35.
104 Kurchev, cited in Koleva, Belene, 35.
105 Mihail Kurchev, interview with the author, Belene, February 2006.
106 Mihail Kurchev, interviews with the author, Belene, May 2005, February, and March 2006. Also see Kurchev, cited in Koleva, Belene, 35; Manolova, “Dzhipsi, Dzhipsi Belene . . . .”
107 Mihail Kurchev, interviews with the author, Belene, May 2005, February, and March 2006. Also see Kurchev, cited in Koleva, Belene, 35; Manolova, “Dzhipsi, Dzhipsi Belene . . . .”
inmates. “Certainly,” Kurchev confirmed, “that’s what they were there for . . . to learn through hard physical work. That kind of work is necessary for everyone.” Much like his everlasting belief in the Bulgarian Communist Party, Kurchev seemed equally convinced of the credo of transformation through forced labor.

I wondered about the atmosphere in the village during those early days of preparation. Kurchev assured me that that everything happened very fast and “on the move.” His impressions also confirmed the conclusions of the secret police report from 1949, which had raised doubts about the suitability of the place as a future camp site. Kurchev remembered that the local villagers were upset about losing access to the island territory; he recalled that “on the island . . . there were sheep and cattle there, it was the pasture of the entire area [of the village of Belene] . . . and then since May 1949 and even earlier, all the animals had to be removed from the island area . . . that’s how it was . . . remove the animals in order to put the people.” The former camp superintendent appeared conflicted in his recollections of the camp and prison inmates. At times, he spoke dismissively of them, while on other occasions he expressed respect. In April of 1990, he described the different categories of people interned, his words reminiscent of those of the loyal communist P. G. who in 1944 had requested that Sofia’s bourgeois youth be shipped off to concentration camps:

The ones with the short skirts and tight jeans, with the immoral ways, drinking, smoking . . . the dandies and the hussies. There were terrible. But there were others too, former government members, some military personnel . . . criminals too, a famous pop

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110 Mihail Kurchev, interview with the author, Belene, February 2006.
that they served as an example to the staff.  

In 2008, in an interview with Daniela Koleva, Kurchev described life for the inmates on Belene island in very positive terms, “even though there were bars on the doors and on the windows.” Speaking about the camp (Site II), in particular, he went on: “It was an exemplary site. Flowers, roses everywhere. A cultured thing [environment]. Not like some believe, that such a camp . . . [would be harsh]. The camp was educational, and political, and for labor. . . . That was the most exemplary site. I’d say that there, there were the most educated, the most cultured.” Two years earlier, in an interview with me in 2006, the elderly Kurchev had spoken somewhat elliptically, but his words described life for the camp inmates with equal cheer:

The people started coming in 1949, ‘50, ‘51, ’52 . . . They were . . . “contemporary, modern people.” Some were good. The political ones were smart . . . they had good manners. And then they started working—agriculture, logging, stock-breeding, construction, forestry. These people were interned [meaning they were not sentenced]; you know that there was forcible internment [of people] at that time? And once inside, they started working . . . some worked well, and we also treated them well. 

I confirmed my knowledge of the existence of forcible internment. I also reminded him that Belene survivors remembered their experiences in stark opposition to the descriptions he

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111 Manolova, “Dzhips, Dzhips Belene . . .”  
112 Kurchev, cited in Koleva, Belene, 41.  
113 Kurchev, cited in Koleva, Belene, 41.  
114 Mihail Kurchev, interview with the author, Belene, March 2006.
provided: harsh working days that often lasted ten to twelve hours, beatings, killings, meagre food rations, negligible medical care, rampant epidemics and disease, terrifying experiences in solitary confinement, abuse and torture by the guards—these descriptions repeated in the narratives of all.115

Kurchev did not appear perturbed: “All this euphoria after 1989 and what these people [i.e., the former inmates] claimed . . . it was not like this, there were not such beatings, no such atrocities.”116 He echoed the interview he had given sixteen years earlier. Back then he had acknowledged the existence of sanctions and heavy labor in the Belene camp, but had claimed that “this kind of work is suitable for all people.”117 At these moments in our conversations he became distrustful and seemingly worried, withdrawing into himself.

After a couple of hours and many tales about the war, it became evident that Kurchev would always describe the Belene camp as a strict but, in essence, proper re-educational facility, with “rather good sleeping quarters and warm, cooked meals for the inmates even when the guards ate only dry food.”118 “There was severity in the camp [of Belene], but much humanity too”—these were his concluding thoughts in 1990.119 It seems that the time lapsed did not change his mind, for Kurchev expressed the same opinion in 2004, 2006 and 2008.120 He was not used to elaborating his ideas and as our interview drew to a close, he just uttered flatly: “It wasn’t a job that I wanted, but I had to do it.”121 Did he think that he made the right choice in selecting the people who staffed the camp? “Yes, I am proud of all the people . . . my

115 FO 371/106258.
117 Manolova, “Dzhips, Dzhipsi Belene . . .”
118 Manolova, “Dzhips, Dzhipsi Belene . . .”
119 At this point of the interview, Kurchev drew a comparison between the Lovech and Belene camps, pointing out that Belene’s camp reality was not nearly as severe as that in Lovech.
121 Mihail Kurchev, interview with the author, Belene, March 2006.
Julia Ruzhgeva was one of the women he chose to work as a guard for the female section in Belene. Kurchev remembered: “I knew her grandfather, her father—he passed away early—they were good people, hardworking but very poor, and her mother too, a widow and handicapped . . . and Julia was special.” Back then, she was nineteen years old, tall, blonde, statuesque—Belene’s beauty with an uncommon first name.

Julia Ruzhgeva: Camp Guard and Defendant at Trial

Julia Ruzhgeva was born in Belene in 1939. In August 1959, two months after her twentieth birthday, she began working as a guard in subdivision 0789 of the Ministry of the Interior in the female section of the Belene camp. She was later transferred to the Lovech camp, where she worked until August of 1961, when she handed in her resignation. Ruzhgeva was reprimanded only once during her service as a guard: she left a group of female camp inmates to labor unsupervised while she departed the site, “out of curiosity,” to observe an accident that had taken place nearby. It was a minor transgression in an otherwise successful, if brief, career in the Ministry of the Interior’s most notorious subdivision (0789) and at the site of the most severe camp (Lovech). During her two-year employment Ruzhgeva

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122 While I could not confirm the accuracy of his story, especially the detail about the wire transfer, it does seem likely for him to have participated in the selection of Belene’s candidates for guards because he was the local representative of the secret police and knew the village’s residents.

123 Julia Ruzhgeva explained that she was the only woman in all of Belene who had this first name.

124 AMVR Lovech: Regional Department at the Ministry of Interior No.7067 at the city of Lovech. Reference in the personal archival file of Julia Pavlova Ruzhgeva, No.9997/20.09.1993. Signed by the Director of the Regional Department at the Ministry of Interior at the city of Lovech, V. Rangelov.

125 AMVR Lovech: Regional Department at the Ministry of Interior No.7067 at the city of Lovech. Reference in the personal archival file of Julia Pavlova Ruzhgeva, No.9997/20.09.1993. Signed by the Director of the Regional Department at the Ministry of Interior at the city of Lovech, V. Rangelov.
was promoted to the rank of sergeant, and she reached the position of a senior guard. She was commended for her zealous service and received official gratitude.\textsuperscript{126}

In April 1992, Ruzhgeva was arrested and charged in her official capacity as guard “for the premeditated killings [committed alone and in conspiracy with the defendant Tsviatko Goranov] of more than one person, carried out in an usually tortuous way and with unusual cruelty.”\textsuperscript{127} She and two other male guards, alongside the vice minister, Mircho Spasov, were the only defendants in a complicated and prolonged trial for crimes committed in the Lovech camp.\textsuperscript{128} The trial was discontinued in 2002 on the basis of the expired statute of limitation.

For a period of three and a half years (1992–95) during the trial Ruzhgeva remained in prison.

I met Ruzhgeva face to face in May 2004 on her sixty-fifth birthday. She was a thin woman in the advanced stages of Parkinson’s disease. Although her body shook and swayed, her mind remained lucid. By this time, I had read and learned much about her. In the accounts of former camp inmates, she is described as “strikingly cruel and pretty,” hence earning the nickname “Julia the Beautiful,” “the youngest of the [female] guards who mercilessly beat women,” sometimes to death.\textsuperscript{129} Most narratives I came across reported scenes of incredible sadism. According to one witness, who testified at the post-communist trial against her, “Julia was beating (Dina Pitsina) to death with a club. After she finished beating her, she mutilated

\textsuperscript{126} AMVR Lovech: Regional Department at the Ministry of Interior No.7067 at the city of Lovech. Reference in the personal archival file of Julia Pavlova Ruzhgeva, No.9997/20.09.1993. Signed by the Director of the Regional Department at the Ministry of Interior at the city of Lovech, V. Rangelov.

\textsuperscript{127} Bill of Indictment for Case No.2/1994 of the Military Prosecutor’s office. This case concerns the crimes committed in the camp of Lovech.

\textsuperscript{128} For more information on the trial, see Hristov, Sekretnoto Delo. The trial began in 1992 and was moved back and forth between several courts until it was discontinued in 2002.

\textsuperscript{129} Testimonies by Nadia Dunkin and Nikola Dafinov, former inmates in Lovech and Belene, in The Survivors; transcripts of the accounts can also be found in Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 84, 85, 116, 122. The court testimonies (from the files of Case #4/1990 of the Military Prosecutor’s Office) of Petrunka Boneva, former inmate from Belene and Lovech; Christina Subeva, Liliana Popova, former inmates from Lovech; and Georgi Yosifov (Goro Varnata), a former inmate from Belene who later became a nurse in the Lovech camp. Cited in Hristov, Sekretnoto Delo. See the following sections, “Zhenskata Chast”, 30–35, and “Konspiratsiata s Trupovete,” 49.

Nikola Dafinov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 29, 2011.
the dead body by jumping on top of it, and she shoved the club in her eyes, then down below, she kept on jumping on top of her . . . she disemboweled her.”

In addition to this gruesome scene, the transcripts from the trial report that Ruzhgeva set an inmate’s hair on fire and that she shoved snakes in women’s mouths. The language describing Ruzhgeva often had a sensationalistic quality. For instance, in 1991, one of Bulgaria’s leading literary critics, recounting the plight of camp inmates in Lovech, remarked that “one was lucky not to have ended up in her evil paws.” Bulgarian newspapers covering the trial in the mid-1990s frequently referred to her as the “killer guard” from the “death camps,” but some went out of their way to comment on her “apparent” wickedness: “Ruzhgeva tried to look as ill as possible, she trembled the entire time, but she failed to conceal her ferocious gaze,” remarked one reporter in 1994.

More telling than the print media characterizations, however, were the visual representations, of which the most popular one was fictional. In 1993, the feature film Canary Season, directed by Evgeni Mihailov, was released in Bulgaria and later abroad to praise from both critics and the audience. The film also achieved significant box-office success at home, as well as acclaim at international film festivals. Canary Season was one of the first post-communist Bulgarian fiction films to openly address the atrocities committed in communist

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130 Quoted in Hristov, Sekretnoto Delo, 33–34. Hristov is quoting the original transcripts from the forty-eight volumes of Case #4/1990 of the Military Prosecutor’s Office. However, Hristov, an investigative journalist, does not provide the exact source in his citations, such as page numbers. He uses quotation marks to indicate that he is citing directly the court transcripts.

131 Hristov, Sekretnoto Delo. See the following sections: “Zhenskata Chast”, 30–35, and “Konspiraziata s Trupovete”, 49.

132 See introduction by Edvin Sugarev, introduction to Svideteli, by Boncheva, 9.


forced-labor camps and other episodes of political violence from the era.\footnote{Evgeni Mihailov, dir., \textit{Sezonut Na Kanarchetata} [Canary Season], Bulgaria, 1993.} One of the most painful but also memorable scenes from the film takes place in the female section of a forced-labor camp. A woman guard walks arrogantly among the starved, disheveled, and terrified inmates. She laughs at them, humiliated them verbally, and threatens them. She is beautiful and powerful. She holds a whip in her hands and observes the frightened women. It is obvious that she is enjoying herself: her long hair is let loose, her blue uniform is comfortably unbuttoned, and she is smiling. Eventually the guard picks on the weakest among them, a woman who appears to have lost her mind: she hits her face with a rock until the woman bleeds. She then orders to have her hair set on fire. The female guard in \textit{Canary Season}, as the film director explained, was modeled on Ruzhgeva.\footnote{Evgeni Mihailov, in conversation with the author, Ahtopol, 2010.} Mihailov stated that he closely studied all reports about Julia, including all testimony in court, to try and get it right, down to her height and shape.\footnote{Evgeni Mihailov, in conversation with the author, Ahtopol, 2010.} He wanted to create a fictional character narrowly resembling Ruzhgeva and whom the audience could recognize and identify right away.\footnote{Evgeni Mihailov, in conversation with the author, Ahtopol, 2010.} It seems that this popular cinematic depiction of Ruzhgeva, together with newspaper reports, indefinitely sealed her persona in post-communist Bulgarian public space as one of a vicious executioner.

For although nowadays the topic of the camps is rarely present in the Bulgarian press, a newspaper (from 2013), for instance, ran an article on Ruzhgeva reproducing the familiar discourses of the 1990s and pegged her as a “beautiful, sinister, and sadistic torturer.”\footnote{Ivan Butovski, “Palachut ot Lagerite Juliana Ruzhgeva se Obesila v Baniata” [The Camp Executioner Julia Ruzhgeva Hung Herself in Her Bathroom,”] \textit{168 Chasa}, January 24, 2013.}

In the fall of 2003, prior to meeting with Ruzhgeva myself, I interviewed as many people as I could who had any contact with her in the past. I spoke with the principle investigative journalist who had covered the topic of the camps in the 1990s for the daily
Demokratsia, with the photographer who took her picture for the same daily, with the investigator who collected evidence for the case of the Military Prosecutor’s Office, with the attorney general who tried the case against her and the other defendants, and with a documentary film director who had managed to interview her. All warned me to be careful with someone “as vicious” as Ruzhgeva. The filmmaker, Ana Petkova, also explained that her interview with the former camp guard was so disturbing that Petkova suffered a massive haemorrhage and had to be hospitalized. According to the discourses I heard, Ruzhgeva chose to become a camp guard to fulfill her sadistic desires. Her deviant, almost erotic, femininity, prosecutors and journalists decreed, had enabled her to kill.

Given these representations of Ruzhgeva’s actions and her character, I was surprised that she eventually talked with me openly, in a manner that seemed unaffected. She spoke plainly and willingly about a wide range of topics related to the camps, though almost never with others present. Unlike the interviews and interrogations of the other defendants, and unlike Kurchev, Ruzhgeva described the camp reality as having been severe.¹⁴⁰ She was not in complete denial about the violence and suffering it inflicted.

In fact, her account never really shifted throughout the years, though she spoke under different circumstances and on different occasions. In 1997, she told a newspaper: “My job in both the Belene and Lovech camps was to guard women, supervise their labor, and to make certain that they fulfilled their assigned quota. In Lovech, the conditions were harsh, and the food was poor. Women worked a lot.”¹⁴¹

In 1990, as a witness to the trial, she said:

¹⁴⁰ Both of the other defendants, the guards Nikolai Gazdov and Tsviatko Goranov, deny any form of physical violence in the camps of Belene and Lovech.
¹⁴¹ Liana Kirilova and Natalia Ruseva, “Ne sum ubivala nito hora, nito jivotni,” Vestnik za Zhenata, May 23, 1997,
When the inmates did not carry out their quotas, I beat them with a stick. I beat them with a stick, but not a big one. These were my orders from [camp commander] Gogov and [his deputy] Goranov. Both of them told me that [vice minister of the interior] Mircho Spasov’s instructions indicated that these women were the dregs of society and were sent here for heavy labour. Mircho Spasov I have seen once. . . . Goranov used to curse at the camp inmates very vulgarly and cynically. He gave me orders to beat them, saying that it had been Gogov who ordered it and that these are [sic] the instructions of Mircho Spasov. There was no way that I could not execute these orders. According to Gogov and Goranov, Mircho Spasov used to say that if someone left the camp “his road should be narrow” [da mu e tesen putiat]. These words of Mircho Spasov, or rather the instructions given to me by Gogov and Goranov, I understood to mean: after they have passed through the camp, they should no longer be whole people [te veche da ne sa pulnotsenni kato hora]. This we had to achieve through the hard labor that we assigned them to, and beatings, if they didn’t fulfill it [the hard labor quotas]. Female camp inmates were not murdered during the time I was there.142

The prosecutor went on to ask her about the death of three female inmates at Lovech. She replied that “during my time [in the camp], no female camp inmate died. What you are saying to me is not true.” The prosecutor pressed her, saying that “many of the female camp inmates

142 Cited in Hristov, Sekretnoto Delo, 31–32.
that we questioned point to you, that you killed these three women.’ Ruzhgeva replied, “I have not killed anyone. How could I kill and sleep peacefully?”

In 1992, after she became a defendant in the trial, the court forced her to participate in an interview for a documentary film. As she talked about her time in the camps, she claimed that

they gave me a small, wooden stick. My bosses had big clubs, longer ones, better made; the women [inmates] made my stick . . . . I don’t remember dead women during my shifts. I am telling you that I hardly beat them. Everyone hits occasionally. . . . But I have never killed. I have never killed and I will never kill. This is something horrible, isn’t it?

She repeated the same words to me during several of our meetings. In essence, she admitted that there was violence in the camps and that she participated in the beatings. However, she was adamant that she never murdered nor witnessed anyone being murdered. Unlike her superiors, she did not, however, claim that the conditions were welcoming for the inmates. The camp reality she depicted did not stand in contrast to that described in the memoirs of survivors, except when it came to murders. And this seems significant: the hyperbole that characterized the initial post-communist media treatments of the camps was generally absent from survivors’ memoirs and from Ruzhgeva’s account. In this sense, this perpetrator’s narrative proved closer to the memories of the survivors than to the sensationalist newspaper headlines.

143 Cited in Hristov, Sekretnoto Delo, 34.
What was troubling, however, was that throughout our numerous meetings, Ruzhgeva seemed proud of her role as a guard in the camp system. This contradiction between her (nearly) honest account of the violence of the camps and her pride in her camp work (the financial remuneration, the responsibility she was given) was difficult to accept. Yet I became convinced that it was not sadism that had enabled and motivated her actions in the camp.

To me, but also in an interview for a women’s newspaper in 1997, Ruzhgeva explained that her family’s poverty was one of the main reasons for choosing to work in the camp. “As soon as I learned that they were looking for guards,” Ruzhgeva explained, “I decided to apply…. I never thought that it would be a scary place, because after all, so many people from Belene were already working there. And I really liked my uniform; I had never had such nice clothes before.” Her blue uniform frequently came up in our conversations. At first, I refused to believe that it was possible for her to have desired the position of a camp guard because of the clothes. Yet clothes were not simply that. The uniform constituted a status symbol, something that transformed how the self-described “poor peasant girl” came to be seen in her village and beyond. Significantly, her employment as a guard also kept her from marrying out of necessity; and it gave her what she called “a sense of self.” Did she regret it? In May 2004, looking at a picture of herself in her blue uniform, she reminisced: “This is what gave me the greatest suffering but also the greatest happiness.” She pointed to another photograph of herself in uniform, holding a rifle. Again with evident pride, she told me that she shot better than a man. She kept these photographs in the same family albums as pictures

146 Julia Ruzhgeva, interview with the author, Belene, September 2005.
147 Kirilova and Ruseva, “Ne sum ubivala nito hora, nito jovotnii.” She also shared this explanation with me when we spoke about her decision to work in the camp. Julia Ruzhgeva, interview with the author, Belene, September 2005.
149 Julia Ruzhgeva, interview with the author, Belene, September 2005.
of her young daughter playing with snowballs and celebrating Christmas at her daycare. These two roles, as they coexist in the album—that of the camp guard and that of the single mother—were the ones she cherished most.

Figure 4.8 Photographs of Julia Ruzhgeva and her daughter from Ruzhgeva’s personal photo album. Belene, 2004. Photo still from the documentary film *The Mosquito Problem and Other Stories* (2007), courtesy of Agitprop.

Figure 4.9 Julia Ruzhgeva holding a rifle at the site of the former Belene or Lovech camp. From her personal photo album. Belene, 2004. Photo still from the documentary film *The Mosquito Problem and Other Stories* (2007), courtesy of Agitprop.
Ruzhgeva’s story gives us pause, as many accounts of ordinary individuals committing acts of murder often do. No evidence suggests that Ruzhgeva carried out her responsibilities as a guard because of an ideological commitment to communism. She was not even a member of the Communist Party. She was not averse to volunteering and accepting her job, however, because by the time she did, the camp had been in existence in her then village (now town) for nearly ten years. The camp was, in fact, one of the few employers in the area. In light of the widespread destitution during the postwar period in rural Bulgaria, and in particular, of the poverty of Ruzhgeva’s family (her father died when she was young and her mother struggled as a crippled widow), working as a guard in a camp seemed to be a practical (if not a morally acceptable) choice as a route toward personal socioeconomic betterment. Ruzhgeva’s decision to become a camp guard is better understood in terms of both the limited options of a young woman in her position and of the systematic way that violence had become normalized in her environment.\footnote{On the motivation of female perpetrators on the Nazi eastern front, see, Wendy Lower, \textit{Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields}. (New York: Houghton Miffling Harcourt, 2013 ),1–31, 145–166. On perpetrators in the Soviet context, see, Lynne Viola, \textquotedblleft The Question of the Perpetrator in Soviet History,\textquotedblright \textit{Slavic Review} 72, 1 (2013): 1–23} She was a girl from a very poor family in a poor part of the country, living in a small town whose administration and economy were deeply intertwined with a prison camp where many residents found employment and that offered significant financial rewards and social standing. Hence, we can only understand Ruzhgeva’s choice to become a camp guard in light of the way in which the large and ever-present state bureaucracy of violence had normalized the brutality of the camp system by the late 1950s. The existence of camps such as Belene and Lovech not only sustained fear across Bulgarian society but also enabled violent positions of employment to exist and be desirable, particularly in certain pockets of the country.
The accounts of Ruzhgeva’s life that present her as a sadist downplay or ignore the role played by systematic socioeconomic pressures and the fact of normalized state violence. This has resulted in the obscuring of the systematic nature of state violence and in shifting the terms of the debate too far toward questions of personal responsibility. It is not that Ruzhgeva was not guilty of the crimes that she stood accused of. She most likely was guilty of the murders. Yet those responsible for creating the system that enabled her to participate in this violence have done so with impunity.

In 2004, to celebrate her sixty-fifth birthday, Ruzhgeva invited me, two of my film colleagues, and Mihail Kurchev. “Since you are so curious about the camps,” she told me, “I wanted to surprise you . . . you can ask Grandpa Michael anything.” Her daughter, however, preferred that we not discuss the camps. The accusations against her mother and the prolonged trial had taken a toll on her. Working as a history teacher in Belene at the Marie Sklodowska-Curie Nuclear Energy high school, she wanted to lead a simple, “normal” life, and avoided questions about her mother’s camp past or the trial. “This is a deep wound for me, from which I will never recover,” her daughter explained in between bouts of tears. She meant the trial, not the camp past. Ruzhgeva’s daughter has always denied her mother’s crimes. Yet as the birthday celebrations proceeded, the topic of the camp could not be avoided. Kurchev spoke about them, as he always had and always will, as respectable governmental facilities. What was more shocking, however, was the pride he showed in having selected such a fine camp guard in Ruzhgeva, as the following two images demonstrate.

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However disturbing, Kurchev’s words are not altogether unsurprising in the context of the politics of memory and failed judicial reckoning in post-communist Bulgaria. Kurchev, one of the individuals responsible for creating the Belene camp, was never put on trial, while one of the women he selected to work as a guard not only stood through the trial but also came to symbolize the excesses of the entire repressive apparatus. Kurchev will celebrate his ninety-
fourth birthday later this year. Ruzhgeva committed suicide in October 2005. She was sixty-four.

The Belene of the Survivors

Nikola Kurtukliev spent five years of his life as both a prisoner and an inmate on Belene Island, and eighteen years altogether in different prisons. He was sentenced and imprisoned in Belene’s prison from May 1952 until April 1956 for an attempt to flee the country, and from November 1956 to December 1957, he was sent to the camp in Belene without a sentence. When I met him in the summer of 2006, he had requested and received portions of his secret police file (see figure 4.12). It contained many pages of surveillance reports and his deportation and internment orders for Belene. “In case you wanted real proof,” he told me, although he did not feel comfortable with me copying his records. For the following few hours he narrated his experience calmly and meticulously. Seemingly devoid of emotion and unlike the survivors’ testimonies from the early documentary films, Kurtukliev’s narrative was neither angry nor seemingly rehearsed. Many years had passed since he first set foot in Belene in 1952. Moreover, it was no longer 1989, when survivors publicly recounted their experiences for the first time. In fact, by 2006, Kurtukliev rarely spoke much about what had happened to him even after the political changes.

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A heavily built man, strong and physically imposing even in his advanced age, Kurtukliev kept a face that seldom conveyed much. He was a veteran of the prison system, hardened by years of exile, internment, and interrogations. He did not speak of himself as a victim or as a hero. His account of events was clear and his speech balanced: remembering details, names, numbers, years, and months. Yet his lack of emotional expression could not conceal what I interpreted to be a strong desire to tell his own story. Most important, to tell it “right”: without accusations, hope of redemption, or moralistic commentary. He simply wanted to talk. This is one of the main reasons why I focus on his narrative. His account lacked the familiar tropes. He presented his story as individual and subjective, much as it was. He narrated primarily from the perspective of lived experience.

Another reason I draw attention to his narrative is that he had been in both Belene’s prison and in the island camp. Four of the seven years he was sentenced for an attempt to flee the country to Yugoslavia he spent in Belene’s prison: from May 1952 to April 1956. Several
months after his release, he was detained again in November 1956, for what were considered more serious transgressions: involvement in conspiracies to compromise national security related to the Hungarian crisis.155 “Completely untrue,” he says of the above accusations, “eight people just came early in the morning at 5 a.m. and took me away.”156 This time, without a sentence, he was sent to the newly opened camp in Belene:

It was early December when we arrived in Belene by train in horse carts. There, at the train station, were around twenty policemen on horses and twenty guards with rods. There were fifty-five of us. They made a detour to avoid the town, so the locals don’t see us, and brought us to the bridge and we were loaded on boats. Once we stepped on the island, it was a long way to Site II; twelve kilometers, and they begin hitting you almost immediately. Strong blows . . . to put some fear into you, that’s the usual practice. Two hours and more to get to the site and they keep on hitting you.157

At the same time, he was clear that the beatings in the camp itself were not circumstantial: “In Belene, the violence was not an independent act decided by the guard, they . . . the guards had instructions that they followed.”158 This was not unlike his experience in the prison site some

155 Nikola Kurtukliev reading his secret police file and his order for internment in Belene from 1956.
156 Nikola Kurtukliev, interview with the author, Sofia, July 12, 2006.
157 Nikola Kurtukliev, interview with the author, Sofia, July 12, 2006.
158 Nikola Kurtukliev, interview with the author, Sofia, July 12, 2006. At the same time, however, I have come across different testimonies about gratuitous forms of violence in the Belene camp that contradict Kurtukliev’s account. For instance, Haralan Popov writes in his memoir: “Guards moved among us in the field beating any who were not working fast enough. . . . Just on impulse, a guard would single out a prisoner working in our midst, walk over to him, put his rifle to his head and pull the trigger. . . . Since the whole work schedule of the island was behind . . . instead of marching to the field, we were ordered to run three to four miles with guards on horseback chasing us and cracking long leather whips on our backs. . . . In the evening we were chased back . . . they took great joy in beating the half-dead, staggering line of prisoners.” Haralan Popov, Iztezavan Zaradi Viarata si (Sofia: DOHI Press, 1994), 37.
ten kilometers away, but almost immediately he realized that, in fact, life in the camp differed from that in prison: “The regime in the camp is very hard, much harder than in the prison. The physical labor is extremely difficult with very high quotas, and the food is so meager that it skeletonizes you after a few months.” But the differences were not confined only to the working and living conditions:

Lectures on ideology and re-education were much more common in prison than in the camp. In fact, these were very rare in the Belene camp. What was very characteristic of the camp was the attempt to recruit you as an informant for the secret police, and after a while you kind of knew, who among you was reporting to them . . . suddenly, they were called in more often, their workload was lessened.

According to Kurtukliev, and this is something he witnessed on multiple occasions, former communists suffered the most in the prison section of Belene: members of the Communist Party who had been sent to the Island. In general, he emphasized that the guards held a hostile attitude toward the inmates:

Toward me, for instance, they will mistreat me, yes, but the way they acted with “one of their own,” a member of the Communist Party, who was there because he was guilty of an “ideological crime” . . . it is certain that death awaited him there. I still remember how they tortured this partisan, Boris Panaiotov, who

159 Nikola Kurtukliev, interview with the author, Sofia, July 12, 2006.
160 Nikola Kurtukliev, interview with the author, Sofia, July 12, 2006.
had tried to escape the country too and was caught at the border. Doubtless, they were following instructions about this as well.\footnote{Nikola Kurtukliev, interview with the author, Sofia, July 12, 2006. On the suffering of communist Party members in the camps, see Dencho Znepolski, \textit{Posmurtna Izpoved} (Sofia: Hristo Botev, 1997) and Stefan Bogdanov, \textit{Dve smurti niama, a bez edna nemozhe: spomeni} (Sofia: K&M, 1991).}

Kurtukliev was released from the Belene camp on September 9, 1957, because he received an amnesty from the Communist Party on the occasion of Bulgarian Liberation Day. Three years later, he was sentenced again and sent to a different prison for his second attempt to flee Bulgaria, this time to Greece. He was reluctant to tell me more about his past prior to his first imprisonment. While he was reading his personal file, I understood that he had studied to be a lawyer. Later, I learned that he was the son of a former cavalry officer from the king’s army.\footnote{I was told this information by the wife of a former prison inmate of Kurtukliev, Zdravka Toneva.} He simply told me that he came from a family that was “inconvenient” for the then new regime. Kurtukliev lost his right to reside in Sofia in 1949; it was not granted to him again until 1990.\footnote{Nikola Kurtukliev, interview with the author, Sofia, July 12, 2006.} So was the house in the center of the city where he now lives.

Whereas clarity and circumspection distinguish Kurtukliev’s commemoration of the lived experience of the camp, another attempt at commemoration, by the political prisoner Krum Horozov, set itself apart by the variety of means he employed. In addition to writing a memoir and giving interviews, Horozov attempted to render the history of the camp and the experience of imprisonment through a number of drawings that depicted the camp in both abstract spatial terms and from the perspective of a person living the island. These drawings included conventional maps of the various camp and prison sites on the island reconstructed from memory, plans of the different sites rendered in the spatially abstract style of architectural blueprints (figure 4.13), more naturalistic color drawings of the sites (figure
4.14), and drawings in between the architectural and the naturalistic, such as the interior of one of the prisoner’s barracks (figure 4.15).

Because no photographs appear to exist of Belene Island when it was an active camp, Horozov’s colorful naturalistic drawings may be the closest we can get to a visual representation of the lived experience of the camp. Yet the subtle visual distortions of perspective and scale attest to the gulf separating reconstructed representations and the historical experience of people in the actual space of the camps. Like all survivors’ accounts, they commemorate both the experience of living inside the camps and the impossibility of rendering this experience with complete precision. They are expressions of what happened and what has been lost in commemoration.

Another powerful symbol of the difficulties of expressing the lived experience of the camps can be found in Horozov’s self-published visual memoir. In a copy of his book that he gave me, he had pasted small pieces of paper on some of the pages (figure 4.16). These additions to the book were photocopied printouts of English text, most of them translating the Bulgarian descriptions of the drawings. Although the English is awkward and filled with grammatical errors, the translations are powerful symbols of Horozov’s need to communicate. They also symbolize the limits of language to express the lived experience of the camp. Much
as language breaks down and reveals its weakness in the face of the trauma of the camps, so, too, Horozov’s testimony breaks down as it tries to reach an audience beyond his mother tongue. Horozov spoke no English, so, as he told me in conversation, a friend with only a basic sense of the language did the translations for him.

Describing the first drawing in the book, a bird’s-eye view of the camp compound, the translation reads, in full:

This view shows a place where lived people, which number was over than a big Bulgarian village. They lived and died in buildings worst than cattle-sheds. The prisoners weren’t protected by any law, without any rights—like slaves in their own country. There was only too hard physical work; insects starve to death and a lot of executions. Just a place named not a jail but hell.

Figure 4.16 Description of the camp compound of Site II, the Belene camp and prison complex. Courtesy of Krum Horozov, Ruse, 2003.

Although the message is awkwardly conveyed, it speaks loudly. There is something deeply moving about the breakdown of language in the translation, as it powerfully expresses
the strength of this survivor’s desire to be heard and his will to communicate. With an almost poetic power, the troubled language expresses Horozov’s determination to use whatever means are available to him to represent Belene. In this case, those means were scissors, paste, and a friend with a Bulgarian-English dictionary and a very basic sense of English. Horozov had already written about his experiences in Bulgarian, drawn images of the camps, attended conferences, spoken to journalists, and had conversations with as many Bulgarians as would listen. With his ad hoc English translations, we register his desire to go further and push into realms beyond his own ability to communicate. In lieu of an adequate effort by the state to investigate and memorialize the history of the camps, we are left primarily with the isolated and sometimes idiosyncratic voices of the survivors to commemorate the memory of the camps. And it seems that with the passage of time, their voices become less audible. Still, the written records, memoirs, testimonies, and Horozov’s drawings have enabled the preservation of the memory of repression from Bulgaria’s biggest and longest-running site of violence, Belene Island. The same cannot be said of the subsequent incarnation of the camp. After a temporary closure in 1959, the staff and 166 “incorrigible” inmates of the Belene camp were transported to a location just outside the town of Lovech, where one of the most brutal camps was established.
CHAPTER 5:


Every morning we died and every evening we came alive, just to die again in the morning.
Anonymous Lovech camp survivor

In 1992, Tzvetan Todorov, described the violence of the Lovech camp as the “most primitive form of torture”\(^1\) and more recently, in 2011, the historian, Roumen Daskalov wondered how it was possible that “such a place could exist at all.”\(^2\) In the most general sense, this chapter discusses the violence of the Lovech camp, yet it also situates the camp’s significance outside the analytical realm of cruelty. In order to better understand the unsettling atrocities that took place there, it is necessary to shed light on what allowed for them to take place. I argue that there are two noteworthy characteristics about the Lovech camp that ought to be considered and assessed in detail. First, the camp was established relatively late in the communist era, after de-Stalinization, and during a time when repressive practices had declined in general. Second, the Lovech camp was the product of penal reforms that seem to have led to a paradoxical increase in the levels of violence at the camp.

International Pressure to Reform the System

\(^1\) Tzvetan Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 18.
\(^2\) Daskalov, *Debating the Past*, 273.
On January 17, 1959, the UN Convention Concerning the Abolition of Forced Labour, signed almost two years earlier on June 25, 1957, came into force. Bulgaria only ratified this human rights treaty forty years later, in 1999, but the Bulgarian communist leadership shut down the Belene camp in August of 1959. The closing of Bulgaria’s largest camp suggests that communist officials may have felt some international pressure regarding the existence of forced-labor camps when the treaty became effective. After all, by 1959, the Soviet gulag had been greatly reduced in size and the forced-labor camp systems of neighboring Eastern European states had been mostly disbanded. The year 1959 also marked a brief period of eased Cold War tensions when the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon visited each other’s countries for the first time. Despite the international arms race, these developments made rapprochement between the two superpowers plausible, and although these hopes were dashed with the Berlin Crisis of 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Bulgarian statesmen took notice and attempted to respond to the shifting international climate.

Thus, in 1959, against the backdrop of de-Stalinization and the international abolition of forced labor, Bulgarian communist leaders initiated significant transformations in the administration and implementation of forced-labor and camp internment practices. Perhaps they took their cues from their Soviet colleagues who by the mid-1950s had undertaken substantive reforms to the Soviet penal system, ones aimed at curbing its violence and

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4 International Labour Organization, Lists of Ratification by Convention and by Country (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2003), 127. The decision to close the Belene camp was taken in August 1959, and the majority of camp inmates were released a month later in September. However, a group of 166 inmates and some of the staff were moved in October 1959 to the newly opened Lovech camp. TsDA, f.1, op.6, a.e.3984, l. 9, in Stoyanova and Iliev, Politicheski Opasni Litsa, 157. I am grateful to Borislav Skochev for our discussions on this point.
reducing its size. In fact, in 1959, the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior sent delegations to the Soviet Union to take part in several supervised tours of reformed Soviet prisons and corrective-labor colonies for both men and women. To Western visitors, the Soviets aimed to demonstrate the “superiority of socialism” through these reformed penal facilities. To visitors from the East like the Bulgarian delegation, the Soviets emphasized “practical concerns of governance,” however. During their visits, the Bulgarians received preferential treatment and access to more than the standard tour sites. Although it fell short of the full equivalent to the Soviet campaign of restoring “socialist legality,” the Bulgarian communist leadership did appear set on reducing state violence as a form of governing strategy, more particularly, of reducing camp internment as an element of that strategy.

As early as 1957 the Bulgarian prime minister Anton Yugov announced before the Western media that there were no more concentration camps on Bulgarian territory. In January 1959, a few days before Bulgaria’s entry into the UN convention abolishing forced labor, the Presidium of the National Bulgarian Assembly amended the Decree of the National Militia and, as a result, abolished internment in a camp (TVO) as an administrative measure. Even though the Belene camp continued operating in the following months, the selection of

6 Hardy, “Gulag Tourism,” 66.
7 Hardy, “Gulag Tourism,” 66.
8 There seems to be a misunderstanding regarding the chronology of Anton Yugov’s statement. Two sources indicate that his announcement to the Western media took place in 1959. See, The Bill of Indictment of Case #2/1994 of the Military Prosecutor’s Office, 7. Also, see Hristov, Sekretnoto Delo, 144-45. Both sources take into account the information contained in the one of the historical references of the Ministry of the Interior archive compiled in 1967. AMVR, f.1, op.1–2, 1. 6. Skochev, however, indicates that the information contained in the historical reference is misleading and that Yugov most likely made the statement in the summer of 1957. Skochev considers several sources to support his conclusion. Most convincingly, he points to a report by the Ministry of the Interior to the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party from 1957, which relates the outrage expressed by the writer, Iasen Valkovski, regarding the lies spread by Yugov before an American journalist claiming that there are no concentration camps in Bulgaria. See AMVR, f.1, op.5, a.u.61. Also, see Skochev, “Kontzlagerut Belene,” 151.
9 Decree No.10 of the Presidium of the National Assembly issued on January 10, 1959, in Sofia. Published in Izvestia na Presidiuma na Narodnотo Subranie 5, January 16, 1959.
inmates became much stricter, and authorities placed an emphasis on reducing the numbers of those interned.\textsuperscript{10} Most critically, on August 27, 1959, at a session of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the decision was made to “liquidate labor correctional facilities in the country [da se likvidirat trudovo-vuzpitatelni obshtezhitia v stranata],” that is, to close all camps.\textsuperscript{11} There are no explicit reasons given for the issuing of this decree. Still, it is plausible to assume that the international circumstances at the time, the easing of Cold War tensions and the UN convention on the abolition of forced labor, yielded enough pressure on the Bulgarian government official in order to have them enact the decree. For even though Bulgaria did not ratify the convention, it appears that the regime did not wish to draw more attention on its forced-labor practices, the existence of which had become known to the outside world.

Despite these official announcements, the Bulgarian communist authorities did not successfully realize any of the major intended reform initiatives. Yugov’s 1957 statement to the Western press was simply untruthful. The Politburo decision, aimed at the elimination of concentration camps, did not actually see implementation, and it appears that no lessons were learned during the Gulag tours in the Soviet Union. What occurred instead were minor changes giving the appearance of reform, while, in fact, the camp system deteriorated and levels of violence and depravity reached new heights in the early 1960s. Therefore, while international pressure prompted the closing of Belene, the communist authorities simultaneously initiated a process that led to the creation of what would become Bulgaria’s harshest camp, Lovech, and a neighboring, less violent female section, Skravena.

\textsuperscript{10} AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.97.
\textsuperscript{11} TsDA, f.1, op.6, a.u.3984, l. 9, in Stoyanova and Iliev, \textit{Politicheski Opasni Litsa}, 157.
The Physical Violence of the Lovech Camp

Lovech operated between 1959 and 1962, Skravena between 1961 and 1962. The camps were situated in north-central Bulgaria, just outside the historic town of Lovech, near a stone quarry, surrounded by the Balkan mountain range. The violence in Lovech was ubiquitous, sadistic, and differed starkly from that experienced in the other Bulgarian camps. An estimated 1,500 men and women passed through Lovech and Skravena, 155 of which died there. Given the extreme violence, the testimonies of survivors and guards, the internal government review of the camps, and archival evidence of frequent trips taken out of the camp by the automotive vehicle tasked with the transport of dead bodies, the actual number of deaths may well have exceeded 155.

![Figure 5.1 The stone quarry, a former work site of the Lovech camp, 2011. Photographer unknown.](image)

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12 Camp “C,” the secret camp that operated between 1947 and 1949, was also extremely violent. Scant archival evidence makes precise information on what transpired there impossible to ascertain.  
13 AMVR, f.23, op.1, au.91, 1–14; AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.131, 13. It is difficult to confirm the accuracy of these numbers. They were compiled by the Special Inquiry Commission in 1990 and correspond closely to those compiled by the investigative officers for the prosecution, which mounted the case against the camps. See Bill of Indictment of Case #2/1994 of the Military Prosecutor’s Office.  
14 On the frequency of trips transporting dead bodies, see AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.109.
Various forms of punishment and discriminations, such as malnutrition, exhaustion due to the harsh labor regime, humiliations, intimidations, and the threat of violence, characterized all Bulgarian camps.\textsuperscript{15} Physical violence, however, defined as the “intentional harming of another person’s body,” be it through touching, wounding, or, in extreme cases, killing was practiced more systematically in Lovech than anywhere else.\textsuperscript{16} Beatings, shootings, and deaths certainly occurred in Belene and in the other camps. They did not, however, form part of the camp governing strategies, as was the case in Lovech. Furthermore, Lovech’s violence proved unusual in being simultaneously systematic and arbitrary: systematic because it formed part of the camp’s organizational structure, that is, regular beatings with wooden clubs defined daily life for the male and female internees; arbitrary because it also occurred ad hoc, on the whim of individual guards. While inmates were targeted regularly, the manner in which they suffered attack seemed indiscriminate. In addition, extreme brutality distinguished the violence at Lovech. Todorov, for instance, has argued that the camp’s violence cultivated a very specific “form of destruction.”\textsuperscript{17} Survivor testimonies unanimously underline this particular form of destruction and repeatedly point to pervasive cruelty and sadism at the camp.

**Remembering and Reconstructing Lovech: Testimonies of Victims and Perpetrators**

Nadia Dunkin was a theater actress sent to Lovech in 1961 when she was in her forties, allegedly for speaking out against the regime and for her involvement in oppositional cultural


\textsuperscript{16} On the definition of physical violence in the socialist context, see Thomas Lindenberger and Jan C. Behrends, Introduction to “Physical Violence and State Legitimacy in Late Socialism,” ed Thomas Lindenberger, Jan C. Behrends, and Pavel Kolar (unpublished manuscript, 2014), 1–6.

\textsuperscript{17} Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 18.
activities. In the immediate post-communist period, Dunkin emerged as one of the first people to talk openly about her experiences in the camp. Dunkin not only spoke frankly about what she had endured; she also named the perpetrators and insisted that they be held accountable. “They must be tried, for the sake of those who died, those who survived and all those who shared our suffering,” she stated in 1990. \(^{18}\) As an outspoken survivor, Dunkin worked closely with the attorney general and the investigators, testifying publicly before the Bulgarian and foreign media as well as before the court. She was, in fact, one of the key witnesses for the prosecution’s case against individuals responsible for human rights abuses in Lovech. \(^{19}\) As a result, her testimony appears in several print and media sources from the early 1990s. \(^{20}\)

Dunkin’s life ended tragically in 1994, at the height of the trial, when she was killed in her apartment in Sofia. Although there has been speculation about a politically motivated murder, the reasons for her death have never been established. The former attorney general lamented her loss and asserted that, in the long term, it was more detrimental to the public remembrance of the camps than it was to the actual trial. \(^{21}\) Her court testimony had already been deposited and could always be accessed. Yet Dunkin’s passing left the survivor community without a prominent public spokesperson, one who candidly evoked the narrative of state repression and was committed to preserving the memory of violence. Moreover, regardless of the motivations behind it, her murder sent a chilling message to the rest of the survivors: they read it as a frightening example of what could happen to those forthright about their experiences in the camps, to those who dared break the silence.

\(^{19}\) Ivan Tatarchev (former attorney general) interview with the author, Sofia, September 2003.
\(^{21}\) Ivan Tatarchev, interview with the author, Sofia, September 2013.
In the early 1990s, Dunkin recalled her entry into Lovech: “My first impression was of a somber, nightmarish landscape. We drove through a narrow valley surrounded by towering rocks.”

Dunkin entered the camp alongside a woman named Margarita, who believed that she had been sent to Lovech because she had confronted her husband, a military officer, about his infidelity, and that he had decided to get rid of her by sending her to the camp.

As the women entered the camp compound, a man named Sakho beat them severely:

He walked up to me and started to hit me with a whip. I protected my eyes, terrified that I’d be blinded. It was terrible: he must have hit me twenty times. The pain was too much, and I finally fainted. He then moved to Margarita. . . . Sakho hit her even harder. He finally stopped. The two of us were sprawled on the ground. Looking up, we saw crows hovering and cawing above the rocks. . . . We were allowed to wash ourselves; then we waited. A half hour passed, and a gray battalion appeared, called the death battalion. Wounded and crippled men, covered with bandages, their faces swollen by untreated toothaches.”

The brutal entry into Lovech, marked by Sakho and his whip, frequently emerges in the testimonies of survivors. “He beat me mercilessly,” stated former inmate Nikola Dafinov in 2011; “he hit me everywhere, on my legs, on my back, across my face.” The diaries of a former camp guard, Ivan Panteleev, also point to Sakho as the initiator of the first act of violence, one of many to follow:

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22 Nadia Dunkin, quoted in Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 121.

23 Nadia Dunkin, quoted in Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 119. This instance of Dunkin’s account also highlights the arbitrariness with which internment in Lovech was carried out.

24 Nadia Dunkin, quoted in Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 121; Nadia Dunkin interview in Kiriakov, *The Survivors*.

25 Nikola Dafinov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 29, 2011.
The barracks of the camp were surrounded by barbed wire, which was wrapped around high concrete pillars with curved inward peaks. The gate was guarded during the day by the black gypsy (Sakho). He had a limp, one leg shorter than the other, he leaned on a cane; he was 42 years old. He welcomed the new inmates by hitting them, 5 or 6 times, on the back with his club.26

Sakho, whose full name is Shaban Kaleev Dokov Uzukdhiev, was a criminal camp inmate, and his Roma origins are often vilified in the testimonies of both survivors and perpetrators. As was the practice in the latter half of Lovech’s existence, the most hardened criminal inmates were often appointed to supervisory roles in the camp, usually to oversee the labor of the other inmates. They were called “brigade chiefs” (brigadiri), and they either carried out beatings or aided their superiors, the camp guards, in doing so. Although it appears that Sakho, for instance, had a sadistic streak and actually derived pleasure from inflicting the abuses, it is also difficult to conclude that this was indeed the case. Camp survivors have also alluded to the fact that an inmate’s brutal attitude towards other inmates guaranteed one’s survival and also insured the favor of superiors. Therefore, Sakho’s brutality could also be interpreted as a manifestation of a survival strategy.

Lovech: a Camp of “Criminals” and “Hooligans”?  

What was new in Lovech, in addition to the extreme forms of violence, was the intermixing of criminal and non-criminal inmates. It marked another break from previous

governing practices in the Bulgarian camp system, which had formerly discouraged the commingling of the two categories. The separation had been motivated by the desire to minimize the ideological influence that the political inmates could exert on the criminal prisoners, who were deemed closer to the working class. In fact, as early as 1945, instructions in the emerging secret police apparatus advised minimal contact between the two groups.\textsuperscript{27}

Even when some intermixing occurred in Belene after 1956, it was regulated and limited, as the criminal inmates were separated from the political ones by barbed wire running between the different sections of the camp. In many ways, however, the distinction between criminal and political inmates collapsed in the winter of 1958 when the category of “hooligan” was introduced into the administration and vocabulary of the secret police.\textsuperscript{28}

The campaign to end hooliganism in fact criminalized the behavior of those opposing the socialist mores of the day. The term hooligan is misleading, however, because it enclosed within it many who would previously have simply been considered criminals, namely, people convicted of having violating specific laws. Based on the limited evidence available, it appears the administrative use of the term \textit{hooligan} was further complicated by the fact that many of the people categorized as hooligans were arrested for a crime, though they were not convicted in a court of law.

This expansive category of the hooligan and the conflation of common criminals with social and political dissenters complicated attempts to understand the elevated levels of violence in Lovech in the immediate post-communist period. These complications became apparent in the proceedings of the Special Inquiry Commission in 1990.

In the most general terms, the violence in Lovech was explained by the internment there of mostly criminal inmates, and authorities blamed their presence for the atrocities

\textsuperscript{27} AMVR, f.1, op.1, a.u.114, 11.
\textsuperscript{28} TsDA, f.-B, op.6, a.u.3518; AMVR, f.12, op.1, a.u.1541, 1533, 1535, and 1540.
committed. In discussing who was sent to Lovech, one of the commission members, who had reviewed some of the files and lists contained in the Ministry of the Interior archive, exclaimed, “They were all criminals.”\textsuperscript{29} Another SIC member interjected, “We cannot know how many of them were criminals and how many were there due to political reasons. And if we are to generalize, we can say that there were indeed both groups. But we cannot determine how many of them were criminal, and how many political.”\textsuperscript{30} Only rarely did someone raise the obvious question of the complete absence of judicial proceedings, that is, the problem of sending even the most hardened criminals to a camp without a trial or a sentence.

As blurred as the line had become between the criminal and the political inmates in the administrative records of the Lovech camp, survivors confirm that there were certainly ways of distinguishing the “actual criminals,” since they often had privileges the other internees did not. The account of a former camp guard, Nikolas Ivanov, corroborates the survivors’ explanations. What is particularly interesting about Ivanov’s account, and what sets it apart from those of the other male guards, is that he did not deny the extreme violence of the camp. On the contrary, Ivanov discussed it in a seemingly truthful manner. He did not appear to have been under duress when providing his story and was never put on trial. Ivanov’s account comes from a newspaper interview, not the proceedings of the criminal investigation.\textsuperscript{31}

This is how Ivanov described the Lovech inmates during an interview for \textit{Demokratsia} in 1990: “They were so terrified . . . and too weak. Exhausted, crippled, covered in wounds and bruises . . . in rags, reeking from filth. . . . Their impotence was terrible.”\textsuperscript{32} Ivanov’s testimony further distinguished among the different categories of Lovech’s inmates:

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\textsuperscript{29} AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 22 (session 3).
\textsuperscript{30} AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 26, (session 3).
\textsuperscript{31} Nikolas Ivanov, interview for \textit{Demokratsia}, April 2, 1990, quoted in Todorov, \textit{Voices from the Gulag}, 144.
\textsuperscript{32} Nikolas Ivanov, interview for \textit{Demokratsia}, April 2, 1990, quoted in Todorov, \textit{Voices from the Gulag}, 144.
Many of the prisoners were cultivated—these were the political inmates, I guess. Doctors, engineers, judges, managers . . . there was even a resistance fighter against fascism [a former communist]. There were those who didn’t know why they were there, others who were there because their wives were beautiful . . . others because of shady dealings that threatened people in high places . . . or others were there simply because their pants fit too tight or because they were caught telling political anecdotes. There were also the actual criminals, but they were employed as brigade chiefs and kept order in the barracks and so forth. They were willing to do anything necessary to hold on to their privileges. It seems they were the ones who hit the hardest. Sakho, of course, belonged to this group. He was always standing by the door with a club in his hand, keeping an eye out.33

Did Ivanov imagine the professions of the people he thought belonged to the non-criminal category? It seems unlikely that he would have talked to the inmates about their former professions. Perhaps he talked to someone from the camp staff familiar with the internees. According to his own account, he “didn’t read the files” of the camp inmates. Although it is not certain, he seems to have been able to visually differentiate among the inmates, identifying many as not “criminal” by outward impression.34

Ivanov’s testimony is also one of the few that raised the question of sexual violence in Lovech. According to him, some guards regularly got drunk and entertained themselves by “torturing inmates and assaulting women prisoners.”35 “Some of the women prisoners were

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33 Nikolas Ivanov, interview for Demokratsia, April 2, 1990, quoted in Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 144–45.
34 Nikolas Ivanov, interview for Demokratsia, April 2, 1990, quoted in Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 144.
35 Nikolas Ivanov, interview for Demokratsia, April 2, 1990, quoted in Todorov, Voices from the Gulag, 145.
beautiful, though it was difficult to tell, since they were also filthy and horribly neglected,” Ivanov stated.\textsuperscript{36} He continued, “You felt like retching when you walked past them. Still, the policemen raped them regularly,”\textsuperscript{37} notwithstanding the fact that there is generally little correlation between beauty and sexual assault. The former camp inmate Nikola Dafinov, for instance, also broached the topic of the guards’ sexual behavior, but not in relation to the inmates. Dafinov discussed the heavy drinking and the sexual interactions between individual guards, but he did not speak about the rape of either male or female inmates.\textsuperscript{38} “They did not think of us as human,” said Dafinov, implying that sexual abuse was out of the question.\textsuperscript{39} The chief investigator and first prosecutor in the post-communist period, Lilko Iotzov, declined to pronounce with certainty the regular occurrence of sexual violence in Lovech. “We simply don’t know enough,” he stated in 2003.\textsuperscript{40} Another prosecutor, Ventzislav Teofilov, only hinted at the possibility: “Concerning the female camp section, women for obvious reasons refused to talk.”\textsuperscript{41} It would seem logical to deduce that sexual violence, and the accompanying humiliation and shame, were part of the “obvious reasons.” Yet the general absence of testimony from both survivors and perpetrators on this topic makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions.\textsuperscript{42}

**On Hard Labor**

A distinguishing characteristic of the Lovech camp on which there is consensus, however, was the intense character of the physical labor performed by the inmates. According

\textsuperscript{36} Nikolas Ivanov, interview for *Demokratsia*, April 2, 1990, quoted in Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 145.
\textsuperscript{37} Nikolas Ivanov, interview for *Demokratsia*, April 2, 1990, quoted in Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 145.
\textsuperscript{38} Nikola Dafinov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 29, 2011.
\textsuperscript{39} Nikola Dafinov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 29, 2011.
\textsuperscript{40} Lilko Iotzov, in conversation with the author, Sofia, October 2003.
\textsuperscript{41} Hristo Hristov, interview with Ventzislav Teofilov, *Sekretonto Delo*, 167.
\textsuperscript{42} The men I interviewed who were interned in Lovech, as well as women survivors from camps other than Lovech or Skravena, denied that any sexual abuse took place in the camps. I have never interviewed a woman who was interned in Lovech or Skravena.
to the former camp commandant, Petur Gogov, the work quotas were so crushing that “the inmates died from exhaustion. The regime was extremely hard. I remember that women had to dig out 5 cubic meters of soil [a day] and move it 30 meters with a wheelbarrow. It was an impossible task for a woman.” The norm for men was higher, around eight to ten cubic meters of dirt and stone per day. Both men and women had to perform this labor under draconian conditions, in a hurry, and with the constant threat of violence. Not only survivor accounts but also the testimonies of guards and the camp leadership confirm the existence of the brutal labor regime, marked by impossible quotas and sustained by the malnourished bodies of abused inmates. For example, Lieutenant Nikolai Gazdov, the secret police chief at Lovech, who was one of the defendants on trial in the post-communist years, routinely pointed to the work regime as the reason for multiple deaths in the camps. The acknowledgment and insistence on the brutality of the regime also gave perpetrators an opportunity to displace their responsibility for inmate deaths, however. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be documentary evidence that could directly establish who was responsible for the creation of Lovech’s deadly work regiment and its lethal quotas. Although the dearth of information has proved a challenge for researchers attempting to discover what prompted Lovech’s violence, it became a convenient strategy for the defendants on trial.

Reckoning with the Legacy of Lovech: Witness Testimony, Judicial and Medical Interpretations in the Post-Communist Era

The severe physical violence and hard labor occurred under conditions of extreme duress, which further contributed to the high death rate. In July 1990, the Military Prosecutor’s

43 Petur Gogov quoted in Hristov, Sekretmoto Delo, 18.
44 Hristov, Sekretmoto Delo, 18.
45 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.140, 50 (session 5).
Office, the judicial body that initiated the legal investigation into the camp’s crimes appointed a medical commission to examine the evidence it had collected. The medical commission, headed by Stoicho Radanov, the chief of forensics at the Medical Academy, and including five additional experts, examined 250 official documents and about 600 pages of testimony from several hundred eyewitnesses.46 The conclusions reached by the medical experts are worth quoting in their entirety because they provide a comprehensive summary of the conditions in the camp:

The living conditions in Lovech were extremely severe. According to witness testimony, inmates were not able to talk to each other, to maintain contact with the outside world, to lodge complaints, to read, to maintain their personal dignity and self-esteem as human beings. On arrival in the camp, and during their entire internment, the majority [of inmates] were severely, and in most cases, without reason, beaten with clubs and rubber hoses. Described are cases of people being torn by guard dogs to intimidate other inmates, of people being tied to a post and doused with cold water in the winter, of condescending murder threats, etc. All this shows that living conditions bore the sign of undue sadism [sic]. The inmates slept in “dormitories” unsuitable for normal rest, sometimes exceeding more than 100 people [per dormitory]. Sleeping was done on wooden planks, lined with sackcloth and straw, bedding was missing, and old blankets and materials at hand were used for covering. The inmates wore old military uniforms. Individual warm clothing was not allowed. Sleep was extremely insufficient.

46 Hristov, Sekretnoto Delo, 19.
The inmates’ nutrition, assessed primarily on witness statements, consisted of tea and jam (with a limited amount of bread) for breakfast, meatless dishes (bean or vegetable soup, and the extremely rare meat offering) for lunch, and there was usually a meatless dish with a half or a full serving of bread for dinner. By estimation, the caloric intake of this food ration could not under any circumstances cover the daily requirement. By rough estimation, the latter was around 4000–5100 kilojoules per day [around 950 calories]. All this created conditions for systemic malnutrition and, consequently, for conditions that endangered one’s health and existence, and decreased resistance to different types of external influences.

Rest times as well as the severity of the work regime were not the same for all inmates. The requirements for those who worked on the penal excavation site, “the quarry,” were extremely demanding. There, the workday was not regulated, but in all cases, it lasted more than ten hours and it was interrupted for an hour during lunch break. The only hours dedicated to rest during the week were the afternoons on Sundays. Work quotas were not defined and established. Camp inmates were expected to work without interruption at the maximum strain of their physical abilities. The work consisted of the extraction of stones, breaking them, and loading them into carts. Women dug and excavated earth. According to witness testimony, men derived from 8 to 20 cubic meters per day, women around 5 cubic meters daily. It is possible that this volume of work is not realistic, as it goes beyond the physical capability of the average inmate, and it is absolutely unattainable for persons without any prior physical training. The latter, incidentally, was never performed and inmates
were driven straight to work. When the work quotas were not fulfilled, inmates worked late into the night. The labor regime at the quarry can be summarized as dangerous for the health of the inmates.

The hygiene requirements, under such conditions, were not met. There were no showers, nor hot water. Washing was done with a hose and through a faucet. Sewage facilities [bathrooms] were inadequate and insufficient, and their use at night was prohibited. The inmates had lice, and some of them had scabies. There were no [hygiene] products and means for washing and sanitization.

Preventative [medical] measures were not carried out. There was no medical center or an infirmary. The most elementary medical care was performed by some inmates who were physicians and in the complete absence of any medical resources. These labor and living conditions, combined with elements of physical violence bordering on sadism, and the violation of the value of individual human life [lichnite tzennosti], created a real danger for the physical and mental health of the inmates, and, therefore, contributed to the high mortality in the camp.47

Notwithstanding the bureaucratic reticence with which the medical team formulated their observations, their succinct exposé emphasized the magnitude and breadth of the violence and depravity at Lovech. The archival records they examined came from the already purged archive of the Ministry of the Interior. The doctors themselves acknowledged their primary reliance on witness testimony in assessing nutrition in the camp and the violent excesses of some guards. Witness testimony, then, was at the core of the investigative material the Military

47 Conclusions of the medical expertise committee headed by Doctor Stoicho Radanov and five more medical specialists, quoted in Hristov, Sekretonoto Delo, 19–21.
Prosecutor’s Office provided to the medical commission. Thus the recollections of camp survivors considerably informed the conclusions reached by Radanov and his colleagues. In this sense, the question of timing is critical to consider here.

A substantial amount of time lapsed before these facts about Lovech came to light. The nearly thirty-year gap between the experience and the recounting of the violence is not an insignificant factor in how the story of the camp emerged. The camp closed down in 1962, while the first public testaments about occurrences there surfaced in early 1990. The Military Prosecutor’s Office began its investigation into the crimes committed in Lovech and Skravena in March 1990. In February and March of 1990, the first articles on the camps appeared in the Bulgarian press. In March and April of 1990, the Special Inquiry Commission interrogated and publicized the testimony of several camp survivors. The medical commission reviewed the collected evidence in the summer of 1990. How reliable was the testimony provided by survivors? How trustworthy were the witnesses? After all, the investigation into the crimes committed in Lovech coincided with the public revelation of these same crimes. Did the simultaneous disclosures undertaken by the media, the judiciary, and the post-communist Bulgarian government interfere with the accurate reconstruction of the events in Lovech?

According to Teofilov, the former prosecutor who interviewed the majority of the camp survivors, they did:

It was most difficult to determine what exactly took place there [in Lovech].

Many former inmates, for personal reasons, did not wish to return to these events, [did not wish] to remember. . . . The difficulty stemmed from the fact that some of them recreated not what they had experienced but what they had

read in the newspapers. Several times I encountered such cases; it was as if they were reciting yet another publication. I had collected all of them [the newspaper articles] and carried them with me, and when they began recounting some of the events, I started intervening: wait, you said that this event occurred at this particular site, but you never worked there. Yet the person [the former inmate] started describing one particular murder. I said: Did you read this article? Yes, that person responded. There was such mixture [confusion] of things. And then I would ask that person: OK, now tell me what you saw, and not what you read.49

Teofilov’s words, as he himself insisted, should not cast any doubt on the brutality of the Lovech camp. It was not that the prosecutor wondered whether or not a particular murder had taken place, “that was a fact,” but rather, when and under what conditions.50 Questions of chronology and details surrounding the killings concerned him. Still, Teofilov sheds light on a very important phenomenon, namely, the discrepancy between the lived experience of the camp violence in the 1960s and the sensationalized reporting of it in the early post-communist years. It is reasonable to assume that the promise of high sales and the battle for circulation fueled the exaggerated newspaper articles in the early 1990s.

There was something else at play: the incommunicability and the impossibility of articulating trauma silenced and suppressed for thirty years. Once again, Teofilov’s insight is important to consider here: “The whole truth [about what took place in Lovech] will never be known, no one would be able to describe it. What people passed over in silence, even that said

49 Hristov, interview with Teofilov, Sekretnoto Delo, 167.
50 Hristov, interview with Teofilov, Sekretnoto Delo, 168.
something to me, do you understand? This cannot be expressed through words or with a camera.”

It is precisely what survivors, “passed over in silence,” the enormity of the violence, the inability to speak of it, that was transformed and disfigured into shocking headlines. As Radonov’s medical commission declared, silence was a major condition of life in the Lovech camp, and inmates were barely allowed to utter a word during their internment there. Those who survived and were released in 1962 continued living in silence, and they never discussed the camp, as their relatives attested to Teofilov in the 1990s. Conversations about Lovech were forbidden in the survivors’ families, and the topic remained off limits to even the closest family members: “They did not want to talk about it while they were alive,” acknowledged the former prosecutor.

Thirteen years after Teofilov’s investigation and Radonov’s medical report, another team of doctors looked into the plight of camp survivors. In 2003, doctors from the Assistance Center for Torture Survivors (ACET) in Sofia conducted interviews and medical rehabilitation sessions with survivors of communist violence, including former camp inmates, as well as with their families. The conclusions reached by the two medical groups were not too far apart. In 2003, the doctors detected similar patterns as their colleagues in 1990 regarding the way in which Bulgaria’s survivors of political violence lived with the experience of repression. Fear and trauma caused by the severity of the experience emerged as constant markers in their

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51 Hristov, interview with Teofilov, Sekretnoto Delo, 168.
52 Hristov, interview with Teofilov, Sekretnoto Delo, 178.
53 Hristov, interview with Teofilov, Sekretnoto Delo, 178.
54 The Assistance Center for Torture Survivors (ACET) is a Bulgarian nongovernmental organization dedicated to providing medical rehabilitation services to torture victims (refugees and victims of the communist regime in Bulgaria and their family members) and working to prevent torture and other inhuman treatment. The organization’s medical rehabilitation program provides services in Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, and Kazanluk. ACET is accredited with the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT). The center is a member of the Balkan Network for Prevention of Torture and Rehabilitation of Victims (BAN) and of the SOS-Network of the World Organisation against Torture (OMCT). For more information, see ACET’s publication, Evgeni Genchev ed., Tales from the Dark (2003).
lives. More surprising, however, the devastating silence of the camp identified by the doctors in 1990 and recognized by Teofilov in his interviews with the victims’ families figured just as prominently in the lives of survivors in 2003. Camp survivors could not adequately deal with the trauma because the topic of their suffering was “still being avoided, rejected, and disregarded” in Bulgarian society. “The adequate rehabilitation of torture victims is a crucial step to the rehabilitation of society as a whole too,” concluded the team’s psychotherapist, Evgeni Genchev.

**Lovech in the Communist Files**

The post-communist records and testimonies examined thus far reveal in detail the atrocious circumstances of the Lovech camp and the ensuing trauma that continues to mark survivors, their relatives, and society as a whole. What do communist files disclose about the camp? Due to the purging of records, the archival paper trail documenting the excesses of the Lovech and Skravena camps is rather thin, though it does exist. The most convincing record to emerge from the communist archive was a report from 1962 providing evidence that something had gone terribly wrong behind the camp’s barbed wire. The revelations from this document did not contradict the survivors’ later accounts. In fact, they only reinforce our understanding of the camp as a site of extreme brutality. The report eventually led to the closure of Lovech and Skravena, and it also put an end to the most violent phase of the Bulgarian camp system.

In 1962, at the behest of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, a commission was tasked with investigating the conditions in Lovech and

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55 Genchev, *Tales from the Dark*, 1–8.
56 Genchev, *Tales from the Dark*, 7.
57 Genchev, *Tales from the Dark*, 7.
Skravena. The commission was composed of four senior members of the Communist Party, and it became known as the Velchev Commission, after its chair, Boris Velchev, the secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party’s Central Committee. He had been part of the communist resistance to fascism in Bulgaria and had been interned in a camp before the communists took power. Velchev led the investigation alongside his colleagues Apostol Kolchev, Nikola Angelov, and Sabotin Genov. They conducted a closed investigation to publish a confidential five-page report in early April 1962.

The commission gave an extremely damning report. It contended that the allegations of the abuse of camp inmates, which had initially propelled the inquiry, were indeed true. The report spared no references to the sadistic violence, or to the heart-wrenching physical labor. The report stated: “Some time ago, the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party received signals regarding the existence of a very hard regime and cruel atrocities in the labor group [Trudova Grupa] near Lovech.” Velchev and his colleagues also noted that no written order authorizing the opening of the Lovech camp was found, and to this day it remains unclear how exactly and on whose orders the camp came into existence. As noted in the report, the only set of regulations (pravilnik) regarding life in the camp was written up in February 1962, after the Central Committee learned that the camp was under investigation. In addition to the written regulations, the Lovech camp authorities also managed to put together a “Plan for Cultural-Educational Activities for the Lovech Inmates,” meant to

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58 Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag*, 22.
59 TsDA, f.1-B, op. 6, a.u.4749. Apostol Kolchev was a member of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and a deputy minister at the Ministry of the Interior. Nikola Angelov was deputy head of the administrative section at the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Sabotin Genov was a member of the administrative section at the Central Committee of the Communist Party.
60 TsDA, f.1-B, op. 6, a.u.4749.
61 TsDA, f.1-B, op. 6, a.u.4749.
62 TsDA, f.1-B, op. 6, a.u.4749.
63 TsDA, f.1-B, op. 6, a.u.4749.
64 AMVR, f.23, op.1., a.u.129, 1–5; TsDA, f.1-B, op. 6, a.u.4749.
“reinforce the re-educational efforts of the labor regime.” Despite the leadership’s efforts to paint a picture of the camp as a proper re-educational institution, Velchev’s commission remained unconvinced. The report further underlined in disturbing detail the severity of the violence and pointed to the fact that knowledge of the atrocities was not contained within the camp’s borders: “The facts about the hard labor regime were known to a number of officials, as well as to quite a few citizens from the city of Lovech and the county.” How many citizens from the city proper knew of the camp conditions is difficult to determine. However, since some inmates worked outside the bounds of the camp, we can reasonably conclude the existence of limited interactions between the camp and civilian worlds. The commission’s members suggested that the violence was visible enough; according to its report, the sight of camp inmates caused civilians from surrounding areas to experience “bewilderment, discontent, and even feelings of sympathy for the inmates.”

The Velchev Commission report made no recommendation for anyone to be held criminally liable. It would take nearly thirty years before anyone would make such an attempt at justice. Instead of addressing criminal responsibility, the commission recommended closure of the sites and mild “[Communist] Party punishment” and retirement for the camp leadership. It also recommended that Mircho Spasov, the deputy vice minister of the interior, receive a mild “Party punishment” and be given a different position. Although the camp was closed shortly after the report’s publication, the camp affair was silenced, and officially, knowledge about the existence of this mechanism of state repression remained confined to the ranks of the

65 AMVR, f.23, op.1., a.u.125, 1–2.
66 TsDA, f.1-B, op. 6, a.u.4749.
67 TsDA, f.1-B, op. 6, a.u.4749.
68 TsDA, f.1-B, op. 6, a.u.4749.
ruling Communist Party. Spasov was expelled from the party and stripped of his rank of army general only in 1990.69

The Velchev report suggests that the top communist leadership had no knowledge of the abuses in Lovech prior to the investigation. Furthermore, once revealed, the atrocities and killings seem to have caused a powerful stir among Bulgaria’s ruling communist elite. In an interview for a documentary for Bulgarian National Television in 1999, Gatio Gatev, the deputy head of the investigative department of the secret police in 1962, hinted at the possibility that although the report’s findings were genuine, the Velchev Commission’s thorough investigation was in fact a political maneuver.70 In other words, not concerns about abuse prompted the commission’s formation, but, rather, the possibility of gaining political leverage through their revelation. In this sense, the creation of the Velchev Commission appears to be more the product of internal strife and less a manifestation of de-Stalinization reforms adopted in Bulgaria as a result of the twenty-second congress of the CPSU in the Soviet Union.71

In early 1962, Todor Zhivkov had almost fully solidified his grip on the Bulgarian Communist Party but there were still warring factions within the communist elite, including people interested in seeing him deposed from power. Were the results of the Velchev Commission meant to intimidate Zhivkov and his supporters? If this was the intent, it ultimately failed, since Zhivkov remained in power longer than any of his contemporaries and lost his position only when the entire system collapsed in late 1989. Regardless of the

70 Interview with Gatio Gatev for the documentary film Sekretnoto Delo za Lagerite (Bulgarian National Television, 1999), based on Hristov’s eponymous book.
71 Historian Richard Crampton points out that liberalizing influences of the twenty-second CPSU congress was felt in Bulgaria in the cultural front, for instance. See, Crampton, The Oxford History of Modern Europe: Bulgaria, 349-351.
motivation behind the commission’s formation, the report did capture the extreme violence of the Lovech camp. When asked about the worst experience in Lovech, a former inmate replied:

The worst thing I’ve been through, the most terrible thing was when they once made me carry the sacks with the bodies of dead inmates. There were three or four of us who were nearest at hand. The sacks were about 70 meters away from the entrance [of the camp]. The car didn’t drive in, it waited at the entrance. And those who were around [were told by the guards], come here, you, you, and you. We started to carry them, when I lifted the sack up, it was torn, [there was a] big hole, you could see half his head, brains slipping [out]. And flies and wasps swarming around, the sack was soaked in blood and we carried them. It was so revolting that I can’t tell you how I lived through it. Now I’d rather die than carry a single sack like that. It was dreadful, really dreadful.72

Some of the remaining records from the secret police files corroborate the scene depicted by this survivor. A handwritten note from the summer of 1961 by Spasov stated:

Immediately and quickly put an end to all this noise with regard to the corpses of those who have died in Lovech, and their transportation and internment. . . . The car with which the bodies are transported should be changed frequently. . . . Everything possible should be done to keep this a secret, at least when it comes to the transportation and the

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72 Lovech camp survivor interview for Kiriakov, The Survivors.
internment, although there is nothing illegal about it. Act on my behalf and please report to me on how you proceed with everything.\textsuperscript{73}

In 1990, Spasov denied that he had any involvement with or responsibility for the violence in the camp, though he acknowledged that what took place in Lovech seemed wrong to him from the current perspective.\textsuperscript{74} Again in 1990, when asked to account for his role in the camp, Spasov stated:

\begin{quote}
I do not consider myself guilty. . . . Everyone, including Todor Zhivkov, knew the camp regime was hard, even harsh, I would say. . . . This regime was created to re-educate the criminals interned in the camp. Back then, we considered that a criminal violator is [\textit{sic}] also a political violator, and we punished them according to the law. This was the vision of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. I did not create the laws, I only enforced them.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Spasov is certainly not the only one to shift the onus of accountability to his superiors. In 1962, the camp commandant Petur Gogov testified to Velchev that instructions about Lovech’s harsh regime came directly from Zhivkov himself.\textsuperscript{76} Notwithstanding Spasov’s and Gogov’s self-justifying narratives and attempts at displacing their personal responsibility—they were both, after all, criminally tried for their role in the camp abuses—their words cast doubt on the conclusions of the Velchev Commission. Was the camp really a secret well kept from the top communist leadership? Were Zhivkov and his closest entourage truly unaware of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[73] AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u.109.
\item[74] Mircho Spasov, quoted in Hristov, \textit{Sekretnoto Delo}, 23.
\item[75] Spasov, quoted in Hristov, \textit{Sekretnoto Delo}, 23.
\item[76] Peter Gogov quoted in Hristov, \textit{Sekretno Delo}, 137.
\end{footnotes}
its existence? Was Lovech’s violence simply the result of the whims of a few guards gone berserk, enjoying the sadistic perks offered to them by their employment? What actually accounted for the levels of violence and the extreme abuses that took place there? Or as one of the camp survivors, Bozhidar Vitanov, put it some fifty years later, recalling his severe beating by one of the guards: “Was he hitting me because he was ordered to do so or on his own initiative? If it was the former, there was no salvation, but if it came from him, then there was a glimmer of hope.”

Vitanov survived the camp because he was young, strong, and most important, had won the favor of one of the guards. Yet the confusion he experienced while being struck captures what lies at the heart of understanding Lovech’s violence: Was it mandated from above or enacted individually?

**A Semi-Legal Camp**

It seems that although they may not have actually ordered the creation of such a violent regime, Bulgaria’s communist leadership, the Politburo, including the country’s head of state, Zhivkov was clearly aware of Lovech. The higher party echelon did not merely tolerate the camp’s existence; it, in fact, mandated it. The deputy vice minister of the interior, Spasov, one of Zhivkov’s trusted allies, had much leverage in running Lovech. And either way, what happened in Lovech had already begun three years earlier, in Belene. In 1956, following the Hungarian Uprising, the Belene camp reopened with a much harsher regime than before. Spasov, in his position as deputy vice minister since 1957, initiated this new regime, alongside the camp staff later transferred to Lovech. What further exacerbated the severe conditions in Belene was the start of an active campaign against “hooligans” in 1958.

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This latter measure, coupled with Spasov’s severe vision of how the camp should be run, ultimately turned camp repression into a system of dehumanizing practices aimed at the reformation of “anti-social elements.” Its full-blown effects manifested in Lovech.

In administrative terms, Lovech was not a new camp. In the Belene camp management, its personnel and guards, as well as some of the inmates were relocated to the Lovech site in October 1959. In records of the Ministry of the Interior, the Lovech camps still appeared as “TVO Belene” until April 1960. In the summer of 1959, camp interment was technically abolished as an administrative measure and all camps in the country liquidated. In October 1959, the minister of the interior, Georgi Tsankov, submitted a formal proposal to the Politburo to improve the creation of the already formed camp in Lovech. The Politburo did not take a formal position on Tsankov’s proposal, however, so that the camp existed with the Politburo’s tacit consent. As such, the Lovech camp had a semilegal status: it existed as a site but it was not regulated through the central administrative camp structure because the latter had technically been dismantled. In administrative terms, this meant the absence of regulatory practices. Hence, until news of the formation of Velchev’s commission reached the Lovech camp leadership, no formal sets of regulations regarding internment and labor practices existed. Lovech’s semilegal status and unregulated regime very possibly account for its extreme violence. In this sense, Lovech is indeed an aberration of the Bulgarian camp system, though an expected one and, perhaps, the logical outcome of an evolving repressive apparatus in place for fifteen years.

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80 AMVR, f.10, op.5, a.u.530; also see, Skochev, “Kontzalegerut Belene,” 334.
81 See pages 4–6 of this chapter.
82 AMVR, f.1, op.7, a.u.420.
83 AMVR, f.1, op.7, a.u.420.
Conclusions: After Lovech

At the outset of this chapter, I suggested that the creation and functioning of the Lovech camp, from 1959 until 1962, poses a paradox. Why did communist Bulgaria’s cruelest forced-labor camp, established through a process of penal reform, operate for several years after the country’s most repressive period? Did de-Stalinization somehow lead to renewed repression and should the Lovech camp be seen as a re-assertion of the Stalinist type of political violence?

By 1959, when the camp was created, mass political repression had substantially declined. By 1959, when the camp was created, mass political repression had substantially declined. Bulgaria’s protracted de-Stalinization process lasted from 1953 until 1956, and even though the events in Hungary in 1956 meant the halting of promises of liberalization and a re-introduction of some forms of coercion, the country never returned to the previous levels of repression and political violence.

Therefore, despite the fact that the violence of the Lovech camp was more extreme than that of any other camps of the Bulgarian gulag, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the creation of Lovech camp signaled a return to Stalinist repression. By the time Lovech was created, the Bulgarian communist regime was stable, and though there was internal strife, the regime as a whole was not threatened by political opposition, for the latter’s leaders and their supporters had either perished in camps or were sentenced to death during show trials.

Therefore, the Bulgarian communist party, having consolidated its power politically by 1959, turned its attention to the consolidation of power within the social realm. The creation of the

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86 Liberalization policy was announced during the 1956 April Plenum of the Bulgarian Communist Party Central Committee, which condemned the cult of personality leadership of Vulko Chervenkov, and further articulated during another plenum in September, 1956. On the initiation and the halting of the April 1956 reforms, see, Crampton, The Oxford History of Modern Europe: Bulgaria, 345–349; Daskalov, Debating the Past, 275–305; Evgenia Kalinova and Iskra Baeva, Bulgarskite Prehodi, 1939-2010, 138–185.
Lovech camp was a manifestation of this attempt. The launch of the 1958 campaign against the so-called “hooligans,” constituted a means of criminalizing the behavior of men and women seen as potential social threats to the regime.

Todor Zhivkov was one of the leading proponents of the “anti-hooligan measures.” He became secretary general in 1953, assumed control of power in 1956, consolidated his position late in 1962, and remained in power until the regime collapsed in 1989. Zhivkov’s relationship to violence, crucial in the context of this discussion, has not been fully assessed by his biographers, and some have argued that he did not favor extreme forms of coercion. This was partially true: rampant political repression did not mark Zhivkov’s era in Bulgarian politics. However, when necessary, Zhivkov did resort to extreme coercive measures. In addition, Zhivkov was extremely close to Mircho Spasov, the deputy vice minister of the interior, who was responsible for initiating and sustaining the violent regime of both the Belene (after 1956) and the Lovech camps, and he even protected Spasov within the Party ranks once the violence of the camps was revealed. Zhivkov also resorted to extreme measures in 1978 when he ordered the murder of the Bulgarian dissident, the writer Georgi Markov and again, in the mid 1980s when Bulgaria reopened its main concentration camp, Belene, to confine Turkish leaders who resisted forced assimilation. As Roumen Daskalov has pointed out, “as he worked his way up in the grim Stalinist era, Zhivkov showed no scruples in dealing with his political rivals and was very active in accusations and persecutions.” And this was true not only of the Stalinist years. For although Zhivkov credited himself with the

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87 Daskalov, Debating the Past, 281.
88 Kalinova and Iskra Baeva, Bulgarskite Prehodi, 144–147; Iskra Baeva, Todor Zhivkov (Sofia: Kama, 2006), Boyan Kastelov, Todor Zhivkov-mit i istina (Sofia: “Trud,” 2005). Throughout Zhivkov’s rule Bulgaria remained closely aligned with the Soviet Union. In fact, it only deviated from the Soviet line, towards the end, in the late 1980s, because Bulgaria’s aging leader was openly critical of Mikhail Gorbachev and his reform policies.
89 Daskalov, Debating the Past, 282.
permanent closure of the country’s most hardened forced-labor camps, Belene and Lovech, for instance, were in operation during the first years of his leadership.  

The trauma of the Lovech camp was considerable and it is evident in the experiences of both the survivors and the perpetrators. Many of the surviving camp inmates released in 1962 were unable to fully reintegrate themselves into society. Some of them died shortly after they left the camp, while others spent the rest of their lives in psychiatric hospitals. Although multiple narratives based on oral interviews of survivors from Lovech exist, no survivor has ever published a written memoir about his or her experiences there. Nikola Dafinov did embark on the endeavor, and I still keep the cover of the book he had intended to write, *Liturgy of Subdivision 0789: Three Stories from Oblivion*, named after the administrative identification of TVO Belene and Lovech as “Subdivision 0789.” Dafinov’s book, however, remains unwritten.

![Figure 5.2](image)

*Figure 5.2* A photocopy of the cover of the memoir, *Liturgy of Subdivision 0789: Three Stories from Oblivion*, that Nikola Dafinov intended to write. If completed, the memoir

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90 On Zhivkov’s claim, see Kalinova and Iskra Baeva, *Bulgarskite Prehodi*, 144–147. On the continued operation of the camps, see Daskalov, *Debating the Past*, 282.

91 See Hristov, *Sekretnoto Delo*, 123.
would be the first published book about the Lovech camp by a survivor. Photo by the author.

The existence of Lovech made possible the encounter between a young adult, the guard Julia Ruzhgeva, and the teenaged inmate, Nikola Dafinov. In 2011, Dafinov described his meeting with Ruzhgeva in the camp compound. At the time, he was eighteen years old and she a little short of her twenty-first birthday. He described her as walking proudly around the camp in her blue uniform. It was the end of the workday in Lovech, during roll call, and that particular evening, Dafinov had not fulfilled his quota. She called him into her office and ordered him to lie on the floor: “You have not done any work today!” Ruzhgeva screamed. “Until when [will this continue]? You won’t get out of here [alive].” After screaming at him for a while, Ruzhgeva began beating him. “I can’t describe to you how brutal the beating was,” he remembered, “extremely brutal.” Usually, on these occasions, one got hit ten to fifteen times and the beating lasted at least five minutes. In this case, the abuse was both physical and verbal. As Ruzhgeva beat Dafinov, she also kept hurling insults at him, asking him why he had not worked enough, who he thought he was, and warning him that he would not get out of the camp alive. “This is not a rest station!” Dafinov recalled Ruzhgeva screaming. Thinking of the pain, Dafinov explained, “You can’t sleep at night, it hurts so much.” At some point, Ruzhgeva stopped hitting him because, as he put it, “she felt that I was going to die.”

By the time I met Ruzhgeva and Dafinov, almost half a century later, it was difficult to imagine them as they had been in 1960 and 1961. She was frail, frightened, and sick, barely holding on to life, though she had enough strength to strangle herself in the fall of 2004. Dafinov was a sturdy bon vivant who lived in the center of Sofia, liked to entertain guests, and enjoyed his vodka on ice. He is one of the few Lovech survivors willing to talk openly about his experience, and he has always been active in this regard, having participated in several

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92 Nikola Dafinov, interview with the author, Sofia, March 29, 2011.
research and documentary film projects. Yet Dafinov never joined any of the camp survivor organizations: “It’s just that I don’t feel like a victim, not anymore.” Though it still takes a lot of vodka to talk about the time when he was one.

Figure 5.3 Nikola Dafinov at home in Sofia, March 29, 2011. Photo by the author.
CONCLUSION:

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND BREAKING THE SILENCE

At the outset of this dissertation, I argued that Bulgaria’s idiosyncratic culture of silence is the necessary framework through which the history of the country’s repressive past can be understood. Drawing on archival records, media sources, legal files, and oral history interviews with survivors and perpetrators from the concentration camp system, and taking into account Georgi Gospodinov’s provocative characterization of the peculiarity of Bulgaria’s silence, as “continuous” and “unbroken,” I surveyed the history of the camp system during the communist period and the politics of memory of the camp past in the post-1989 years.

In spanning the years from 1944 until 2011, I demonstrated how the silence about the camps during the communist era turned into a culture in the post-communist period. In chapter 1, I traced the institutionalization of the Bulgarian camp system, which lasted almost until the collapse of the regime: during this period of time, I stressed the ways in which the silence was produced by threat, internment, and imprisonment. In chapter 2, I investigated how in the immediate post-1989 years, the memories of survivors were subjected to sensationalized headlines and how this limited representation eventually led to the exclusion of the survivors' experiences from the Bulgarian public sphere. In chapter 3, I revealed how the deliberate destruction of archival evidence was an act of intentional silencing that made it more difficult to speak about the camp past even as the Special Inquiry Commission carried out a public
inquiry into the history of the camps. In chapter 4, I showed how the continued existence of the Belene prison complicates the attempts of survivors to create a memorial that will mark the site of the camp and stand as a lasting representation of their memory. Focusing on the harshest of the camps, in chapter 5, I demonstrated how the administrators of the Lovech camp created new policies to ensure silence within the camp as well as a new and more menacing threat of repression for society at large. At the end of this dissertation, I return to two issues that I have discussed in previous chapters but require further thought: the role of the press and the camp trial.

On February 3, 1990, the local newspaper in the town of Lovech, Naroden Glas (People’s Voice) published an article titled, “Sunstroke at Sunny Beach” (Slunchev Udar na Slunchev Briag). In hindsight, it would be difficult to guess, simply from reading the headline that this was the first article on the topic of the camps to appear in Bulgaria’s newly uncensored press. Sunny Beach, after all, was the country’s most popular seaside resort located on the Black Sea. Yet the article title echoed the irony and double-speak characteristic of the communist era. Survivors and those who knew of its existence mockingly referred to the Lovech camp as “Sunny Beach.” Sunstroke was the cause of the death indicated on death certificates of inmates who had been interned there. Many of these fatal “sunstrokes” had apparently occurred in the winter months of 1961. On March 10, 1990, Naroden Glas published a second article describing the abuses that had been perpetrated behind Lovech’s barbed wire. Although this particular newspaper was not widely known, the news of the atrocities it revealed did not go unnoticed. In fact, the articles that appeared in Naroden Glas sparked the explosion of sensationalist publications on the camps that soon flooded the

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1 Georgi Gospodinov, “After the Silence,” 143.
3 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u. 131.
Bulgarian press. The disclosures made in this small newspaper also caught the attention of government officials.

The Special Inquiry Commission (SIC) was formed weeks after the publication of the first article. In fact, one of the initial communiqués released by the SIC, indicated that it was the two publications in *Naroden Glas*, along with those that followed in the rest of the media outlets, that prompted the formation of the Commission. The human rights violations committed in the Lovech camp also launched the criminal investigation of the Military Prosecutor’s Office in March of 1990, which became known as the Camp Trial. Initially, investigators and prosecutors wanted to form a case for crimes committed in all of the camps, but by the time they got the archival holdings, the records had already been purged. The only evidence collected that could hold in court was for violations committed in the Lovech and Skravena camps. Yet even this was insufficient. The attempt to criminally prosecute those responsible for the abuses perpetrated in Lovech and Skravena ultimately failed due to the expired statute of limitations. Since prosecutors tried, and failed, to open a case for crimes against humanity, which would not have had any statute of limitations, the crimes committed in these two camps were treated as regular murders. The investigation began in 1990 and the trial lasted from 1992 to 2002, and during this period of time, forty-eight volumes of testimony, evidence, and hearings were accumulated.

Much like the investigation of the Special Inquiry Commission, the trial became enmeshed in the politics of the post-1989 period. Therefore, the attempt to prosecute communist crimes in the post-communist judicial landscape cannot be fully separated from the

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4 AMVR, f.23, op.1, a.u. 131.
5 In the 1990s, the camp trial was covered exclusively by the investigative journalist Hristo Hristov for the newspaper *Demokratsia*. In 1999, Hristov published, *Sekretono Delo za Lagerite* (The Secret Camp Trial), based on his research into the transcripts of the case files.
political agenda of the ruling elite in the transitional years. As Katherine Verdery has argued, this was the case with most transitional justice initiatives, such as trials or lustration laws, enacted in the former communist states in Eastern Europe.7

In early 1990, the revelations of the camp atrocities sparked a public outrage. The cries for justice coupled with the initial vigor of the Military Prosecutor’s Office had some impact during the early days of the Camp Trial. The Bulgarian Criminal code was amended, increasing the limitation of criminal liability from twenty to thirty-five years for the murder of two or more persons since 1960.8 However, the provision was unenforceable because the Bulgarian parliament did not grant it retroactive force. Parliament did not act to address the issue. After political and judicial wrangling, the case was stalled and resumed several times before finally being ended by the Supreme Court in 2002, when it ruled that the statute of limitations had expired.

Still, even though the case ultimately failed, prosecutors had been successful in charging five individuals involved with the camp system for murder. Procedural hearings began in June of 1993. A Bill of Indictment from 1994 indicated that sufficient evidence of fourteen premeditated murders and accounts of torture had been gathered. The five defendants in the case were: the head of the camp, Petur Gogov; the supervisor and local secret police chief who was accused of twelve murders, Nikolai Gazdov; and the guard in the women’s camp section who was accused of two murders, Julia Ruzhgeva. Although they had been included in previous proceedings, the deputy-head of the camp, Tsviatko Goranov, and the former Deputy Minister of the Interior, Mircho Spasov, had both died under house arrest by

7 Verdery, “Postsocialist Cleansing,” 63, 73.
Gogov, the head of the camp, was accused of malfeasance and the only murder charges
were laid on Gazdov and Ruzhgeva, who were detained for three and a half years during
investigations. Both, but especially Ruzhgeva, were rather low-ranking perpetrators. She was a
senior guard and Gazdov was the camp supervisor and head of the secret police at the Lovech
camp. Mircho Spasov was the only high-ranking government official who was ever charged
for his role in the camp system. No one from Politburo, the Council of Ministers, or the heads
of key departments at the Ministry of the Interior was ever held responsible for the abuses
perpetrated in Lovech. The case proceeded with numerous difficulties. In 1994, after issuing
the Bill of Indictment, the Attorney General, Ivan Tatarchev, was removed from his post
because of internal political strife. For the next eight years, the case was shuffled between
courts, closed and re-opened several times, until it was finally discontinued in 2002.

Over the twelve-year course of these troubled prosecutions, Nikolai Gazdov always
denied his personal involvement in the violence of Lovech while Julia Ruzhgeva
acknowledged it to a degree, admitting to the beatings but not to the murders. Her attempts at
honesty, however, had consequences and permanently sealed her fate in the post-communist
Bulgarian imaginary, as the most vicious of the Lovech executioners. That Ruzhgeva was
vilified more than Gazdov or any of the other defendants becomes clear if only through a
cursory glimpse at the gendered dimension of the news coverage during the trial and the
fictionalized representation based on her in the film *Canary Season*. Ruzhgeva’s partial
admissions stood out all the more against Gazdov’s blanket denials. Her awkward descriptions,
uttered with half a smile, like that of the “small and gentle stick” that she used to beat women,
remain one of the most haunting and staggering testimonies to the camp violence in
communist Bulgaria. There is no doubt that Julia Ruzhgeva was a perpetrator. What is also

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9 Goranov died in 1992 and Spasov in 1993. Nonetheless, Goranov and Spasov were mentioned by name and
implicated in the 1994 Bill of Indictment.
disturbing, however, is that this rank-and-file perpetrator came to symbolize the excesses of an entire repressive apparatus.

During my interviews with camp survivors, I have asked them whether the attempted camp trial achieved its intended moral catharsis? They have all said that it had not. Was it a case of seeking and establishing a political legitimacy? Most likely, yes. Verdery has stated that regardless of moral motivations, “postsocialist cleansing,” of which the Bulgarian camp trial is one example, is “good business politically.”¹⁰ Yet in this particular instance it is difficult to determine who if anyone benefitted politically. On the transitional justice scorecard, proposed by political scientist Lavinia Stan, Bulgaria scored rather low: “a laggard state,” which “adopted weak approaches to transitional justice.”¹¹ In terms of legal proceedings, this assessment is right.

The number of individuals, victims of political violence, murdered in the Bulgarian camps and prison has never been accurately determined and it is possible to argue, as many of the survivors do, that from a moral standpoint, the victims were never compensated and that they never received judicial recognition for their suffering. In addition to legal proceedings, however, victims almost always seek a public validation of their suffering and Bulgaria’s survivors of political violence are no exception. Yet they have not found an official acknowledgment of their plight in the post-communist Bulgarian landscape. In a certain way, the trial against the camps remains the most important attempt at addressing the human rights abuses of the communist era. Yet, this failed trial demonstrated that the “demands of the legal process” do not run parallel to the “needs of the victims.”¹²

¹⁰ Verdery, “Postsocialist Cleansing,” 73.
¹² Michael Marrus, Official Apologies and the Quest for Historical Justice (Toronto: Munk Center for International Studies, 2006).
What is furthermore troubling in the Bulgarian case is that the camp trial seems to have been pre-determined, or at least predictable, from the very start. A letter found in the private files of one of Ruzhgeva's lawyers, the now deceased Reni Tsanova, raises suspicions about the motivations of the prosecutors from the very outset of their proceedings. The three page letter, likely meant for private circulation, is dated from June 21, 1994 and it is signed by Ruzhgeva's first, attorney Georgi Vurbanov. With this letter, he refused to represent her as her defense attorney:

Bearing in mind the actions of the court and prosecution, even to the most legally ignorant citizen, it will become clear that this trial is purely political. With the sentence that the court will pass, you will be pronounced guilty, and afterwards the statute of limitation will be applied and your sentence will not be carried out, but you will bear the accumulated burden and endure years in detention without conviction. I will not participate in such a trial, because I REFUSE TO PLAY THE ROLE OF THE EXTRA in such a trial, to act only formally as a defense attorney such as the law requires, without being able to exercise my right to represent you.

In one of your letters, you wrote to me that I might get scared from what is happening with this trial and refuse to defend you. No, Ms. Ruzhgeva, I AM NOT SCARED. But in every trial, I act as a defense lawyer and I am not there to execute anyone’s orders. I have participated/defended [sic] people who were illegally sentenced by the totalitarian regime during the revival process [the forced-assimilation campaign against Bulgaria's Muslim minority] […] and I was never afraid, not now, and not then. But I will not allow—again I

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emphasize this to you—for the law to be broken, not to receive replies to my requests as your defense attorney, and to only participate with my physical presence in the court.

Vurbanov returned the fee that Ruzhgeva had paid him and he suggested that her daughter purchased medication for her with this money instead of waisting it on a lawyer. Vurbanov’s prediction also turned out to be true: Ruzhgeva spent three-and-a half years in detention without a legal conviction and the rest of her life convicted by public opinion.

The repressive legacy of the Office of Secret Police, culminating in over forty concentration camps was essentially reduced to the cases of a guard and a camp supervisor at a discontinued trial. The judicial reckoning failed, the archives were purged, and history textbooks remain mostly silent on the topic of communist political violence. In sum, Bulgaria’s transition from communism to democracy has been uneasy and challenging. And it is not only the survivors of political violence who have fallen victim to the difficulties of the post-communist transitional processes.

The transformation, which the country experienced, dramatically reorganized its politics and economy from a centrally planned, single-party authoritarian state to a free-market, multi-party democratic one. Bulgaria also underwent a dramatic shift of identity: what was once the most loyal of the Soviet satellites is now the poorest EU member. Ever since the collapse of the communist government in late 1989, life for the average Bulgarian citizen has been extremely difficult. In 2009, twenty years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the results of the US-based Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project survey, indicated that an overwhelming number of Bulgarian citizens were deeply unsatisfied with the post-communist
transition. According to the survey, only thirteen percent claimed that they were better off in 2009 than they had been in 1989. The toll of the transition has indeed been staggering. By 2013, more than one million Bulgarians had immigrated abroad since 1989. Bulgaria’s death rate is the sixth highest in the world, higher than Somalia and Afghanistan. Until very recently, it appeared as if Bulgarians would continue tolerating widespread corruption and low-living standards, nostalgically looking backwards towards the ever-receding communist past. And it seemed rather odd. As anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee put it: “From where does the cynicism toward democracy and capitalism arise, and how can it be that people really feel that their lives are worse off today than they were in 1989 when there were travel restrictions, consumer shortages, and secret police?” Partially, it comes from Bulgaria’s failed transition from communism.

“The country is a classic example of everything that is wrong with democracy—corruption, dysfunctional institutions, and public apathy,” wrote Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev in the summer of 2013. It seemed to him, and many others, that for the first time in many years, Bulgarians decided that they have had enough of the flaws of the system. For however much it failed, democracy had also presented them with the opportunity, Krastev concluded, to “mobilise civil energy and allow people to topple governments that must go.”

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16 Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook. Country Comparison: Death Rate. Death rate compares the average annual number of deaths during a year per 1,000 population at midyear; also known as crude death rate. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2066rank.html, last accessed on April 24, 2014.
17 Kristen Ghodsee, Lost in Transition, 179.
In February 2013, popular protests had toppled the center-right government of Boyko Borisov. Throughout 2013, popular protests continued with the aim of toppling the subsequent government led by the Socialists. The trigger for these most recent protests was the appointment of Delyan Peevski, a thirty-two year old media mogul, reputedly with ties to the mafia, to the position of head of the powerful State Agency for National Security. Bulgarians were incensed at his appointment, and as one of the protesters aptly put it “If you read the biography of Peevski, he personifies all the problems of Bulgaria.”\textsuperscript{20} In other words, Peevski exemplified the “corruption, nepotism, organized crime and the abuse of state power,” that have come to define life for ordinary Bulgarian citizens since the collapse of the communist regime.\textsuperscript{21} Although the government, led by Prime Minister, Plamen Oresharski, withdrew Delyan Peevski’s appointment, the protests, though diminished in vigor and numbers, continued into 2014.

In many ways comparisons between the most recent protests were drawn with the protests in 1989. It seems that the key demands in the winter of 1989 and in the summer of 2013 were similar: a change of government, which now, just as back then was perceived as corrupt, illegitimate, and “morally bankrupt.”\textsuperscript{22} However, there is one major and significant difference: a difference of generation. Those who led the protests in Sofia’s streets in 2013 were the children of those who came out for protests in 1989. In the words of a young Bulgarian journalist who belongs to this generation:

\textsuperscript{22} Maria Spirova, “Who are the Bulgarian Protesters?,” \textit{Euronews}, July 6, 2013.
The thirty-somethings of Bulgaria had been silent till now – too busy trying to sort out their careers and families in an ever-contracting economy, an environment of growing lawlessness and nepotism. Sometimes, [they were] too busy planning emigration. This is their first mass outing, their first concerted attempt at active citizenship—an organized discontent. Their ranks grew out of several green movements which gained traction in the country since the mid-00s precisely because they offered a politically unaffiliated—i.e. unsullied—outlet for the frustrations Bulgarians had with a long line of resource-stripping, land-grabbing, neglectful and polluting governments. The people protesting in front of the Parliament today feel cheated out of their youth, dreams and hopes: after nearly a quarter century of “change”, nothing in their lives has actually changed for good.23

Perhaps these continuous protests, markers of active civic engagement, demonstrate that Bulgaria’s “continuous silence” has finally been broken. And this is most likely because those who decided to break it grew up in the post-1989 world of post-communist Bulgaria. It was a world of political instability, social inequality, the erosion of communist values and certainty that had defined life for half a century before them. However, it was also a world without the omnipotent presence of the secret police, a concentration camp network and a large repressive apparatus. It was a world that made possible the emergence of a new generation of civic-minded Bulgarians who have overcome the silence and fear of previous generations. It was the same fear that the documentary film director, Atanas Kiriakov, had warned me about in 2003 as I embarked upon my research. Perhaps with it gone and with the

23 Maria Spirova, “Who are the Bulgarian Protesters?,” Euronews, July 6, 2013.
silence diminished, the voices of camp survivors will finally be heard. Perhaps it will be this new generation that will impact the change. For crimes committed in Lovech, Belene and the rest of the camps reverberate through the years and across generations.
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